"Dead Men Like Fog" . . GORDON KEYNE

"King's Man," C. F. KEARNS — A novelette, CADDO CAMERON

Short Stories

Twice A Month

October 10th

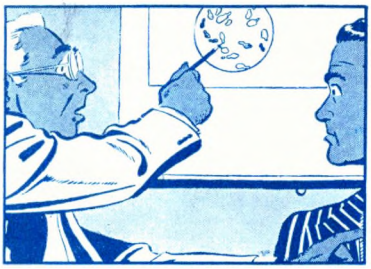
25c

"Honor—God give us more of it in a crazy world"

"Salute to Honor"

FREDERICK C. PAINTON

1 WHAT TO TRY NEXT? That dandruff was so unbelievably stubborn! I was sure upset—suppose this was the infectious kind! When my wife suggested Listerine, I said, "First, I'll ask Doctor Joe!"



2 BOY! WAS I GLAD TO HEAR from the good old Doc that Listerine Antiseptic kills millions of germs associated with infectious dandruff! Hope at last! I'd *try* Listerine and massage. It helped other dandruff victims—would it help me? I could hardly wait to get started!

3 AFTER A WEEK I WAS CONVINCED! Itching let up—scales began to go! . . . my scalp felt more vigorous and healthy. Take it from me, massaging with Listerine Antiseptic morning and night sure did a swell job for me.

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If you have any of the symptoms that often go with that common scalp condition, infectious dandruff —*itching, inflammation, flakes, scales*—don't neglect them. If you do, you may regret it. Start this very day to give your hair and scalp antiseptic baths with Listerine Antiseptic.

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HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED - THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!

I Trained These Men

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

Before I completed your lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPC where I am now Chief Operator. HOLLIS F. HAYES, 327 Madison St., Lapeer, Michigan.

Service Manager for Four Stores

I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. I am now Radio Service Manager for the M—— Furniture Co. for their four stores. JAMES E. RYAN, 110 Pebble Court, Fall River, Mass.

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I am doing spare time Radio work, and I am averaging around $500 a year. Those extra dollars mean so much the difference between just barely getting by and living comfortably. JOHN WASHKO, 97 New Cranberry, Hazleton, Penna.

In U. S. Signal Corps

I am in the U. S. Army, Signal Corps, as Chief Radio Clerk. My duties also include maintenance of the transmitter and receivers when the Chief Radio Operator is absent. R. W. ANDERSON, Radio Station WTI, Vancouver Barracks, Washington.

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BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

October 10th, 1941

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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WITHOUT a doubt, you often shivered to that coast to coast radio chiller—the WITCH'S TALE. And now, in the November issue of WEIRD TALES—unique magazine of the uncanny and the strange—you will read a story specially adapted from the broadcast by Alonzo Deen Cole, author and director of the famous program.

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DREAMER'S WORLDS

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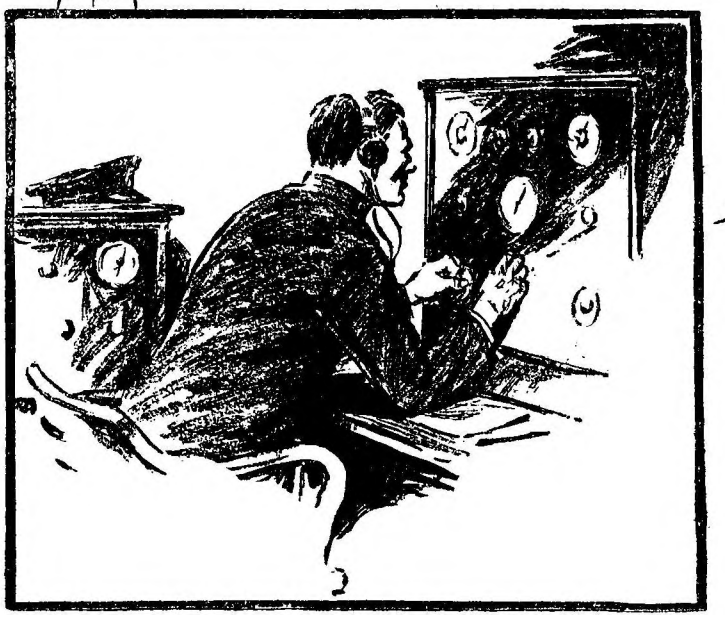


CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING MR. PENNIPHER

THE Rolls Royce limousine was thirty feet long and cost a thousand dollars a foot. It pulled up in front of the Pennipher Building at five minutes to midnight, and I saw Old August Pennipher get out and run spryly, for all his sixty-odd years, across the snowy sidewalk to the entrance.

"Okay, Shorty," I said through chattering teeth, "turn into that alley and douse your glims and wait."

Shorty Becker is the driver that the F.B.I. men use when on special assignment in New York; and he's got a nimble foot on the gas, and an agile mind in a traffic chase. But even he moaned at the thought of an indefinite wait on such a bitter winter night.

He prayed under his breath in an unprayerlike way.

"Quit your beefing," I said irritably, "I been tailing that old monkey for five thousand miles."

I opened the car door and stepped out into the whistle of the gale. It was zero, by then, so cold that the icy air made you cough. Stinging snow, riding the shoulders of the wind, pummeled your face. The cold went through my camel's hair coat as if it was cellophane.

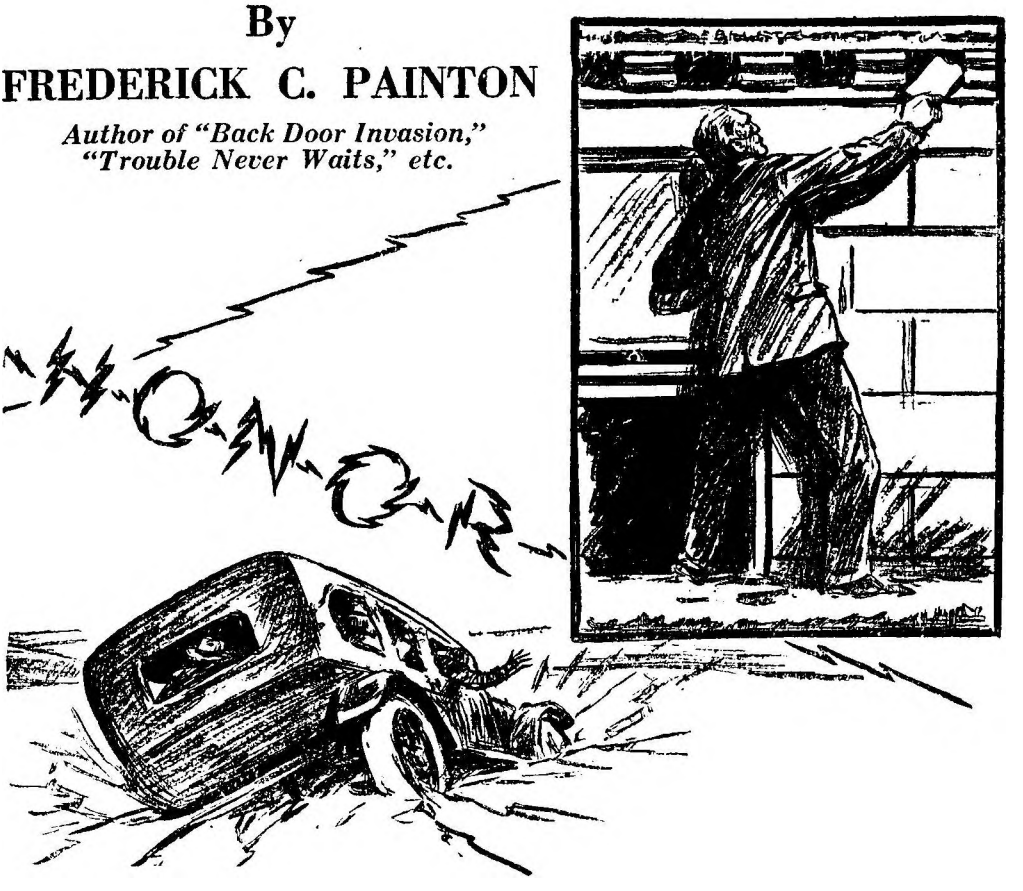
"What about Jane?" Shorty called, asking about my blonde assistant.

I said, "She's watching Pennipher's girl friend, Tana Petroff. Better get in touch with her and tell her where I am."

By

FREDERICK C. PAINTON

Author of "Back Door Invasion," "Trouble Never Waits," etc.



Shorty Becker has a frequency-modulation radio in his car which can contact, on a special wavelength, the other F.B.I. car carrying Jane around. As I burrowed, head down into the gale, Shorty's "Okay" came faintly to me.

I went into the Pennipher Building.

The Pennipher Building is a twenty-eight story monolith towering upward in a series of setbacks like some monstrous cannon pointing at the stars. As I walked into the gush of warm smelly air that came through the door, I wondered for the fiftieth time why a man like August Pennipher should be a damned German agent.

The gratitude of some people! This Pennipher comes from Europe on an immigrant cattle-boat when he's eight, bringing with him the clothes he stands in and a desire to be rich.

He got rich, all right, eighteen million dollars' worth, according to our *dossier*. Started as a peddler and parlayed his wagon into two hundred knick-knack stores stretching from coast to coast. You'd think that a guy would do *anything* for a country that let him mint that kind of money.

You run into all kinds of characters doing counter-espionage work these days. And it was my job to get the evidence to convict him of financing and leading the Nazi spy ring in New York.

Our guys had cased his office twice and found nothing. I walked up twenty-eight flights now in the hope he'd show me where he hid things.

THERE was a glow of light through the frosted glass of his office when I pantingly arrived, but the door was locked. I listened. No sound came from within.

My trick keys opened the door but still I heard nothing.

Instead, I was hit by a blast of icy air.

I looked through the opened door of his private office—and froze in amazement.

He'd opened the window wide and I could see him just crawling out to stand on the narrow ledge that ornamented the building at this height.

I thought, "The old man knows we're on to him. Rather than be arrested he's going to take the high jump."

I sprang forward to stop him.

But halfway to the window I stopped. He wasn't taking the dive; he was very carefully hugging the concrete and moving inch by inch along the two-foot ledge. The wind tugged at his overcoat, blew his hat away, so that his silvery hair whipped loosely. Then he vanished from sight. I raced to the window and cautiously peered out.

SNOW pellets pounded my face. I took one gander down at the street five hundred feet below and got giddy inside. Motor cars the size of tootsy-toys; it would take a blotter to pick up anybody who fell. Then I turned and peered at Pennipher, about five feet away.

By God, risking a fall to instant death, the old man was taking some kind of paper out of a crack between cement and chromium steel decorations. In rising he seemed to lean on the wind and then began to inch backward toward the window.

No wonder, I thought, our guys had never found anything incriminating. No one but a human fly or a screw-ball could get out there, five hundred feet above nothing.

Fascinated, I watched that snail-like return. He must have been only three feet from the window ledge when suddenly he stopped. A strange, queer stiffness seemed to seize his body, and he stood motionless, the wind mercilessly beating at him. I waited for him to start again. He didn't.

I heard him say softly, *"Ach, du lieber Gott!* I should not have looked down. I think, now, I must fall."

I knew, then, that he had looked down, been seized by height paralysis. When you get that, you freeze. Your muscles won't respond. You finally topple and fall.

He didn't say anything more. But his face was pitiful as he fought to move. I didn't want to go out there. I hate height (except in an airplane) and on that ledge it was fifty-to-one I'd slip on the snow and dive myself. It was crazy. But something drew me upright. I found myself with one foot on the ledge, scraping away the snow for footing. I heard myself saying calmly, so as not to shock him, "Stand steady, and when I give you my hand—*move!*"

His voice, replying, was steady. "The wind is bad. You'll slip and fall."

I didn't reply. By now I was spread-eagled on the ledge. The wind tore at me with vicious fingers. The snow pelted me blind. I forced myself to look only toward him. With my right hand hanging to the window ledge, I stretched toward him. My fingers scraped only the rough fuzz of his overcoat sleeve. I couldn't reach him. I moved my feet two inches. A blast of wind swayed me and I thought, "Dear God, here I go."

For an instant I swayed. Then my hand touched his icy-cold fingers and I was balanced. His fingers gripped mine. We had about two feet to go and it seemed two miles.

I gave a gentle tug and said, "Come on."

He didn't move. I'd heard that the touch of another human being sometimes imparts a sense of security and pulls a victim out of height paralysis. Why didn't he move? I looked longingly at the warmth and brightness of that window.

"Well," I snarled, "are you going to sit this one out? *Move!*"

A sigh left him and, by the Lord, his feet slid along the snow. A long fifteen inches and I was sliding carefully in the

window. Then I was inside, jerking him after me by both hands.

"Upsy-daisy," I said, and he came in headforemost and fell with a crash, and me after him. I let go a breath I had held for an hour.

"Don't try that again until you sprout wings," I muttered.

He smiled thinly without mirth.

"It seems, Mr. Bently, that I am owing to you for my life."

"How'd you know my name?" I said.

"As you watched me, my agents er—studied you," he said. "You are a very persistent, clever young man. I—I thought —they were to stop you coming here tonight."

I thought quickly. So! That car broadsiding into us in a snowy skid was no accident.

I smiled grimly. "Okay, we know the score. Now, give me the paper you took out of that niche and we'll see what the next move is."

He reached into his coat. But his hand did not bring out a paper. The fingers held a blue-steel Colt six-gun. Behind the sight his deep-set eyes narrowed.

"No," he said quietly.

CHAPTER II

OLD ACQUAINTANCE

AUGUST PENNIPHER was an old, thin guy, a little more than half my weight. But those cold glinting eyes and that gun told me he was a man.

"Now listen," I said patiently, "this won't get you anywhere. I could pinch you right now for smuggling aliens into the country. Two. Mr. and Mrs. Gerhardt von Umbreit."

His expression did not change. He did not speak.

"You took them from Matanzas, Cuba, on your yacht and transferred them to a fishing boat off Boca Raton, Florida," I went on. "We've got a sailor in the can who will tell all at the proper time."

Still he only stared.

I said, "You're a rich influential guy in this man's country, Mr. Pennipher. You made your moolah here. We think you're a Nazi agent because you're being forced to it. Help us round up these lice and we'll go easy on you."

An expression of pain swept his face, vanished instantly.

"Mr. Bently," he said, "I swear to you I mean no harm to this country. As you say, it has been good to me. What I must do I must do for honor's sake. I can tell you no more."

"You Germans are all alike," I said bitterly. "Honor, my eye!"

"I'm no German," he cried sharply. "I'm from Extanburg, the principality. We may speak a German patois but—"

"It's German now," I said. "We have a tip this Tana Petroff who works with you is a Gestapo ace."

He waved a hand wearily.

"You cannot understand and I cannot explain. Please go, Mr. Bently. Perhaps in a few days—"

"When we meet again it's cuffs for you," I said.

All this time I had watched for a chance to jump his gun. It didn't come. He rose and the muzzle never wavered.

"You saved my life," he said. "At another time I could be grateful. Now, go quietly or, by Heaven, I'll shoot."

And with the gun on my ribs he backed me to the hall.

"If the Gestapo is forcing you—threats to relatives—" I began one more try.

He shook his head. "The Gestapo is not forcing me."

The door slammed.

Thoughtfully I went to the night elevator. When I got to Shorty's car Jane was in the seat, shivering under the alleged mink coat I gave her. I gave her an abstracted kiss.

Jane is a fugitive from a Hollywood screen test who uses her gold curls and beautiful pan to help me in the business

of keeping the European war flames from igniting over here.

"Well," said Shorty irritably, "do we just sit here and congeal?"

I was still thinking about Pennipher's strange behavior.

"Hon," I said to Jane, "what about this gal Tana Petroff?"

"I'll swap for a dry martini at Twenty-one," she said wistfully.

"Two," I told her. "A bird can't fly on one wing."

We drove to Twenty-one and she told me the odyssey of her trailing Tana Petroff. Like any account of a tail, it was dull. The gal had gone to the docks of the Black Star Steamship Line, got three suitcases and had taken them to Pennipher's house on Fifth Avenue. Then she had gone to her own apartment on East Twenty-fourth Street.

"She's still there," Jane concluded; "like any sensible person she stays in out of the cold."

"What kind of a dame is she?"

Jane shrugged. "Attractive. Mouse-like outside, but she's got a brain. She has her first-papers and attends Americanism rallies.

I nodded and we went into Jack and Charlie's Twenty-one and had two drinks. I was still puzzled.

One thing the front office insists upon is a bullet-proof case before we make a pinch. We had Pennipher for alien-smuggling.

But it was not enough. If he was the head of a Nazi *nid,* or nest of agents, then we wanted to round up the lot. I couldn't prove Pennipher was the head of a Nazi *nid.* And with a guy who has his millions, you can't go blasting around violating the guy's constitutional rights.

The paper he had recovered. The suitcases the girl had claimed. They were the obvious clues.

"We'll try the girl," I said. "Let's give her a little high-pressure."

"Why not Pennipher?" growled Shorty. "Pulling a gun on you put him out on a limb."

"No," I shook my head, "I had no right in his office. And besides," I went on, "I like that guy. I got a hunch he's no Nazi."

They looked at me as if I was half-witted. I was kind of astonished at myself. We drove to East Twenty-fourth street.

NEW YORK on a cold blizzard night can be as lonely and desolate as an Arctic tundra. Shorty pulled up and said, "How long have I got to wait?"

"I don't know," I said. "It depends on this Tana. Come on, Jane, and play chaperon."

It was a four-story brownstone walk-up. Jane was an old hand. She pushed five—six buttons and we waited for some sleepy ginzo to push the clicker that released the night lock.

"Sam?" said Jane.

"Yes, hon."

"Why do you think Pennipher is no Nazi? Everything checks that he is."

The door clicker buzzed and we pushed in. I answered in a whisper.

"Darling, you don't stay in this racket without getting to know something about people.

"Pennipher is a straight-shooter. He hated himself for threatening me with a rod—but he did it because he had to. We've got to find out why."

We could talk no more. Jane went to a door and rapped lightly.

After a half-minute's silence Tana's voice said, "Who—what is it?"

Jane replied, "A note, dearie, I found downstairs under the door. It's for you—the boy friend, I guess—" She giggled foolishly.

Jane knows how to get a gal to open her door at one A.M.

I heard the bolt click; there was a rectangle of light, a girl's lovely pale face under a confusion of dark curls.

"Oh!" she gasped, "you—"

"Just John Law, babe," I said, thrusting in. "Take a seat and let's talk."

She backed up, her dark long-lashed eyes wide. Jane went to her, patted her shoulder.

"Don't get frightened," she soothed. "Sam's bark is always worse than his looks."

Swiftly I weighed the girl. I had turned unconventional in this; I'd better keep on.

"We're F.B.I.," I said, "and we're between a whoop and a cheer of pinching Pennipher as an unregistered Nazi agent. Whether he is or not depends on you."

Her hand dropped down to pull tighter the negligee over her pyjamas. It was sheer silk stuff and something hung in there from a gold chain around her neck.

"You mustn't hurt him," she cried. "Oh! he's so good, so kind. He—" she broke off abruptly.

"He what?" I prodded.

Her head shook the mop of curls.

"I—I can't tell you." She saw my face set coldly. "Oh, don't you see if you interfere *they'll* be killed?"

"Who'll be killed?"

She just stood there, her head shaking miserably.

Jane said, "Tana, listen to me. You've only first-papers. You are setting yourself to be deported."

Her head shook. But her face blanched with terror. Swiftly I strode to her. My hand shot out, ripped at the flimsy silk at the V of her neck. She half-screamed.

Jane cried, "Sam, for God's sake, what are you doing?"

I gave a jerk that broke the thin gold chain and held up the little gold swastika.

"Only Nazi agents wear them, babe," I said grimly. "Now, quit lying—or else."

She had recovered by now. Her eyes smouldered sullenly. "All right, you found it. I say nothing more."

Jane sighed. "You guessed wrong on Pennipher after all, Sam."

"Looks like it," I nodded curtly. "Okay, Tana, get your clothes on. You're under arrest. Watch her while she dresses, Jane."

"No, Tana," said a new voice, "stay where you are. It will be Bently's next move and I suggest, *mein herr,* that you put up your hands."

I whirled to look into the long blue snout of an automatic pistol one size smaller than a tommy-gun. The holder of the gun was big and tall and had green eyes as cold as sunlight on glacial ice. Behind him was another man, also with a rod.

But I had no eyes for this second man. I was studying the familiar military bearing of him who had spoken. The full red mouth below the clipped blonde mustache. The seamy scar that ran from his ear down to his neck to vanish below the low collar.

"By God!" I muttered, "Valter Albrecht! I killed you dead as hell four years ago in Egypt."

His cold deadly smile was a grimace of hate.

"Then let us call this, Herr Bently, a return of the dead."

CHAPTER III

TANGLED SKEIN

FOR a long minute the room was silent save for the whine of the wind, the beat of the snow against the window panes.

"Valter Albrecht?" I repeated finally "I dropped you with a shot in the stomach in the Mousky bazaars in Cairo in 1937."

That final moonlit fight had ended the pursuit of as dangerous a gang of narcotic smugglers as had ever dumped a half-ton of heroin annually into the United States.

Smuggling, mind you, done with the connivance of the Nazi Reich to get money to make their military machine. And Albrecht of the Gestapo had been the kingpin of that ring. The story of his death in the *Egyptian Gazette* had been a lie to stop further pursuit.

If he was in with Pennipher, then I had been mistaken about the old man not being a Nazi.

I let my breath go, and forced a smile.

"Well, Albrecht," I grinned, "what is it this time, sabotage?"

He ignored this crack.

"Search them, Karl, and be careful, Herr Bently is a clever, elusive person."

I submitted to the search that took my Colt. Jane did the same and surrendered the little pearl-handled automatic she carries in her purse.

"See that I get it back," she said. "You can't get those on the swindle sheet."

Albrecht's eyes smoldered as he stared at me.

"The temptation to settle our score, Bently, is—" he broke off. "Perhaps another time when duty is not so pressing." He turned to Tana. "Get dressed, *lieb' fraulein*. It is time to go."

Tana should have been delighted. But, by the Lord, as she took a step toward the bedroom she looked close to fainting. Pale as flour.

Jane's gorgeous eyebrows arched upward at me. I shrugged and moved slightly to get Albrecht between me and this squarehead Karl's gun.

There was still a slim chance of pulling this off.

Tana gave me the break I was waiting for. She came out, pale, drawn, fixing a babushka hat to her head. As she neared Albrecht she suddenly seized his arm and cried, "Valter, please, in the name of God, I'll show you if—"

"Take your hands off me," he snarled, and tried to jump back to get me covered. He didn't have time. I bounded across the intervening space. I swung a right hook with all my one-eighty pounds riding behind it.

"Scram, Jane," I yelled.

I hit the kraut all right but Albrecht was dodging, so the blow lacked the full force of a mule-kick which it usually carries. But he went down, and as he did so I leaped bodily onto him and grabbed for the gun.

Jane didn't scream. She went for Karl like a tigress. He punched her flat with a blow to her eye and came for me. I tore at Albrecht's hand to get loose his gun. I got it but not in time. This Karl towered over me as I straightened. I tried to dodge. But I couldn't. His gun smashed downward and the world blacked-out in front of my eyes.

I DON'T know how long I was out. I looked up at the strange ceiling; felt the dull pound behind my eyes and finally sat up. It was Tana's room, only now it was empty, and a tiny clock, ticking like a nervous heart, was the only sound. I licked my lips, swallowed, and then the memory of Karl's sock came like a blow. Tana, Jane, Albrecht, where were they? I got to my feet, reeled, and put my hand to my head. A lump like a golf ball.

Then I saw the note on the floor.

I opened it and recognized the prim, military script of Albrecht. The note read: "Herr Bently: Only the necessity of avoiding collision with your police prevented me from attending to you permanently just now. I hope the opportunity will not be too delayed. I have taken your young lady, Fraulein Winthrop, with me. She is my surety that you will make no move against me for forty-eight hours. At the end of that time she will be returned to you, none the worse for the experience. Try to interfere and *she* will wish you had not."

It hit me like the impact of a .45 slug. A shock, then numbness when your brain seems dead. Jane! I just sat there, staring, and the little clock ticked and ticked.

Finally I looked at it. Two-twenty. I went to the kitchen, slapped icy water on my face. I was moving like an automaton and, like one, I found my hat, went down to the snowy street.

The snow had ceased and it was bitterly cold. The car was down the street where we had left it. Shorty flung open the door.

"For cat's sake, what the hell kept you? Where's Jane?"

He had the motor running, the heater buzzed. I got inside and sat down.

"Didn't you see 'em?"

He stared at me. I must have looked like a ghost. "See who? Sam, what the hell's happened?"

"They got Jane," I said thickly. "They evidently went out the back way and they took her."

Then, suddenly, my brain was clear and cold like a chunk of ice. "Drive to Pennipher's and pour on the coal."

On the way I told him what had happened.

"It's my fault," I finished. "I made a bad guess about Pennipher but I'll fix that now." I turned to him. "Give me your gun."

He did so. "Look, Sam, don't lose your head."

I didn't reply. We pulled up in front of that pile of marble near the Metropolitan Museum, a small palace that cost Pennipher a half-million.

"I better go in with you, Sam."

"No," I said, "I want no witnesses to this."

He mumbled something but now I was galloping up the steps to the front door. I punched the button.

I expected a butler and an argument. It was August Pennipher, fully clothed, staring out at me. I held the gun muzzle under his nose.

"I'm in no mood for fooling, Pennipher," I said. "Back up and keep your mitts in sight."

Silently he retreated. I kicked the door shut with my heel.

"Now," I said, "where have they got Jane stashed? Quick, by God, before my finger slips."

His face had been calm, cold, alert. Now it looked puzzled.

"Jane? Do you mean your assistant, Miss Winthrop—"

"Stop stalling," I said. "You know your boss, that kraut Albrecht, grabbed her. And I want to know where she is—right now."

He stiffened as if hit by a blow.

"Albrecht?" he cried. "You mean Valter Albrecht has kidnaped Tana?"

"He snatched Jane," I said, "and Tana went along for the ride."

He was still rigid, gray as plaster.

"Come on, speak," I growled. "I haven't got all night."

"Mr. Bently," he said earnestly, "as God is my witness I know nothing of this."

CHAPTER IV

THE LETTER

HE WAS a good actor, or telling the truth, but I was in no mood to believe him.

"Listen," I said, "Tana is a Nazi agent. I saw her swastika. She also works for you. Albrecht saved her from a pinch. That puts you in this up to your tonsils. Now, come clean or—" I took a step toward him.

He did not shrink. He stood motionless, his face sick.

"Albrecht will find out about Tana," he muttered as if to himself. "And he will kill her."

"Then what are you waiting for?" I snapped. "Albrecht hates my guts. He'll kill Jane to get back at me."

Pennipher pulled himself together.

"Tell me what happened," he said.

The guy had tremendous dignity. I found myself explaining just what had happened.

"And," I concluded, "Albrecht was most friendly to your Tana."

"He doesn't know yet. But when he finds out—" he suddenly broke off. "Mr. Bently, it is most unfortunate, this incident. But Miss Winthrop's life—and Tana's, too —can be saved. I will go at once."

He turned. I grabbed his arm.

"I listened to you once tonight," I growled, "and look what happened. You don't go anywhere without me from now on."

Not ungently he shrugged off my hand. He turned, his eyes blazing.

"Bently, only one person in this world can save those two girls from death. Me. If you stop me, their deaths are on your head."

I looked at that strong, fine face, sensed the splendid dignity of him. Was I wrong again? I had to believe him. Every instinct made me.

"Look," I urged, "suppose I let you go and you fail?"

He smiled mirthlessly. "I will not fail, Bently. Be sure of that."

"But what's it all about? So I can come after you?"

His eyes became far away.

"I told you once—a question of honor. My honor. I could tell you no more—no matter your threats."

"That letter?" I said. "The one you damn near died tonight to get. Give it to me."

I thought he'd refuse. But he did not. He went to his study and returned with it.

"Your knowing that can do no harm at this time," he said. "And now, may I go? Every moment counts."

I had to trust the life of Jane to a man whom I had the evidence to convict as a Nazi spy. I stared at him thin-eyed. He returned the stare unblinking.

"Pennipher," I said slowly, "if this is a trick, God help you—because I won't."

Silently he went to a closet, put on his hat, a big fur-lined coat. He took the Colt six-gun out of the pocket and handed it to me.

"I shan't be needing that," he said.

I hefted the gun.

"Dammit, man!" I exploded. "Why this secrecy?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Gerhardt von Umbreit," he said cryptically. He went to a side door. Here he paused. "And if you value the life of Miss Winthrop, Bently, do not follow me. You have trusted me, and I swear I shan't fail."

He disappeared. A moment later I heard the purr of that big Rolls Royce limousine. By the time it backed out to Fifth Avenue I stood by Shorty's car and watched the twin tail-lights vanish into the night.

Shorty ejaculated, "But, Sam, that was Pennipher. Aren't you going to make a pinch? At least, tail him?"

"No." I got in the car.

"Cripes a'mighty, are you going whacky?"

"Yeah," I said wearily and switched on the dome light. "Yeah, I'm losing my grip, Shorty."

I took out the letter Pennipher had given me and opened it. The writing was in German script which I read with comparative ease.

The letter read: "Excellenz, I have definite information that the Reichunterseebot U-59 will be somewhere in Long Island Sound between January 19 and 24 for the purpose of taking aboard Hauptmann Valter Albrecht and the two he was sent to apprehend. The exact rendezvous will be established by short-wave radio when and if Albrecht succeeds in locating those he was told must be returned at all cost.

"Be on your guard against Albrecht, and carry out your plan as you explained it to me. Albrecht knows nothing definite, I am certain, and is planning only to meet all contingencies. If the worst occurs, an anonymous warning to the U. S. Coast Patrol might smash the rendezvous. But that means death, so only do this as a last resort."

The letter was signed "Smolensk" and there was a huge seal with "E" on it just below.

"Well," said Shorty, "what does it say?"

I told him. He looked puzzled. "But what does it mean?"

"An international kidnaping," I said, "and, by God, Pennipher has gone to swap his life for four others and Albrecht will double-cross him."

"You are whacky," he said.

"Yeah, I must have been to let that gallant old boy make that gesture," I muttered. Then an idea flashed across my mind like a comet. "Shorty, get to Police Headquarters on Center Street—and make it wide open."

He made it in fourteen minutes which should be a record even if it isn't.

We tore up the steps and a curious cop directed me to Sergeant Connors in charge of the N. Y. Police radio bureau.

I flashed my shield and Connors was instantly all attention. Believe me, the F.B.I. gets swell cooperation from New York cops.

I told him about the sub and the possibility of a message.

"This is the twentieth," I concluded, "and if there is a message you could locate the sending station by radio compass, couldn't you?"

"Well, yes," he nodded. "We'd get other stations to take a bearing on it and with a triangle cross-bearing we could locate it. But only within a square mile or so."

"That'll be close enough for me," I said. "Get your listeners listening."

Connors pawed a paper out of a drawer, scanned it. "Yes, we can get a triangle by using the Boston PEX, and the Clyde-Mallory liner, *Shawnee,* ought to be somewhere off the Jersey coast. To make safe I'll use a Philadelphia station, too."

Rapidly now, he talked by long distance phone to Boston and Philly, and got the *Shawnee* by ship-to-shore.

"Police business," he said. "We are endeavoring to locate a secret radio short wave broadcast station. We'll do the listening. As soon as we've located the wave-length we'll communicate it. Stand by to listen in and give us a radio directional bearing."

He started three young cops turning short wave dials, covering all wave-bands.

"It's like looking for a mosquito a mile up," he said, "so just hope your kraut is talking to the sub."

Time passed at a turtle's gait. At the end of a half-hour I couldn't stand it. I went out for java and sandwiches.

When I came back Connors shook his head. "Nothing."

An hour later he was willing to give up. "Your Nazi friend simply isn't broadcasting."

"Keep on trying another ten minutes," I urged. "Albrecht's holding all aces now and he'd have to tell 'em that so—"

One of the young cops yelled, "Hey, I got something."

We sprang to stand beside him.

"It's in German," he said, "on an eight meter band that the Germans do use. Wait a minute." He wrote. "Hell, it must be code."

Yard-long German words like, *"Arbeiten-geschbellschaft"* and *"Deutschesauslander"* came through.

"You've got a code outfit in Washington that could break that," the sergeant said hopefully.

"Hell, it would take a month, and I haven't got but minutes," I said. "Anyway, I want the station."

The young cop swung a diamond-shaped aerial on a compass until he picked up the loudest signals.

Connors gave the wave-length to the *Shawnee* and Boston and Philadelphia. The instant they got the secret station tuned in, they'd turn their compass aerial until they picked up the signals strongest and draw a bearing. They'd give the length and direction of the bearing, and we'd enter them on the east-coast map that was now before Connors. The line from Philadelphia would intersect that of Boston and of the *Shawnee* and our own bearing. At the

point where all those lines crossed each other on the map—there would be the secret station.

Impatiently I bent over the map. The bearings intersected at a point in Connecticut inland from the Sound. Connors got a big-scale map of Connecticut.

Now began the minute corrections to reduce the margin of error.

Suddenly the young cop said, "The sender's signing off— Wait! I'm picking up an answer."

Eagerly I leaned forward. But he only wrote down, *"Zu befehl, Excellenz! Rendezvous Sontag mittage!"*

"So Albrecht's an 'Excellenz' now," I muttered, "and they're going to meet him Sunday noon. Like hell."

The young cop looked up. "The air's dead, sir."

I watched Connors make his final correction. He had finally brought in stations at Buffalo and Albany to reduce the margin of error, and extended all lines on the bearings given to him by the listeners-in. Now all the lines crossed about a mile and a half from a town called Eastport about ten miles in from the Connecticut shore. But the lines did not meet precisely. Instead, they made a hexagon inside of which, somewhere, the station was located. The scale of the map, a mile to an inch, made the hexagon include about two square miles. I swore.

"It's the best I can do," Connors said, and then, hopefully. "Maybe there aren't so many houses in that locality."

"You did swell," I said. "Let me see that code that was copied down."

The young cop handed me the senseless gibberish he had recorded. Carefully I went over it, looking for anything that might be a clue. I didn't get it on the first reading but I did on the second, buried in the middle of a German polysyllabic word, *"Grossernaugatuckkommen."*

"Naugatuck?" I exclaimed.

"Why," said Shorty, peering down, "there's a lake by that name—"

I cut in bitterly, savagely, "But that isn't where you heard it."

"No," he said. "You spoke—"

"It's the name of August Pennipher's summer estate on Lake Naugatuck," I said. "And look." I pointed inside the hexagon made on the map by the radio bear-

ings. "There's Lake Naugatuck. That secret sending station is in Pennipher's own house."

Shorty muttered, "My God, can you tie that?" He gave me a queer look. "You didn't get the score on him after all, pal, did you?"

I didn't say anything, my mind a hodgepodge of conflicting thoughts. Then I turned to Connors.

"Get me a police escort to the state line. We're going to Naugatuck."

CHAPTER V

NAUGATUCK

THE longest minutes in the world are those you dissect second by second with death hanging in the balance. We tore up the Hendrick Hudson Parkway, averaging forty-seven miles an hour, and to me we crawled. Shorty was hitting sixty-five on Cross County Parkway and I expected dawn to catch us. Shorty is a patient guy; when I cursed and told him I'd drive my-

self, by God, if he didn't get leaden-footed, he merely elbowed me gently and said, "Guy, I like Jane, too."

On the Merritt Parkway where the brutal wind had swept off most of the snow, he hit eighty miles an hour. It was too fast for safety and I said, "I could get out and run faster."

We had no escort now; the Connecticut State Police car wasn't at the toll gate and I refused to wait for a phone call. So we tore across the white night to the Lake Naugatuck road.

That singular pre-dawn luminosity had come. Black trees raised their sullen nakedness to a sky where neither dawn nor night ruled.

"It's about five miles," said Shorty, breaking a long silence. "What do we do?"

There were two tommy-guns in the rack behind the seat. I broke them out.

"It's no time to be clever," I said.

Shorty grinned; he loves a fight.

So we roared, all unknowing, into the trap.

This was all wooded, hilly land around here, sloping down to the lake which was about six miles long by four wide. Through this ran a narrow gravel road that climbed far beyond to a white house on the crest of the hill. Shorty had speeded up to give the spinning wheels traction on the slope. The next instant the car struck something. It must have been a steel chain or cable painted white, for we saw nothing. The chain struck angularly at the base of the windshield. I heard the smash and tear of it and yelled. Then the glass broke. The front of the car came back in our laps. I yelled again. But now the car reared like a bucking bronco, turned in the air like an acrobat and came down on its roof with a crash that sprang both doors. I was hurled out, sprawling, into the snow. I went head-over-heels, stopped, flat and breathless. I heard Shorty yell, "Sam, look out!"

Then a black form towered over me.

It was this mug, Karl, with a vicious smile on his broad thick pan. He had a gun and he raised and swung it. I dodged and the blow almost broke my shoulder. I tried to leap up at him. Then he fell on me—literally. His body flattened me. He swung the gun and it hit my eye so hard I thought the orb had exploded. I went back, half-stunned.

I heard Albrecht's voice, "Tie him, Karl."

Before my head was clear I was trussed up like a rib roast. Albrecht came over to look, smiling with a deadly coldness.

"I hardly expected you, Bently," he said. "This is a pleasure."

I DIDN'T say anything. When you fall for a sucker trick like a white chain stretched from tree to tree, what can you say? Albrecht, still smiling, ordered Karl to carry me to the house. He himself took Shorty. The latter's head was all bright blood. He looked in a bad way and I cursed again.

I'll never forget the sight that met my one good eye when we came into the living room of that New England house. A bright fire blazed in the stone fireplace. On a rug before it lay August Pennipher, naked save for shorts, and bound hand and foot. His bare legs and arms had black, bloody and blistered spots. His flesh was gray with the agony of torture that he had endured. But his eyes were open and complete dismay and pity leaped into them as he saw me, helpless as a spitted chicken.

Albrecht rubbed his hands in satisfaction.

"Very clever, Karl, to put that listening device in the guard hut," he said, and smiled at me. "Karl had a submarine sound-detector. We heard you coming for four miles."

I merely stared at him. He laughed again. "This time my duties will not interfere between you and me, Herr Bently. As soon as I have finished with Pennipher--" he turned. "And, Pennipher, have

you decided to tell where you have concealed Frau and Herr von Umbreit?"

In almost a monotone Pennipher said wearily, "You know my terms, Albrecht. Tana and Miss Winthrop to go free. When they telephone they are safe I shall personally take you to Mr. and Mrs. von Umbreit."

"It won't do, Pennipher," said Albrecht, "not at all." He nodded to Karl.

Karl's face set cruelly. He bent over Pennipher. God, I began to shake. "Don't—" I yelled, as Karl moved and the sweat stood on Pennipher's gray skin and he was panting. I heard his teeth grinding as his lips clenched, but no other sound.

"Where are they?" roared Albrecht.

"No," gasped Pennipher. "Their lives first."

I suddenly found Albrecht's glance on me.

"You hound!" I said softly.

He ignored this. "I think, Karl," he said, "that Herr Pennipher gains courage by Bently's presence. He hates to surrender in front of witnesses. Take this pair of *verdamnt Amerikaners* into the other room."

"Pennipher!" I yelled. "Don't—"

Karl's blow hit my mouth and smashed my lips against my teeth. In one heist he slung me over his shoulder and carted me to the next room. He flung me down and went back for Shorty.

"Sam!" came Jane's cry. "Oh, dear God, he's got you, too."

I looked over to where Jane was lying on a couch, bound up like a mummy. One of her lovely blue eyes now had a shiner. Worse, she was worn and getting ready to crack. It was in her face, her voice. I managed a lop-sided grin.

"Hon, who hung that shanty on you?"

She was torn for an instant between hysteria and control.

Then, "Golly," she said, "is it bad? I wish I had a mirror."

Her remark saved me, too, from the heeby-jeebies. Before she could slip again I said, "Where's Tana?"

Her face went taut. "Dead. I think. Oh, Sam, she was a Nazi agent and she betrayed them. So Albrecht said."

Rapidly she told me what had happened after I had been goose-egged in Tana's apartment.

"Tana was supposed to work on Pennipher and find out where this Mr. and Mrs. von Umbreit were hidden. But she's an Extanburger—and she was telling Pennipher of the Gestapo moves. Then she tried to bargain with Albrecht for Pennipher's life and he took out a gun and shot her point-blank."

She shuddered and began to sob.

"Steady, kid," I said gently, "you can do that later."

She got hold of herself, sniffing and muttering. "You'd think I could have a hanky."

We were quiet after that. The door was partly open. I could see Karl peering in. No chance to roll over to Jane and get her to work on these knots. No chance to get to Shorty lying there so still and white.

I stopped a new outburst from Jane by lying about him. When she gasped at his paleness I said, "Just kay-ohed, hon. Keep your head. It all depends on you and me now."

She sniffed a couple of times.

"Sam, what's it all about? Why does this devilish Albrecht want a Mr. and Mrs. von Umbreit?"

"Hon," I told her, "Mr. and Mrs. von Umbreit is the alias for the Duke and Duchess of Extanburg. Germany wants them so badly she's sent a submarine to violate American neutral waters to help in the snatch. They've sent Albrecht, their top-drawer agent, to make Pennipher tell where he's hidden them."

"You mean," said Jane, "that Pennipher smuggled a duke and duchess into the country? But why?"

I shrugged.

"I don't know that one. But if he's

hidden them Albrecht will never make him tell. Never."

A half hour later events made a liar out of me.

Albrecht came into the room and stared down at Jane and me. There was no mistaking the triumphant glitter in his eyes.

"Herr Pennipher has yielded to er—reason and er—persuasion," he said. "I will take Frau and Herr von Umbreit with me tonight. And also you and the *gnadige* fraulein, Bently. We shall see if you two can swim back from the Middle Atlantic."

CHAPTER VI

WARNING FROM PENNIPHER

BEFORE daylight fully came, Albrecht had acted swiftly. Sensing that if I had found this place there might be others to come to our aid, he moved instantly to hide us.

Pennipher's estate was well over six hundred acres, spreading back into the woods beyond the west shore of the lake. Drifts had clogged the dirt tracks, but Pennipher had an old Locomobile limousine fitted with chain grippers on the tires and this was used to transport us over the frozen surface of the lake to another log cabin hidden in the woods.

It was a clever move. The still whistling wind quickly swept snow over our tracks on the lake. If and when Sergeant Connors bestirred the Connecticut state police to a search, they might be days finding this small log hut. And I knew Albrecht was only waiting for night to begin his escape.

Meanwhile, in the study of the log cabin there were three of us, guarded by the sullen Karl. Jane, sleeping from exhaustion; Pennipher, worn so with torture as to seem more dead than alive; and myself, numbed by tight ropes and cursing in helpless fury.

Where Shorty was I didn't know. Nor Tana, either, if she still lived.

The brief winter day had ended dully; night was come over the snow.

Then it was that I heard Pennipher's whisper, just a faint breath against his teeth.

"Bently? Bently?"

"Yes?" I whispered.

"Listen carefully. I have no strength to repeat."

I strained my ears, wondering what was coming.

"You must not let Miss Winthrop come with us when Albrecht moves after nightfall. I cannot save you, but you are a man and take a man's chances. She—I would have saved both her and Tana if I could."

"What do you mean?" I was puzzled. "What can you do?"

A sound like ghostly mirth escaped him.

"Albrecht does not understand honor. He thinks he has tortured me into revealing His Highness' whereabouts. He thinks tonight I take him there on promise of my own life, which promise he will not keep."

A few seconds pause.

"I am taking him to die and all who go with him."

"How? Where?" I muttered.

"You will see," he whispered. "Bently, I am sorry if you be one to go with me and Albrecht. It hurts me to think of Miss Winthrop—I hope you can manage to save her. But if she goes with us—" he paused —"she must die. It is your lives against—" he broke off as Karl came striding across the room. The man gave me a brutal kick in the side.

"It is *verboten* to talk," he growled, and with a motion of his gorilla arms sent me smashing against the baseboard on the other side of the room.

The sound waked Jane.

"Sam?" she wailed.

"Silence!" shouted Karl.

Groggy, I could only say, "Keep your shirt on, hon, I'll fix that monkey later."

Actually, though, I was worried. What was this trap of Pennipher's in which he meant to sacrifice us all and himself to kill Albrecht?

During the dreary time that followed I worked on the knots that bound me. I got slack at the expense of skin, but when Karl finally picked me up and carried me out, I was helpless to resist.

It was black night and no light gleamed in the old Locomobile that was parked on the ice along the shore. I was stacked inside, on the rear seat. Albrecht had me covered with a gun. He was talking to two other men in German.

"Dispose of their two bodies," he was saying. "Leave them under the snow in the woods. They will not be immediately discovered—and that is all that matters now."

So! Tana and Shorty were dead. I gritted my teeth in silent fury.

"You will proceed to the rendezvous separately so as not to attract attention," Albrecht continued. "Off Staton Point, make the signal so that the boat will be waiting when I arrive at ten hours."

"Zu befehl!" said one.

"That is all then," said Albrecht. *"Heil Hitler!"*

"Heil Hitler!" they chorused, and vanished toward the woods on the right.

Listening, I knew I had the last pay-off clue in this hurdy-gurdy. But unless I could escape Pennipher's trap and warn the Neutrality Patrol, it was useless.

Now Jane was thumped into the seat on my right and then Pennipher beyond her. Karl was behind the wheel and next to him Albrecht faced us with a Luger pistol one size smaller than a cannon aimed toward us.

"You will not forget, Herr Pennipher," he said softly, "to take us by the direct route."

"I will not forget," said Pennipher thinly.

The motor purred, the gears grated. Then the wheels spun, the grippers seized the ice below the snow and we started across the lake.

"A little more left, this side of the point," Pennipher spoke slowly.

As the car veered, a sickening hunch seized me. I knew what Pennipher intended to do and it seemed nothing could save any of us.

Somehow I must get my hands free for what was to come.

I nudged Jane in the elbow and cautiously twisted so that her back was to me. There was already slack in the ropes. Her cold tense fingers began working at the knots. I don't think Pennipher was aware of it. He had leaned back, his eyes closed, looking old and dying from the pain he had endured. Albrecht stared back, but the interior was dark and Jane was clever. The rope loops fell away from my wrists. I had the pins and needles agony of returning circulation. Yet I started on Jane. I did not know how many seconds separated us from eternity.

Pennipher's voice broke the interior silence.

"More left. There is a road up from the lake to the cottage."

"Left, then, Karl," said Albrecht.

Beside me, I felt Pennipher stiffen as to an expected blow. I gritted my teeth and forced my fingers to work slowly and carefully. Plucking at the final knot I jerked and Albrecht saw the movement. He

emitted one of those yard-long German curses.

"Stop, Karl," he yelled, "that *verdamnt* Bently—"

He got no farther. Beneath the car the ice suddenly sank like a yielding wave. Above the purr of the motor came the exploding crackle of ice breaking. The snow

turned black as water gushed through the cracks. The nose of the motor tilted down sharply.

But for Albrecht's shout to Karl we would have driven in and through the thin ice that covered the spring hole toward which Pennipher had coolly directed the car. As it was the ice ahead broke. The car was slipping into the water, nose first. There was a split second in which to act.

Karl screamed, "Jump, Excellenz, we sink."

Say this much for that squarehead at the wheel. He stuck there, fighting to stop—to back out.

I waited for nothing. I ignored Albrecht's gun. As the sliding car gained momentum, I flung open the door. With my other hand I got Jane by her gold curls and pulled her by the head. I kneed her from behind and she went sprawling out onto the snow, sliding some ten feet clear of the car. Water was welling up below me. But she was clear of that.

The only reason I did not die then from a bullet was that Albrecht was wrenching at the front right door. The ice was coming up at me with incredible speed. I grabbed Pennipher and leaped.

Three things happened then with lightning swiftness. The ice caught the opened door and hurled it back on me. Pennipher was torn from my grasp and fell in the foot of water that gushed over the sinking ice.

The door trapped me half in and half out of the car. My jammed body blocked Albrecht's body as he tried to leap clear.

He twisted, cursing wildly, and levelled the gun in his hand at my face and pulled the trigger. I had the instinct to knock his arm upward. The blaze of the explosion blew off my hat, set fire to my hair.

Before he could fire again the car dove under the ice. The bitter black water gushed in on us in a trapping torrent.

Chapter VII

MR. AND MRS. VON UMBREIT

I HAD a second to grab a deep lungful of air. As the arctic water closed over me, I tried to wriggle backward, clear the door and fight to the surface. But the water was pouring into the interior of the car, and the pressure of it against the door held me pinned as if in a vise. Albrecht had let loose of me and his arms swished the water near my face. I fought to stay cool, conserve my air and as soon as the interior of the car was filled with water and the pressure relaxed, I could crawl out and claw to the surface.

Albrecht had gone mad. He was whipping his body around, clutching with his hands. He had backed over me and was clawing at the outside of the car roof to pull free. Then the car hit the bottom on an angle. It teetered there, and if it had turned to the right it would have rolled on us, pinning us there forever. But, instead, it rolled on its left side, and we were uppermost. Now the only thing holding the door was the natural weight of it pushing into its slot.

And by now I was in hellish shape. The shock of the icy water had made it difficult for me to hold my breath. We'd been down there maybe thirty seconds, and the water was twelve-fifteen feet deep, and the pressure on your lungs at that depth is tough.

I felt like I was exploding inside. But I was still keeping my head. I let Albrecht claw and pull, and I braced against the back of the front seat and pushed myself clear of the door.

I gave a kick. My heavy overcoat was holding me down, my soggy clothes. God, I could not rise. Finally my stabbing foot hit the side of the car. I shot upward.

Then Albrecht's hands closed around my legs. With an incredible speed, the desperate swiftness of a man frantic to live, he clawed up my body as if I was a pole. His hands shoved at my shoulders. He

kicked at my hips. I was reeling sideways and he was going up. But I clung to him and we went up.

I let go my air, preparatory to getting another breath before Albrecht and my wet clothes pulled me down. But my head did not break water.

It bumped against ice.

We had not come up in the hole made by the car.

I don't remember much of that instant. My lungs were on fire, my eyes bulging, staring upward. Albrecht was clawing at me, butting his skull against that ice. My eyes saw the bubbles of my breath. They slid to the right. I made one last desperate move. I kicked to the right—and my eyes saw the dark night, the blessed, pulsing stars. My lungs sucked in the air they had screamed for. My thrashing arms were sweeping through air and spanking the water surface.

I had time to gasp once before Albrecht grabbed me and pulled me under, climbing up me as if he were a telephone lineman.

I burst loose again. Popped out.

"Sam! Sam!" It was Jane's scream.

I couldn't answer. Albrecht was pummeling me in the face. He had filled his lungs and was trying to use me to clamber onto the sheet of ice and crawl to safety. I thought in that first instant that he was still in a panic. But not later when he drove his fist into my face to break my hold. He wanted to live but he wanted also for me to die there.

I'll never forget his face then. It was white and glittering, water dripping from his hair. His eyes wide, his lips skinned back in a grimace that was animal and not human. His blow had torn me loose and had propelled him toward the ledge of ice.

He seized it, his hands diving into the covering of snow on it. A sound that was neither laughter nor a shout broke from him. It was a wolf-cry of triumph.

I can't tell you how I got to him. A man does things without memory—incredible things. Or how I avoided his backward kicking as he tried to slither onto the ice, I do not know. But I did avoid his deadly feet, and when the chunk of ice he was clawing at broke loose and went under because of his weight, I was beside him.

I have no clear memory of what followed. The hot salt of blood was on my icy cheeks. The weight of my clothes was pulling me under. I was exhausted.

But I had my hands on his throat, and his fingernails were gouging huge gutters of flesh from my wrists as I forced him under. He fought and twisted but I held him so. He was pulling me under when I saw Jane sprawled on the ice, clad only in her slip, and she was holding out her dress. Old Pennipher had her by the ankles in case the ice broke under her.

"Sam," her voice cut through the red roaring in my ears, "grab—quick—the whole ice is giving way."

I grabbed that dress with my teeth and it held me up, my neck against the ice.

I felt Albrecht clawing at my hands. Then silver bubbles cascaded upward. His hands fell away from mine. He did not move. I drew up my feet, and kicked him downward. His body went away. It did not come up.

I was nearly finished myself. I grabbed the dress and finally Jane tugged me to solid ice.

"I'm—I'm hellish cold," I said, and fainted.

The water I lay in was steaming warm. A guy about thirty or so, wearing a mustache and a Van Dyke beard, was bending over the bathtub, holding up my chin. As I opened my eyes he picked up a steaming drink and said, "Here, this will do you good."

It did. It was hot whiskey—Scotch at that.

The bearded gent beamed.

"How goes it?"

"I'm warm," I said, then I remembered

and gave a jump that splashed water on the tiled floor.

"Hey! Shorty, Tana!" I yelled. "And that sub—get me to a phone!"

"Gently, Herr Bently," said the bearded guy, "all is taken care of. The Neutrality Patrol seeks the *unterseebot*. Herr Becker and Tana are in the hospital at Norwalk and will recover. You have only to keep from getting pneumonia from immersion."

"Pneumonia hell!" I said. "I'm all right. Get me some clothes. I want to clean up this case."

The bearded man smiled. "You Americans! I believe you *are* well. Here."

I towelled off and he gave me a dressing gown with a monogram, and slippers. He led me out to a brightly lit room where Jane sat in negligee before a roaring fire. Pennipher was stretched on a couch. Near Jane was a tall beautiful gray-haired woman. She was prematurely gray and her face had trouble lines in it. But she smiled at sight of me.

"Ah, Michael," she said, "you have performed the miracle."

At the sound of her voice Pennipher dragged himself off the couch. Somehow he tottered to the bearded guy and knelt.

"Your Royal Highness!" he said and took the guy's hand and touched it to his forehead and his lips.

The man who had bathed me smiled and patted Pennipher's white hair.

"August," he said in a German patois, "here I am von Umbreit and you are an American. Stand!" He pulled old Pennipher to his feet. "Noka, please help him."

The gray-haired woman held Pennipher. "Dear August." she said, and kissed him on the cheek. The tears ran down the old man's face as he turned to me. But he controlled his voice and spoke simply.

"Bently, two hundred years ago His Highness' forebears saved mine from death. My family pledged life, honor to help Extanburg. So I had to help His Highness escape the Gestapo."

He paused. Then: "It was necessary to smuggle the Duke into the country because after the German occupation of Extanburg there was rebellion and sabotage. The Germans thought if they could get the Duke back—for he is popular—they could quell it by threats against his person. So he had to come to this country more than incognito. He had to enter illegally, secretly, because the Germans must not know he was in America. We let it be known he was in Cuba."

He smiled gravely at me. "Mr. Bently, you have called me an ingrate, thinking I was supporting Nazism with the money this great country gave me. I pray you will believe it is not so. What I did, I did to redeem the honorable pledge of my people. It was, as I have said, a question of my honor."

His voice broke, strengthened. "For America all else I own belongs. I have violated the laws because honor demanded. I am ready to pay."

He put out his hands as if for handcuffs. I took one of them, rather unsteadily.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said. "After awhile, when it can be arranged, the Duke here had better get in touch with the State Department. They will protect his incognito." I had hung onto his hand. Now I pressed it hard.

"I've got nothing for you but applause," I said.

Jane was weeping because she is a sentimentalist at heart. So was the Duchess. I was feeling wet inside, so I said, "I feel a cold coming on. How about a couple of drinks to build an inner fire?"

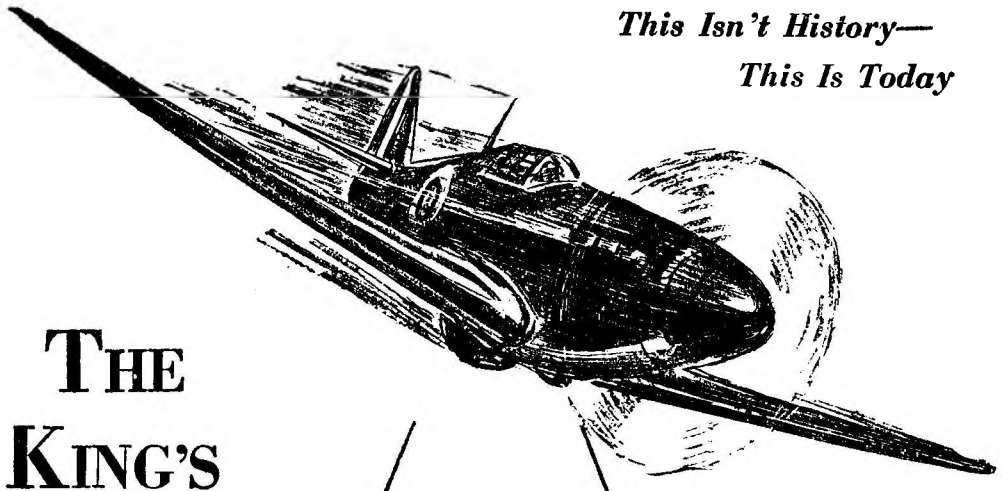
Jane came to me and kissed me. "You're quite a guy, Sam. I always said so." I kissed her and didn't say thanks for saving my life because she knows how I feel about her.

The Duke gave me some Scotch. He was a nice guy.

"A toast, then, Herr Bently?"

"Why, yeah," I said, holding up my glass. "A little salute to honor—and God give us more of it in a crazy world."

This Isn't History—
This Is Today



THE KING'S MAN

By C. F. KEARNS

1914 **1941**

IT WAS Mike Finucane who first told me about Caution Cove, by the Pacific's sheltered tide, in the green land of tall trees and majestic mountains. He would talk to us of nights, while the star shells flared and the German trenches were only a hand grenade's toss away. He would grow deftly lyrical in describing the mild, moist climate, the salmon fishing, the placid serenity of his home. We made due allowances for the contrast but even so he sketched intriguing pictures for men in the mud of narrow ditches.

A good soldier, Finucane, with the gift of handling soldiers and making them like it. In his late thirties, sturdy, actively restless and with a hint of the brogue in his speech. He was our platoon sergeant.

Promotion was fast—for the survivors. A year in France and he was a company commander and I was orderly room sergeant. I was alone with the adjutant the day Captain Finucane reported back from leave—we were billeted in rest at the time—and he stamped into the room like a mad bull. The adjutant waved cheerily.

"Welcome back, you mad mick, we've missed you and—"

"I'll see the new C.O.," snorted Finucane, stiffly regimental. "One Colonel Penhalis—is it! If he is the same man I think he is then there is no space for both of us here. Announce me at once—if you please."

"That will not be necessary," broke in the crisp voice of our new Commanding Officer. "I am here, Captain—ah—Finucane?"

He stood in the doorway; a straight military man wearing Boer war ribbons. It was too plain, that—the door being open

—he had heard Finucane's outburst. He wore a thin, cold smile and his eyes were like agate. The adjutant gasped, "Ohhh" in a tiny squeak and went out quickly on tip toes. He was a wise man; wiser than I, teetering in indecision because the room was charged with hot conflict that overrode such a feeble matter as military discipline.

"You heard me then." Finucane seemed to pant. "You heard me then, Colonel—ah—Penhalis. I want a transfer."

"I heard you," said Penhalis calmly, but it was no less tolerable than a shout. "I heard you, Finucane. You will get no transfer."

Their eyes clashed like swords. I could feel the slither of cold steel, the cherished enmity, the blood hate. And I could not understand.

"A damned Irish Rebel bearing the King's Commission!" spat Penhalis. "A damned Irish Rebel!" he repeated slowly, unbelievingly.

Finucane laid his gloves and his stick on the table. He took off his cap and put it beside them. He folded his arms across his wide chest and it seemed to me that his fingers caressed significantly the ribbons of the D.C.M. and the M.C. on his left breast.

"The number of the same might well run higher than you could count." He was ironically suave. "And since when did an Irishman take the King's shilling and let that same King down while he wore the uniform and took the pay!" His jaws set. "Name me one. Just one!"

Penhalis' eyes flamed but he did not speak.

"Bah!" said Finucane, but defensively. "This isn't history. This is today. The month of December, nineteen sixteen. What went before is no man's business. I'm a Canadian now."

"No?" queried Penhalis. His thin grin came and went, and ice was warmer. "I'm a Canadian, also. No history, you say? Then you don't want a transfer?"

Finucane was caught in his own net. The blood flooded his face and his control broke. He called his C.O. a name. Called him several names. And he used the sordid vernacular of the gutters.

Penhalis heard him out before he said:

"Consider yourself under arrest, Captain Finucane."

THE case never came to trial. I think, had I not been present, Penhalis would not have reported it. But I was duly summoned before the Brigadier. The Brigadier was busy. My visit was brief.

"You were present at an interview between Colonel Penhalis and Captain Finucane in the orderly room of your unit this morning, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me what took place."

I was in a spot. Finucane and I were friends. Our friendship sprang from a mutual sharing of danger and hardships. A lot of us knew that he had fought with Lynch's brigade in South Africa. He hadn't made any particular secret of it, and the Irish are an unpredictable proposition in any case.

I knew now that he and Penhalis had met before and that hostilities had never been finished. I didn't know what to say so I said nothing.

The Brigadier looked up from his writing, impatiently.

"Well, Sergeant?"

I said, "I don't remember, sir."

He held his pen poised, looking at me directly for the first time.

"What did you say?"

"I don't remember, sir. I was very busy."

"You're lying," stated the Brigadier flatly.

"Sir!" I protested, and tried to look injured. "Sir!"

"I still think you're lying." The Brigadier was not impressed. "Why?"

I had to carry the bluff through. I swung my left arm around and grabbed the chevrons there with my right fingers, and

yanked. I did it pretty effectively, too. I tore the three stripes off and I laid them on his desk.

I tried to do it with dignity and made a passable effort, I hoped.

The Brigadier sat up straight and relief stood in his eyes.

"Is that your answer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Pick up those chevrons and sew them back. You will report to Corps H.Q. immediately. Your papers will be ready as soon as you can pack your kit. I trust in future you will—ah—I am sure—"

"Yessir," I said fervently. "My memory is terrible."

He gave me a hasty, understanding smile and dismissed me with a jerk of his pen. He was a distraught and harassed man, and he was blown up at a forward listening post a week later.

Finucane got his transfer, I learned later, but we did not meet again. Subsequently I transferred to the Royal Flying Corps as an aerial gunner and a day came when I got in the way of a burst of incendiary bullets from a Fokker over Cambrai. I spent the rest of the war in hospitals and for a long time afterwards I wasn't much good for anything.

IN nineteen twenty-three I drifted west to Vancouver where one day I passed Penhalis on the street. He stopped me.

"Wait," he said. "I know you. I never forget a face but I don't recall your name."

"I was your orderly room sergeant, sir," I reminded him. "Just for a very short time—when you first took over the battalion."

He knew me then. His eyes hardened and geniality faded somewhat, but not on my account.

"Yes, I remember. Very well I remember. Will you have a spot of lunch with me?"

He took me to his club which was a cheerful place overlooking the harbor and the mountains. We had a seat by a window where we talked trivialities before I asked if he knew of any jobs that would suit a man whose nerves were none too good, who wasn't fussy about office work but had no particular training in anything else. He asked what my hobbies were.

I told him I hadn't any, unless it might be fly fishing or sailing a small boat. Whereat he shut one eye humorously and not without a certain hint of guile, which I was later to understand. Then he nodded in a speculative, satisfied sort of way.

"You like to fish and sail a boat, do you? Two things I do very well myself. I think I have enough influence in the right quarters to get you just what you want. How would you like to join the Provincial Police and be stationed in the loveliest and by no means the loneliest spot on the coast. Where you can sail and fish to your heart's content."

"It sounds good," I said, "but this policing— I've never done any—"

"Quite simple," he gave a negative wave of the hand. "We have asked for a resident constable at Caution Cove and—"

"Caution Cove!" I exclaimed in sudden recollection. "Why, that's where—ah——"

I stumbled then and Penhalis took over.

"Quite right. The Finucane lives there. But even his presence cannot entirely foul all the air. It so happens that you were a witness to the second act of a drama that he and I were fated to play. It may be possible that you will see the finale. And perhaps you may not find it necessary to lie like a gentleman—as you did once."

His words were melodramatic, but his eyes were not. Hate lived there; smoldering, uncompromised, relentless.

So that was how I came to join the Provincial Police and, after a short probationary training, to be stationed at Caution Cove. I had no fault to find with it from the time the steamer came in sight of the long curved beach where white-walled dwellings dotted the background of intense greenery. Around a bold rock promontory was a snug shelter for small craft, and

the business section of a docile little settlement. The first man I met on the wharf was Mike Finucane.

He thumped me on the back and wrung my hand. If I was a bit embarrassed by the warmth of his welcome I was also flattered. He gave me a general introduction to the bystanders.

"Our new and very own cop. Look out

for him, folks. He's bad medicine. No fooling. He was with me in France."

I soon gathered that Mike was considerable of a power in Caution Cove. He owned the hotel, the chief store, a logging camp up the valley with a fleet of trucks and a fifty-foot towboat. He was modestly proud of it all, no less so than of his wife and five children, four girls and the youngest, a boy.

"I'm getting by nicely," he admitted. "I told you about Caution Cove, didn't I? I could see the possibilities of the place and I bought some land before I went to fight.

"It was dirt cheap then, of course. But it's worth a lot now for residential acreage. This is an exclusive neighborhood in a way. The best climate in Canada. The finest fishing. Not too far off the beaten path and yet far enough for those who like to live their own lives." He looked at me oddly for a moment. "You will remember one man. He lives here—summers."

"Penhalis got me this job," I told him fairly. "For a reason—looks like."

"Did he!" It might have been Penhalis' own eyes that burned back at me. "All right—straddle the fence. You saved me a court-martial once. Maybe you'll have a chance to save me a hanging."

From my living quarters at the rear of the new police office I could look out to the open gulf, where the coastwise shipping slid by and the Empress liners on the first leg of their course for the Orient. By night their riding lights joined the winking glow of the towns on Vancouver Island. It was a maritime panorama of sea and mountains and veering horizons that never became monotonous because it was never the same on any two successive days. When the mood of weather changed so did my view.

A restful thing, that outlook. Sharing it at times with Penhalis or Finucane—or anyone, for that matter—it was sufficient to just sit and look without the tedious necessity of conversation. Between these two and myself was a mutual bond of common service that gave us a ready bone of discussion—the war. But there was one subject I avoided with either of them. Indeed, everyone in Caution Cove did the same.

It was difficult, too. With the passing years the Finucane girls grew up, went away to school, married and made their homes elsewhere. Young Conn Finucane was eighteen the summer the war came again.

And Mona Penhalis was seventeen.

I had never met her father, Flight Lieutenant Penhalis of the Royal Air Force, but I had seen his picture. He had just got his wings when the Armistice was signed and was bitterly disappointed. He had stayed in the permanent Air Force and saw service in Russia and Persia and India. He was killed in the high mountains of Waziristan, a year before I came to Caution Cove.

I watched Mona grow up. I knew her mother and was lonely for a time when she went back to England, for she was a gracious woman. She married her late husband's chum but left Mona with her grandparents. The Penhalises had no other children.

I watched Mona Penhalis and Conn Finucane grow up in the same small community and, like everyone else, I speculated about what would happen, if, some day——

Not that there was any friendship between them. The families did not speak but I had seen Mrs. Penhalis and Mrs. Finucane smile at each other in a guarded sort of way. Mona and Conn met on the tennis and badminton courts, they sailed against each other at the regattas and competed in the swimming events with the rest of the young summer crowd. It is unlikely that they had ever exchanged a word except in a crowd and no one ever saw them dance together.

Time slips along. So fast, so quietly, so *soon*. Came the day when war was on us again, and we looked blankly at each other —we who knew war when we were young —and we pondered where all the years had gone.

Such pleasant years, the sixteen I had spent in Caution Cove. Some men would have been bored utterly by my routine. I knew everyone for fifty miles of coastline on either side of the Cove; the ship crews, the tugboat men, the loggers, the fishermen, the Indians and the summer people who came seasonally and were prone to linger until they were permanent residents, like the Penhalis family.

The place grew on me until I would not willingly have lived anywhere else at any price.

The police offered me advancement, and a move. I begged off. When they insisted I went to either Finucane or Penhalis depending which party held the greater power in Provincial politics. So I stayed.

SEPTEMBER, 1939. We heard the King talk and felt our backs stiffen. Then the down boat whistled and we were on the wharf when it came alongside. Mona Penhalis, with her grandparents, going back to school. Trim, dark, winsome and a bit on the skinny side but even a gently graying man like myself could feel warm and important when she smiled and held out her hand.

"Do take care of Gramp and Mums while I'm gone, won't you, Chief?"

Everybody called me chief.

"Take care of him yourself. Bet he's going down to enlist."

"Of course he is, but he's too old. They won't take him, will they?"

She turned away without waiting for an answer because Conn Finucane, off to an Eastern university, came along with his father. I toed Finucane's bag."

"Morning, Captain," I said. "They won't take you."

"Be damned they won't." His glance slid coldly past Penhalis. "My chance is as good as some."

Conn pulled my sleeve. He wasn't as big as his father but he had ridgy muscles in his neck and springs in his feet. Curly haired, sunbrowned and eyes too serious for a boy, that morning.

"Dad says he is going to enlist and he'll break my neck if I try it. Says he's experienced and I have to stay out and—"

"Wait up," I told him. "Everybody feels the same way. Nobody knows what it is all about yet. You're starting your second year medicine. They'll need you as a doctor before it's over. Don't get het up. Lots of time yet."

He didn't even listen. I didn't expect him to.

War! It takes time for a non-militant democracy to get into high gear; to oil the creaking machinery of a quiescent militia and enlarge the plant. Came the spring and early summer. The capitulation of the low countries. Dunkerque!

I took the boat to Vancouver where the recruiting sergeant grinned at the ribbons on my police tunic. "What age?"

"Forty-three," I stated gravely.

"And ten," he said, just as gravely. "Maybe fifteen. Be your age, fella."

Penhalis was on the up boat. He was

a recruiting officer with the rank of captain. I asked him if he were on leave.

"Yes," he said bitterly. "On permanent leave. Damn that medical board. They found enough things wrong with me to kill a horse and all because I had a bit of a fainting spell. Won't even have me for home service. What rot! I'm only sixty-four. I'm no older than that damned Finucane."

Jealousy. New fuel to old flames. Finucane was a major in a forestry battalion. All loggers and mill men. Right in his mitt, of course. Penhalis caught my arm.

"That man isn't going to have the laugh on me. Why he's fully as old as I am—or older. Give his age as forty-five—will he? We'll see about that!"

"Let it drop, Man," I begged him. "You've carried the grudge long enough."

"I'll carry it longer," he promised fiercely. "If this is a young man's war we won't have any favorites. What about that brat of his?"

"Conn's a nice kid," I said soothingly. "He'll get into it in time."

"Bah!" he growled. "Finucane breed!" His tone was pure poison and I didn't like it. I only half heartedly responded when he suggested, "Let's find another pair and have a rubber or two."

Penhalis kept his word. Three weeks later Finucane came home in civilian clothes and he was the maddest man I had seen for a space.

"Too old!" he snorted as he came down the gangplank. "Too damned old for the brass hats. Ha! I'd like to see the man in this place that can keep step with me all day. Yes—by God—or in Vancouver either!"

Penhalis was on the wharf that afternoon and it may have been by chance that Finucane looked his way. But it wasn't by chance that Penhalis was registering an unmistakable, smug satisfaction.

That was midsummer and the war was nine months old. The winter came and went, summer was in the offing again. May, nineteen forty-one, and the world was blazing. But flowers bloomed in Caution Cove and Mona Penhalis was home from school.

I gave her a salute. She had the clear rose and cream complexion that is the birthright of youth reared in a moist, cool climate like ours. But the sea bloom is wasted on boys. It wasn't wasted on Mona. She was still a bit too thin for my old-fashioned taste but she was a strictly pretty girl. Clear blue eyes and long sweeping lashes and perfect teeth. Maybe her nose wouldn't have suited some people and her mouth may have been a bit too wide but she made me wish I was twenty again.

"You are summer," I said, "and don't you brighten up the place."

"Nice old Chief." She crinkled her eyes and wrinkled her nose at me. "You say such quaint things. Do you think we will have a crowd this season? I want to get in a bit of decent tennis before I go to work."

"Work?"

"Of course. Everybody is doing something. I've taken a special course and I'm going to work in a factory, adjusting fuses for shells. They require a sure and delicate touch, you know. Mums isn't very keen about it. She thinks I should be a canteen worker or something of the sort. She's dated a bit. I wish I were a boy so I could join up."

Before I could comment she asked, "Where is Conn Finucane?"

"Still studying medicine, as far as I know. Spends his vacations doing special lab work in a Montreal hospital, so I hear. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," she said carelessly. "Gramp says the Chinooks are in and I'm going to troll on the turn of the tide tonight. Want to come along?"

"Sure I do," I said, "but a policeman's life is hard. I have to work."

"Work? You? Bosh!" she scoffed.

The first one off the next up boat was Con Finucane. Nearly two years since I

had seen him and he looked both older and thinner. He held up his hand.

"Hi'ya, Chief."

"Hello, son. Where have you—"

"Hello, Mona," he said suddenly, looking past me.

"Hello," said Mona primly. "Where's your uniform?"

"They haven't got one to fit me," he said airily. "They only want men anyhow." His smile was a trifle frosty. "Besides, I've got a good reason."

"Have you?" And did she put an edge on that rising query.

"Sure. I'm scared."

He walked swiftly up the wharf.

I WORK sometimes. I had a tip that a certain salmon troller was doing a mild bit of bootlegging, and was due in to the Cove that night. The illegal red-eye—according to my informant who was the parent of a wayward Indian youth—was artfully concealed in an extra gas tank in the fish boat.

All this in explanation of why I was sitting on a guard stringer on the wharf that evening, with my back to a piling. It was darkish, with a thin crescent moon hanging low, and I was in the shadow of the piling. Outside somewhere came the chug, chug, of a heavy duty engine and I knew my man would be along shortly. Across the cove I heard Mona Penhalis' rippling laugh as she called, "Won't be half a jif." Then her dingy came sliding across the faintly silvered moonpath with her gleaming oar blades dripping molten phosphorescent drops.

A figure strolled down the slipway from the wharf and stood on the float below me. I puzzled a bit before I decided that it was Conn Finucane. He waited until the dinghy came alongside and he caught the gunwale. Mona stepped lightly out. Conn was bent over, probably making the painter fast.

He straightened. They both stood still. I could see the gap of riant, dusky water between them. Then Mona said haughtily:

"Oh—it's you, is it?"

Conn said quietly. "Yes, Mona. I—I was standing up on the path, l-looking at your light. And I heard you laugh!"

Except the sound of the gas boat's engine somewhere beyond the point it was quiet in the Cove. So quiet that it emphasized the faltering explanation. I would have given my right eye if I could have gone away without being seen. But they were only scant feet from me and a move would have disclosed my presence. It was not for me, or anyone—this meeting. Yet I stayed. I stayed.

"You were watching our light!" Somehow the disdain was missing. "Our light? Why?"

"Because"—it was as if he took his heart in his hands and held it out to her—"because you were there. I—I don't care what you think of me. I love you. I loved you ever since I can remember. You are the only girl I have ever loved. I—"

Mona stamped her foot on the planks and she used the same amazed inflection that her grandfather would have used:

"Oh damn! Why did you tell me that!" Conn didn't answer. He probably couldn't. And beyond them the riding lights of the gasboat showed in the mouth of the cove.

"You"— She caught her breath audibly. "You shouldn't have said that, Conn Finucane! You know you shouldn't. What will our famil—"

The quivering gap between them was no more. They were a single dark shape below me and Mona was crying, all throaty and shaking: "Oh, I love you, too! Oh, Conn! I love you most terribly. I don't care if—"

A spotlight's brilliant pencil darted from the gasboat, swept across them and steadied on the wharf, ten feet from where I sat. Then it shifted full on me and held for long seconds, so that I put my hands over my burning face until it shifted to the float again. I could hear the light sound of running feet up the slipway.

I waited a moment before I went back

to the slipway and down to the float. I was fuming at the thought of having been caught listening. There was something almost sacred in the revelation of those two kids and I had the ashamed feeling of an unwitting profaner. I took it out on Wallaby Joe when he tossed me his painter and said affably:

"Hello, Chief. Nice night, eh. Moon and stars and everything."

"Yeah," I was a bit rough. "Especially the everything. That's what I am going to have a look at."

"Why, Chief!" He sounded very injured. "I know I shouldn't be running passengers around but this was an emergency, and I never charged any fare either."

A man came out of the back cabin and said wearily, "Hello, Chief. I have to catch the boat down in the morning but I felt so tough I thought I had better get as far as I could tonight. I'm a bit below par."

It was Father Bill, the Missionary from the reservations up the coast. A dumpy, benign little man who had lived among the Indians so long that he was almost ill at ease with white people. He had been an Army chaplain in France and we had fished together often. I knew that of late years he kept to a strict diet and I also knew that he feared an operation above all things on earth. I saw that my poacher hunt was off for the night.

"We'll go to Finucane's," I said heartily. "They'll fix you up with—"

"No," he protested. "No, Chief. I don't want any fussing around. I should have been more careful but the oolichans are running and my people feel insulted if I won't eat what they offer me." The oolichans or candle fish are mostly oil; very tasty, if one has a strong stomach. "No. I'll stay with you until the boat comes—if you'll have me."

My home, as I mentioned, faces the outer gulf, a matter of a hundred yards from the wharf. I helped the padre off with his coat and shoes. He decline my hasty enumeration of various emergency remedies.

"If you have a hot water bottle it might help," he said. "But my trouble is organic and the knife is the only cure. I'll just have to endure it until I get to Vancouver."

I was heating water on the gasoline stove in the kitchen when the door opened and in came Mona Penhalis and Conn Finucane. I didn't notice at first that they were holding hands because of the radiance that sat upon them.

"Well!" I felt decidedly awkward. "Hello, kids."

"Good old Chief." Conn's grin almost touched his ears. "Absolutely imperturbable—knowing what he does."

"Eavesdropper!" said Mona. "Skulker on wharves. You snooping, prying—"

But she hid her face against my arm, still holding tightly to Conn, and the tears were close as she whispered:

"Oh, Chief! Tell us. Tell us what to do."

I patted her shoulder reassuringly and before I knew it I had gathered Conn into my other arm and I hugged them both for a moment before I pushed them away and stood back to look at them.

"What a question! The devil to pay. Two devils to pay—and not enough pitch in this country to heat up for either of them. You kids have started something. Something too much. Now what?"

"Tell us," begged Mona. "Please tell us. I'm—I'm terrified."

"I'll run myself if you don't keep holding me," remarked Conn. "Honest, Chief—we don't know what to do. I——" He gulped. "I—yes, I do. Call up our fathers and tell them we're here. Tell them their feud can go chase itself as far as we are concerned."

"That's an idea," I agreed. "You've got to tell them sometime and the telephone would be the safest way. Who'll do the telephoning?"

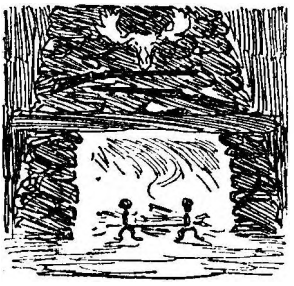
"You will," they cried together.

I didn't like the task but it had to be done. I got Penhalis first and told him I would like him to come over to my office.

Before he could ask why I said as offhandedly as I could:

"Mona and Conn are here and they seem to have decided to be friends or something."

He said "Good God!" as a man will when he is both shocked and surprised. I heard the receiver drop. I waited for six



or seven minutes before grinding out Finucane's call, which he answered in person.

"Is that our ring?"

"Yes," I said. "Will you come over here in about five minutes. As long as it will take Penhalis to row across the cove."

"And just why"—I could feel his bristle—"should I come to your house to see that man?"

"Isn't it enough that I ask you?"

"All right," he said. "I'll be over."

His voice was harsh, holding more than a threat.

THE telephone was in the hall, between my kitchen-dining room and the living room, which is fairly large. I went back into the kitchen and poured hot water into the rubber bottles. The two thoughtful, worried youngsters were at my heels.

"Think somebody will need that?" Conn tried a feeble jest. "When we break the news."

"Somebody needs it now," I told them. "Father Bill is in the bedroom with a pain in his pinafore. Bad one, too. Has to get to town by the down boat. Maybe this will help him a bit."

"Father Bill!" exclaimed Conn, his eyes lighting. "Father Bill—in there!"

"Yes," I said, "he—"

"Gosh!" gasped Conn. "Look, Mona—I—sa-ay, we could—"

"No!" Mona shook her head. "Don't be dumb. We can't—"

"Sure we can!" He caught her by both arms but she wouldn't look at him. "No, No!" she protested. "Be sensible. Gramp'll go through the roof properly. He's due to detonate anyway." She looked up. "Be your age, Chump. You only met me tonight."

Must be nice to have a girl look at you like that; misty eyed, tender, half afraid, altogether glad. And all for you.

"Liar." His eyes were eloquent. "I've known you always—"

Somebody came through my kitchen door like a projectile. Finucane in his shirt sleeves, puffing with a combination of haste and anger. He stopped short with an explosive "Ha!"

"Ha, yourself," I greeted him. "Don't you ever knock?"

"Ha!" He snorted again. "I thought so. I thought so! What does this mean?"

He got no answer because Penhalis came in quietly through the still half-opened door. He was as straight as a lance, his bleak expression quite devoid of either compromise or mercy.

"Come, girl," he commanded, holding the door open.

Nobody moved, except that Mona clung tighter to Conn's hand. Both kids were white. Then Finucane snapped:

"Away with you, then. And I will take this child of mine off."

At that, Penhalis shut the door positively, as if he had remembered something more important.

"So!" His right hand was in the pocket of his rough tweed coat. "So! I am to take suggestions from—"

"Stop that." I stepped hastily between them. "This room is too small. Come into the living room."

Mona and Conn hastened ahead. I gave Finucane a push and Penhalis followed me.

I gave Finucane another push when we got inside, and switched on the lights.

"Stand over there." I told him bluntly, "and you here." I held Penhalis by the door so the width of the room was between them. I motioned Conn and Mona halfway down the room from the two smoldering old men whose personal hatreds were at last about to flame violently.

"One minute. Look at me!" I had a prescience of blood, and it was no unreasonable premonition. "Look at these children. Let your own grudge wait. It's waited forty years, hasn't it? These kids—they are old enough to be friends if they want to—aren't they?"

My argument seemed to be ineffectual, even to me.

Penhalis growled, "Ohrrr!" Finucane growled, "Ahrrr!" Both of them ready. Finucane knew what Penhalis had in his pocket and Penhalis knew he knew. Not cowards, either of them.

"If my boy doesn't drop that girl like a hot coal"—Finucane's pointed finger might have been a spear at the other man's heart —"he'll never set a foot across my doorway again. And I mean it, be God!"

"My granddaughter is at the impressionable age." Penhalis' scorn cut. "But even so, I am amazed—and ashamed. I forbid her to even speak to this—to your breed."

"Gramp!" Mona bounced and sizzled. She was startlingly arresting in that moment. "Don't—speak like that—about—Conn——ever!"

"So!" Penhalis dropped ice with every syllable. "You approve of the—ah—Finucanes!"

Finucane snorted so loudly it was like a bull elk's whistle. Mona stepped a pace toward her grandfather and the tempest left her. She nodded her head slowly, wistfully.

"His people are my people," she pleaded softly.

That hit Penhalis hard. He said, "Good God!" in a low tone of utter disbelief. Finucane snarled impatiently, as he turned his stabbing finger on Conn:

"Is that so! Not if I know it. Listen, boy: these families don't mix. Tell me now—tell me quickly—whose man are *you?*"

Conn's answer was cryptic. He put his hand into the pocket of his flannels and when he took it out he tossed something at his father's feet. Something that glinted in the light and tinkled faintly as it fell.

"You want to know whose man I am?" He smiled staunchly. "Pick that up and read what it says."

Finucane swept a bauble off the floor; a tiny oval silver plate with a thin chain attached. Not one of us but knew what it was before he held it to the light. A flying man's identification bracelet. He read haltingly:

"Pilot Officer Conn M. Finucane! Pilot Officer Conn—"

"There's your answer," said Conn stoutly. "That tells you whose man I am. I'm King George's man."

"A flier!" Finucane still stared at the identification badge. "A fli—ah, don't lie to me, boy. You've been at the university for—"

"Sorry," said Conn crisply, "but I fooled you, Dad. My mail came and went from there but I've been flying for more than a year. I've been a flying instructor for the past three months. Now I'm on my overseas leave. I've three weeks and a bit to spare if I fly both ways. I came to Vancouver yesterday by T. C. A. plane and—"

"Conn!" It burst from Mona at last. "Oh, Conn! You never told *me!* You—you—low, crafty sneak! You said this morning that—"

"That they didn't have a uniform to fit me." He grinned a sheepish, bashful grin. "That's the truth. Mine had to be made to measure. But the real reason I didn't tell you was because——"

He snagged on that, but it was explanation enough. That he wouldn't use the

glamor of the uniform. That he wanted to know if she liked him as he was, or—

"Pilot, eh?" marveled Mike Finucane. "War pilot, eh?" His eyes were proud. "Didn't think you had it in you, son, but I might have known."

"Three weeks!" whispered Mona desperately. "Three weeks? Ohhh—Conn!"

She clung to him, her head on the arch of his chest. Penhalis cleared his throat, momentarily off guard.

"Ah—ummm. Three weeks. Puppy love. It will wear off and—"

"Stop it!" Mona tore loose and whirled on him." Stop it, Gramp. Come to earth. Look at the calendar. This is today. Right now! There aren't any perhaps or maybes. Three weeks is all we have. Three weeks!"

She said more quietly, trying to be composed. Almost succeeding:

"Better tell Mums to come over, Gramp. There's a dear. Tell her I'm going to marry Conn Finucane—tonight."

"What!" Penhalis lost his control, shouting at her. "Have you gone mad, girl? Marry! With one of those—those —people!"

Words are a capable vehicle for delivering the insult deadly, but mere language without the tonal inflections of a cultured accent is a pale thing. Penhalis made simple words into the same number of jagged darts, each dipped in venom and speeded direct by the raging disdain behind it. It stunned me for a moment. I knew he hated Finucane sincerely, but I could not believe that he would include all Finucane's family.

Finucane licked his lips and his eyes sneered at the weapon that Penhalis held in his hand, bulging his coat pocket. He poised on both feet, his body swaying slightly as he grated:

"I made a mistake. I made a mistake —forty years ago. I should have saved one bullet!"

"I made the mistake," Penhalis corrected bitingly. "I should have let my lancers pin you to the earth for the vermin you were—forty years ago."

"Ha!" Finucane threw his head back. "That's good! A merciful man you were, on your big horse, with a good half troop of lancers. A brave man, you—facing a lone, starving lad with a bit of an empty gun. Mistake? You made no mistake. 'Take him alive,' you said. 'Take him alive so we can hang him publicly for the traitor he is.' Mistake? Twenty men on horseback rushed me, and your yourself—my brave lad—you stood clear."

PENHALIS wore a thin, chill smile. Death waited in his eyes.

"Mistake," said Finucane, and the past lay with us. "A clout over the head with a carbine butt and clubbed lances to help out. Trussed like a damned pig for market in your bivouac that night. But you never thought there was life in Mike Finucane. Life enough to chew through the ropes, strike down your pickets and make off with Lieutenant Penhalis' own charger. Yes, maybe you did make a mistake, Mister. You should have—"

"Oh—stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" Mona shrieked with her hands wild and high as she spun between them. "Stop it—you two tiresome old men. What do we care what you did before—before Conn and I were born? What do we care for your old wars! It's not our lives you're living. Not mine and Conn's. Our life is now—this minute—this short hour—and you shan't spoil it. You shan't keep us apart any more—like you always have."

She spun on the axis of her twinkling sandals and she wasn't the child I knew. She was a primitive woman in revolt, fighting against the inherent disciplined routine of a lifetime. But her grandfather ignored her. I doubt if he even heard her, so intent he was on a scene in the past. But he gave me the real reason why he hated Finucane so.

"I made a mistake," he spoke as a judge wearing the black cap and passing sen-

tence. "I made a mistake when I took you prisoner. The garbled story that came back from the Boer lines made me a laughing stock among my fellow officers. Made my position untenable. Made me"—it was hard for him to say, even after forty years—"resign my commission in the permanent army!"

He took a hot step forward, swept his tempestuous granddaughter aside so imperiously that she was momentarily frightened. His hand caught her upper arm and whirled her half around. He stood eye to eye with Finucane—three paces separating them—and his hand was still in his coat pocket.

"But you can't appreciate that! Can you —you scum?"

That was my cue to jump between them. To keep them apart. Somehow I couldn't move fast enough. I couldn't move at all. But young Conn ducked as he swept his right foot in an arc and he kicked his father's feet out from under him quite neatly.

He twisted lithely and grabbed his father's arm so that Finucane fell on the seat of his pants without too hard a jar.

Penhalis stared down at him; his pocket thrust out straight and stiff. Mona screamed "Ohhh!" with her frantic hands to her lips. Mike Finucane put his palms flat on the floor as he looked up, his legs out in front of him.

"You would—" he gasped defiantly. "You would! Pot a sitter!"

I still couldn't interfere. Nor could I explain why. In review I am not proud of the part I played then, and yet—I am thankful that for a spell I stayed in the role of an impotent spectator.

Penhalis hesitated. Probably nothing else that Finucane could have taunted him with would have checked him. He rasped, "Oh—you recognize a gentleman's code? Did you ever practice—"

"If blood is all you want—" Conn leaped easily over his father's shoulder to stand almost against Penhalis, and between them. "If blood is all you want, Colonel —I'll wash the slate."

Penhalis backed a bit. Conn was too close to him.

"I'm a pursuit pilot," said Conn calmly. "The fastest planes that fly. Can I pay the debt?"

Penhalis focused his eyes as if he had never seen Conn before. He stepped to one side to peer past him, and this time I acted. I slid my hands on either side of his neck and I grabbed the lapels of his loose coat and tore the garment back over his shoulders, pinioning his arms. It is a most effective trick and I swung him around so that his left side was to Mike Finucane.

Most men would have struggled, or cursed, or both. Penhalis did neither. He stared at Conn unbelievingly as he asked a hoarse question.

"When did *you* grow up?"

I felt the steel leave him and I let go his coat. Finucane got up from the floor, drew his hand across his eyes, and sighed. Mona's cheeks were wet. Conn said, in a dull, flat tone:

"I don't know. Lately, perhaps. But call off the—the feud. And I promise you I won't see Mona again until the war is over."

"No!" She slipped to his side and her firm, sun-brown hand lay across his twisted lips. "No—you shan't say that! You mustn't say that. What do we care what these old men think? This is our time. Our war. If you are good enough to fight for the damned stiff-necked Penhalises you are good for— Oh, Conn!"

She clung to him. Conn's grin was staunch but wryly aslant:

"I guess you better shoot, sir," he said to Penhalis. "I can't promise anything."

IT WAS then a stranger stood among us. Father Bill walked into the living room and his appearance startled even me, who had forgotten him completely.

"I'm sorry," he said gently, "but it did not seem opportune to intrude before. Still,

with all this talk of shooting and marrying, a member of my profession should be included, in one capacity or another."

Penhalis shot me a swift, suspicious glance.

"Stage all set," he observed caustically. "Your work, this. Force my hand, would you!"

"No," denied Conn. "The Chief has nothing to do with it. I—I meant what I said. But if I come back on my feet I'm going to—"

"Stop!" Mona straightened. "Stop that. You *must* marry me now. I won't have people feeling sorry for me and calling you a scoundrel. I won't be compromised and—"

"What!" Penhalis flared white hot. "What—are—you saying, girl?"

"Liar," said Conn quietly. "Stop that, Mona. No one's going to be idiot enough to believe that sort of melodrama."

Penhalis went through the motions of tearing his thin, grayish hair. His face was rueful. He took his chagrin out on the interloper, the Padre:

"What are *you* doing here?"

"I'm a sick man, Colonel." The Padre laid his hand on his side. "I'm waiting for the boat." He hesitated, and dared a reproof. "I'm a coward, too. Like some other people who dislike to face realities. You can't live both in the past and the present."

Penhalis stood and scowled bleakly. Finucane frowned and pulled his lower lip. Mona wrung her hands, her face utterly scarlet.

"That's the story I'll shout to the world. Try to stop me. I'm a Penhalis too—damn them!"

Her father's lips quivered. His face grew chalkish. She was trembling from head to toe as she dared him. We did not doubt her.

Penhalis could not.

"Quit it, Mona," Conn's voice broke. "You know perfectly well that nobody will believe such rot. We'll only look foolish in the news pictures."

"Bah!" Penhalis spun on his heel. "Get me Vancouver," he snapped as I followed him into the hall.

I switched to the long distance line and the city exchange answered. He pushed me aside, gave a number, and got a man. Before he was finished I was looking at Mike Finucane and he was looking at me. In every respect but with his daughter Penhalis got results.

He replaced the receiver wearily. He said to Finucane, dry ashes in his mouth. "Must it end like this? Do our children have to make themselves into a sob story?"

Finucane held his hands by his sides.

"Was that gun loaded?"

"What do think?" Penhalis countered stonily, and went back to the living room. We followed.

Mona was huddled in a chair with her head in her hands and Conn was standing in distress beside her. Penhalis shot a question at him:

"Got a uniform?"

Conn nodded. "In my bag—at home."

"In an hour"—Penhalis took out his watch—"the plane I ordered from Vancouver will be in the cove with a doctor on board. You and the Padre can go to town on it."

Just what he implied was anybody's guess. Mona lifted her head.

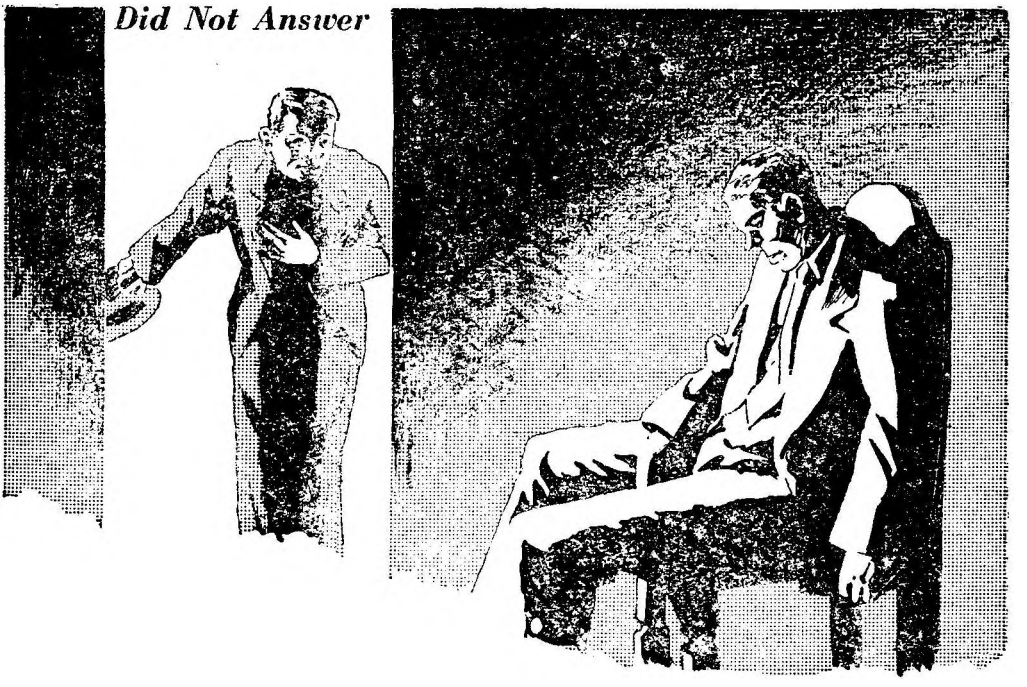
"And me!" She choked. "Otherwise I'll —I'll swim!"

Penhalis asked the Padre a question with his eyes, his brows up. The Padre smiled, his lips formed the word—yes—and he inclined his head toward me. Provincial policemen issue marriage licenses.

Penhalis walked over to the chair. He gave Conn a hearty thump on the shoulder before he pulled Mona to her feet and held her close to him.

"In that case," he said softly, "we'd better let the Padre go alone—when we are finished with him!"

"Well, Good-by, Red," I Said to the Corpse—but He Did Not Answer



DEAD MEN LIKE FOG

By GORDON KEYNE

Author of "Mistakes Don't Pay," "Crocodile Tears," etc.

I

I SUPPOSE you're a practical fellow like me, and take no stock in ghosts and unseen forces and all that sort of thing. Well, I used to think there was nothing, no matter how mystifying or fantastic, that could not be logically explained. And perhaps there is not; but the only thing I am sure about is that some mighty curious matters can happen in the city of the Golden Gate.

When I got into San Francisco, late one afternoon, a thin and chilly fog was drifting in from the sea. I halted at a filling station for gas and directions, and the attendant spoke rather sourly about the fog.

"It's going to be a bad one," he said. "When it comes in thin of an afternoon, like this, the night brings it on thick. Boy, there'll be some smashups this night!"

It was still thin when I reached my destination, the Jonquil Morot Court. This was a hotel on the seaward side of town, which had been recommended to me as comfortable and cheap. Leaving my car outside the office, I walked in.

The proprietor was a fat little man with gray hair and mustache and curious, prying eyes. When I had looked at a room and talked price, I registered:

Wm. G. Howard, Sacramento

"Going to be with us long, Mr. Howard?" asked the little old fat man.

"Don't know yet," I told him. "I've had a court reporting business in Sacramento the past two years, but went broke at it. I've landed a job with a firm here. I drove over from Sacramento today."

"What kind of reporting did you say?"

"Court. I'm a stenographer, you know."

"Oh!" he said, with a disappointed air. "With your red hair and face like a brown barnacle—you're one of these chaps who sit in an office and write pothooks? You look more like a stevedore than a ten-dollar-a-week clerk."

That made me grin. "Court reporters don't do so badly; we're tops in our trade. But I guess stevedores are tops too, these war days. Well, it's too late this afternoon to see about my job, so I'll let you know tomorrow how long I'll be here. I'll take the room for a week, anyhow."

"C. O. D.," said he. "And let's have a look at your draft card. We get checked up on that sometimes."

I showed him my registration card, paid a week's rent, then drove my card in alongside my cubby-hole and got my duffel unloaded.

When I inspected myself in the mirror, I chuckled at memory of his words. Brown barnacle, eh? That was a good description of my classical features; they were knobby and unprincipled, and my nose had not recovered from an auto crash some months previous. I had picked up a scar or two down on the Border while I was knocking around in Mexico, but they were not where they showed.

It was not dark yet; I determined to drive downtown, get supper and see the sights. So I cleaned up a bit and then pulled out.

I left the car in a parking lot on Market Street, and stowed the parking check safely with some letters I meant to post when I found a mailbox. I aimed to see the sights, but not the expensive ones, for I had less than ten dollars left to my name. The attractions were the shop-windows and the crowds and the expensive life all around me; they are the real sights in San Francisco. This city collects more human flotsam than any other in the world, and things are always happening here. In some cities nothing ever happens, even to a red-haired hillbilly like me.

Dropping into a French restaurant whose prices fitted my purse, I settled down over an evening paper to an excellent dinner and tried to cheer myself up a bit. I had flopped in business for myself, and it hurt. While I had a line on a good job here, I was in no mood to be overly optimistic. Bill Howard is not one of the brave lads you read about, who kid themselves by buying a new car and a diamond ring when they go broke.

There was nothing behind me to worry about. I had long ago cut loose from my family back east, I was not tangled up with any of the fair sex, and my debts were paid; so nothing worried me except the future. And at twenty-six one does not regard the future too seriously.

During my meal, I noticed a man with a bald head who sat at another table facing me. I noticed him, first, because he seemed to notice me; and second, because of his total baldness, which is a rare thing. Except for eyebrows he did not have a hair on his head. What was rarer still, his ears lay flat back against his head as though glued down. He had a long nose and a strong, ugly horse-face; but there was a lively twinkle in his eye and his expression was pleasant.

After a bit he had an extension phone put at his table, and as he used it I had the uncomfortable impression that he was talking about me.

With some disgust, I kidded myself out of such a fool idea. The truth probably was that I had stared at him too much. So I carefully paid no more attention whatever to him, devoting myself entirely to the newspaper. Even when he took his hat and coat from the rack and walked out, I did not give him another glance.

"Do you happen to know who that man

was?" I asked my waiter, when he had gone.

"Some kind of a preacher, I think. He drops in a couple times a week," said the man. "He made a crack one time about dead folks being all around us; sounded like preacher talk."

So the bald man was a nut of some kind, was he? I dismissed the matter and thought no more about it.

The fog had still been thin downtown, when I entered the restaurant. When I paid my bill and walked out, it had thickened. It was so bad that one could scarcely see the street-cars; their lights were just a blur. I stood in the doorway, buttoning my coat, and gave up my notion of roaming the streets. Better to head for a movie house and keep warm, I thought.

Just then a man bumped into me, as I started out. A woman was with him, her dark fur coat emanating warmth and feminine perfume. They had been looking into the restaurant window and we had both moved at the same instant, into collision.

There were mutual excuses—then the man caught at my arm, with words that checked me.

"A lucky accident, Red! Just leaving, were you? A good thing we located you, too; if we'd missed you, there'd have been the devil to pay! Oh, excuse me. Peggy, this is my old pal Red Masters. Miss Margaret Cameron, Red."

I WAS not Red Masters and started to say so, but he cut me short. The young woman was shaking hands with me. She was dark and vivacious, from what I could see of her.

"No time to lose, Red," went on the man. "Better pop into the car with us and come along fast. I tell you, I've been on the jump today! You have a date in less than an hour at the swankiest blowout in town."

"Now, wait a minute!" I found voice at last. "You folks have made a mistake—"

"Mistake? Come off! Don't pull that stuff on me, Red." The man's fingers pressed my arm. "You've worked too long with Jim Harker to sing that tune to him. No, you haven't been prowling around South America long enough to forget old friends! Now, Red, this is a big thing for tonight. Agnew's running the show, and all we needed was you. A split of ten grand, too; it ain't to be sneezed at, huh? You talk to him, Peggy."

My head was whirling, but the mention of money steadied it. Ten thousand dollars? It was a case of mistaken identity, of course, but on the other hand money has no home and always has a welcome. Then the young woman slipped her hand in my arm and breathed a low word, which Harker could not hear.

"See it through, to help me! Don't talk." And, more loudly, "Come along, Red; here's the car at the curb. We need you badly, really we do! Where do we go first, Mr. Harker? To see Agnew?"

"No, I reckon not," the man responded. I let Peggy Cameron turn me toward car-lights near at hand. Her quick, soft plea had silenced me. "No, first to my place. I'll have to fix Red up with party clothes, and square him. You take the car and go on to Agnew's house. If we're being tailed, that's safer. We'll grab a taxi and be there in twenty minutes. Suit you?"

I had the distinct feeling that it did not suit her at all. Her momentary silence, the tightening of her hand on my arm, the almost inaudible catch of her breath, made me think she meant to voice sharp protest. Perhaps, I thought, she resented the authority, the hard steely ring, in Harker's voice.

Then she reached forward and swung the car door open.

"Okay," she said with forced cordiality. "Since I'm to go on with the car, I'll drive. You two get in back."

We complied. The thought struck me that I was being kidnaped; but that would have been a laugh.

The car swung out into the fog, and Peggy proved to be a good driver. She left Market Street and cut across town; I thought to Sutter, but could not be sure, for it was a long time since I had been in San Francisco. Then she turned west and the car went roaring over the long hills.

"There's the Rosemount," said Harker, as we passed a huge lighted building. "That's where the party is, Red; that's where you and Peggy do your stuff."

I said nothing. I was relaxed and trying to think. See it through just to help her? Not much. She was nothing to me! Still, I was interested and curious.

I did not believe for an instant that Harker had actually mistaken me for some old pal he used to know. I was nobody's twin; besides, he was too assured, too fluent. His mention of ten grand was bait on the hook. From the little I had been able to see of him, he was a hard-boiled egg. How long had they been looking into that restaurant window? He had not bumped into me by any accident, but on purpose.

Still, he was a smooth worker. And it was so long since anybody had taken me for a sucker that I began to look forward to the proceedings. So I kept quiet and waited to learn what the game was.

"This fog is piling up thick," Harker observed. "Won't hurt us a bit, with the mob we're up against. Senor Castrillo's party may be a safer bet for you, Peggy, account of the fog."

She returned no answer.

The car slowed, and she brought it to a halt. Harker got out and I followed. To see where we were was impossible. It looked like the old-fashioned district lately occupied by the Oriental invasion, for steps and a high banked lawn loomed above us. Peggy exchanged a word or two with Harker, then the car swept off.

We mounted the stone steps. A house loomed dimly above, with a fog-piercing light over the entry that illumined porch and steps. Harker pressed a bell. I heard the ring, and it was a hollow sound, like that which comes from an empty house. It sent a shiver up my spine.

The door was opened and swung wide by a smiling Japanese boy, and Harker strode in. He spoke to the boy and, I thought, gave him something, then swung toward me with a gesture and a cordial word.

"Come along, Red. Throw down your things anywhere. Do you live in the city?"

"No. I'm from Sacramento."

He led me into a room mustily furnished, with a litter of magazines over desk and table. I had less interest in the room than in the man. Harker was, I judged, in his early forties. He was lean, hard, lantern-jawed, with a tight mouth and a gimlet eye.

HE SETTLED down at the desk, produced cigars and liqueur glasses and a bottle of B & B, and poured drinks. I accepted mine, sipped it, and lit one of his cigars with a word of thanks. He leaned back and spoke, crisply.

"We've not got too much time. I'm going to skip everything except my own share in this business." He was eyeing me shrewdly and appraisingly, as he spoke. "I'm playing with Agnew, who's running this show. He picked you as a likely man for the part; that's good with me."

"What's it all about?" I demanded. He shook his head.

"That's for Agnew to tell you. Now, you're nobody's fool. You know perfectly well that I didn't mistake you for Red Masters, so ease back and relax. I don't care who you are. But, for tonight, you'll be Red Masters to all the world except Agnew and Peggy Cameron and me."

"You take a lot for granted," I said mildly.

"You've arrived here today from South America, by plane. You're going to a bang-up party tonight with Peggy, to do a certain job for us; a whacking big job, too. And while there, you'll do another and

smaller job for me, on the side. Any objections?"

I smiled and blew a smoke-ring. It wreathed across the desk in front of him and curled about a large fountain pen that

was not a fountain pen at all. It was a tear-gas gun.

"I still say you take a hell of a lot for granted," I rejoined.

Harker pressed a bell set in the desk. The door opened and Ito came in.

"Who's this gentleman, Ito?" asked Harker.

The boy nodded his head to me and grinned. "William G. Howard, Equity Building, Sacramento, please."

"All right. Give me back the ticket."

Ito advanced to the desk and laid something down; it was my parking ticket. Harker took several letters from his pocket and put the ticket with them. They were my own unposted letters. He extended them to me.

"I'm not trying to impress you with magic tricks; that's Agnew's specialty," he said, laughing. "He'll raise your hair and no mistake!"

"At least, you've roused my curiosity," I said, pocketing the letters and ticket.

"You recall that I bumped into you, no doubt?" He waved his hand as though this were explanation enough. "When we came in, I gave Ito the parking ticket. He phoned the parking lot and got your name from the white slip in your driver's compartment. No, I'm pulling no cheap tricks; all the cards on the table is my motto. Do you play ball with me?"

"Depends on the salary."

He produced a wallet, counted out ten ten-dollar bills, and shoved them at me.

"This is from me, to pay you for saying four words tonight. Good enough?"

I thought fast. Playing safe never did appeal much to me. The man who never takes a chance gets nowhere except into a coffin; and I don't like flowers after they're cut.

"Okay," I said, and pocketed the money. "Instructions?"

"Later tonight you'll meet a man named Thatcher. Tell him from me that all bets are off. That's all. He'll understand."

"Okay," I repeated. Harker leaned back and puffed at his cigar.

"You know, I think we struck something good when we found you!" he said meditatively. Then he roused. "But time's short. You must get into white tie and tails. My outfit will fit you. Okay again?"

"You said it," I rejoined. He crooked a finger at Ito who came forward and bobbed.

"Take Mr. Howard upstairs to my room. Lay out my full dress outfit."

The Jap's eyes widened. He swallowed hard. He stammered something, apparently a protest. Harker cut in.

"You have your orders! And no talking."

"You come, please," Ito said to me resignedly.

I complied. Mr. Harker seemed to fancy me, but I did not reciprocate. I figured him to be cold-blooded as a frozen fish. What really kept me in the game was curiosity, and something intangible about that girl Peggy Cameron. I wondered how she came to be tangled with a hard customer like Harkins.

Ito led me upstairs. The house was huge and very old-fashioned. In the upstairs hall I noted the muddy tracks of wet feet; this seemed odd, because there was

no rain. The tracks were fresh, too.

Stopping at a door, Ito pushed it open and I walked into a large, comfortable bedroom.

The Jap boy bustled across the room, pulled open a closet door and hastily laid out garments on the bed. He worked fast and appeared anything but happy; his manner puzzled me. Shirt, shoes, tie—everything was laid out ready, and then Ito faced me and bobbed his head again.

"I go now, please?" he asked, as though worried and anxious.

"Sure. I can tie my own tie. Tell Mr. Harker I'll be down in ten minutes."

I began to undress as I spoke. Ito went out and closed the door after him.

Then I saw what I had previously missed. A chair had been behind the open door, and in the chair was sitting a man.

"Oh, hello!" I said. "You don't look very comfortable there—"

The words died on my tongue. It was a big chair; the man sat with his hat pulled over his face, his hands on the chair-arms. But on second look I perceived that there was a pool of water under his feet; the man himself was soaking wet. Something in his motionless attitude drew me. I went over to him.

His eyes were staring out at me in death.

II

NOW I knew why Ito had been so unhappy.

Surveying the man closely, I saw that he was fairly young, with a hard face. To deny that I was startled would be absurd; I was more than startled. For a moment, recollecting those wet footprints in the hall outside, I had a bad case of the jitters, until common sense told me the chap had not walked here. I never did solve the mystery of those wet footprints—perhaps this corpse had been walked along between two men.

I touched his hand, and it was stiff; he had been dead for some hours. Then, more than suspecting what I would see, I lifted his hat, and I was right; he had red hair. Ten to one, I thought, this was the original Red Masters in person.

There was nothing to show how he had died, and I did not investigate. Instead, I changed clothes and did it full speed; I wanted to get out of here, and no fooling!

Harker had sent me to this room on purpose; why? It was fairly obvious. He wanted to jolt me. He wanted to make me realize that I was in a game where nothing was barred. My opinion of the man was fully confirmed: he was a bad actor. The corpse might have been meant as a warning to me, too. I got into those tails in record time, changed over my money and personal possessions, and walked out.

"Well, good-by, Red," I said to the corpse, but he did not answer.

Walking back along the hall to the stairs, I started down, only to pause abruptly as a voice reached up from somewhere below. It was not a loud voice, but the words came to me distinctly:

"Whatever your excuse, you had no business bringing him here!"

"The guy had to have party clothes, didn't he?" rejoined Harker's tones.

"That was my worry, not yours. I didn't ask you to assume it," barked the first voice. "Be careful, Harker! Your reputation's bad; but you'll make a frightful mistake if you try to doublecross me. And don't deny it, for I've been warned that Thatcher has been in communication with you."

This jolted me, as I recollected the message to Thatcher. Then came explanation.

"Sure he has; that's no crime!" Harker's voice was startled. "And I've sent him word that I'm not playing with him. I've turned him down cold. Honest, I have!"

"All right. I believe you," was the response.

"And now listen here, Agnew," went on Harker, and the name gave me a jump.

"You didn't need to come running over here in a mess of nerves. The guy's all right, and he's dressing now. Another five minutes and we'd have been on our way to your place."

"You should have come direct," replied Agnew, and then the voices dropped to a murmur.

Agnew, eh? Obviously, he had been swift to resent Harker's action in dropping off with the new Red Masters. It looked as though Harker were taking risks in order to send that message to Thatcher.

Peggy Cameron's report had brought Agnew here hotfoot. I wondered whether he knew about that corpse upstairs; probably not. Then, breaking into a loud and cheery whistle, I descended the stairs and the voices hushed away. Harker came to meet me.

"Oh, hello! Dressed already, eh? You will not have to go on to Agnew's place; he came here instead, with Miss Cameron." Harker's eyes were probing me as he spoke. I knew he was hoping that I would blurt out nothing about the corpse, but he had no chance for a word aside. We were coming into the big room, and he introduced me. "Mr. Agnew, this is Red Masters, and he ought to fill the bill very well."

I nodded to Peggy, who stood at one side. It was my first real sight of her and I was so busy getting an eyeful that I could scarcely take in Agnew. I turned to meet his extended hand, and got another shock —this time a good one.

Agnew was no other than my bald-headed man of the restaurant!

"So you remember me!" A smile came to his lips, and his eyes twinkled at my astonishment. "Yes, we stared hard at each other over dinner. I'd been trying to get hold of a red-headed man for the past two hours, when you showed up. How much has Harker told you about the job ahead?"

"Practically nothing," I replied, conscious that his gaze was searching through me like a gimlet. "That I'm to attend some sort of party with Miss Cameron; and he mentioned a fantastic sum of money. Oh, by the way! You'd better send Ito upstairs to look into something there." I turned to Harker and saw a swift stab of startled alarm leap in his eyes. He thought for sure I was going to mention the corpse. "I'm afraid I put down my cigar on the dresser, and forgot it."

His quick relief, his wide grin, told me plenty; Agnew knew nothing of the corpse. He nodded, evidently appreciating my grim pleasantry.

"I'll see that it doesn't set the house afire, Red."

"The sum mentioned was not fantastic," struck in Agnew. He had a tremendous personality, an inner force that dominated the whole room. "I understand that you've agreed to go ahead with this impersonation, Mr. Masters? We might as well call you by that name."

"I've agreed to nothing," I said coolly, for I was not anxious to seem like putty in Harker's hands. "Miss Cameron asked me to see the thing through for her sake. Thus far, I've done so."

"Oh! I see. Suppose we sit down," said Agnew, and we did. "No doubt you want to be assured that the matter is strictly legal and so forth?"

I had to laugh at this. Peggy Cameron —lord, what a girl she was, now that I could see her!—was all the guarantee needed, and I said so frankly.

"Not that I care about legality; that's all bosh," I went on. "I'm in for anything short of murder, and can depend on my own ability to keep out of jail."

"You're the one who might get murdered," murmured Agnew. He seemed amused. "Superficially, this is a plain business deal. Beneath the surface, however, it involves greed and hatred and conflicting forces, of which Mr. Harker here is one." He gave Harker a glance and a smile, which Harker did not seem to like by half. "Some of these forces are sinister and extend far and deep."

"Thanks for the warning," I said. "If

it comes to a scrap, I can hold my end up."

"I trust it will not. The deal concerns mining properties in Colombia, from which you have just returned today. It involves a cash payment of a hundred thousand dollars; if it goes through you get ten per cent."

I drew down my brows at him. "I'm not simpleton enough to think such a deal is made overnight, or that so much cash is picked up in five minutes."

"No. The deal has already been made; it depends only upon the delivery of certain confidential reports, which are here." Agnew slapped a briefcase that lay on the table, and I saw that it was stamped with the name of Edward Masters.

"Masters is unknown personally to anyone you'll meet tonight," he went on. "His identification papers fit you passably well. You will turn over these reports to Senor Castrillo, giving a brief verbal résumé. He gives you the certified check that is already in his hands. You and Miss Cameron then get the check to me—and it is all over."

Taking a fresh cigar from the box, I lit it carefully.

"Where's the catch?"

Agnew's eyes twinkled at me. "Which one?"

"Oh! Simple as all that, is it?" I reflected, and thought of the dead man upstairs. "If this briefcase is so important, why did Masters part with it?"

Agnew extended a worn black wallet to me.

"His wallet, with complete identification if needed. Everything depends upon his presenting these reports in person. As for your question, I've been in touch with Masters for some time. He knew his danger. Upon arriving here, he turned over these belongings to the airline officials, having them sent to me. Otherwise they would have disappeared with him. As was no doubt expected by others concerned.

I sized up Agnew to be as square as Harker was on the loose.

"Where's Masters now?" I asked.

"He left the airport in a taxicab, and hasn't been seen since. I'm afraid—"

"Hold on," spoke up Harker. "I forgot to tell you before, Agnew. Two of my men fished him out of the bay this evening, on a hot tip that was phoned in. He had been shot through the heart and dumped in the water. That taxicab was planted by the gang."

"So? Yes, I was told that he had been drowned," said Agnew, unsurprised. "In fact, I was told that his body was in this house—your men or you hoped to find something of importance on it, eh? No matter," he added, as Harker was about to speak. "There is no harm done. And we've small time to discuss things. Well, Mr. Masters?"

"Where do I run into trouble?" I asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea; all the way, perhaps. Your appearance as Masters, with the reports, may provoke trouble; you will have to use your own judgment."

"All right, I get it. Where do we go from here?"

"You'll go with Miss Cameron. Her car is out in front."

After Agnew appeared, I had noticed, there was no more "Peggy" talk; Harker was not being familiar any more.

Her face showed that she was anxious enough, but well poised and capable. Also, it was a face to catch at your heart; it dimpled when she spoke, and in repose it relaxed into lines of strength. She was dark and lovely, in other words. Now she stood up with a curt word to me.

"If you're ready, let's go."

"Okay." I picked up the briefcase. "We'll do our best, gentlemen; here's luck!"

"I'll expect you before midnight," said Agnew, shaking hands.

I followed Peggy to the door; then, at a sudden thought, I walked back across the room and went to the desk. Picking up the fountain pen that was not a fountain pen, I unscrewed it. In the barrel was a

cartridge that had no bullet. I glanced at Harker.

"Mind if I borrow this?"

"You'd take it anyway, wouldn't you?" he said sourly.

"Thanks. It might come in handy." I snipped it on an inside pocket.

LATER, and not so very much later either, it occurred to me to wonder whether this action of mine did not vastly affect the events of the night. If this tear-gas gun had remained on Harker's desk, under his hand, he might have been alive when I next saw him.

Peggy and I went outside and passed down the long flight of steps to the street level and the waiting car. I had picked up my hat and coat coming through the hall, and was glad of the coat; the fog was thicker than ever, and the night was chill.

"Have you a party dress on beneath that fur coat?" I asked.

"Naturally." She started the car "I'll have to warn you about all this," she went on. "I can't let you go ahead so lightly, so casually—"

"Debonair is the word," I cut in cheerfully.

"That's just it. You don't realize how serious it is. Mr. Agnew wasn't joking about the danger. On the way here he told me about the murder of Red Masters—"

"And he sprang it on Harker for a goal," I said. "It's true. I saw the body up in Harker's room. But how the devil did Agnew know about it?"

"I can't say. He knows so much! He'll amaze you, startle you, terrify you—and all with his wise, gentle smile. They say strange things about him, terrible things—well, I just don't know what to make of him."

"I'll say he's on the level, anyhow."

"Yes, he is." She was driving cautiously through the thickly swirling fog. "And now I'm afraid for what may happen to him, to you—shall I tell you about it?"

"I'm in this game because you invited me."

"Thanks. You see, my father died a month ago. He had been in South America a lot, and had arranged this deal for the nickel mines. Castrillo and his friends engaged Red Masters to report on the properties, and then father died suddenly."

"Wait," I said. "I thought Castrillo didn't know Masters personally?"

"He doesn't. Masters was down there; a well known expert. They engaged him from here by cable. The war has made nickel tremendously valuable, you see, and the government has taken over control. There are two freighters on their way here with ore alone worth a small fortune."

She went on, and her explanation shed light upon the murky waters.

Masters was a mining expert of some repute; if he confirmed prior reports, the deal would go through like a shot. But owing to Cameron's death, others were now trying to grab the gravy for themselves. Peggy was not sure who they were. She was desperately trying to put through the deal, which would give her enough money to live on.

She talked frankly about it. Castrillo was paying a hundred thousand cash. She had undertaken to split this, keeping sixty thousand herself, giving Agnew forty; Harker would get ten thousand from Agnew, I would get another ten thousand, leaving Agnew twenty.

"How did Agnew get into it and who is he?" I demanded.

"He's a promoter, in a way," she said, hesitating. "Father knew him and trusted him. I appealed to him after father's death, and he has been helping. He has a good deal of strange influence here in San Francisco, in certain quarters."

"And where does Harker come in?"

"He's a local personality. Father got him to interest Judge Thatcher and one or two others. Harker knows everybody and can be valuable. Just the same, I wouldn't trust him too far."

Judge Thatcher—holy smoke! My eyes were opened suddenly. That private message was for Thatcher, but I had not connected him with the alleged judge.

While I did not know him personally, I had heard plenty about Judge Thatcher up in the capital. He was a politico famed in Sacramento for having a finger in every pie, and long dirty fingernails to boot. He and Jim Harker made a fine, juicy pair. No wonder there was talk of doublecrossing and murder!

"Is Thatcher in the game too?"

"He's one of Senor Castrillo's friends, yes."

"I'm beginning to see light. Where are we heading for?"

"The Rosemount Hotel. Castrillo has the top floor and is giving a grand party tonight.

"He used to be president of Colombia, you know; he lives here now, and is in with all the mining crowd. There's the hotel ahead," she added, as we crested a fog-wreathed hill and saw the lights glowing through the vapor.

"I gather that we attend to our business and then quit?"

"Correct. But I'll know a lot of people there. I may have to stay for a dance or two."

"Nibs on the first dance, then," I said, and she laughed an assent. "Also," I went on, with a breath of warning blowing across my brain, "suppose we leave this car at the curb somewhere nearby. If you turn it over to the parking boys, we'll be slow getting hold of it; we might just possibly want to evaporate in a hurry."

"Good idea," she approved.

So we left the car half a block down the hill and walked back to the hotel entrance.

WITH my old hat and overcoat, and the briefcase under my arm, I was no object of style and beauty, but Peggy more than made up for my deficiencies. With her stunning looks and mink coat, and a gauzy gold scarf about her dark hair, she was gorgeous to the eye.

The hotel, which was San Francisco's newest, was tops in grandeur and glitter. We had to walk the full length of the lobby to reach the elevators; as we approached them, I received my first intimation of possible complication in store.

"Hey, Bill!" sang out a voice. "Bill Howard, you ornery old cuss—hey, Bill!"

I glanced around in consternation, to see Jake Minor skating across the marble floor with outstretched hand and a howl of delighted recognition.

Jake was the black sheep of a big mining family, from which he had inherited a world of filthy lucre. He was an old pal of mine down below the border. We had knocked around northern Mexico all one summer, and he was a grand guy drunk or sober, except that he was a bit too handy with his fists. I shook hands, rather helplessly, yet tickled pink to see him; it was the same old Jake, with the big nose and big jaw and a wide grin.

"What you doing here?" he burst out. "I thought you had gone back to penpushing or something in Sacramento!"

I looked for Peggy; she was waiting by the elevators.

"Lay off, Jake. No time to talk," I said desperately. "And for gosh sake don't bellow my name again! Why, you're all dressed up in the soup and fish yourself!"

"I'm in on a big party upstairs," he said. "Who's the señorita?"

I had to think fast. With his mining connections, it was ten to one that he was here for Castrillo's party. He began to laugh.

"Bill, you look as though you'd been beaned with a knuckle-duster!"

"No wonder." I caught his arm. "Come on. You're going to Castrillo's blowout? So are we. But for the love of Mike, use your head!" We crossed over to Peggy, and I presented the guy. "Miss Cameron, allow me to introduce Jake Minor, an old friend of mine. Square as a die and almost

as reliable. He's going to the party. Will you be kind enough to beat it into his thick skull just who I am?"

I held the briefcase so Jake could see the name stamped on it. Peggy sized him up with one cool look, shook hands, and smiled.

"You couldn't mistake Red Masters for anyone else, could you?"

"Red Masters?" echoed Jake, staring. "Listen, I know that guy! I came here tonight to meet him, sure. Judge Thatcher said he would show up—"

The elevator door clanged open before us. Upon learning our destination, the attendant demanded our cards. Peggy gave him two, and Jake fished out one of his own. The truth flashed over me. He was here on purpose to identify Red Masters! Then he shoved me into the car and followed; he had tumbled to everything.

"All right, all right," he said, with a nod to Peggy. "I don't savvy it, but you can count on me. Mighty glad to know you, Mr. Masters. That guy Howard we were talking about—boy, was he the prize sap! He was always a sucker for trouble. He'd be a rich man today if only he had laid off the girls and the booze—"

"And inherited money he couldn't earn, like you," I snapped. Jake guffawed.

"Correct, Red, correct! Well, if you need anything, you know where to holler, so count on me to back you up."

The door clanged open. We left the elevator and separated. I was conducted to a room where I shed my things but clung to my briefcase; then I struck out for myself. And was I at a party!

I wandered through drawing rooms, bedrooms and bath, and at last came to a grand reception hall, with a buffet dinner opening off one way and a dance room another; and everywhere was a crowd. I encountered Peggy; she gave me a cold look and turned away, evidently not wishing to seem acquainted.

What a lovely thing she was! Now she wore a blue gown, a deep dark blue spangled with golden stars; she was not tall, she moved with a lithe easy grace, the lines of her features and neck were glorious—well, description is hopeless. The real self inside her was what counted, and this radiated through her physical self like sunlight.

I was conscious of glances flung at me and at the briefcase under my arm, as I drifted toward the couple who were obviously my hosts of the evening. Castrillo and his wife were a handsome couple. She was rather statuesque in Spanish beauty, he was a man of fifty, tall and striking. The guests were passing them, greeting them—at one side I became aware of Jake Minor standing with another man, looking at me. Jake caught my eye, beckoned, and I went to meet his exhuberant word and grip.

"Red Masters! Heard you were to show up tonight—how are you? Why, you cross-eyed galoot, you haven't changed a mite! I hear you've been down in South America . . . oh, pardon me. Shake hands with Judge Thatcher! He's a great guy, practically runs this end of the state all by himself—"

I shook hands with Thatcher, who looked utterly dumbfounded. He was a lean splinter of a man, scrawny, with deep crafty eyes and a face like old leather.

"So you're Masters!" he croaked, as though he could not believe it. "Glad to meet you. We've been anxious to hear from you. Just arrived today, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said, resolving to give him something to think about. "Got into quite a bad jam, too, but a friend of yours pulled me out of it. A man named Harker. An efficient sort of chap."

There was no doubt that Red Masters had been reported dead, for Thatcher's eyes were bugging out at me. I did not want to deliver Harker's message at once, for I was afraid it might somehow spoil Agnew's game.

"Harker gave me a message for you," I went on carelessly. "But excuse me, Judge. I must speak to Señor Castrillo. Jake,

come along and introduce me, will you?"

Jake grinned and obliged. I met my host, who welcomed me effusively, gathered a crowd around us and introduced me wholesale, presented me to his wife. Jake was lost somewhere in the shuffle. Castrillo took my arm and led me off toward a doorway, and pointed.

"Dios, man! I'm glad to see you; we've been worried," he said. "Go into the library, will you? I'll be with you in two minutes; I must collect the others—"

Everything was going off okay, thanks to Jake Minor. He had been planted to detect any attempted imposture, and the plant had backfired.

III

THE library was a cheerful, conventional room but was more like a business office, being equipped with a handsome mahogany desk and telephone. I waited, but not idly.

With a sudden sense of being up against hard realities, I unzipped the briefcase and took a look at the contents. Thank heaven! Masters had done his job with the greatest neatness. The various reports were all labeled, photographs were attached, and each report carried a brief summary of its contents. The setup was perfect for me.

Barely was I assured of this when Castrillo and half a dozen other men came into the room. Judge Thatcher was among them, and one glance at his leathery features told me he meant business. He marched straight across the room to me, and gave me a low word and a biting look.

"What's that message? Let's have it, quick!"

"That all bets are off," I said, unable to evade further.

He actually whitened with the anger that consumed him, but had no chance to give vent to it. I saw him glance at the telephone as though itching to use it. And now, for the first time, I comprehended what this message must mean. Agnew's words should have showed me the truth earlier. Harker had been in the notion of doublecrossing Agnew, but had decided against it. Instead, he was doublecrossing Thatcher.

I had no chance to reflect on the matter, for Peggy Cameron came into the room, Castrillo bowed her to a seat, and the doors were closed.

"Welcome, Miss Cameron," he said. "Gentlemen, this is Mr. Edward Masters, who has his report to present. I gather that we need not waste time. Mr. Masters, will you let us know your findings with regard to these properties, in a few words?"

There were five reports in all. Thanks to the summaries, I had no difficulty in giving a brief account of each, handing it to Castrillo as I finished. All were highly favorable. While I spoke, the gaze of Judge Thatcher was gripped upon me in a glare. When I finished, Castrillo rose, beaming.

"I take it there are no objections to concluding our arrangement?"

A chorus of assenting voices replied. Through them bit that of Judge Thatcher.

"Yes! I object!" he snapped. "I believe we should go slow in regard to this, Castrillo. I'm not entirely satisfied about this man Masters—"

"Then you're a bit late saying so," spoke up one of the others. "Castrillo, if Miss Cameron has her papers ready, I vote to put the deal through here and now."

There was more approval. Thatcher bit his lip and stood silent. Peggy handed an envelope to Castrillo, who looked over the contents and nodded. In return, he took another from his pocket and gave it to her. She drew out the enclosed check and smiled.

"And now, gentlemen, a glass of champagne to luck!" cried Castrillo.

A waiter brought in champagne; the sound of music drifted in from the other rooms. Several of the men surrounded me and plied me with questions about the

mining properties, and I managed to throw a good bluff until Peggy came to the rescue.

"Mr. Masters, I want to thank you for all you've done," she said. The hand she gave me was like ice; she was nervous as hell.

"Don't mention it," I replied. "And if you'll give me the honor of the next dance I shall be a thousandfold repaid!"

We got away with it. A toast was given, the enterprise was christened with champagne, and I led her out of the room. We swung into a dance amid the other couples. I caught sight of Jake Minor, who kept his eye on us.

"Steady, now," I said to Peggy. "Thanks for the rescue work. This guy Masters can't disappear too suddenly to suit me. You and Jake take the next dance. I'll have a word with Castrillo and pave the way for my vanishing act."

She nodded. "Look! Judge Thatcher's talking with your friend."

So he was. The judge was as mad as a wet hen, and he was pouring it into Jake Minor.

"Meet me in the lobby after the next dance," I told Peggy. "If Jake wants to come along, let him. He's safe, and a great guy."

She assented again. When the dance ended, we left the floor close to Minor, who made a dive for Peggy and carried her off. Thatcher swung around and came at me. The glitter in his deep little eyes was eloquent.

"Do you think you're going to get away with this?" he snapped.

"With what, Judge?" I demanded innocently.

"With the way Harker has double-crossed me! I'll get to the bottom of it, and you'll both wish you hadn't been such fools."

I was relieved. He did not suspect the impersonation at all.

"Well, I don't know anything about it," I replied. "I merely gave you the message."

If looks could bite, he would have taken my head off; then he turned his back and walked away. I shrugged and went back to the library.

Castrillo and his friends were discussing mining matters so eagerly that the party had been forgotten. I got the señor aside, pleaded a headache and so forth, and made my excuses to get away before anyone else could pump questions at me.

The next dance was going on. I got to the elevator and was jerked down to the lobby; the thought of Judge Thatcher somehow left a very bad taste in my mouth. Approaching the cigar stand, I spotted a telephone booth and shut myself into it, searched the book and found the name of James Harker. I slipped a nickel in the slot and called.

"Hello!" Harker's voice answered.

"This is Masters," I said. "Thought you'd like to know that everything has gone off nicely, but Thatcher didn't seem to like your message."

He laughed harshly. "No, he wouldn't."

"Is Agnew there?"

"That box of tricks is gone, thank heaven! How did he know about our friend being upstairs? Fog, he says, is the time for dead men to walk! Well, that just ain't so. I know a guy who's a dope on the spirit racket, and he claims the spirits are just out of luck in a fog or a wind—"

His voice broke off short. I heard a stir of movement and another indistinct voice.

"Hello!" I said. "Hello, Harker! Are you there?"

I heard a low curse, as of astonishment, break from him. Then:

"Look out—look out!" His voice rose shrilly. "Put that thing down, you fool."

Over the wire came the ear-bursting report of a shot. Through the explosion and ending it, I caught a gasping groan and nothing more. With sweat on my palms and a jumping pulse in my veins, I hung up and pushed myself out of the booth.

I had heard Harker murdered while I talked with him—murdered!

When I came to myself, Jake Minor was shaking my arm and Peggy stood staring at me. Jake wore his hat and coat, and had brought mine along. He pushed them at me.

"Wake up!" he said urgently. "What the devil's got into you?"

I struggled into my coat. "Let's get out of here in a hurry. Is there a side door?"

"Sure. Come along."

HE LED the way; a moment later the magnificence around us faded and dimmed into chill fog. We were out on the side street with the murk wrapping us like a blanket.

Jake spoke again.

"I don't savvy what it's all about, but you folks are in bad with Thatcher. At least you are, Bill. And he's nobody to ignore. What was wrong with you when you came out of that telephone booth?"

"Plenty," I said. "Never mind now. Peggy, is it far to Agnew's house?"

"Yes. Out toward the beach."

"Then let's get moving," I said, still shaky.

"So you won't talk to an old pal?" barked Jake. I poked him in the ribs as a hint.

"Not yet. But drift along with us."

I did not want to tell what had happened, in front of Peggy. Was Thatcher responsible for the murder of Harker? Someone had walked into Harker's house and shot him at his desk. Not Thatcher, of course; but he was the type of man who telephoned his orders and kept himself a perfect alibi.

The thing to do now was to pass that check to Agnew and get clear of the mess. I was plenty curious about Agnew, but the first job was to see Peggy Cameron in safety.

"Red!" Peggy, who had me by the arm, halted abruptly. "Here's where we left the car; I'm sure of it! Just past this fire plug."

"Nope, it was in the next block," I stated positively. There was no car in sight. "Remember, we came out of the side entrance of the hotel."

"It was this block." Her tone brooked no argument. "We were in front of this store. The car's gone!"

"Sounds screwy to me," said Jake, "but let it pass. My car's down the street. We can take it and go out to Danny Murphy's place on the beach, and thrash this whole thing out. I don't savvy it, and it's high time I did."

"But the car!" wailed Peggy in dismay. "It's my car and I can't lose it—"

Right then, everything began to happen at once.

The fog swirled with sudden motion, and figures appeared around us. Jake exploded in an oath; something smashed into me and I went staggering, with Peggy clinging to me. Men were all around us, voices were yammering, blows were falling fast.

A crack in the face knocked me loose from Peggy. As I reeled, someone else hit me behind the ear.

Far from proving myself any hero, I do not recall striking a blow. The surprise was complete, and that smash back of the ear nearly finished me. As I dropped, somebody kicked me and knocked my wind out. Convulsed, helpless to move, all but senseless, I found myself doubled up in the gutter.

A car engine roared almost on top of me; then a second one passed. I was dimly aware of a figure beside me, and groped for it.

I encountered another man and tried to grapple with him, only to go rolling flat. He fell on top of me, and I got my fingers into his gullet.

He cursed violently. I recognized the voice, and gasped out a word.

"Jake!"

We fell apart. We were alone here together beside the curb. Everything around us was silence and whirling fog. Then Jake Minor stood up and called Peggy. Nothing answered.

IV

WHEN we had satisfied ourselves that Peggy was gone and the street deserted, we took Jake's car and headed for the beach.

Rather, Jake did. I had a couple of nasty bumps over the head and was still knocked silly by that kick. I did not come around until we were well on our way. Then I made no protest, for I was miserable over my own abject failure to protect Peggy Cameron.

"Never mind, Danny Murphy will take care of us," said Jake, as I groaned something about my head. "He's a good scout. But for gosh sake mention no names! This is the gangiest town in the United States, and nobody knows who's who or what. Everything's under cover. We can talk things out and get all straight when we get there.'

"Stop on the way," I advised. "The Jonquil Motor Court. I want to get out of these cursed glad rags." I told him where the place was, and he assented; it was on our way, he said.

Jake, of course, did not yet know what it was all about in the first place.

When we reached the motor court, I was pretty much myself. The place looked just as I had left it—empty, deserted, so thick with fog one could scarcely see ten feet away. Jake pulled up in front of the office and I crawled out painfully and shoved open the office door. The fat little old proprietor was standing there with his eyes bulging; at sight of me, he actually jumped.

"Let me have another key to my room," I began.

That was as far as I got. He let out a yell, ducked behind his desk, and came up with a big automatic in his hand.

"Get out of here!" he shouted. "Get out! You're dead! You're a corpse and I don't want no ghosts around."

"You fool, I'm Bill Howard! I have a room here!" I exclaimed. He jerked up the pistol at me and let out another yell. "The cops just left here—get out, you're dead! I'll empty this gun through you, ghost or no ghost."

He was vapid with terror and capable of anything. Jake pulled me back out of the doorway and shoved me into the car.

"Aw, the hell with it!" he said disgustedly. "Come on, let's get to Danny's place. Dead, are you? And the cops here after you? That's the last straw. Come along."

We went away from there. I was too bewildered and furious and pain-wracked to know what to say or do, and Jake was just mad at everything. I could not understand it, and he did not understand anything.

Reaching our destination, we presently found ourselves installed in a private booth with the din of jukebox music in the air. A grinning Danny Murphy looked on while a waiter bandaged me. Jake had plenty of bruises but needed no attention. A drink was set before us and we found ourselves alone. Jake and Danny Murphy were friends, it proved.

Jake lifted his glass. "Here's how and good luck! You look like a pirate with that bandage around your head. Now let's have all the dope, and I hope it makes sense. First, about you being dead and a ghost."

I launched into my story and skimmed through it rapidly. I was thinking more about Peggy Cameron than myself—Peggy, carried off into the fog by unknown men. Jake made no comment as he listened. His hard face with its big nose and heavy jaw remained quite blank He was drinking everything in, however, and missing nothing.

As I got toward the end of the yarn, telling about my phone call to Harker and what I had heard, I fumbled in my pocket for cigarettes. I tried the overcoat pocket and found something else—a crumpled envelope. I drew it out, examined it in surprise, looked into it—and pulled out a certified check for one hundred thousand dollars, issued to Margaret Cameron.

"My lord!" exclaimed Jake, as I goggled at it. "That's why they wanted her! And she had sense enough to jam it into your coat pocket."

He jumped up and went out of the booth, leaving me to stare at the check. Now I remembered falling against her, and how she had clung to me; in that bewildered moment she had kept her head and had thrust the envelope into my coat pocket.

Jake came back and plumped into his seat again.

"Okay, I've cleared up the ghost business," he announced cheerfully. "Phoned your motor court and said I was a newspaper man; the guy talked. It seems that you were picked up awhile ago in the street, dead. Hit by a car in the fog."

"But I wasn't, you fool!" I exclaimed. "You know good and well—"

He waved me down. "Identified as Bill Howard by papers, a receipt for a week's rent from the motor court, and so forth. Red hair, get it? There's been some fast work. You became Masters, and the dead Masters became you. They dumped the corpse with your papers in his pocket—after they had killed Harker, naturally. What you need, Bill, is a manager, and I'm it. Manager of a living corpse!"

It roughed me up the wrong way, until I realized that he had hit the nail on the head. Then, as we talked over the matter, Jake shook his head soberly.

"Who's back of this killing? Thatcher?"

"Don't be absurd," I said. "He's a politician, not a gangster."

"Listen, baby, and let papa explain." Jake grinned and lit a cigarette. "Nothing could be pinned on him, I grant you. He's too smart. But this is a man's town; that's why I like it. If you're a friend of anybody, you can get by. Now, this is a game for a hundred grand, which is no chickenfeed; maybe for more.

"Your pal Harker is, or rather was, a big shot in the racing and gambling world. He doublecrossed Thatcher, who simply put in a phone call and the boys went to work. Peggy was being shadowed all the time. Harker, too. Her car was abstracted five minutes after she parked it, probably. When Harker was killed, the mob knew just what to do with that corpse you saw. You being him, they made him into you; a neat trick."

"So far as I'm concerned, it's sour," I said. "What about Peggy?"

"Coming right up. We must get in touch with Agnew. Know where to reach him? I never heard of him, but—"

I had not the faintest idea, of course. We got a phone plugged into the booth and searched the phone book; there were thirty-odd Agnews in the bay district and we did not even know our man's initials. That washed out any help from Agnew, until suddenly Jake broke into a wild laugh.

"The check, of course—that's the hole card!" He grabbed up the phone and called the Rosement, and asked for Señor Castrillo's apartment.

"Hello! I'd like to speak with one of the guests, Judge Thatcher. I'll hold on." He winked at me, waited, then leaned down to the phone. His voice came thin and reedy, in a totally different intonation.

"Hello, Judge! This is Agnew speaking. Yes, Agnew. I have a check here issued to Miss Cameron; she seems to have disappeared, but the check hasn't. Somebody made a mistake. She didn't have it, and Red Masters did."

He listened, beamed cherubically at me, and resumed.

"Oh, of course I know you don't know a thing about it! But it occurs to me that we might make a bargain—eh? Sure, I mean you. Maybe you'd sooner that I dealt with someone else, eh? Okay, Judge, only it'll have to be somebody big enough to say yes or no. Well, why not have him come here and see me? You know the address? Yes, that's right; 438 Simpson Street." Jake winked exultantly at me. "Remember, it can't be any bootblack or

fish peddler! Oh, it will? Yes, he'll do. So long."

He jammed down the phone and surveyed me triumphantly.

"Boy, that got him! Look up that address under the Agnews; see if we can phone the guy."

We did so. The phone book listed no Agnew at such an address.

"All right, forget it," said Jake. "I know the street and it's not far from here. One of those little hideaway streets close to the beach. We can get there in five minutes."

"Then let's go."

"Hold everything! This is my party, and I don't take much stock in your Agnew gent. You and me make a better pair to draw to. The judge doesn't aim to show his own hand at all. He'll send someone around to see Agnew. We've got time to spare."

"Who's he sending?"

"The top guy, who takes his orders direct from Agnew. And by hokey, I got him!"

Just then Danny Murphy drifted in to see how we were getting on.

"Tell me something, Danny," said Jake. "Know a guy named Dago Harry? Who is he?"

Danny lost his smile. "A good guy to leave alone, Jake. He owns a place down by the fish wharf; but he owns a piece of this joint too, and others. He could own the Golden Gate Bridge, if he wanted to. He did a six-months' stretch last year; that was Jim Harker's doing, and it'll be bad luck for Jim yet."

He turned and left us. Jake gave me a significant look.

"Get that, Red? Give you two guesses who killed Harker tonight!"

I finished my drink. "What do you aim to do?"

He told me, and I objected. It looked screwy to me and I said so.

"Since when did you have to hold three aces before you'd stay for the draw?" he shot out at me. "Listen; I know that Simpson Street. It'll be empty and deserted. We just can't go wrong on the deal! If you'd sooner play with Agnew than with me, say so."

Remembering Agnew, who was obviously no person to tackle San Francisco's cheerful underworld leaders, I reconsidered. After all, Jake Minor was a pretty good guy.

"All right," I said, and took off the bandage. I did not need it any more, and it was in the way. "When do we go?"

"One more drink," said Jake. "Then I'll get something I want from Eddy, and we're off. And believe me, when we knock at Agnew's door we won't be empty-handed! That is, if we plan our campaign aright."

So we planned it, had our drink, and departed.

V

IT WAS a little street, a street of darkness and mystery and uncanny silence. The fog was thick; we could hear the restless rustle of the surf on the beach. All the houses were dark. My head was still pretty sore, but I was in shape for anything.

Jake had parked his car two blocks away. Afoot, we found Agnew's house; it was a large areoplane-type bungalow set a little back from the street, and looked deserted. The garage in connection was closed.

"There we are." Jake pointed to the yellow fog-piercing lights of a car coming around the next corner. "It's your ante. Good luck!"

He drifted away and was instantly lost to sight.

Overcoat buttoned up across my shirtfront, I waited at the curb in front of Agnew's desolate-looking house. As Jake had said, everything would depend upon smooth work, for we might be sure that Dago Harry would not be alone in the car; that this was his car, we could be certain.

He would have no difficulty finding the house, since the numbers were painted on the curbing.

I pulled my hat down over my eyes. The car eased along and stopped directly before me. I stepped forward and was at the driver's door as it swung open. I had a glimpse of three men in the car.

"Looking for Agnew's house?" I said.

"Yeah," came the reply.

The tear-gas gun was in my hand, cocked. I pressed the spring; there was a flash, a low report, and the gas gushed in upon them. I slammed the door and then sprang back.

It must have been hell inside that car, for an instant or two. I could dimly see flailing arms and a tangle of figures. Then the door opposite me was jerked open—that was Jake Minor at work. Indistinct cries beat through the fog, voices yammered chokingly, then they fell silent.

"Okay, Red," lifted Jake's voice.

I was already passing around the car, joining him. At his feet lay two indistinct figures he had dragged out of the car. The third was half in and half out, strangled and coughing. He made a frantic movement and Jake leaned forward, striking down with his slungshot. The figure relaxed and came tumbling out.

"How does it feel to be a slugger?" I asked.

"All right. This one looks like the big shot; gimme a hand with him, into the lights."

I caught hold, and we lifted the last victim around in front of the car. He was a young, slim, swarthy fellow. I took a knife and an automatic from his pockets. His super-tailored clothes, a flash of jewelry, and the name inside his hat told he was our man.

"In with him! Let the other two lie," said Jake. "Haul him up, and we'll see what our friend Agnew will do in a pinch."

We took hold of Dago Harry and then straightened up, each of us getting an arm about our necks, so that he lolled between us. Then we heard a dry, amused voice.

"Very kind of you, gentlemen! Your friend Agnew is at his best in a pinch, I can assure you—"

I looked up. Agnew was on the curb in front of us, in the car lights. His bald knob was shining, and there was a smile on his long horse-face.

"Lord!" I gasped. "Where did you spring from? Jake, this is Agnew—Jake Minor, an old friend of mine. We have a visitor for you."

"Very well, bring him along." Agnew turned and preceded us to the house, with a total lack of surprise that floored us.

We lugged our victim out of the car lights and on up to the house. Agnew held open the front door. The place was lit up inside, and Agnew directed us down the hall and into a room on the right.

It was a sizeable room. In the center of the floor was a huge carved oak chair, facing a blank wall; against the wall stood a small table, on which was a brass tray. Against the opposite wall, behind the chair, was a couch. Nothing else was in the room. The windows were hidden behind drawn blinds and curtains.

We dumped our man in the chair, where he sagged limply. I swung around to Agnew.

"They carried Miss Cameron off when we left the hotel—"

"Yes, I know," he said calmly.

"You know?" I could only echo his words, as I goggled blankly at him. Then

I grew angry. "Then what have you done about it? There's been a lot of talk about you and what you know, and your bag of tricks and so forth—what have you done about it?"

He hesitated. I repented my words, for there was a queer look in his face that struck into me, somehow, as though my angry speech had hurt him. He rubbed his long nose, looked from me to Jake Minor, and spoke awkwardly, slowly.

"Gentlemen this affair of murder has been most distressing to me. I did not anticipate things would go so far. It is true that I have certain talents, certain gifts, which I have used frequently—"

His voice died out. I prompted him, remembering what had been said about him.

"Your tricks, you mean?"

"Tricks?" He seemed thoughtful. "You have heard that I'm in touch with the dead, no doubt; that ghosts haunt this house, that spirits of the dead speak with me—"

Jake Minor laughed jarringly. "We'll believe that when we hear 'em, Professor!"

"Quite right." Agnew brightened, and even smiled again. "Anything can be explained, my friends. For example, how do I know about what happened to Miss Cameron?"

"Well, I'll bite," I said, none too genially. "How?"

He motioned to the chair. "This gentleman, locally known as Dago Harry, phoned me a good half-hour ago that they had taken Miss Cameron but did not want her; what they did want was the check. She is unhurt. I told him to come and talk to me. I had my own reception prepared for him, but you seem to have forestalled me."

Jake shoved forward. "You say that he phoned you? Then I went and phoned Judge Thatcher, pretending to be you, and he fell for it! He said he'd send Dago Harry. I told him he could have the check in exchange for Peggy."

We told Agnew all about it, and he seemed amused as things were made clear; evidently our talk with Thatcher had not gummed things up in the least.

Suddenly, at a cough from our victim, Agnew leaped into life. From a pocket he took out two pair of handcuffs, darted at the big chair, and chained Dago Harry solidly to the wood by one wrist and one ankle. At a word from Jake, I passed him the pistol we had taken from the man.

"He's coming around," said Agnew to us. "Your methods would never make him talk, as you had hoped. Trust to mine, then! You get back on that couch against the wall and stay there. Whatever you do, don't interrupt! Don't speak! Don't move! Quick about it!"

We obeyed his words, which held imperative command. Jake and I settled down on the couch and waited to see what would happen.

Agnew went over to the table against the opposite wall, in front of Dago Harry, and paid no further attention to us. Taking a glass jar from the floor he poured a big heap of powder into the brass tray and spread it out carefully.

WHEN it was arranged to suit his taste, he struck a match, leaned over, and held it to the powder, which began to send up a thick smoke; it was some kind of incense. Then, in two long steps, Agnew was at the door and leaving the room. A switch clicked and the lights went off.

"What the hell!" muttered Jake, beside me.

Dago Harry was coughing violently. I had no idea what Agnew was about, but I began to think he was right in one respect. We might have had a hard job making our victim talk, much less finding Peggy Cameron. Men of that type do not yield readily to a third degree, such as Jake had anticipated.

Suddenly Jake nudged me, and I looked. Dago Harry had passed from violent coughing to more violent cursing; he was quite helpless, but he was begging for

water and was obviously most uncomfortable, which was as it should be. It was not because of him that Jake drew my attention, but to the light.

This was a dim, ghostly radiance. Whence it came I could not tell. It lighted nothing, apparently, except the incense-fumes against the opposite wall; these curled and wreathed like fog. I caught a sharp intake of breath from Jake.

"D'you see it?" he breathed.

"Yes," I rejoined.

I had thought it some illusion of my own senses.

Something was visible in or against the wreathing incense-fumes; it took shape, it grew. It was a head and shoulders, a face, and the face was looking at Dago Harry, who let out a startled oath and fell silent. But I recognized it with a prickly thrill stealing up my spine.

It was the face of the dead man I had seen at Jim Harker's house—the dripping wet face of Red Masters. And as I looked, the lips parted and I heard the face speak.

"You drowned me this morning, Dago Harry. You shot me and dropped me into the bay."

The man in the chair erupted in an explosion of oaths and frantic struggles. He became silent again as Red Masters looked at him and smiled. It was not a nice smile, not by half.

"It's a lie!" blurted out Dago Harry. "I never seen you before!" He trailed off in a burst of Italian that died away into paralyzed silence.

"I'll be waiting for you," said Red Masters, and then slowly, slowly faded out and became part of the incense fumes and was gone. .

JAKE leaned over and put his lips to my ear.

"This is good, Red! I could pull the trick myself with a magic lantern and smoke, and a bit of ventriloquism."

"Where's the light from the lantern or movie?" I responded cautiously.

He had no answer for this. I had thought of the same thing; it just wasn't so. There was no shaft of light to mark the projection of the figure or face. Nor had it been a still picture; it had moved, it was alive!

"Where's the young lady, Harry? Where's the skirt?"

The words broke upon the darkness. Again I felt that eerie spine-prickle; for I knew this voice instantly. It was the voice of Jim Harker. There was no mistaking those hard, level tones.

Then a face formed again in the smoke of the powder, and it was the face of Harker.

His hard-angled features were distinct; his eyes glittered at the man in the chair, his lips moved, his voice sounded afresh.

"Spill it, Harry! Where is she? It was quite a shock to find that I had fished Red Masters out of the water this afternoon, wasn't it? Well, tell me where she is and I'll have her fished out too!"

"She's not hurt!" burst forth Dago Harry in a shrill, frantic cry. "She's in the back room at my place—she's not hurt, I tell you! Gimme a phone and I'll turn her loose—let me out of here!"

"No, Mr. Rat, you're caught and you stay caught," rejoined Harker, grinning at him. There was the sound of a scuffle, as Dago Harry tore at his chair unavailingly. "Thought you did for me tonight, eh? Well, so you did."

His head and shoulders came more clearly into sight, and a gasping groan broke from Dago Harry. In the front of Harker's shirt was a gob of blood, fresh blood.

"I'll turn her loose!" His voice was high-pitched with terror. "Gimme a phone!"

"There's a phone on your lap," said Harker. "The receiver's off. Your finger can reach to dial the connection. Here, I'll give you more light."

The light widened a little. It was not a shaft of light, but a radiance hard to de-

scribe. I confess that I sat there paralyzed; if that were not a visitation from the dead, I could not tell what it was.

As we were behind Harry, I could not see what happened; but I could hear the click of a phone being dialed. Once again Harker broke the silence, and his voice was as real as any voice could be.

"Careful, now! Just say that she's to be set free and you're sending Red Masters to get her. If you try any tricks, I'll croak you myself!"

His hands came into sight, reaching out. Dago Harry shrank away. When he spoke into the phone he was hoarse with fright.

"Hello! This is Harry speaking—yes, you monkey! About that skirt in the back room. Put her at a booth out in front; yes, turn her loose!" he snarled. "I'm sending a guy over for her. Masters is his name. You tell her and keep her quiet. Okay."

There was a subdued crash, as the telephone and receiver toppled to the floor; he must have been shaking so much it fell from his knee. Certainly he was in almost uncontrollable fear.

Harker stooped, out of our sight. I heard a slight sound, as the receiver was put on its stand. Had he done it? Could any ghost do so material a thing? I could not tell.

"No harm done," said he, straightening up again. "Very well, Harry. You must remain here until she comes." His head thrust forward, and his eyes glittered. "And, Harry! I'll be waiting for you. Understand? I'll be waiting for you, and it won't be long. You'll be too smart for your own good, this very night—I'll be waiting for you."

He faded from sight. Nothing remained visible except the smoke curling up in the light, and now the light itself died away and was gone. I could hear the convulsive, sobbing breaths of the terror-stricken man in the chair. And, if you ask me, I felt just a bit shaky myself.

Jake Minor was feeling for my hand, jerking me up. I rose and accompanied him blindly. He located the door, softly opened it, and closed it again behind us.

We emerged into darkness, but when the door closed a light sprang up. There was Agnew looking at us and rubbing his hands, seeming highly pleased with himself. We stood in an adjacent room which was comfortably furnished but held no paraphernalia of any kind, that we could see.

"Hocus pocus!" exclaimed Jake, who was not a bit abashed. He lit a cigarette and handed me one. "The old hat tricks, Professor! Used to do 'em myself. Still, you made a damned good job of it."

"Thank you, Mr. Minor; as you say, the old hat tricks. I have a message for you, however, which may disturb your complacency a bit. First, Masters, before I forget it, here's something you may find handy. I presume you'll go to get Miss Cameron?"

"Sure!" I said. "Only I don't know where to go."

"I do," put in Jake. "We'll go in my car. I know Dago Harry's joint."

I took the object Agnew handed me. It was a cartridge that had no bullet, being sealed like a blank with red wax.

"Oh! For the tear-gas gun!"

"Precisely." Agnew beamed at me. "And I suggest that you go to the police in the morning to straighten out your identity. Say that you were held up and robbed in the fog. Mr. Minor can identify you as William Howard without trouble."

"Well, this is no time for hot air," interposed Jake Minor. He seemed a trifle uneasy as he eyed our host. "That Cameron girl's waiting, so we'll get off."

"Yes." Agnew took his arm, turned, and led us to the front door. "That message is from a young lady who lived in Los Cerritos, across the Border in Sonora. She said to tell you that everything was all right, and to thank you for the headstone and flowers. Her name is Carmencita."

He held open the front door and we went out.

Jake walked along like a wooden image.

I never saw a man so absolutely petrified. His jaw had fallen, his eyes were bulging, and he was white as a sheet. I did not know what it was all about and did not care.

Next moment the fog swallowed us up.

VI

JAKE did not utter a sound.

Dago Harry's car was still at the curb beneath the street light. There was no sign of the two men; I took for granted they were still in the car. We avoided it and walked down toward our own car in the next block. Not until we reached the corner did Jake break silence.

"Red!" he croaked.

"Yes?"

"Did you tell that guy things about me? About our jaunt below the Border?"

"Nary a thing. I never saw him before tonight. Besides, I know nothing about what you did there after we broke company. I never heard of any Carmencita."

"That's right," he said. "It was after we separated and you came back home—"

He was a man in a daze. We located his car, and in another two minutes were heading back for the city. Then Jake spoke again.

"I was crazy about that girl," he said. "We were fixing to get married. Then she got pneumonia and died; I was badly broken up. I came back home here and found that I had inherited the family fortunes and so forth. Well, a couple of months ago I took a notion, and sent down to Los Cerritos and had a stone put over her grave and flowers planted. Not a soul knew about it except the Mexican I hired to do the job. So what? Now you tell me the answer."

I whistled softly. "So it was true!"

"True as gospel," he said. "How did he know?"

I had been unscrewing the little tear-gas gun. Now I inserted the shell, and pocketed the gun again.

"He's just got information, that's all," I said. "I've heard some queer talk about him tonight."

"That's all!" said Jake, mockingly. "Yeah! And we were looking at smoke pictures, were we? Did pictures come to life and scare the guts out of Dago Harry? That guy is tough."

"It was a good trick. You said so yourself. Anybody would think from your talk that Agnew was one of these mediums who can whistle up ghosts."

"If he is, then he's got a swell racket."

"Bosh!" I said. "There's nothing that doesn't have a rational explanation."

"If you can find it. All right, you tell me how he knew about Carmencita's headstone! And that boss underworld artist was so damned scared that I bet his hair's turned white! What's the logical explanation to all that?"

"Watch your driving and stop asking fool questions," I said, irritated. At the moment I could find no explanation; nor, to be honest, have I found one since.

Jake merely laughed in a nasty way, and we sped on through the fog.

We had to go clear across town, but Jake knew where he was going. This eating place near the fish wharf, which had given Dago Harry his start, was no high class fooditorium, Jake explained. Neither was it a dump. It was like a hundred others where anything could happen.

"There we are," said Jake at last, when a brilliant neon sign loomed through the fog.

"No telling what may come off inside," I observed. "Suppose you wait in the car, while I go in and fetch her out. Then we can be off on the jump in case of trouble."

"Okay," said he. "But nothing can go wrong now."

I was not so sure.

He drew up on the taxicab zone at the entrance. I hopped out, told the attendant we had come to pick up a lady, and walked in, ready for anything. The place was one of these joints with subdued lights, a tiny

dance space and crowded tables; along the rear walls were booths. A brisk head waiter came up to me.

"I'm calling for Miss Cameron," I said, and kept going. "Harry said she'd be waiting in a booth—"

She was, too. She looked white and flurried, and at sight of me came to her feet with a glad cry of relief and recognition. There was no trouble of any kind; everything was matter-of-fact.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes, yes!" She caught up her fur coat and I held it for her. "Come, get away from here quickly! You found the—the envelope?"

"Good lord!" I exclaimed. The check was still in my pocket. "I clear forgot all about giving it to Agnew—here, take it back."

I thrust the crumpled envelope at her, and she took it, and we walked out. At each step, I expected something to happen; nothing did. It was incredible, but true.

Outside, Jake swung open the car door for us. I put Peggy in, and followed. Then the car slid away into the fog and we were all talking at once, unable to believe that we had actually pulled the trick.

Peggy was quite unhurt. She had merely been flung into a car and brought to the restaurant and held in a room, after a woman searched her and made sure she did not have the check. Just why Thatcher wanted that check was not clear, now or later. We figured that he meant to use it in some scheme of his own, perhaps to shake down Castrillo; once the syndicate group learned that the real Red Masters had never shown up, there would have been no end of trouble.

"Well, the fog's still here but the clouds have rolled by," said Jake cheerfully, as we acquainted Peggy with what had happened, more or less. We said nothing about the smoke pictures or ghosts or whatever you prefer to call them. "You'll probably get your car back in the morning, Peggy. Where to now?"

"Mr. Agnew's house, of course," she said. "I must see him and arrange to meet him tomorrow when the banks open."

"Okay," he rejoined, and we headed once more toward the beach. After a moment he spoke to me. "Say, Red! I've been thinking about those two guys we left in the car, out in front of Agnew's place. He didn't know about them, did he?"

"Come to think of it, I guess he didn't."

Jake put on speed. The fog thickened, as we neared the ocean; it was so thick that we had to crawl along in spite of Jake's desire for speed.

"Here we are; Simpson Street," he said at last, swinging around a corner. "Hello! That's funny."

"What?" I asked. He made no response, but swung his spotlight on the curb to pick up the numbers.

Then he brought the car against the curb and halted.

"This is the three hundred block, so Agnew's is up ahead," he said. "Peggy, suppose you wait here; sit in the car, while we take a look around." He switched off the car lights and we were instantly lost in night and fog. "I'd like to be sure that everything's okay at Agnew's. Can't run you into possible trouble, you know."

"I'd be more uneasy sitting here alone than with you," she said hesitantly. "Still, whatever you say."

"Good idea," I approved, and got out. Jake followed, and showed her how to lock the car doors from the inside.

"Turn on the radio, lock up, and nothing can budge you," said he. "We'll be back as soon as we locate Agnew."

WE STARTED away and the car was instantly lost in the fog. It was a job even to follow the sidewalk. I stopped abruptly.

"Whatever you do, don't bring her to the house!" said a voice beside me. Agnew's voice it seemed, but I could not be sure. I swung around and found no one.

"What's the matter?" demanded Jake.

"Didn't you hear it?" I told him about it, and he took my arm.

"Easy, now. You're imagining things. There was nothing, or I'd have heard it," he said. "But if you want to know what struck me as funny, look ahead! There were street lights when we left, one right in front of Agnew's house. Where are they now?"

I did not argue about imagination; it was quite possible he was right. And he was certainly right about the street lights. They were all out in the block ahead. The hammering of the surf came in from the nearby beach; the loneliness and desolation of the spot were horrible.

Abruptly, Jake pierced the murk with a flashlight.

"Brought this light from the car, luckily," he said. "There's the house, ahead—but the car's gone!"

The curb was empty, indeed; there was no car here, or near here.

"Dago Harry's two pals came to their senses and skipped out," I said, with a breath of relief. The thought of those two gassed gentlemen had been worrying me. "Well, that settles everything satisfactorily. Gimme that flashlight."

He handed it over. I turned and started for the house, shooting the beam ahead of me.

"Go on back and get Peggy," I said, over my shoulder. "We've been acting like a pair of frightened kids! Let's get this thing over, and go find us a bed somewhere; my head's still sore."

His response was lost in the swirling vapor.

Out of patience with the whole affair, I kept on to the porch, crossed it, and with the help of the flashlight located the bell. I pressed it and heard the ring inside the house; it reminded me of how Harker's bell had sounded, earlier in the evening. There was no response and I rang again, then tried the door.

It was unlocked, and swung open to my hand. Darkness greeted me. I stepped in, picked up an electric switch with the flashlight, and pressed it; lights sprang on overhead.

"Agnew!" I called. The word re-echoed emptily. The hall doors were closed. Remembering which way we had passed on coming in with Agnew, I went on to the end of the hall and swung open the door leading into the big room. This was dark, too.

"Hey, Agnew! Wake up!" I called. "We fetched her back and everything's okay!"

The silence startled me. Glancing around, I found a switch here, pressed it, and the lights shot on. A figure sat in the big chair in the center of the room, and I had a glimpse of Agnew's bald head glittering.

He had fallen asleep waiting for us to return, eh? I walked over to him and poked him with the flashlight.

"Come on, wake up!" I said cheerfully.

He sagged down a little and his bald head fell forward. Startled, I caught hold of his shoulder to give him a shake—but did not give it. Instead, I let go suddenly, and my heart stopped.

Agnew was dead. Blood was seeping over his shirt; he had been shot twice.

VII

UPON my startled horror grew a snarling voice.

"Up with 'em, you! Up!"

I swung around, lifting my hands. The door of the adjacent room was open, and in it stood Dago Harry and another man. Both of them held pistols, and they were advancing upon me.

"So you fetched her back, did you!" said Harry. "Drop that flashlight, you mug—drop it!"

I let it fall. It thudded on the floor. The second man swiftly passed around me and his hands ran over my pockets and under my arms.

"Okay, Harry," said he. "No rod."

The swarthy features of Harry grimaced at me.

"So you fetched her back! You're one of Agnew's mob, huh?" he said. "Where is she now?"

"In the car. Outside," I said.

"Go take care of her, Bert," he ordered his companion. "And when Tony comes back with the car and the boys, tell 'em to wait outside. We've got no choice now. We've got to make it clean and leave no traces. You!" He snapped at me. "Sit down on the arm o' that chair and talk."

The other man turned and left the room. Harry kept me covered; his attention was fully centered on me, and he meant business.

Gingerly I obeyed his command, trying not to touch the body of Agnew as I sat on the chair-arm away from him.

"Now, then," he said, "talk! I want to savvy this whole thing a lot better. Cough up everything and I'll turn you loose, understand?"

I knew better; he had just said enough to show his desperate intent. To save himself he had to make a clean sweep of anyone who might bring the murder of Agnew home to him.

"All right," I responded, letting my arms fall. "I haven't any gun. You don't mind if I smoke? I didn't expect to find you up and around so soon."

He grinned wrily. "Smoke, and I'll plug you if you try anything! Talk up, and I'll let you go. Where'd you come into this thing? Who are you?"

I got a book of matches out of my pocket, and fumbled for cigarettes. While I fumbled, I took a long chance, cocked the plunger of the tear-gas gun, and slid it up my sleeve.

"I'm the guy whose identification papers you planted on the body of Red Masters tonight," I said. "Howard."

"Oh!" His eyes widened. "So you're Howard, huh? I get it now. Who else is in this game with you?"

I got out the cigarettes, took one from the packet, and lit it, feeling the slim weight of the pencil-like gun up my sleeve. When my arm fell, the thing slid into my hand.

"Nobody else," I said. My brain was racing frantically; I was up against it hard. Murder was in the murky eyes fronting me. The tear-gas would not save me; with its gush, I would be dead.

Unless, somehow, I could momentarily shock or stupefy the brain of this killer, sufficiently to delay his murder-impulse. That might work. It was the only chance.

I eased my seat on the chair-arm, sitting on the very end of it, my whole weight on the carven oak. There was a chance, a slim chance, an utterly desperate chance, of evading the bullet from that gun. I must take it. I had no choice.

"You're a liar," he barked at me. "You are like this guy Agnew, full o' tricks! If you want to walk out of here, you come across."

"Well, you saw some queer tricks when you were sitting in this chair tonight!" I said, and saw him change expression slightly. "Remember what Red Masters said to you? That he was waiting for you? And remember what Harker said, about waiting for you? He said something else, too—that you'd be too smart for your own good, this very night—"

That did it. His eyes flickered. He remembered, and the memory galled him. He spat an oath at me, and I knew there was fear in his brain. It was the crucial instant.

I pressed the catch of the thing in my hand, throwing up my hand slightly as I did so. And, in the same motion, I let myself go off the chair-arm, sliding forward, dropping full weight to the floor.

A yell burst from him. The pistol in his hand exploded deafeningly. I struck the floor and went rolling over and over. The pistol exploded a second time and I felt a searing burn under my arm. A neat thing, that!

My head cleared, as I came to one

knee. He was standing there beating the air with one hand, ten feet away from me, but he had not dropped his gun. He whipped it up, a strangled cry escaped him, and I knew he had me cold.

Before the gun could explode, another shot roared through the room. Dago Harry let his weapon fall, spun around, and collapsed in a heap.

"This way!" yelped the voice of Jake Minor.

A whiff of the gas reached me. I dropped to the floor and crawled toward him. He was in the doorway, and his eyes were bulging at the room.

"Who's that in the chair?" he demanded.

"Agnew," I said, coming to my feet and coughing. "Murdered—no time to waste, Jake! One man's gone with the car—"

"I got the other one," he said grimly. "Easy, now! Gimme that tear-gas gun." He took it, whipped out his handkerchief, wiped it thoroughly and tossed it away. "Let it go; possession's a felony in this state. Anything else, now? No, I guess all's clear—come on, then! Beat it!"

He caught my arm. As we passed the light switch, he rubbed it with his handkerchief and turned off the lights; the same in the hall.

"I just conked the guy who came out. I was waiting," he said. "We've left no traces; now to get out of here and get away fast!"

"But he has men coming!" I exclaimed. "One of his two companions has gone to get more men."

"Go on and tell Peggy about it," he said. "I'll wait long enough to put in a phone call anyhow. A radio car can be here in time to catch those monkeys—go on, go on! She'll have heard the shots and be worrying."

I stumbled out of the accursed house, gained the sidewalk and the fog outside, and hurried along. When I came to the corner, I almost collided with a vague figure. It was Peggy. She had, indeed, heard the shots and was on her way to learn what had happened—just like a woman, the finest woman in the world!

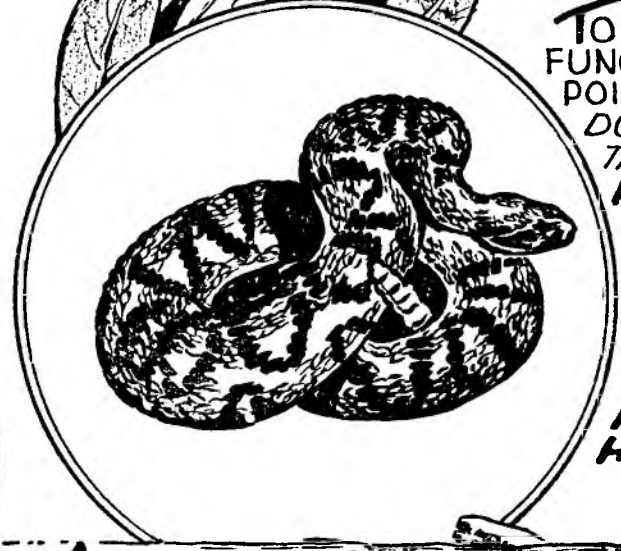
And Jake Minor was the grandest guy in the world. I was a lucky man all around—but as we waited for Jake, with the lights on and the engine running, to make our getaway and fade out of the whole picture, the only person I could think about was Agnew.

I have thought about him a lot since then, too, but I never learned the answers.

Curioddities

BY Weill

CERTAIN ANTS ARE THE *ONLY CREATURES OTHER THAN MAN CREDITED WITH THE ABILITY TO BUILD BOTH* ***PONTOON*** *AND* ***SUSPENSION BRIDGES***!



TO BREAK OFF THE FUNCTIONAL FANGS OF POISONOUS SERPENTS *DOES* ***NOT*** *RENDER THEM* ***PERMANENTLY HARMLESS!*** UNLESS THE EMBRYO FANGS ARE TAKEN OUT, *THE DEFANGING IS NOT PERMANENT- OR THE SNAKE* ***COMPLETELY SAFE TO HANDLE***!

AUSTRALIAN LUNG-FISH "CERATODUS" *COMES TO THE SURFACE* ***EVERY HOUR*** *TO RENEW THE AIR IN ITS LUNG!* POSSESSING A LUNG BESIDES ITS GILLS, IT BREATHES WATER AND AIR, AND CAN SURVIVE WHEN RIVERS BECOME DRY *AS LONG AS THERE IS* ***MOISTURE ON ITS GILLS***!

WHERE DO MARRIED LADIES HAVE A MUSTACHE TATTOOED ON THEIR LIPS? *See Curioddities next time.*

HOPALONG CASSIDY SERVES

PART III

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

HOPALONG CASSIDY, Sheriff of Twin River County, having told his deputies that he's tired of desk work, undertakes personally to serve a writ on a homesteader back in the hills. As he rides, he finds his mind dwelling on an old reward poster for the apprehension of train robbers, and the fact that the $500 bills they stole must have been circulated somewhere—yet the bandits were never caught.

He reaches Ben Peterson's small ranch and finds that Ben can pay off the judgment against him—which is a relief to Hopalong. But in the course of conversation Ben mentions that some men who bought cattle from him last year wanted to pay in big bills—$500 ones. That

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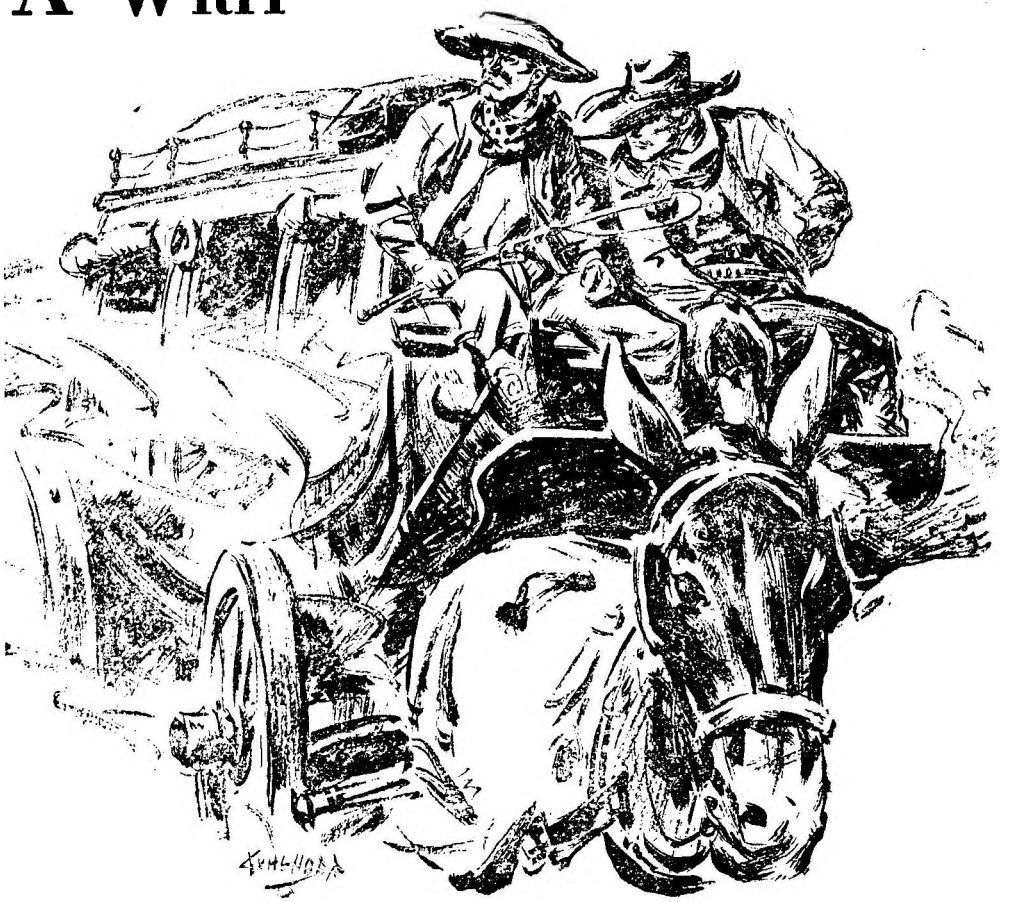
Three Bar 20 Men in Town? Hopalong Knew He Could Handle Any Situation After That

A Writ



rouses Hopalong's suspicions and he rides on, everywhere he stops bringing the conversation around to cattle buyers and big bills. At length he arrives in Hancock—center of a large ranching country. Here he lingers, listening to this and that range gossip, sitting in at poker games, hearing of such and such cattle deals. When he returns to Twin River, he has gleaned a lot of information—but right at home he is told of rustled cattle. He thinks Hancock a likely place to pick up clues, so rides back, and by doing so misses two friends; friends also of many Mulford fans—Mesquite Jenkins and Johnny Nelson. Mesquite and Johnny decide not to wait for Hopalong's return, but to follow him to Hancock, riding by different trails.

Meanwhile in Hancock Hopalong picks up at the general store a $500 bill, its serial number showing it to have been one of the looted bills from the train robbery. Also, he is interested in the many Jones brothers, big ranchers thereabouts who seem to have got the whole neighborhood by the tail. Hopalong himself is traveling under the name of Jones—and sure finds himself one of a large family connection down Hancock way. He decides that the barber is a good source of information.

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

Author of All the Hopalong Cassidy Stories

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XVI

THE barber was honing a razor when the sheriff entered the shop, and looked up with a smile.

"Did you bring yore razor?" he asked.

Hopalong put a hand into a pocket, brought it out with the article in question, and handed it over. The barber drew the edge across a thumb nail, frowned, a little, and placed it on the shelf.

The sheriff was already in the chair.

"Shave an' a hair cut," he grunted, closing his eyes and relaxing. Then he opened them and looked at the barber. "I was just wonderin' if there's any chance to sell graded bulls up here. They make a big difference in th' weight of beef critters." He closed his eyes again. "Say, Aberdeen-Angus, or Shorthorns."

"Why," replied the barber thoughtfully. "I don't know. I ain't heard anybody talk about breedin' from graded bulls. Most of th' ranchers hereabouts might not be able to buy 'em. They come purty high, don't they?"

"Not so high," answered the sheriff. "I could deliver Durhams for about sixty dollars a head, an' Aberdeen-Angus or Shorthorns for a few dollars more. They're th' best investment, considerin' th' outlay, that a ranchman can make."

"Uh-*huh*," said the barber. He worked for a moment in silence. "I reckon about th' only ranchers up here that could buy enough graded bulls to make it worth yore while to drive 'em here would be th' Joneses."

"Reckon I'll have to pay them boys a visit an' find out how they feel about it."

"I don't know how they'll feel about buyin' th' bulls," said the barber after a moment's thought, "but I shore do know how they'll feel about you visitin' 'em. They *don't* want visitors."

"Huh," grunted the man in the chair. After a moment he spoke again. "Did th' Joneses have many cattle before they started buyin' last fall?"

"Don't know. I'd guess they didn't."

"I was told they made some beef drives late last fall," said the sheriff, carelessly. "An' somebody told me they didn't buy beef critters then. Only cows, yearlin's an' some two-year-olds."

The barber made no comment.

"If they did make a drive, which way would they go?" continued the sheriff.

"Along th' stage route, through Little River."

"South?"

"Southeast, in between Jim Glass an' Len Danvers," said the barber.

Hopalong grunted and leaned his head forward as the barber went to work on the back of his head.

"There are three roads," said the barber, busily snipping; "but th' stage road runs south of town, crosses Two Butte Creek an' then swings off southeast an' passes Jim Glass' shack three, four miles east of it."

"Goes right through his range, huh?"

"Yeah."

Hopalong was silent. If a trail herd was driven across a man's range then that man would not only know it, but would ride with it to turn back his own cattle that would be tempted to join the herd. He might even demand that the herd, when it had passed his range, be thrown up and trimmed.

"How far from town is th' Glass ranch?"

"Ten, twelve miles," answered the barber, removing the cloth and shaking it out. He replaced it and stepped to the shelf for the brush. "About a mile after you cross Two Butte Creek you'll come to a fork in th' trail. Foller th' right hand trail to th' next creek, an' then foller a faint trail along th' creek. It'll take you right to Jim's door."

"Uh-*huh*," grunted the man in the chair. "I didn't say I wanted to know how to get to his ranch, but I might be able to sell him a graded bull or two. "Who buys th' hides up in this country?"

"Pete Jameson, down in Little River?"

"Little River in this county?"

"No. It's in Powers County."

"Little River th' county seat?"

"Yeah. Bend yore head forward a little more."

"Is it on th' railroad?" asked the sheriff.

"No," answered the barber. "It's a Wells, Fargo town. Th' railroad's fifty miles or more to th' south." His hands ceased to move. "Yo're askin' a lot of questions."

"Yeah. I may be drivin' some graded bulls up here," explained the sheriff. "If a trail herd went over that route, then there must be good grass an' water along it. It's allus well to know about things like that."

"Oh, shore," replied the barber, his curiosity now satisfied. "You like th' Aberdeen-Angus better than th' Shorthorns?"

"Either one is mighty good," answered the sheriff. "You take them polled, black Aberdeen-Angus an' you got heavy beef. I figger th' Shorthorns mebby get along better in all kinds of climates an' conditions; but if you breed from a cross of both of 'em, you'll have th' best cattle in th' country."

The chair was tipped back and again Hopalong closed his eyes and relaxed. He believed that he had asked enough questions for one day. He hardly heard what the barber was saying during the shave and when it was finished and the chair tipped forward again he opened his eyes, yawned and grunted.

"There you are," said the barber, whisking away the cloth.

"A-w-w-w," yawned the sheriff, slowly getting out of the chair and putting a hand in a pocket. "How much?"

"Six bits. I'll have yore razor ready for you tomorrow."

"Take yore time with it," replied Hopalong, smiling. "I ain't figgerin' on shavin' myself as long as I am in town. See you tomorrow, then."

Hopalong walked down the street and left the sidewalk to cut across the vacant lot toward the stable. The stableman, leaning back in his chair against the side of the building, looked up inquiringly.

"Reckon I'll take a ride," said the sheriff, dropping onto the next chair.

"All right," said the stableman, getting up and walking into the building. In a few minutes he was back again, leading the saddled horse.

The sheriff swung into the saddle and headed for the main street. He followed it south, crossed Two Butte Creek, came to the forks, and not long thereafter he was riding along the faint trail leading to the JG. As he came within sight of the little shack he saw a man working near a wagon, and there were three small barrels on the ground near him. Four quarters of a slaughtered beef were in the wagon, and the hide was draining on the corral fence. Several sacks of rock salt leaned against the barrels.

Hopalong drew up and stopped at a reasonable distance from the busy operation, not wanting to stir up any dust too near the wagon. As he swung down from the saddle the rancher straightened up and withdrew his hands and arms from the barrel.

"Howdy, Glass," said the sheriff, walking slowly forward.

"Howdy, stranger—oh, it's th' newest member of th' Jones fambly," said the ranchman with a grin. "You come down to try to buy a couple head of cattle from me at that fool trail margin?"

"No," answered Hopalong, with a laugh. "I come down thinkin' mebby I could sell you some, an' also to pass th' time. A feller gets lonesome in town. You ridin' in tonight to set in a game?"

"Yeah, I reckon so," answered Glass, "if I get this job done in time. This fool steer had to step in a hole an' bust its laig. Lucky I found him. After I shot him I turned my hand to butcherin'. Lucky for me it was a steer an' not a cow. I don't think a hell of a lot of cow beef. When I get through I'll have me a supply of

corned meat that'll help a lot durin' th' winter."

"Lemme give you a hand," offered the sheriff, taking off his coat and rolling up his sleeves. "You dry or wet packin'?"

"Mostly wet," answered the ranchman. "I allus had th' idear that if you packed her wet, there wouldn't be quite so much juice drawed out of th' meat." He picked up a salt sack and poured some of its contents into the barrel. "This rock salt is just about th' size I like it." Again he leaned over and his hands and arms went into the barrel, to spread the layer of salt properly.

"You use any saltpeter?" asked Hopalong, stepping up to the end of the wagon. "How thin you cuttin' this meat? What size hunks?"

"I don't like saltpeter," answered the ranchman. "I don't care about th' color of my meat, an' I'd rather not take a chance of makin' it too damn hard. Why, about *so* big," he said, placing his hands far enough apart to answer the question. "Yo're goin' to get yoreself all greased up."

"Won't be th' first time," remarked Hopalong, carefully cutting. "Soap an' hot water'll take it off." He was about to make another stroke, but held his hand. "You puttin' th' tenderloin into pickle?"

"Hell, no!" exclaimed Glass. "Cut it out an' lay it aside. I'm goin' to smoke that," he explained, and glanced behind him where a small board edifice stood off by itself, a faint aura of smoke over it. "What you mean, tryin' to sell me some cattle?" he asked as he walked over to the wagon to get meat for another layer.

"Graded bulls," answered Hopalong. "They're th' best investment you can make."

"There's a bottle in th' house," said the rancher. "Let's go look for it an' set down for awhile. I ain't used to stoopin' over so much."

"Let's get this job done first," replied Hopalong, with a grin, and began cutting again. "Here's some tenderloin."

"Put it aside," replied Glass, back at the barrel and bending over again. "Well, that's half full," he grunted and picked up the salt bag.

With two at work it did not take long to pack in the top layer and more salt. In a moment Glass had the head in place and was driving down the hoops.

"Reckon that's as tight as I can make it," said the rancher, and tipped the barrel over, rolling it until the bunghole faced the sky. Knocking out the bung, he peered into the hole. "She's packed tight as hell." He reached behind him, picked up a water bucket and began to pour slowly, a little at a time. Finally, satisfied that the barrel would hold no more water, he drove the bung home with the tap of an axe, stood up and grinned.

"I hate to lose a three-year-old steer, but Jim Glass shore will be livin' off more'n ham an' bacon *this* winter."

Time passed swiftly, and the rest of the job was quickly done. When the bung of the last barrel had been driven home, Glass slowly stood erect, eased his back.

"Thanks, Jones," he said with a broad, friendly smile on his face. "Don't bother. I'll roll 'em in later. Where's them tenderloins? It won't take long to hang 'em up. I got a good smoke already goin'."

He made his words good and then, closing and fastening the smoke house door, he led the way into the shack, washed his hands side by side with his companion, and then found the bottle and waved his visitor to a chair. As he pulled the cork he was smiling. "Next time I go to town in th' wagon, I'll take in a nice, two hundred pound barrel of that meat an' do some dickerin' with th' storekeeper for flour, bakin' powder, beans an' bacon. I ought to be full cocked an' ready to go, this winter."

Hopalong nodded, poured his drink, and saluted.

"Good health," he said.

"Same to you," replied Glass, and placed the bottle on the table. "Yo're just wastin' yore time tryin' to sell me any graded

bulls," he said, drawing a hand across his lips. "I've got all I can do to keep in flour an' bacon."

"Well, then there's no use talkin' to you about it," said Hopalong, reaching for tobacco and papers. "I just thought I'd use up some of my idle time by ridin' 'round an' see if I couldn't make up a small herd of graded bulls for this section of th' country. You reckon any of yore friends would be interested?"

"Don't figger so, but they'll mebby all be in town tonight, an' they can speak for themselves."

"I follered a well used trail on part of my way down here," said the sheriff. "I've been told it's th' stage road to Little River. Been any beef drives down it lately?"

"Not lately, but th' Jones boys threw a herd together last summer an' drove down it. I rode along with it till after it got past my range," said the ranchman.

"Big herd?"

"Big herd for this part of th' country. Between three an' four hundred head," answered Glass.

"You said last fall?" asked Hopalong.

"Last summer—mid-summer."

"Bein' a herd from them Jones' ranches I reckon there was a lot of brands in it," suggested the sheriff.

"Yeah," answered Glass, a peculiar expression on his face. "Abner Jones was sore as hell because I wanted to ride with 'em; but I told him that I'd either ride with it across my range to see that none of my cattle joined it, or they'd have to throw it up for a cut th' next day."

"Mixed herd?" asked the sheriff.

"No," answered the ranchman. "I'd say every critter was at least four years old."

"But I understand that last summer they didn't have enough cattle between 'em to make up a herd of growed beef as big as that," protested the sheriff.

"It struck me as bein' a mite peculiar," admitted the ranchman; "but there it was."

"Did anybody try to buy cows an' heifers from you last fall?"

"Yes. I sold off a few head so I could buy grub."

"Who were they?" persisted Hopalong.

Glass looked away uneasily.

"I don't know," he answered.

"Same bunch that bought from Ben Peterson an' Len Danvers?"

"I don't know who bought from Peterson an' Danvers."

"Does Ben Peterson know who bought his?" asked the sheriff after a short pause.

"Better ask Ben," suggested Glass, uneasily. "I ain't seen Ben but a couple of times since last fall. How come yo're so damn interested?"

"My fool curiosity, I reckon," answered Hopalong with a laugh. "Anythin' that has to do with trail herds an' local range conditions interests me. If somebody up here is makin' drives there won't be no reason for me to come up here to do th' same thing."

Glass was looking at him curiously.

"Reckon that's true enough," he said, " 'specially if you stick to such a fool trail margin."

"Hide buyer been through here lately?" asked Hopalong carelessly.

"No. He'll not get up here till later on."

"Why is Ben Peterson afraid of th' Joneses?" suddenly asked the sheriff. "An' why are you, an' all th' rest of you?"

"I ain't afraid of no man wearin' pants!" retorted Glass, but he looked away again.

"Glad to learn that," grunted Hopalong, getting to his feet. "Well, if I can't sell you some graded bulls, I might as well go back to town. I'll see you tonight if you ride in. So-long."

"So-long, an' thanks for helpin' me with that pack," responded the ranchman, following his guest toward the door, and he stopped in it and leaned against the casing, watching his visitor ride away.

Hopalong had considerable to think about on his way back to town. He disliked making another long horseback ride, but the hide buyer would have to be interviewed. Then he smiled as a thought struck

him; he could make the trip on the stage if he wanted to.

XVII

THE bartender looked up as the nearing steps sounded on the sidewalk outside. The door swung back and the Plumb Creek rancher pushed between them and strode into the room.

"Howdy, Robbins," grunted the man with the bar cloth. "Yo're right early."

"Howdy, Sam," replied the newcomer, his gaze on the man in a corner at the rear of the room. "Howdy, stranger. Back ag'in, huh?"

Hopalong stretched, nodded and smiled.

"Yeah. Came back for th' good eatin', an' for some easy money." He chuckled. "You reckon th' rest of th' boys will be in tonight?"

"Reckon so," answered Robbins. "Have a drink?"

The sheriff very nicely could have done without one, but he had no wish to offend the ranchman. He loafed up to the bar, took the bottle and poured the liquor scantily into the glass. He bought the second round, again pouring scantily, and then led the way to a table.

"You still holdin' to that trail margin?" asked Robbins, without any particular interest.

"Right now I am," answered Hopalong with a broad smile; "but if I come up here next year, an' really want to make up a trail herd, you'll find th' margin about right. You don't want to buy any graded bulls, an' improve th' weight an' quality of yore cattle, do you?"

"They cost too much an' they don't work out so good on an unfenced range," answered the ranchman. "There are too many scrub bulls runnin' around."

They heard a horse coming down the street and then stop out front. In a few moments Jordan, of the FXJ, stepped into the room, nodded to Sam and headed for the couple in the rear.

"How's th' trail herd business?" he asked with a grin. "Howdy, Jordan."

"Plumb dead till next year," answered the sheriff. "You bring some loose change with you?"

"Yeah, an' I aim to add to it," chuckled Jordan. He glanced toward the bar. "What'll you have?"

"Reckon I'll wait a bit," replied Robbins. "We've just had two apiece. Get one for yoreself."

"Same goes for me," said the sheriff. "Have what you want. Rest of th' boys ridin' in tonight? I figger Glass will ride in. He put about six hundred pounds of steer meat into pickle today."

"That's good," said Jordan. "Yeah, I reckon they'll be in." He raised his voice. "Hi, Sam! Bring me a drink of that Scotch, will you?"

"Ain't none left," answered Sam. "You want corn or rye?"

"None left? What'll Abner say to that? All right; make it corn."

"That damn bully will have plenty to say," growled the bartender. "His disposition is mean enough, ordinary; but when he's riled he's like a damn rattler. I figger I'll get hell with no holds barred." He approached the table, placed the drink before the Butte Creek ranchman, picked up the coin and scowled at Hopalong. "Lettin' you have all that Scotch has shore put me in a hole," he growled. "I shouldn't have done it."

"In a hole, huh?" gently inquired the sheriff, his eyes narrowing. "Well, if th' hole gets too deep I'll pull you out damn quick. Didn't I have to threaten you with a gun to get the liquor?"

Sam grinned dubiously and scratched a cheek.

He glanced at a window and decided that it was time to light the lamps, although it would not be dark outside for an hour or more.

"Can't say I saw you pull no gun on me," he replied; "but I did feel that my life was plumb in danger." He chuckled and

turned away, taking a match from a pocket and reaching for a wall lamp.

The sheriff studied the back of the departing bartender and then slowly looked at the faces of his companions, and he saw no smiles. He stirred in his chair.

"You reckon Sam will really get into trouble about the Scotch?" he slowly asked. "Real trouble?"

JORDAN looked steadily at him but said nothing. Robbins, however, nodded, and there was a frown on his face.

"Mebby," he admitted. "It all depends on how Abner feels at th' moment. He holds a heavy hand on th' reins. Well," he said hopefully, "mebby he won't ride in tonight."

"No?" said Hopalong, sighing gently. "It won't be dark for more'n an hour. Oh, well; now I got to figger on stayin' here for a few days, just in case he does ride in." He looked toward the front of the room, where the little doors were swinging inward to reveal the presence of Bud Wilson, of Horse Creek. The newcomer waved toward the bar, saw no one stirring at the table, and grinned as he put a foot on the rail.

"They just had theirs," explained the bartender, reaching toward the backbar.

"In that case," said Bud, with a wide grin, "make mine Scotch."

"It's all gone," said Sam, and slid a round bottle across the bar.

"Too bad," grunted Bud, pouring. A moment later he clacked across the floor, pulled back a chair at the table, and dropped onto it. "What's th' matter with you hombres? You all took th' pledge?"

"Only a thirsty animal drinks," grunted Jordan, and looked curiously at Hopalong. "You told us yore name, stranger; but damn if my mem'ry ain't tricked me ag'in."

"Jones," chuckled Hopalong. "Fred Jones. You savvy—just one of th' Jones' fambly."

"Damn if they ain't named this town wrong," said Robbins. "There ain't a Hancock in it. They should have called it Jonesville, Jonestown, or Jones-somethin'. We shore got our share of 'em. I might go so far as to say that we got too damn many of 'em." The slight frown slowly faded and he looked apologetically at the member of that family now present. "Not meanin' you," he explained.

"Yeah. We shore could do right well without some of 'em, 'specially that damn Abner," said Wilson quickly, perhaps too quickly. "Where in hell does he go, all th' time? He don't stay around here long enough to get set."

"Mebby he's like me," suggested the sheriff. "Mebby he's got th' saddle itch."

"What you figger?" asked Robbins, looking at Wilson. "When a man ain't got no home, but lives with his brothers on their ranches—a day or two here; a day or two, there—hell, I reckon he puts in a lot of time around this section that we don't know about." He turned to Jordan. "Anythin' excitin' happen over yore way since we seen you last?"

JORDAN stroked his chin and appeared to be thinking. He squirmed on the chair and then pushed up to a more erect position, and two deep lines suddenly showed on his forehead.

"I dunno," he muttered. "I dunno." He paused for a moment. "There ain't no tellin' what cow critters will do, but there was a small bunch that liked to hang out five, six miles up th' crick. Last two times I was up that way I didn't see 'em. Th' second time I done some ridin' around, but they wasn't nowhere in sight. Reckon, mebby, they just drifted on to better feed."

"Feed up there all grazed off?" idly asked Hopalong, studying his left hand thumb.

"No-o," slowly answered Jordan. "Not too much."

"I'll keep an eye open for 'em," said Robbins, "in case they drifted over my way."

"I've forgot what yore brand is," said Hopalong to Jordan.

"FXJ. Why?" asked the ranchman.

Hopalong did not answer at once. He leaned back in his chair and allowed the old parade of brands to pass in review before his mind's eye.

At last he looked at Jordan, and smiled faintly.

"You'll find 'em somewhere," he said. "They ain't gone for good—they're just temporary misplaced." He chuckled. "Cattle get notions sometimes. What you say we have a game? Four hand ain't as good as five, but it's better than not playin' a-tall. Say, Wilson, you wan't to buy some graded bulls, an' build up th' quality of yore herd?"

Wilson shook his head slowly.

"No. Not this year," he answered.

"All right," replied Hopalong. "Same stakes as last time?" he asked, looking around the table.

Jordan scaled his big hat onto a chair against the wall and slowly shook his head.

"There'll be somebody driftin' in purty soon," he said. "Let's wait awhile." He glanced at Hopalong. "You sellin' graded bulls?"

"If I could make up a fair sized herd to drive up here, I would," he answered.

As they spoke they heard sounds of a horse coming down the street and they smiled at each other. Other hats now scaled onto other chairs and as Jordan got up to go to the bar for cards and chips, the others drew closer to the table.

XVIII

THE little doors swung inward again and Abner Jones, well covered with dust, pushed into sight and headed for the bar. Hopalong slowly arose and loafed toward the counter to get a cigar. Those remaining at the table tensed slightly.

"Gimme a deck an' th' chips," said Jordan, leaning against the bar.

"Give me a drink," said Abner, hooking a heel on the rail.

"There's yore deck an' chips," said Sam, pushing a cigar box toward Jordan. He reached behind him and picked a round bottle and a glass from the backbar. "An' there's yore drink," he said to Abner, sliding both toward him.

"I'll have a cigar," said Hopalong, ignoring the foot rail, but leaning comfortably against the bar, one elbow on it. He was facing Abner.

"An' there's yore cigar," said Sam, a curious expression on his face.

"You made a mistake," growled Abner, pushing the bottle from him. "I want my own brand. This stuff ain't fit for a dog to drink!"

"Ain't none of yourn left," said Sam, reaching under the counter and showing an empty, square bottle. "There're all of 'em as empty as that."

"What do you mean?" demanded Abner. "Last time I was in here that bottle was near full!"

"Well, it ain't full now," replied Sam uneasily. "A new case oughta be here on th' next stage. That'll only be a few days."

"What good does that do me now?" demanded Abner, color creeping into his ears. "What you done with my Scotch?"

"Some of th' boys called for it an' drank it," answered Sam.

"What you mean," roared Abner, "sellin' my liquor to any damned pilgrim that asks for it?" and he glared at the bartender.

"It wasn't yore liquor," retorted Sam, his neck getting red. "You hadn't bought it an' laid it away. Yo're not my only customer, an'——"

"By Gawd, I'll take you apart!" shouted Abner, starting for the end of the bar, but it happened that he chose to take the wrong direction.

"I'm th' very customer that drank yore liquor," said Hopalong evenly, now standing squarely in the other's way. "I bought it an' drank it, an' Sam couldn't do nothin' about it. An' I'm goin' to have my fair share out of th' next case, me an' my friends. An if you take anybody apart it'll be me an' not Sam."

Abner stopped for a moment, caught flat-footed by surprise. His whiskers seemed to bristle as he thrust out his jaw. The two men were not more than a yard apart, too close for an unhampered draw, and Abner stepped backward for more clearance and his hand flashed downward; but as he stepped back Hopalong stepped forward and stabbed out his right hand to the left wrist of the other, holding the gun tightly in its holster. Hopalong's left curved over and a little to one side of the middle of the whiskers, and there was full weight and power behind it, the weight of an arched back and thrusting legs. Abner went backward to the left, struck the bar, slid down it and rolled off the foot rail.

Hopalong moved swiftly again, bending forward, and the sheathed gun of the fallen man yielded to his grasp. Half cocking it, the sheriff punched out the cartridges, dropped them into a pocket and then placed the harmless weapon on the bar. Then he stepped back two paces and waited. The sudden gasps from the rear of the room became low mutters of pleasure, and Sam remembered about then to close his mouth.

"It warn't no shootin' matter," said the sheriff quietly, casually watching the man on the floor. Minutes seemed to drag along, although they really were seconds. Sam put his hand under the bar, took hold of something, changed his mind and brought the hand into sight again. He glanced from the prostrate man to Hopalong, and an admiring grin crept over his face.

"Like th' kick of a mule," he muttered, and looked back to the floor, leaning far over the bar to see what was happening.

Abner stirred, subsided, and then stirred again. He drew up a leg and rolled over on one side. Then his eyes opened and an elbow stiffened against the floor. Hopalong took another backward step, his eyes coldly on the other man. Abner blinked, looked around, and then focussed on Hopalong. He was alert now, waiting for his enemy's heels on face and stomach, brutal touches of the rough and tumble fighting of the long frontier. After a moment he sensed that there would be no heels, and he rolled over to hands and knees and slowly, steadily pushed against the floor. On his feet again, he grasped the edge of the bar, where he rocked gently until his senses fully returned.

"It warn't no shootin' matter, *then*," said Hopalong slowly and calmly. "I wouldn't advise you to make it one now, or later."

Abner grabbed the gun from the bar and tried a snapshot at the man who had knocked him down and out, and cursed viciously at the useless click of the hammer.

"Put it away an' get out, after you've had yore drink," said the sheriff. "I've said twice that it warn't no shootin' matter, but if you reckon different, come back later an' we'll make it one. You may have this range buffaloed, but I'm ready for a showdown. Have yore drink an' get out."

"No shootin' matter, huh?" replied Abner, cursing. He jammed the empty gun into its sheath. He unbuckled the belt and tossed the whole rig on the counter. "It takes moren'a lucky, surprise blow to stop me. You got a lickin' comin' to you if you've got th' guts to take off yore belts. An' you'll get another lickin' for every drink of my Scotch you take!"

Hopalong was thinking quickly—to take off his belts and guns? Every waking moment for years he had worn them; but he did not believe that anyone in Hancock or the ranges around it suspected his identity, and if he took them off it would not be for long. He glanced knowingly at Sam, stepped swiftly back and sideways, and

found the bartender quickly meeting him. Sam grabbed the belts and placed them on the backbar, and once again his right hand slipped under the counter, and remained there.

Abner rushed, swinging both hands, but really wishing to get a wrestler's hold where his great strength could be used to its best advantage. There were no Marquis of Queensberry rules in that country at that time. Kneeing and gouging were all right, and no one would interfere until the fight was finished. It was up to each man to protect himself from any kind of attack.

Instead of backing away, Hopalong sprang a surprise by stepping swiftly inside the swinging fists and driving left and right to the body. He was like a cat. The blows seemed to give Abner trouble in his breathing. He was rolled back off balance, and as he recovered it he again rushed and lashed out with a left, which struck the sheriff on the cheek and opened the skin. Hopalong slipped to the right and struck twice with his own left. The first blow missed, but the second landed on Abner's right eye. The effect seemed like the materialization of an oyster out of nowhere, and in a few moments the eye looked like one.

ABNER brought up his knee viciously, but it only grazed the sheriff's outer thigh as Hopalong twisted sideways, and then both of Abner's hands flashed out for a grip. Hopalong drove him back on his heels again with two more hard lefts, and one of them got the same eye. Again Abner rushed, trying for a grip, and this time wrestling got into the fight. His left wrist was caught and Hopalong swung quickly around, put his shoulder under the other's armpit, turned like a flash, straightened up with all the power of his body, and bent swiftly forward.

It was the old flying mare, and Abner left the floor and sailed through the air. Quickly as it had happened Abner saw where he was going and managed to get his right arm across his face to protect it and his eyes. The window sprang to meet him and then fairly exploded as the sailing man crashed through it. It was a six-foot drop to the ground at this place and when Abner struck he rolled over twice and lay still.

Hopalong hardly checked the motion of the throw, but turned it into a continuing motion toward the end of the bar, and around it.

Almost before anyone had recovered from surprise he had one of his guns and had his back to the backbar. Breathing quickly, he waited.

"By Gawd, you've killed him!" shouted Jordan, half out of his chair.

"No such luck," growled the bartender, letting loose of what he had been holding under the bar.

"You all saw it!" snapped Hopalong. "I didn't figger on th' window. Didn't have time to, didn't know where it was; but it was a fair an' square fight. Any objections?"

"Put on yore belts," said Robbins. "He got what he was itchin' for—some wrastlin'. We got to go out an' take a look at Abner. He's likely dead."

"Not that coot!" said Jordan, a slow grin showing. "Man, I've seen a fight today. All right; let's go look."

They streamed out through the rear door into the deepening twilight, turned the corner of the building and bent down over the man on the ground. Robbins removed his fingers from Abner's wrist, the other hand from his chest. He nodded and straightened up.

"Tough as rawhide," he muttered. "I thought shore he'd be killed." He bent over again. "He shore is a gory mess. His skin must be full of glass." He looked at the window frame around the prostrate man's head and shoulders, but did not appear to see it. "Tough as rawhide," he repeated. "He should have been killed."

"Any glass in his face, in his whiskers?" snapped the sheriff, a sudden thought pop-

ping into his mind. "Take a good look, *all* of you!"

The examination found some glass, a little blood, and curious faces turned to the sheriff, but he gave no explanation. He passed the back of his hand over the beard and stood up. It was coarse and stiff, almost like hog bristles.

"Well, I'm glad he wasn't killed," he growled. "I've said all along that it warn't no killin' matter; but from now on I reckon mebby it will be when he gets so he can come to town." He looked up as a horse stopped beside him and saw Jim Glass leaning over the saddle and looking down.

"What th' hell hit Abner, an' who framed him?" demanded Glass with pardonable curiosity, a grin slipping over his face. "He ain't dead, is he?"

"By Gawd, he *is* framed!" shouted Jordan, and let out a roar of laughter. "Look at that hunk of sash! All framed an' delivered!"

"From th' looks of that eye I'd say he was branded, too," chuckled Robbins. "What a job, what a job! Well, it was man to man, rough an' tumble, an' there ain't no question either about th' rough or th' tumble. Abner shore was unlucky. Come on in; I'm buyin' the drinks."

"But there wasn't no windstorm, or earthquake," said Glass. "How th' hell did he get like this, an' why th' frame around him?"

"Our friend, th' cattle buyer with th' big trail margin, just heaved Abner through that window," explained Jordan, pointing. "It is called th' flyin' mare, an' it shore flew." The bartender was standing in the ruined window. "Hey, Sam, get a bucket of water an' bring it out here," ordered Jordan. "This damn' bully ain't comin' too fast enough to suit me."

THE man in the window disappeared and in a few moments Sam lugged a bucket of water around the corner of the building and heaved it precisely over Abner, who stirred, opened his eyes, groaned, and then sat up with the aid of Robbins. The dazed expression slowly cleared and he looked at the sheriff. One shoulder seemed to be a little askew and his left arm was peculiarly bent. His right hand slowly felt of his shoulder and his other arm. His forehead was white and beaded from pain. He set his teeth, holding back another groan. Sam reappeared, this time with a tumbler of whiskey in his hand. Abner gulped it down and a little color came into his face, where the beard did not hide it.

"Got some busted bones," he grunted. "Get me to th' Doc." While three men carefully took hold of him he looked at Hopalong again, his eyes blazing with hatred.

"I'll be all right in a couple of months," he said between his teeth. "What I said about drinkin' my Scotch still goes. Next time I'll break every damn' bone in yore body if yo're here when I come back ag'in!"

Hopalong and Sam, the latter holding the reins of Glass' horse, watched the departing group.

Sam suddenly blew out his breath and looked at his companion.

"By Gawd, *that* was a *fight!*"

"An' there warn't no reason for it!" snapped the sheriff, angrily. He looked behind him at the ruined window. "Get that fixed an' I'll pay for it."

"Mr. Jones," said the bartender, picking up the bucket in his free hand and turning toward the stable, "that'll be on th' house. It's what you might call a pleasure an' a privilege." He saw the curious stableman approaching, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Turning the horse over to this tardy person, he waved toward the tie rail out front, ordered Abner's horse taken to the stable, and then led his companion back to the hotel and into the barroom.

"This celebration rightly calls for Scotch but you mebby know by now that we ain't got none," said Sam, with a grin. "Here's to you, feller!" He downed the drink,

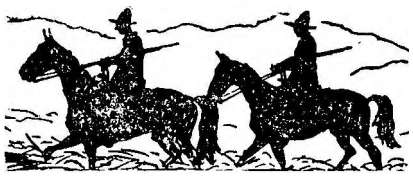
choked with sudden laughter and threw himself on the bar.

XIX

THE Saturday night crowd was coming in to town. The sounds of horses' hoofs, the squeak and rattle of an occasional wagon, hard heels hitting the board sidewalks and a rising dust steadily increased. A horse stopped in front of the hotel and a moment later heavy steps clacked across the walk, and Bud Wilson pushed the little doors apart and glanced about the room. Then he looked inquiringly at the two men at the bar.

"Their hosses are at th' rail, but where are they?" he asked, his eyes on the cut on the sheriff's face.

"Over to Doc's," answered the bartender, and quickly smiled as he shook his head. "There ain't none of 'em hurt. They just carried Abner Jones over there, to have a busted collar bone an' a broken arm fixed up, an' th' glass picked out of his damn' hide." He waved a hand toward the broken



window, and began to laugh again. "Abner went right through it, an' it wasn't open."

"Good Gawd!" exclaimed Wilson, staring at the window. "I never heard of him gettin' as drunk as that! I've never even heard of him gettin' drunk a-tall. It don't sound reasonable."

"Abner wasn't drunk," replied the bartender, still laughing. "He just went out of his way an' picked a fight with our friend, here, an' got throwed through it. Head first. You shoulda seen it."

"Wish I had!" replied Wilson, looking with friendly approval at the cattle buyer. "I didn't suppose there was anybody hereabouts who could lick Abner. He's supposed to be a combination of pizen an' chain lightnin'. Too bad you didn't bust his damn' neck." He looked at the bartender again. "What th' hell started it?"

"Scotch whiskey," answered the bartender. "I've knowed a lot of fights to get goin' from too much whiskey, but this un started because there wasn't no whiskey a-tall." Sam laughed again. "Abner had to drink *our* kind of liquor, or go without, an' he just blew up an' went on th' prod."

"Our liquor, huh? Too bad!" sneered Wilson as the bartender walked to the rear door and yelled for the stableman, telling him to bring boards, nails and a hammer, and then hurriedly returned to the bar to wait on several men who had just come in. The story of Abner's defeat was too rich a morsel to be kept secret, and the bartender told his new customers about it. Laughter roared out loudly and congratulations, and drinks, were in order.

The window was being boarded up when the three missing ranchmen returned, their faces wearing broad grins.

"Hello, Bud," said Jordan to Wilson, and then he looked at the bartender. "You was right to have Abner's hoss taken around back an' looked after. He won't be needin' it for quite awhile. I never knowed such a damn' fool, or a man with more guts. He was hell bent to ride home to one of th' ranches, after th' Doc got through with him, but th' Doc gave him hell an' said for him to stay in town, an' in bed, at that. Doc's a mite worried about all them cuts. There was dirt an' cloth in some of 'em, an' some of 'em was right generous slashes. Mrs. Thompson is gettin' a room ready for th' cripple. We asked Doc if turpentine wouldn't be right good for 'em, an' he looked kinda funny an' said that th' stuff he was goin' to use on 'em would be powerful enough to suit anybody. He was still pickin' out th' glass when we left."

"Yeah," said Robbins. "An' you've no idear how much Abner loves them whiskers

of his. Doc was goin' to send for th' barber to cut 'em off so he could look for cuts on Abner's face, but Abner plumb raised hell about that. He wouldn't even let th' Doc touch 'em. It didn't look like his face was cut, but one ear was. An' you should see his right eye!"

HOPALONG'S expression did not change while he listened about Abner's love for his whiskers. He ordered a round of drinks and took a cigar for himself. After a few minutes he followed the ranchmen to the table in the rear of the room and sat down on his chair. Abner Jones' fierce affection for his whiskers was a matter of deep satisfaction to the sheriff. He watched Wilson shuffle the cards and deal, and sat back as they fell before him. Picking them up and spreading them until the pips showed, he saw the bet and waited for his turn to come around again. The town was getting noisier. He heard horses stop at the tie rail and idly glanced at the swinging doors a moment later.

This time the maintenance of the sheriff's poker face was a real strain, for his curious glance at the front of the room showed him Mesquite Jenkins, and to his utter disbelief, Johnny Nelson. He let his gaze move around the room and return to Mesquite and his companion. There was no question about it; it was Johnny. He saw the raise, tossed in a red chip to raise again and gave his full attention to the game; but his ears were alert.

The earlier customers at the bar had drifted out again and the two newcomers had the long counter to themselves.

"Got a couple of rooms for th' night?" asked Mesquite.

"Reckon so," answered the bartender, picking up the iron bar and lustily banging the steel triangle, but he had little confidence in the sound reaching the ears of the stableman through the noise of a Saturday night. He put the rod down on the backbar and opened the account book. "Number Two's occupied. I can give you Three and Four. The beds are comfortable an' clean. If you'll just sign yore names on th' next two lines." He pushed pen, ink and book across the bar, then left the page open for the ink to dry, and turned to light a lamp at the far end of the backbar. "All right," he said, "if you'll foller me."

"What about our saddles an' bed rolls?" asked Johnny, paying no attention to anything but the matter at hand.

"They'll be brought in an' carried upstairs, unless you'd as soon leave th' saddles in th' stable office," answered the bartender, pausing in his progress toward the stairs. "They'll be safe there. How long you figgerin' to stay?"

"Don't know," answered Mesquite. "Leave th' saddles at th' stable, but bring th' rolls upstairs. Give our hosses a drink an' a little hay."

"Hell," said Johnny. "Wait a minute. We'll get th' rolls ourselves. Come on, Kid. We ain't cripples."

The bartender placed the lamp on the far end of the bar and waited until the new guests returned with bed rolls and rifles, and then led the way. The noise outside was still climbing. Bits of song and occasional yells broke through the general sound level.

Hopalong's eyes were on the game, but his ears were not. He was tingling with pleasure. It was like going back into the past and ripping out a precious page of action to have Johnny Nelson in the same town with him right now. There were half a dozen Joneses? To hell with them; there were three Bar 20 men on hand. He passed, threw in his hand and leaned back to enjoy the fight between Glass and Jordan. The pot contained eighteen cents, but a man would have thought they were dollars. Between deals the talk invariably swung back to the fight, and there was plenty of laughter.

Heavy steps were sounding overhead and Hopalong tried to locate them in relation to his own room. Yes. He remem-

bered, now. Number Four was next to his room and Number Three was across the narrow hall. The bartender came clomping down the stairs and headed purposefully for the rear door. His bellow could have been heard all over town, even in this noisy night, and the answering reply was almost as loud. Another hand had been played before the stableman passed through the room on his way to get the horses at the tie rail. He tried to bum a drink, but was turned down flatly.

"Yore deal, Jones," said Robbins, pushing the deck and the discard across the table, and pulling the chips to him. "This looks like my night to howl, th' way they're comin'."

"We'll make you howl before it's over," laughed Glass.

The bartender stopped at the table, glancing from face to face.

"Suppose these two new fellers would like to set in? How about it?" he asked.

"Suits me," grunted Jordan, idly watching the cards as they fell.

"Me, too," said Glass, rolling a cigarette. "There's allus room for more suckers. That's my motto."

"All right," said Robbins, glancing curiously at the sheriff.

Hopalong nodded carelessly and the bartender went back to his bar. The noisy steps overhead now assumed a purposeful direction and soon clattered down the stairs. Johnny and Mesquite turned to their left and stopped at the bar.

"What'll it be, gents?" asked Sam, mopping the bar.

"Corn liquor for me," said Johnny. "We've rode a long way, an' I need it."

"Make mine a beer," said Mesquite, and once again the sheriff had trouble keeping his poker expression. Evidently things had happened to the kid. Up to now soda pop and sarsaparilla had been his drinks.

"There you are," said the bartender. "Th' dinin' room is closed for th' night, but if yo're hungry you can eat at Mike's, around th' corner to th' left on th' first side street. Now, lemme see—room, breakfast; stall, supper an' breakfast." His lips moved while he figured and then he stated the sums, made change and pushed it across the bar.

"We ate supper before we hit town," said Mesquite. "Have another, Johnny?"

"Not right now, kid," answered Johnny, and turned to look at the card game. "Anythin' to do in town before bedtime?"

"Th' boys in th' back will be glad to make room for you if you'd like to set in a game of draw poker," said the bartender, nodding at the table. "It's just a little friendly game of penny ante," he explained.

Mesquite also had turned and was watching the game.

"All right. How about you, Johnny?" he asked, and followed his friend and the bartender toward the rear of the room. The dealer kept on shuffling, his eyes on the approaching trio. The proper introductions made and acknowledged, the newcomers dragged chairs to the table, bought chips and waited for the cards to stop falling. Hopalong renewed the struggle to keep his poker face; when he had last seen Mesquite that person's knowledge of cards went no farther than California Jack, and he did not particularly care for that. During the time of the kid's visit, Tex certainly had taught him some manly traits. Drinking beer and playing poker! He was curious to see what kind of a game the kid played, but he believed that with Tex as the teacher, the game would be soundly based.

"Sorry we're makin' it seven handed," said Mesquite, glancing around at the players. "There'll be quite some dealin' from th' discard. Are we playin' straights? All right; give me two cards."

"You boys aimin' to stay here very long?" asked Glass, tossing in his hand.

"Reckon not, 'though there ain't no real reason for us to get any saddle itch," answered Johnny. "If we like th' town, an' I reckon we will, we might hunt us up a job of punchin' hereabouts."

"There ain't much chance of that," said

Jordan. "It's mostly little ranches, an' th' bigger ones ain't hirin'."

Hopalong laughed and patted his stomach.

"Wait till you sample th' grub," he said with a wide grin. "You'll not be in any hurry to leave town."

The game went on and then came the final hand and the usual good nights. The three guests of the hotel went to the bar for the final rounds with the ranchers and then returned to the table, where they talked of ordinary and innocent subjects. There was still some noise outside when the bartender locked the front door, then the one in the rear, filled a water glass three-quarters full of whiskey, blew out most of the lamps and made his weary way to join his guests at the table. After half an hour of idle talk they stood up and made their way toward the stairs, the bartender putting out the rest of the lamps as he followed them. He listened until he heard their foosteps overhead, and then he poured more liquor into the glass and sought the nearest chair. Again it was Saturday night and he sighed with pleasure and relief.

XX

ON Sunday mornings breakfast was an hour later than on week days, and Hopalong, at that, barely got through the doors in time. One glance told him that there were only two in the room beside himself, and as he looked at them and hesitated, Johnny raised a hand invitingly.

"Why not eat with us, Mr. Jones?" he suggested, and Mesquite nodded.

Hopalong walked slowly toward their table and pulled back a chair.

"I'd shore be glad to," he said, as he sat down. "You'll find th' food here about th' best cow country grub you ever tasted. I reckon you've already ordered?"

"Yeah," answered Mesquite with a wide grin. "Ham an' aigs, buckwheat cakes with molasses, an' coffee. I'm a mite anxious about th' aigs."

"You needn't be," replied Hopalong. "Th' hens are out back that laid th' aigs yesterday. An' this is one place in th' great land of cows where you can get real cream, milk an' real butter." He watched the cook place the orders of his companions before them and then gave his own.

"You said you was ridin' through, unless you could get a job punchin' somewhere on th' range around th' town?" he said.

"Yeah," mumbled Johnny, his mouth full of ham and eggs. "That's right."

"I don't believe you'll find any," replied the sheriff, and then, hearing the cook busy in the kitchen, lowered his voice until his words could barely be heard. *"We've got to talk things over, without arousing any suspicion."* Then he spoke in full, natural voice. "From what I've heard I don't believe that there are any jobs around Hancock. Of course, you can't be shore of that till you try."

"We don't need jobs, not for awhile," said Johnny, his mouth again full. "By Gawd, these aigs are *aigs!"*

"We got six months pay in our pockets, an' no particular place to go to," explained Mesquite. He dropped his voice to a mutter. *"Foller our lead out in th' barroom."*

"You had any luck makin' up trail herds in this part of th' country?" politely asked Johnny, attacking the second piece of ham.

Hopalong laughed.

"No. Didn't need any at this time of th' year. My herds were all made up when I got here. I saved myself from buyin' any by insistin' on a four dollar trail margin."

Mesquite chuckled understandingly and cleaned the last of his eggs by scouring the plate with half a biscuit. Then he pulled toward him a stack of buckwheat cakes and the molasses pitcher. There was plenty of butter and he used it all.

Hopalong heard the slow steps approaching from the kitchen and leaned back to give the cook a chance to place the dishes in front of him. With the exception of the

eggs, his order was the same as his companions.

"That was a nice bunch of fellers we played with last night," said Johnny, reaching for the molasses. "I had a right good time, an' with this kind of grub I ain't figgerin' on leavin' town in no hurry."

"Th' same reasons why I came back to Hancock," admitted Hopalong. "You ought to see what's out back of this place."

"Yeah?" politely asked Johnny, and then pushed a forkful of dripping pancakes into his mouth.

"You never saw such a garden," enthused Hopalong. "An' there's a big chicken house, an' a barn full of milk cows."

"We'll have to take a look at it," said Mesquite. "I reckon that this is mebby th' first time in years that I ate real butter."

Little more was said, all being too busily engaged with the serious matters immediately before them, and in a few minutes Johnny and Mesquite pushed back their chairs, grunted something, and headed for the door. Hopalong wiped the pleased smile from his face and helped himself to a little more molasses. It was not long before, he, too, pushed away from the table and headed for the door and the barroom.

Sam was smiling at the two guests sitting near the wall, their chairs tipped back. He slowly, mechanically wiped the bar.

"You ain't tasted nothin' yet," he said. "Fricassed chicken, dumplin's, mashed potatoes an' turnips, an' mebby more. That'll be for dinner. I ain't had time to find out what we'll have for supper."

"I ain't in no hurry to pull stakes out of here," said Johnny, looking at his companion.

"Me, neither," grunted Mesquite, grinning widely. "You know, if we could get a job not too far from town—huh, what you reckon?"

"Shore," happily answered Johnny, rubbing his stomach, and then he closed his eyes. "If we could get jobs not *too* far from town." Then he suddenly dropped his chair back onto all four legs. "I ate too much. I'm goin' out an' walk around a little."

"Me, too, I reckon," grunted Mesquite.

The bartender laughed and looked knowingly at the cattle buyer who was leaning on the end of the bar.

"Sounds like a good idear," said Hopalong. "It wouldn't hurt me none if I did th' same."

"Take 'em out an' show 'em th' town," suggested Sam with a chuckle. "Anyhow, you ought to work up an appetite for dinner."

"What about that garden you was tellin' us about at breakfast?" asked Johnny.

"All right," reluctantly agreed Hopalong, pushing from the bar and leading the way to the rear door. "This way is th' shortest."

They looked at the garden, talked with the gardener, looked at the chickens and into the cow barn; and then they wandered toward the main street, loafed along it and a few minutes later sat down on the ground at the end of the street and grinned at each other.

"It's mighty good to be with you ag'in, Hoppy," said Johnny.

"That goes both ways," replied the sheriff. "I thought you was down on th' SV. How come you ain't?" He listened to the explanation and nodded. "Buck an' Rose will be mighty happy."

"I reckon there's somethin' plumb wrong out here," suggested Mesquite.

"I'm beginnin' to figger so," replied Hopalong.

"Deal us hands," said Johnny, eagerly.

"All right, but I ain't got many cards. Then lissen," said the sheriff, and for half an hour he spoke slowly, carefully and in a low voice.

"We can skin some cattle an' get a look at th' under side," suggested Johnny, inspired by the old Bar 20 spirit.

"Or one of us can ride over to Little River an' do some diggin' about th' hides

that was bought up in this part of th' country," suggested Mesquite. Then he shook his head. "Don't know about that; cattle thieves ain't likely to sell hides with changed brands; that is, brands that would show old an' new scar tissue. An' any man that bought such hides would keep his mouth shut."

"All we're goin' on, right now, is suspicion," replied Hopalong, who felt the limiting responsibilities of being a law officer. "That don't give us th' right of goin' 'round killin' cattle, just to look at th' under side of their skins. We got to have somethin' purty certain before we can do that. There's a harness maker here in town, but it's likely he finds it cheaper an' easier to buy his hides all dressed. Anyhow, he'd keep his mouth shut, too."

"Why don't I go out an' visit with Ben Peterson?" asked Johnny. "We know each other. Mebby he can remember things he *forgot* to tell you."

"By gosh, I meant it when I said I'd et too much," growled Mesquite. "All th' meals as good as that?"

"All of 'em, an' some a lot better," answered the sheriff.

"Looks like this feller Danvers ought to be talked with," suggested Johnny. "After all, it looks like he's th' hombre that took th' stolen bill. He is th' hombre if th' storekeeper's not lyin'. If he did take it, what's his rights under th' law?"

THE sheriff carefully and at length explained the law in regard to accepting, owning and passing stolen money, whereupon Johnny grinned and nodded.

"That's shore a square break," he commented. "What about Ben Peterson an' th' hard money he took, if it was stolen?"

"That's a hoss of a different color, but only in th' matter of identification," answered Hopalong. "All th' rest of it's th' same Ben saw nothin' to identify that money. He didn't see any printin' on th' sack." He shifted position and recrossed his legs. "You leave Danvers an' Ben to me, an' do a little ridin' around th' range north of here. I wouldn't ask for jobs unless we have to do that. Don't get too close to th' ranchhouses."

"We can rope an' hog tie Abner Jones after he gets well, shave off them damn whiskers, an' see what's under 'em," offered Johnny, the old-time light in his eyes.

"I took an oath of office not only to execute th' law, but to obey it," replied the sheriff, reprovingly. "I can't do that, or tell anybody else to do it."

"I ain't took no oath of office," retorted Johnny. "There was a time you'd 'a shaved th' whiskers off a whole damn fambly, if you felt like it."

"I'm a deputy," grunted Mesquite, and then suddenly he looked at the sheriff. "But am I?"

"No. You was made a special deputy for th' last job we did," answered Hopalong. "You quit bein' a deputy when it was cleaned up, which it shore was."

"All right," said Mesquite with a grim smile. "We ain't officers, an' we don't know you, except as a cattle buyer named Jones. You see Ben an' Danvers, an' let us alone about th' time Abner gets so he can ride a hoss. Got anythin' else to tell us?"

Hopalong shook his head, foreseeing complications in the future, got to his feet and joined his companions in the walk back to the hotel.

Mesquite suddenly looked at the sheriff.

"Sorta looks to me that Len Danvers is in danger," he said, thoughtfully. "He was th' only man hereabouts that took one of them stolen bills. All but one of th' rest of 'em were cashed hundreds of miles away. That means th' train robbers took mighty good care to spend 'em a long way off. How come they took a chance of changin' one of 'em right here in their own territory? An' when they remember that, an' get afraid of that bill bein' traced back to 'em, then what? Won't they try to break th' connection?"

"By gosh!" exclaimed Hopalong. "Yo're

right! When they gave Danvers that bill they hadn't thought that th' numbers might have been recorded. After they did think of it they went to a lot of trouble changin' th' others. An' before that they showed th' bills to Ben Peterson, an' mebby others."

"They won't bother Ben," said Johnny. "No man looks at th' numbers on a bill that's showed to him, an' if he did he wouldn't remember 'em. You want to remember they're damn' big numbers."

"I'm goin' to take a little ride," said Hopalong. "Danver's shack is thirteen, fourteen miles east of here." He pulled out his big, silver watch and glanced at it. "Huh. I'll wait till after dinner. You go back to th' hotel. I'm headin' for th' stable. See you later."

The stableman was leaning back against the front of the building and looked up curiously as the sheriff turned the corner and stopped in front of him.

"Nice day," said the stableman.

"Yeah," replied Hopalong. "That hoss of mine gets a little mean if he ain't exercised. I'm figgerin' to take a ride on him after dinner, to work th' edge off him."

"Good idear," agreed the stableman, reaching for pipe and tobacco. "You wouldn't want to trade that hoss, with a little to boot?"

"I wouldn't trade him for th' whole town of Hancock," answered the sheriff, turning on a heel and starting for the hotel.

XXI

TO cattlemen the dinner was a rare treat. The chicken was tender and perfectly cooked, the mashed potatoes creamy and the other vegetables tender and tasty. The crust of the dried apricot pie was not too tough or soggy. The three diners had the room to themselves, since they had entered late, and now they sighed gratefully, pushed back from the table and returned to the barroom, two of them heading for chairs while the third stopped in a moment on indecision, made up his mind, and turned toward the rear door.

"Reckon I'll give my hoss some exercise, even if I fall asleep in th' saddle," he said.

"I've rode more'n one mile asleep in th' saddle," said Johnny, and leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

The bartender smiled and dragged his cloth to and fro.

"It's a nice day for ridin'," he said. "There ain't no wind."

Hopalong nodded, grunted assent and walked to the door, through it and on to the stable. His horse, its coat fairly glistening in the sun, was saddled and tied to a ring on the wall. The stableman came to the office door and looked out incuriously, checking to see that the right man took the horse.

"He don't seem to be much on edge," he observed judiciously; "but a little exercise won't hurt him."

Hopalong agreed shortly, untied the reins and mounted. He reached the main street and turned southward. It was not long before he came to the trail leading eastward, and he swung onto it and followed it. An hour after he had crossed the upper and dry bed of Two Butte Creek he began to see LD cattle, but their numbers were few. Soon he came to the faint, almost unused trail leading northward, and followed it. The tracks of a wagon told him that it led to a shack, and the shack came into sight at the end of the second mile.

It truly was a shack, built partly of logs and partly of unfinished lumber. Its chimney was its best feature, being an honest one of stone and mortar. There was a fenced in well and a small, pole corral, and two stacks of bottoms hay, also fenced in. There was a horse in the corral and a saddle rested on a tie rail. Evidently Len Danvers was at home.

When Hopalong came to within a hundred yards of the shack there was hurried

movement behind a window, and then a tall, young and rugged man slouched into sight in the open door, his right hand hooked by its thumb to his cartridge belt. His expression indicated nothing.

"Howdy," called Hopalong, slowing his horse to a walk.

"Howdy," grunted Danvers, with a

trace of suspicion. "What brings you out here?"

"Wagon tracks an' th' promise of water," answered the sheriff with a friendly smile. He stopped a dozen feet from the door. "Also, I want to have a talk with you. I'm sellin' nothin', an' buyin' nothin'."

"Who are you, an' what you want of me?" demanded the ranchman.

"Who I am depends on how well we get along together," answered the sheriff, "an' on whether you give me yore word that our talk will be strictly confidential. I am an old friend of Ben Peterson's, an' he'll vouch for me."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I've knowed him a long time."

"What you want to talk about?" asked the ranchman.

"Will th' talk be strictly confidential?"

"Yes," grunted Danvers, rubbing his back gently against the door casing.

"All right, then. My name is Hopalong Cassidy, although in these parts I'm known as Fred Jones, an' want to stay that way. I am th' sheriff of Twin River County. I want to know who paid you that five-hundred-dollar bill for th' cattle you sold last fall."

He took his badge out of his pocket and held it in his hand long enough for his companion to see it.

"Don't know," grunted Danvers, his eyelids half closed, "don't know as it's any of your business what I took an' who gave it to me. I didn't take no bill."

"I can trace it to you," retorted the sheriff. "As a matter of fact I have traced it to you, or I wouldn't be here askin' questions about it." He smiled grimly. "Might be a good idear, both for me an' you, if we traced it a little farther."

"Don't know," grunted the ranchman, his eyelids still half closed. "They was strangers to me."

"You right shore of that?"

"I'm stickin' to it."

"So I see," retorted the sheriff. "You haven't seen 'em since then?"

"Sorry, Sheriff; but I'm not talkin'."

"You cashed that bill with th' storekeeper over in Hancock. Do you happen to remember th' number that was printed on it?"

"I don't remember it," answered Danvers slowly; "but I writ it down, just in case it warn't good. That what you mean? It's a counterfeit?"

"What good would it do you to write th' number down if you couldn't go to th' man who gave it to you, in case it was a counterfeit?" asked the sheriff. "You have to know who he is, don't you?"

"Was it a counterfeit?" asked Danvers.

"No," answered the sheriff. "It's good money. Can you describe th' men that gave it to you?"

"Why should I?" countered the ranchman. "You say th' bill is good. I sold 'em cattle for it, an' that's all I care about."

"What price did you charge 'em for th' cattle," asked the sheriff, casually.

"Reg'lar range prices. Why?"

"You didn't charge 'em more than reg'lar range prices?"

"No. How th' hell could I? I already told you what I charged 'em. Why? As a matter of fact I threw off th' odd five dollars."

"Well, that lets you out of it," said Hopalong with a smile.

"What you mean? Outa what?" de-

manded the ranchman with some truculence. "It lets me outa what?"

"It lets you out of havin' guilty knowledge regardin' stolen money," answered the sheriff. "So far as yo're concerned, th' transaction was honest. That also lets th' storekeeper out of it, over in Hancock. No, that's not right. He was out of it all along. You still figger you can't describe them buyers?"

"Yes."

"An' you ain't never seen 'em before, an' you ain't seen 'em since?" persisted the sheriff.

"Look here, Sheriff," replied the ranchman. "I ain't stickin' my nose into other peoples' troubles. I got enough of my own. Also, I think right highly of my health an' my skin. I ain't talkin'."

"Don't hardly blame you," replied the sheriff. "You say you writ down th' number of that bill. Have you told that to anybody else?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Then don't," said the sheriff sharply. "Plumb forget that you ever saw a five-hundred-dollar bill. If th' news should get around that you can identify that bill, you'd have damn good reason to worry about yore skin, an' you wouldn't have to stick yore nose out a-tall. But don't destroy th' record of that number. Hide it, but keep it. You figger you've had any of yore cattle stolen since last summer?"

"No!" snapped Danvers. "What th' hell's goin' on 'round here?"

"I'm follerin' yore own play; I'm not talkin'," answered the sheriff, smiling again. "But if you knowed th' answer to that question you might be a hell of a lot surprised. I want to warn you to watch th' cover wherever you ride. In other words, look out for ambushers. Put curtains to yore winders before you light yore lamp at night, an' stay in th' shack till daylight. Well, I'm glad to have met you, an' hope to see you in town sometime. So-long, an' keep yore eyes peeled."

"Wait a minute," hastily said the ranchman. "I don't know what th' hell you've been talkin' about!"

"Well, there's one thing you can be shore of," countered the sheriff. "What talkin' has been done between us was mostly done by me. So-long."

"If that bill was stole, an' I've just admitted acceptin' it, like a fool, how do I know that I won't get into trouble about it?" asked the ranchman, a scowl on his face.

"Because you accepted it innocently," answered the sheriff. "You wasn't required to show any diligence in tryin' to find out if it was stole. If you had sold yore cattle for considerable more than th' reg'lar prices, that would suggest that you knowed th' money was stolen an' was takin' advantage of that knowledge. As it is, you ain't got nothin' to worry about on that score."

"Can it be taken away from whoever has it now?" demanded the ranchman, curiously.

"No. Not unless th' possessor has guilty knowledge," answered the sheriff, "an' then it would take some time an' trouble."

"*You* couldn't take it away from him if you knowed for shore that it had been stole?"

"No."

"Where does that leave th' man it was stole from?" persisted Danvers.

"It leaves him able to bring a civil suit in replevin, *if* th' thief still has th' money, which in this case is not so. What th' original lawful owner can do in regard to goods proved to have been bought with it, with identifiable stolen money, I don't know. I'm not a lawyer."

"You don't seem curious about th' number of that bill," said the ranchman, himself now curious.

"I'm not. Don't destroy that number, an' mebby put yoreself in th' position of bein' an accessory after th' fact. You've told me that you have a record of th' number. So far, yo're entirely innocent. You better stay that way." Hopalong eased the

Stetson up on his head and looked the ranchman in the eye. "If you've let on to yore friend, Ben Peterson, that you know that number, then you'd better ride over an' tell him to forget it. Now, for a little business talk. I said I wasn't sellin' nothin'. I ain't. I find that a man can allus tell th' truth easier than he can a lie. How would you like to buy some graded bulls to improve th' weight of yore cattle? Say, Durhams?"

"Huh! Graded bulls! With th' whole damn range lousy with scrubs," retorted Danvers. "Besides, graded bulls cost too much for me."

"You an' yore neighbors can allus sell off th' scrub bulls," said the sheriff. "However, if anybody asks you, that's what I come to see you about. I'm goin' to try to sell graded bulls to a lot of folks in this part of th' country, mebby, on th' chance that I can make up a herd of 'em that'll pay me to deliver 'em. It may also give me a chance to do some lookin' around where I ain't wanted. So-long."

"So-long," replied Danvers, gently and thoughtfully scratching his head. He started to speak, thought better of it, and then, leaning back against the door frame, watched his visitor ride away and slowly disappear. Suddenly he snapped his fingers and hastened toward the corral, grabbing up the saddle as he came to it. A few moments later he was riding at a gallop on his way to Peterson's, and an observer, if one had been present, would have noticed that he gave critical attention to clumps of brush and patches of weeds; and, also, that he rode with his rifle across the saddle horn.

HOPALONG was smiling as he rode back toward town, for now he had an unbroken chain leading from himself, now with the stolen bill in his pocket, back to the unknown cattle buyers. It was late in the afternoon, almost supper time, when he reached Hancock. He had forsaken the trail and taken a short cut as soon as the roofs came into sight. He turned the horse over to the stableman and walked slowly toward the hotel. Johnny and Mesquite were not in sight. He stopped at the bar and bought a drink, and as he raised the glass he thought he heard the low mutter of familiar voices coming from the street. The strength of the voices did not increase and he heard no steps.

"Well," said the bartender with a smile, "did you work up much of an appetite?"

"Yeah," grunted the sheriff, pushing the empty glass from him. "With th' dust like it is, I was glad there warn't no wind." He glanced at the door leading to the stairs. "Our new friends sleepin' off their dinner?"

"No," answered the bartender, nodding toward the swinging doors. "They're outside, settin' on th' edge of th' sidewalk."

"Sorry it ain't Sat'dy," said Hopalong, grinning. "I'd shore like to set in a good game tonight. Well, reckon I'd better wash up an' get ready for supper."

"I reckon you can get into a game tonight," replied the bartender. "There's three of you here now, to start with." He glanced at the clock. "You got near fifteen minutes."

Three men pushed through the swinging doors and Hopalong paused to nod to them. They were the three townsmen with whom he had played poker a few nights before. As he turned again toward the stairs, Johnny and Mesquite came in and the bartender made the proper introductions.

When the sheriff came downstairs again the dining room door was open, and animated conversation was coming through it. Two tables had been pushed together, and as he entered the room the owner of the stage line beckoned to him and pointed to a chair. Hopalong joined the group. There no longer was any reason to worry about a friendly poker game that night, and the thought made him smile.

"Yeah," Johnny was saying. "I been figgerin' to try to get a punchin' job some-

where around here. I don't want to get too far away from this kind of grub."

"Me, too," said Mesquite, with a laugh.

Hopalong looked across the table at Hank Barlow, the city marshal and the owner of the stage line.

"I want to get to a Wells, Fargo office," he said, knowing that it would be in Little River. His interest was in the town, and not in the express office. "Where's th' nearest one?"

"Little River. Forty miles," answered Barlow. "I make it twice a week."

"What make coach you use?"

"Concord, with thorough braces," answered the stage man. "It rides like a rockin' chair."

"Huh," muttered Hopalong, thoughtfully. "Forty miles there an' forty miles back. Damn' if I ain't had about all th' long distance hossback ridin' I want for awhile. When's yore next trip?"

"Tomorrow mornin', at seven sharp," answered Barlow. "We'll get you to Little River by eleven. We leave there at two in th' afternoon, an' get you back here around six."

"That's right good travelin'," commented Hopalong. "You must change teams to make that kind of time."

"Yes, sir," said Barlow. "We have a swing station at th' halfway point. May I have th' pleasure of bookin' you for th' trip?"

"I'll be obliged to you if you will," answered Hopalong.

"If you like, you can sit with the driver. We seldom have many or even any passengers. It's mostly mail and express. I couldn't afford to keep th' line runnin' except that it's practically an extension of Wells, Fargo, an' gets a cut of th' mail subsidy."

His face became animated, and his eyes glowed.

"I've always been a stage man. I was a division superintendent on th' old Overland, under Ben Halliday. By Gawd, there was a real stage man, an' a real stage line. Ran like a clock, it did. A million dollar investment, rollin' through near nineteen hundred miles of wilderness. You should have seen some of those teams! Most of them were matched for color an' weight. Nothin' like it had ever been seen in th' history of th' world.

"Ben had th' stage business by th' tail on a down-hill haul, but he knowed th' railroad was goin' through, an' he sold out, lock, stock an' barrel to Wells, Fargo; but he made a mistake. He was thinkin' only of th' straight line haul from th' Missouri to Hangtown. That day was over, of course, but he didn't stop to think that th' railroad would increase passenger an' express business.

"He didn't stop to figger out that th' stage business would grow by more an' shorter runs. Th' railroads would populate th' wilderness, towns would spring up, many of them miles from a railroad station. He thought he was sellin' Wells, Fargo a dead hoss, but he wasn't.

"As long as I live I'll be proud to remember that I was a part of th' Overland Stage Line, an' an important part. An' I saw th' beginnin' an' end of th' Pony Express. By Gawd, Mister! It makes me tingle just to think of it. It was th' Pony Express that ruined Russell, Majors an' Waddell. It put them into bankruptcy, an' gave Ben Halliday his chance to take over their stage line. He took me over along with it, an' I stayed with it as long as he did. *Oh,* excuse me, sir. I live too much in th' past."

"Marshal," said Hopalong, earnestly and sincerely, "if I ever had been a division superintendent of th' Overland Stage Line, I'd talk so much about it that I wouldn't have a friend left. I did my little share in th' great cattle movement up from th' South. I know how you feel, an' I'm proud an' honored to know you, sir."

Supper over, they rose and filed into the barroom, where Sam handed the box of chips and a deck of cards to the first man

who came to the bar, and another mild game was soon under way.

XXII

THE team was already harnessed to the stage when Hopalong left the hotel on the following morning. He looked up the street and saw the outfit standing in front of the stage office. The vehicle was drawn by five mules, the two heaviest at the wheels, the two lighter ahead of them, and the lightest in the lead. They were splendid animals, well fed, well conditioned.

Hopalong entered the office, paid for his round-trip ticket and wandered out again. The driver followed on his heels, climbed to the box and motioned for the sheriff to follow him. They rolled on a score of yards, stopped at the general store, which was the postoffice, picked up a scanty sack of mail, and were on their way, the driver's hand full of reins, his right foot resting lightly on the end of the long brake handle.

"Two hours to Halfway," he said, squirting tobacco juice down wind. "I did it twice in one forty," he boasted. "Want I should try for it again?"

"No, thanks," grunted the sheriff hastily. "You lived in this part of th' country very long?"

"Ten years an' more."

"Any tannery hereabouts?"

"Nope. A hide buyer comes up here spring an' fall. All he gits is flint hides, some of 'em salted. Th' tannin' business is damn complicated. A tanner has to know his job. You'd be surprised if you knowed how many grades of hides there is, an' how many different ways of tannin' 'em. A good tanner throws away nearly a quarter of a beef hide; th' belly ain't no good. Yearlin' an' heifer hides is th' best, an' bull hides th' worst. My old dad used to work in a tannery. If these damn fool ranchers would get some sense in their heads, an' make their brands smaller, th' hides would be worth more."

"Mebby they would be," replied Hopalong, "but they couldn't be seen an' read so far off. Big brands save considerable ridin'."

"Hugh!" snorted the driver, spitting again. "Just th' same, I've seen local hides half ruined because some damn fool was too free with a straight iron. You take that Tom Jones, of th' TSJ. Most of his brands are fairly small, but this summer I saw some of his marks that just about spiled a full half of th' hides."

Hopalong was thinking swiftly. TSJ. That could grow out of what mark? Try as hard as he could, he could find no answer so far as certain other brands were concerned.

"Is Tom Jones th' only rancher hereabouts that raises hell with his hides like that?" he asked.

"Yep," grunted the driver, his foot bearing down on the brake handle as the coach rolled down the slope leading to Two Butte Creek. "Th' other Joneses' brands are small enough, I reckon. Last summer they drove a big herd down this here trail. Must ha' been near four hundred head. An' would you believe that you could read th' brands of near a quarter of 'em damn near as far as you could see th' critters?"

"Did you hear if they lost any head on th' way?" idly asked the sheriff.

"Nope. Why?"

"I was just wonderin'," replied the sheriff. "I'm a trail herder, myself."

"It's only a ninety mile drive to th' railroad," said the driver. "They wouldn't likely loose none in that distance."

They rolled across the shallow creek and the mules settled down to a walk up the further slope.

"I still say it's a damn shame to spile so much good leather," said the driver. "You can't do nothin' with that scar tissue but cut it out an' throw it away."

And so they talked and rolled and bounced and swayed behind a fine team and under the cunning hands of a master driver. Halfway came into sight and

the mules quickened and threw more weight into their collars: rest and feed and water were there. They rolled up to the station with the clatter of shod hoofs and in a cloud of dust. The relay team was harnessed and waiting. The station keeper moved like a cat, without a waste motion. This was his job and he took pride in it. The old team was unhooked, the new one in its place in what seemed to be the wink of an eye. Then on again, with only twenty miles to go. Even in so humble a job there was training, practice, pride. Hopalong felt his pulse quicken as he saw, in his mind's eye, those one hundred ninety odd of Haliday's station tenders changing teams twice a day: one, eastbound; the other west. God, it was good to be an American, and in all America there was no place like the West!

The sun lacked an hour of reaching the meridian when they splashed through the unhurrying waters of Little River, the hurtling drops gleaming like jewels. The heavy iron tires grated over the gravel bed and then rolled almost noiselessly through the deep dust of the cut-bank road. The curve was now behind them and the town ahead. It was several times larger than Hancock. Dogs darted from yards and the side streets barking ferociously, but keeping wary eyes on the great whip in the driver's expert hand.

A few loafers marked out one building, but over their heads there was a greater marker, a marker famous from one coast to the other, and a marker of the course of history and of man's endeavor:

WELLS, FARGO & CO'S EXPRESS

The coach rolled on to the post office and stopped before it. Hopalong swung down and looked about him. The courthouse was on the other side of the square and he was about to walk toward it when he remembered that he was supposed to visit the express office.

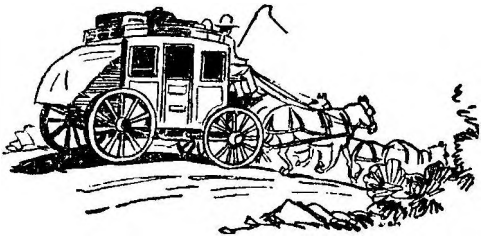
The clerk looked up inquiringly.

"What time does th' next coach leave for th' railroad?" asked the sheriff.

"Tomorrow mornin' at six o'clock sharp. Would you like to make a reservation, sir?"

"No. I can't do that yet," answered the sheriff. "Thank you."

He stepped out to the sidewalk and



looked for a barber shop, found one and not much later felt a lot better.

The courthouse was a two-story frame building and as Hopalong entered the front door he saw a sign suspended over a door near the end of the corridor: SHERIFF'S OFFICE. He pushed open the door and walked in. A tall man was tipped back in a chair, his feet on a desk.

"Howdy, stranger. What can I do for you?"

"You th' sheriff?"

"Yep."

"I'm Sheriff Cassidy, from Twin River."

"By gosh! Glad to meet you. Set down. Take off yore coat."

"Thanks," replied Hopalong.

"My name's Carter. Yo're a long way from home."

"Yes. I've been told there's a hide buyer in town, by th' name of Jameson."

"Yeah; Pete Jameson," replied the local sheriff, looking curiously at his guest.

"What you know about him?" asked Hopalong.

"Nothin' very good. Nothin' very bad. Just run of th' mine. Why?"

"Would he buy hides of stolen cattle?" asked Hopalong. "Hides that showed brand alterations?"

"I dunno. Let's go 'round an' talk to him."

Hopalong shook his head.

"I don't want him to get a look at me, or even to learn that I'm in this part of th' country. He'll be startin' off on a hide buyin' trip purty soon an' will likely meet me over in Hancock. I don't want him to know me."

"You willin' to swear out a search warrant?" demanded Carter.

"No. All I have to go on is suspicion, 'though it's ragin'," answered Hopalong. "Anyhow, he made his last trip this spring, an' he'd have got rid of 'em long before this.

"I didn't come down here with th' idear of pickin' up any definite information, or hope to have much luck; but I have to play every card in this game. I just can't overlook nothin'."

"Who'd be foolish enough to sell him such a hide, even if he'd be willin' to buy it?" asked Carter.

"Nobody. But such a hide might accidentally get mixed up with a bunch of honest ones. Human bein's make mistakes."

"Yeah, it might; but th' odds are ag'in it. You set here an' wait for me. I won't be gone long, I reckon," said Carter. He opened a drawer of the desk and placed bottle and glass close to his visitor's hand. "Help yoreself."

PETE JAMESON was leaving the hotel, working energetically with a toothpick and at the sheriff's hail he paused and half turned.

The sheriff joined him and they walked slowly along the street toward a building bearing a sign which said: GRAIN AND FEED. HIDES BOUGHT.

"Pete, when yo're out buyin' hides you ever pick up any of 'em that shows th' brand's been changed?" asked the sheriff.

"Who'd be fool enough to let me see one?" demanded Jameson sharply.

"Nobody, I reckon; but there's such things as accidents, you know."

"Yes, there's accidents," admitted the other. "Come on in an' set for awhile. Who told you about it? That damn helper I had to fire?"

"Oh, I have ways of learnin' about things that my job's interested in," answered the sheriff with a broad and knowing smile. "Where'd you git it, an' what happened to it?"

"I got it outside yore jurisdiction, an' when I discovered it I built up a big bonfire right then an' there an' burned th' damn thing. I didn't even bring it into yore jurisdiction. You ain't got anythin' on me, an' I'll swear that I never told you a word about it."

"You won't have to swear to nothin', fur's I know, Pete," replied the sheriff with a smile. "You ain't said where you got it, or what th' brand was."

"It's a right fine day, Sheriff. Have a drink an' quit askin' questions. You won't get th' answers. I don't want no enemies layin' in th' brush waitin' for me when I'm out with th' wagon."

"Don't, huh?" asked the sheriff, grinning broadly. "Don't blame you none; but mebby you got 'em already, waitin' for a chance to drygulch you. That's good liquor, Pete."

"What you mean I got 'em already?" demanded Jameson, his face getting red.

"Don't you figger that coyote that slipped up on that hide missed it later on, an' knowed just where it went?" asked the sheriff.

"By Gawd!" exclaimed the hide buyer. He was silent for a moment, doing some deep thinking. "Well, I'll have to chance it. Anyhow, there ain't no evidence to back me up, even if I did tell about it. Yeah, I like that liquor, myself." He grinned. "Drop in ag'in some time."

"That's a good point, Pete; but you wouldn't have to back up such a statement. If some pesky law officer believed it an' went huntin' around on that range, he might make a hell of a lot of trouble for somebody if there was stolen cattle on it."

"Have another drink?" asked the hide buyer.

"Not now, Pete. You wouldn't care to go so far as to say whether that hide came from th' north, or south, or anythin' like that?"

"It came from outside this county an' was burned outside this county, which keeps it outside yore jurisdiction. So-long, Sheriff, an' be shore to drop in ag'in some day."

"So-long, Pete, an' thanks for what you have told me."

Back in his office again, the sheriff threw his big hat at a chair, missed the mark, and sat down in front of his desk. For a few moments he did all the talking and his brother officer did the listening. Then Hopalong did the talking, Carter the listening; and then they both talked at once. They stopped abruptly as steps sounded out in the corridor, rapidly coming nearer.

Pete Jameson entered the room, nodded to Carter and glanced curiously at the stranger, who frowned momentarily at being seen by this hide buyer.

Carter chuckled.

"You might as well get acquainted, now that you've met each other," he said. He looked at Hopalong. "What'd you say yore name was?"

Hopalong swore under his breath.

"My name's Fred Jones, an' you know it an' you didn't forget it. Nobody in this whole damn country wants to improve their cattle. Well, reckon I'll get somethin' to eat an' be ready for th' stage. So-long."

"Try th' *hotel,*" said Carter. "Best grub in town. So-long."

The two men watched him leave and after a moment Jameson walked to the door and glanced about the corridor. Then he turned and faced his companion.

"You put damn unpleasant thoughts into a man's head, Sheriff," he said.

"Allus did, even as a boy," laughed the sheriff. "What's makin' yore dandruff shed?"

"That galoot that made a mistake with that hide!" growled the hide buyer. "I'm takin' no chances on bein' drygulched. That damn thief might get to figgerin' that he's in a tight spot. That leaves him only one thing to do, an' he ain't goin' to do it to me. Anyhow, I never did get enough hides over there to make it really worth my while to go after 'em. I can't prove a thing about that hide; but you wanted to know where th 'damn cow pelt came from. All right. It came from th' TSJ, up north an' west of Hancock. I hate like hell to miss th' meals in th' hotel over there, but I'm all through with that part of th' country."

"I figger yo're wise," replied the sheriff. "Here, have a drink of my liquor. I'm hungry as a wolf an' I ain't et yet. Come on an' walk with me as far as th' hotel."

"All right," replied Jameson, pouring a small drink.

"You don't rightly remember, now that you've started in rememberin' things, what th' original brand was?" asked the sheriff a few minutes later as they stopped for a moment before the hotel door.

"Yes, damn his whiskers!" growled the hide buyer. "It was either TC or TCJ—no! It was TC."

"TC?" repeated the sheriff, thoughtfully. "Wait a minute! How th' hell can you change TC into TSJ? Yore mem'ry gettin' bad ag'in?"

"Think so?" snapped Jameson, dragging an old envelope and a pencil out of his pockets. He labored for a moment. "Well, take a look at that."

The sheriff obeyed, and a look of admiration flashed to his face.

"Well, by Gawd! Adios, Peter, adios!"

"Go to hell," replied the hide buyer.

"In due time, Peter, in due time."

XXIII

HOPALONG was ruefully comparing his meal with those served in the Hancock Hotel when he glanced up and

saw Sheriff Carter heading straight toward his table. The newcomer's stride was purposeful and his face was wreathed by a smile.

"You ever hear of th' TC?" asked Carter as he hung his hat on the rack.

"TC?" echoed Hopalong, frowning slightly as an aid to thought. "Yes. There's a TC over in my county. Tom Colby. Why?"

"Well, there's nothin' like puttin' th' fear of th' Lord an' a Sharps rifle in a man's soul to make him think," chuckled Carter. "It also starts his mem'ry workin', slick as grease on an axle. Our friend Pete is rememberin' things. You also ever hear of th' TSJ? An' know where it's located?"

Hopalong's eyes narrowed and he leaned slightly over the table.

"I've heard of it an' I've been on it, an' it's located north an' west of Hancock. An' you couplin' th' TC an' th' TSJ together makes me damn interested! What about 'em?"

"You was speakin' about playin' every card in th' game, an' you come over here so you wouldn't overlook nothin'," said Sheriff Carter. He leaned back in his chair and laughed; and then he sobered quickly and leaned the other way. "Th' card you played by comin' over was an Ace. You also spoke about accidents. Well, by Gawd, there *was* an accident. Th' very kind you was thinkin' about. On th' TSJ a hide with an altered brand got into th' pile of skins they sold to Pete Jameson. Pete discovered it later on an promptly took th' trouble to build a big fire an' burn it up. An' th' flesh side showed that th' original brand was TC. How's that for pistols, Mr. Colt?"

"TC into TSJ?" muttered Hopalong. His mind was playing with letters again, twisting them, shifting them while Carter leaned back and grinned.

Hopalong shook his head.

"There's some mistake," he said with a frown.

"That's how I figgered," chuckled Carter. He took a pencil and a piece of paper from a pocket and made a few quick strokes. Then he shoved it across the table.

"Damn smart, huh?"

"Well, I'll be—" said Hopalong. I've got two letters to write an' they got to go out on th' Hancock stage today." He was pushing back from the table. "I've got to get paper an' envelopes."

"You ain't finished yore dinner!" protested Sheriff Carter, his eyes twinkling.

"Hell with dinner!" retorted Sheriff Cassidy.

"If they ain't got paper an' envelopes here, you might look in th' left hand top drawer of my desk," suggested Sheriff Carter. "There's stamps, there, too. See you later, I reckon?"

"Shore. Thanks. So-long," replied Hopalong and walked swiftly toward the door. The bartender gave him what he wanted, and Hopalong, paying for his dinner, took the writing materials to a table and went to work.

The first letter was short, addressed to the Hancock Hotel, and concerned his horse and his belongings. The second was long, and was addressed to Mr. John Arnold, in care of the hotel. Hopalong was about to address the second envelope, but stopped his hand in time; the handwriting on the two envelopes should not be the same. He really knew nothing about the bartender. He picked them up, together with the pen and the ink bottle, and got to his feet. Sheriff Carter was leaning against the bar, rolling dice for the drinks, and he looked around at the sound of quick, hard steps.

"Hello, Mr. Jones," he said, smiling. "Get in here an' gamble; low man pays for th' drinks."

"Later on," answered Hopalong, holding out the blank, sealed envelope. "I got a stiff finger. Would you mind writin' an address on this envelope for me?"

"From what I've heard about you, I allus figgered that yore fingers was damn lim-

ber," replied Carter, taking the envelope and then reaching for the pen and ink bottle which Hopalong had just placed in front of him. "Yore finger just sorta petered out after so much writin', huh?" He chuckled. "Well, I reckon they won't look alike." When he handed the envelope back there was no question of the same handwriting being on the two envelopes; but there might easily have been a question as to who the hell could read either of them.

"I got to get these in th' mail right away an' then see th' stage driver," said Sheriff Cassidy. "See you later an' buy you a drink."

The letters mailed, and Hopalong assured by the postmaster that they would go out on the Hancock stage, Hopalong went over to the express office and booked a seat on the southbound Wells, Fargo stage next morning. He could get to the railroad almost as soon as he could get back to Hancock and his horse. It was a difference of less than twenty-four hours, and the trip by train would more than make up for that. And he always liked to ride on Mr. Pullman's palace cars if the distance was not too far.

"When do th' northbound stages leave th' railroad for here?" he asked.

"Tuesdays an' Thursdays," answered the clerk. "Th' eastbound an' th' westbound trains get in within an hour of each other, an' we meet 'em both."

Hopalong nodded happily, paid for his ticket and went out to the street, and as he looked up it he saw the Hancock stage, ready to leave, standing before the postoffice.

He walked toward it, noticing that while its passenger service was nil, its express business westbound was heavy. One box caught his eye and made him grin. A new supply of Johnny Walker would be in Hancock when he returned. The whiskey made him think again of Abner Jones; he expected to have quite some pressing and important business to transact with Abner. For Abner's sake, he hoped that the Hancock barber's razors would still be sharp.

The driver stepped from the postoffice with a mail sack in his hand. It looked ridiculously large for the amount of its contents. The driver grinned, pointed up to the box, and spoke.

"Might as well climb up," he invited. "We'll be away in about two jerks."

"Reckon yo're right about th' jerks," replied Hopalong with a friendly grin. "I'm not goin' back with you this trip. Got some business to do farther south. When will you be here next time?"

"Friday. Well, time I was leavin'."

Hopalong turned and watched the Concord take the corner on two wheels, instantly threatened by two flank attacks by the town's dogs. There came the sharp crack of a whip and the yelp of a more impulsive canine followed it. The sheriff grinned and headed for the hotel, where he stopped at the bar close beside his brother officer, made arrangements for room, supper and breakfast, and then picked up the dice and cup. The first round was on him, but he was thinking so deeply that he had to be reminded of it. He should have obtained affidavits from Danvers and the storekeeper to back up his request for the issuance of the warrants; but, no: that would have showed his hand.

He turned to the sheriff.

"Will you try to get an affidavit from Jameson for me?" he asked.

"Yes. I'll try it right now," answered Carter, finishing his drink and starting for the door.

The hide buyer looked up and frowned slightly when he saw who his caller was.

"What you want now?" he demanded.

"Just want you to make a statement about that hide, an' swear to it," answered Carter with a smile.

"Right now I'm in a position to deny everythin' I've told you about that damn hide," retorted the buyer. "After I make a written statement an' swear to it, I ain't.

Why should I take a chance of gettin' into trouble?"

"There won't be any trouble," replied Carter.

"Yeah, but mebby I'll have to go over to Twin River for th' trial, an' lose a lot of time," objected Jameson, shaking his head.

"You'll have to go anyhow, in that case," responded the sheriff. "You ever hear of a subpoena?"

"Why didn't I keep my fool mouth shut?" growled the hide buyer.

"It's yore duty, too," said the sheriff. "It's also to yore interest to get rid of cattle thieves. How do you know that another accident like that won't happen again, an' you mebby will not be lucky enough to discover th' hide? How'd you like to have a hide like that traced back to you?"

"All right; let's get it over with," growled Jameson, getting up and reaching for his hat. He went with the sheriff to the courthouse and into the office of the clerk.

"Hello, Pete. Hello, Sheriff. What can I do for you?" asked the clerk.

"Pete wants to make a statement an' swear to it," answered the sheriff.

"All right," replied the clerk, uncorking an ink bottle and reaching for pen and paper. "Go ahead, Pete. A few words at a time."

When the clerk was writing down the letters of the two brands, he hesitated for a moment, but kept on writing. The job finished, he laid down the pen and looked up at Jameson.

"Better read it over, Pete. I figger you've made a mistake with th' brands," he said.

"No mistake," grunted Jameson, picking up the pen and signing the statement.

"No mistake, a-tall," chuckled the sheriff.

The pen scratched a few more lines, the clerk wrote his signature and reached for his seal.

"All right. Two bits."

He handed the document to the hide buyer, who passed it on to the sheriff.

"What you goin' to do with it?" asked Jameson as they left the office.

"It's goin' to th' sheriff's office, over in Twin River."

After supper Hopalong found the local sheriff herding up a poker crew and gladly joined it. This was a stiffer game than those over in Hancock, and it put him on his mettle. It was also a game where a bluff meant something. In the general conversation he seized on an instant of silence, looked across the table at Pete Jameson, and made a cryptic remark.

"Mr. Jameson," he said, "I wouldn't advise you to change yore hide buyin' territory next trip. Th' reasons for th' change won't be there any more; but I'll make shore of that an' try to let you know about it in plenty of time."

The hide buyer's lids narrowed speculatively as he studied the speaker's face. You could easily see that thoughts were flip-flopping about in his mind. He glanced quickly at Sheriff Carter, caught the slow, heavy nod, and grinned suddenly.

"I'll not be in too much of a hurry to start out this fall," he said, and then looked at the pot. "An' now she's up a dollar more."

XXIV

FOR breakfast Hopalong had fried beefsteak, and he suspected that it was not only cow beef, but from an aged cow. The fried potatoes were greasy, the butter margarine and could speak for itself, the coffee muddy and bitter, but the biscuits were crisp and flakey. You give some cooks a package of Arbuckle's and they raise hell with it.

He walked slowly to the stage line office, his eyes on the Concord and its six horse team. And it surely was a team, fairly well matched as to size and color. Horses, huh? That meant that the south road was hard instead of sandy. The driver and the

hostler came into sight, carrying a heavy, iron box between them. They slid it into the boot, under the seat and closed and fastened the apron. The clerk appeared in the doorway, nodded at Hopalong and glanced at his watch.

"Yo're th' only passenger this trip," he said. "You might as well ride on th' box. You have two minutes."

"Thanks," replied the sheriff, stepping on the hub of the front wheel, from there to the iron step behind the brake handle, thence to the projecting step of the boot. He moved over to the left hand side of the seat, rolled and lighted a cigarette and waited.

The driver climbed up a moment later as the clerk tried the door handles, the hostler let loose of the lead team, and the long whip cracked like a pistol. There came a sudden pounding of hoofs, a lurch which sent the coach body rocking on its thorough braces, the grind of iron tires and the gently protesting whispers of rubbing leather, the creak of wood and the clinking of chain. The clamorous dogs renewed their warfare, but the driver flicked a bit of hair and hide from the nearest and then they were out of town, rolling southward.

"Where's th' next swing station?" asked Hopalong, idly.

"Twenty-five miles. Halfway," answered the driver. "We take it easier than some runs I've knowed of. No use arrivin' all a-lather an' hang round two hours waitin' for th' train. Otherwise we'd have to break it into three sections, an' that would mean another station an' more expense. Don't you get to worryin'. We'll be there in plenty of time. Which train you figgerin' to catch?"

"Th' westbound."

The driver nodded and kept his eyes on the road and the team. The day was clear and sunny, with not too much wind. The miles rolled behind them, the coach swayed from side to side, to and fro. They crossed a creek and the driver glanced quickly at the sun.

"Right on time," he grunted as he eased off the brake for the upward slope. "Better country down here."

Hopalong had been noticing that more grazing cattle were in sight, and he nodded. He was watching the team below him, and the driver's quick, sidewise glance saw his interest.

"Purty picture, ain't they?" he asked, proudly.

"Purty as hell," enthused the sheriff. "You don't know anybody that might buy some graded bulls, do you?"

AND so they rolled on and on. The swing station consisted of a shack, stable, corral and a small blacksmith shop for shoeing horses and mending small metal. A haystack was to one side, protected by a pole fence. There was a fenced in well, with trough, windlass and bucket.

The country seemed to flatten out a little more and the views grew wider and longer. The cattle increased in numbers. There came another creek and again a quick glance at the sun. Most drivers carried watches, but it seemed that this one believed the sun to be more reliable.

"Be there in another hour," he said, placing his right foot on the foot rest at the top of the long brake handle as they came to and pitched down a steep descent. On the top of the opposite rise he stopped and breathed the team for a few minutes, and the sheriff's heart warmed to him for this consideration, and he wondered if twenty-five miles, at the pace they had held, wasn't just a little too far.

"You been drivin' long?" asked the sheriff, just to be saying something.

"Since I was a mighty young man," answered the driver, swinging wide of a deep rut. "I rode th' Pony for six months."

"You rode th' Pony Express?" exclaimed Hopalong in surprise. He looked at the driver's face, but it was a poor indicator of age.

"Yes, sir! I worked for Russell, Majors an' Waddell as long as they lasted. Rode

pony till I got too heavy, an' then drove stage. My pony trick was from 'Dobytown, which was Fort Kearney on th' Platte, to Midway, which got its name because it was halfway between Atchison an' Denver. When Halliday took over th' line I worked for him, then drove for Wells, Fargo, an' I still am. Midway served th' best meals along th' whole line from Atchison to Hangtown. Dan Trout kept it, an' his sisters was damn fine cooks. Nobody went past Midway around meal time, not if they knowed about it.*

"Th' Platte section was grand country for a driver. He was never lonesome. Emigrant wagons, stage coaches, pony riders as long as they lasted, bull trains and detachments of cavalry were in sight most all th' way. Why, some of them bull trains was so close together that th' dust didn't have time to settle between 'em. Look over there, a little to th' left. See it?"

Hopalong saw it. For a short stretch the sun glinted from polished rails. A line of telegraph poles marched up out of a ravine, over the top of the little divide and on down the other slope. Far off to the right a small ranchhouse could be seen. For the last two hours wagon tracks had left the stage road here and there, to wander out of sight over the high, prairie swells. It was country to warm the cockles of a man's heart.

They swung around a low butte and straightened out again, with the distant town popping into sight almost like a rabbit out of a magician's hat. About the only difference between this town and Little River was that it had a railroad station, a water tower and lacked a courthouse.

"There she is," said the driver, letting the team drop to a walk. "We ain't makin' no close connections, we ain't meetin' nothin' in a hurry, an' we ain't needin' to make fast time from here on. I allus like to rest 'em whenever I can," he apologized. "We've missed th' eastbound. I ain't got nothin' for it. So I let 'em get their breath."

"They've shore earned a rest," replied the sheriff. Here was a man who had lived with horses all his life and who knew them, perhaps, better than he did his human friends.

The driver chuckled, his thoughts in the past.

"In th' old days I used to come a-hellin' into th' stations, an' in them days there was some sense in it; them stages had a hell of a long way to go an' they had to be on time. Let a driver start losin' time on a nineteen hundred mile run, an' he found hisself bein' asked some questions, 'specially by th' next driver. There ain't no sense doin' it here."

"What's th' name of th' town?" asked Hopalong, mildly surprised that he had not learned it. He had asked for a ticket to the railroad, and had not even glanced at it.

"Gravelly Ford. Some of th' gold diggers used it when they stampeded into th' Badlands. Most of 'em died there, I reckon, because th' Sioux riz up an' went lookin' for hair."

They drew up before the express office, in which the post office was housed. The hostler was waiting, climbed up to the box, and sat there until the clerk waved him along. The stage rolled around the corner of the building, to be checked and greased for the return trip in the morning.

"Have a drink?" asked the driver, as he stepped out of the office.

"I could use one," answered the sheriff. "How much time we got?"

"Plenty. Besides, she ain't allus on time. She's been climbin' a hell of a lot of grade since she crossed th' Mississippi. Come on."

They had a drink, two of them, and then the driver waved toward the door.

"Let's go to th' station. Might as well wait there. I allus like to see 'em come in," he explained. "Th' agent's a queer cuss. He woulda been killed with Custer except

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Note by author: Lizzie and Maggie Trout were famous along the line, almost as famous as the infamous Jack (Joseph) Slade.

he was sick in th' post hospital an' couldn't ride. You reckon it was Custer's or Reno's fault?"

"Let's not get into any fight," laughed Hopalong. "I got to get shaved. Then I'll meet you at th' station." He followed the driver's pointing arm and headed for the barber shop.

THE agent was a queer cuss. He had not ridden with Custer, which undoubtedly saved his life; but he had gotten himself mixed up in another fight and had lost his scalp. The wig he wore was anything but convincing. And it seemed that when he lost his scalp he had lost his temper, the use of words and his trust in all human beings, red, white or black. As Hopalong stopped before the ticket window, the agent looked up and said nothing.

"One way ticket to Twin River on a Pullman palace car," said the sheriff.

After a moment's wait the ticket was shoved across the counter to him, and its cost briefly announced. Hopalong paid for it, put it in a pocket, took his change, and grinned mischieviously.

"Who was to blame—Custer or Reno?" he asked.

The agent glared and then hurried to a suddenly clattering telegraph relay, which suddenly stopped as the stage driver loafed over to the ticket window.

"On time?" he asked.

The agent risked the safety of his wig by violently shaking his head.

"Twenty-eight minutes," he grunted, and reached for some way bills.

Hopalong and his companion sauntered out to the platform and sat on an empty baggage truck. Suddenly the driver arose, went out to the track, knelt down and placed his ear against a rail. It was beginning to talk. He got to his feet and went back to the truck.

"Bet you a dollar she'll be in sight in ten minutes by yore watch," he offered.

"I never play another man's game," replied Hopalong. "How long have you been listenin' an' figgerin'?"

"Ten years," answered the driver with a wide grin, and pulled out a big watch, to Hopalong's surprise after the way the driver had timed his run. "You got to figger it different in cold weather," he said. "It shifts gradual, from one season to th' next."

The station agent appeared, tramped down the platform and pulled a lever. A red board slowly swung up and out, over the track.

The driver chuckled.

"I was just wonderin' if he'd forget," he said. "If that board wasn't up she'd go through here like a pony hoss, 'less she had somethin' to put off."

"This ain't a reg'lar stop, then?" asked the sheriff.

"Nor for either of 'em, westbound or eastbound. This lady is th' Pacific Express, an' she shore expresses."

She did, but, seeing the red board, she stopped. The driver scratched his head as he glanced at the watch. There must have been a rainstorm or a sudden draft of cold air somewhere out there; he was nearly a quarter of a minute off his timing. He said good-by, waved his hat, and stepped back to see her on her way again. Then he put an ear to his watch and listened intently, although it was not necessary. Normal ears should have been able to hear it tick from a distance of three feet.

Hopalong found a seat and laughed; the driver had called the station agent a queer cuss!

(*Conclusion in the next* SHORT STORIES)

THE JONQUIL CASE

By B. E. COOK

Author of "Portrait of the Senorita," etc.

"Pillar of Society Out in Front—and the Soul of a Highwayman Underneath

THERE are times in a man's career when he gets to thinking he's almighty clever, pretty near invincible. Then, just to keep his feet planted on solid earth, he gets slapped down.

Year after year I'd done rather well for myself and my merciless, grasping master, Harden Bayle. Wherever his covetousness had sent me, there I had gone. Thus far I had brought him the spoils. Maybe due to extra luck, but with my brute strength plus a keen mind and an utter disregard for danger or the law—I took the credit with a bow. Bayle used to jeer at me for being altruistic; but, hell, I saw no sense in dragging any decent fellow down to my level or Bayle's either. Especially since my "altruism" had never cost me a thing.

Then came this affair—what the papers called "The Jonquil Case." And if it hadn't been for a strange coincidence—one of those things that simply happen, you know—I don't know how I'd have emerged. Looking back at the way things shaped up, I still can't make up my mind what I'd have done. I mean, would I have allowed young Sherman to pay the price or would I have stuck out my thick neck? And would that necking act have done any good? I was stymied. For once I couldn't get one step ahead. It hurt my conceit like the devil, mister. So, by the time this unbelievable coincidence did come along, I was ready to grab any help whatever and to the devil with my pride.

The trophy Bayle sent me after this time was easy picking. Very.

I was just in from a tramp trip down the West Coast, through the Canal and up to New York. Feeling fine, ripe for adventure—and mind you I've no scruples. The well-known thrill of the chase is mine, the joy of matching wits and muscle against odds. Also I enjoy that growing bank account; it's going to leave me sitting pretty when I get done with Bayle. But what I hate most is Bayle and his orders. Yeah, he's got me and he knows it. I do what he tells me to do.

As usual he summoned me to his mansion up the Hudson. And, as usual, we made the inevitable rounds of that strange collection in his secret museum—the sacred scroll, the earrings of the Empress Carlotta, the pirate's chest and so on.

"Well, what is it to be this time?" I asked restlessly. I may as well have queried

a stone; he ignored the question, merely kept on around until we had completed the circuit. At the refectory table he stopped and fiddled with the place in the beautiful carving. Out swung a secret drawer. He glanced at me and chuckled. "Discovered it by chance," he said, "but I think it will do."

Did I ask him do for what? Not me; this was his usual technique to string me along. I waited. I watched him turn and look along the walls. At length he shook his head and said, "No, it is not an object of art, it is not unique, it can easily be replaced—"

"Then what the hell do you want it for?" I burst forth.

He vented that cold, hateful laugh. Quickly his face came to life in that greedy, hawklike expression he wore when he was ready to strike. "Because I shouldn't have it," he declared. "That's why I want it," and in this simple admission he wrote his own biography. What he shouldn't have, he must acquire.

He glanced down along the table to further say, "I wonder what the fellows who carved this table would say if they knew or had known what was going into the secret drawer—a sealed bid for a construction job."

A sealed bid? In this refectory table, in company with the other things in this room? You could have knocked me down

"Last week I stumbled onto something," Bayle went on. "I ran across an old friend of mine, a man named Sands Sherman. Oh, he lives in a certain city not so far away and he's one of their solid, respectable people—much like myself."

The quirk of his eyebrows gave me my cue. "Pillar of society out in front and the soul of a highwayman underneath," I said.

"Aptly put," agreed Bayle, without a ruffle of resentment, for there was no sham between us. Each knew the other for exactly what he was.

"It seems that Sands is a member of the city council, a highly respected member. He is always just as surprised as the other fellow when the Vanner Construction Company invariably underbids all competitors for city construction contracts. It is on the cost plus plan, understand, and of course the lowest bidder gets the contract. The fact that these jobs turn out to be bigger than at first reckoned, always—and this means special appropriations for 'extras'—has just begun to dawn on that particular city."

"Of course, murder will out," I commented sententiously, never dreaming that a real murder was looming up ahead.

Bayle laughed. "Meaning the wicked always get caught? Well, if that's a word for me, forget it. You and I—notice I say *you* and I—don't get caught. We're too smart."

That's Bayle, always swinging the whip over me, always saying in effect, "Remember you're in this as deeply as I. Even deeper. There's no turning back and no backing out."

"Okay, I know all that," said I. "But about your friend Sherman; somehow I get the idea he's a villain after our own hearts."

BAYLE made a wry face. "He's not in our class, he's only a cheap crook politician. As I said, this 'extras' racket is beginning to excite suspicion, but not against Sherman. Don't misunderstand me; Sherman is top hole in his community. However, people are beginning to wonder how it is that Vanner always gets in the lowest bids. There's even an earnest committee of young men who are going to clean up the politics of that city. And they've got their eyes wide open, watching a bid that closes at ten o'clock next Monday morning. It's for a new annex on the city hospital and believe it or not, the organizer and real push in this bright-eyed outfit is young Perry Sherman, old Sands' boy and a junior member of the firm."

"The soup thickens," I ventured.

"Now when bids are sent in, they're deposited in Sands' safe. Good old Sands, watch dog of the public weal! Even though the envelopes looked slightly mussed when opened, nobody noticed it. They'd been safe in Sands Sherman's keeping and that was sufficient for that city.

"Ah, but young Perry had observed a thing or two about them. To him it seemed that as time came for the last bids to be opened, they bore a certain appearance. It was on the back of the envelopes which, after all, were just ordinary sealed envelopes stuck down like any letter. And in comparing figures, he also noticed that Vanner's—which as usual was the last one in—had been a mere sixty-eight dollars under the next lowest bid. Perry went to his father and told him that someone in their own office was opening bids to give Vanner illegal information. Sands, he poohooed the assumption; but he saw that his son was not wavering, the son hung to his accusation.

"And Perry concluded that the older man was altogether too trusting, that someone in his own organization was pulling the wool over his eyes. Therefore Sands decided he'd have to look sharp; son Perry was hot on the trail. And there was Vanner withholding his bids till he got the figures on the other ones.

"Sands was telling me all this only yesterday afternoon. So far, only two bids have been submitted, one from an old, conservative firm which always bids too high for city jobs and the other from a smaller company struggling for a foothold. The latter's is the bid Vanner wants to know about—and the one young Perry has his eagle eye on. He watches every person who goes near that safe and Sands says it is putting him in a tough spot. Presently young Perry had a bright idea: he'd take the bids home over the week-end and deposit them in the little safe he had built into his own bedroom. Certainly they'd be unmolested there.

"Sands was somewhat relieved. Perry was happy as a puppy at having brought the old man around to his way of thinking. Now all Sands had to do was tell Vanner where they were, get the young couple out of the house for an evening and he'd bet dollars to doughnuts that Vanner still would come up with the lowest bid. As to the details, that was Vanner's problem; he knew where he could procure a man for any kind of work he wanted done.

"Sands told me all about it and laughed till his fat face purpled. Thinks it's a huge joke on the boy. Well," Bayle sighed, "that is what gave me my idea—make it a joke on all of them. What I want you to do is to get inside that house before Vanner's man and come away with those bids. It will make a real situation."

So, thinks I, this renaissance refectory table will hide the bids—and clever old Sands Sherman will have to do some fast thinking!

"Here's the address you want for it, a cottage in the suburbs. Right next the gate to a park; great place to keep an eye on things. Soon as the young Sherman couple leaves the house, get in, secure the bids before Vanner's man shows up. How're the finger-tips, tough as alligator hide? I'll bet?"

"Never mind, I'll attend to that item," I said. "Cottage safes are child's play. And when does this affair come off?"

"Tonight," said Bayle. "Catch a train down there and be on the watch when it comes dark."

Just then Bayle had a phone call. He left me there in that secret room with all the precious things I had stolen for him. A chill went down my back as he, on his way out, locked me in. He never left the door unlocked. Huh, the last time he had locked me in here was during the affair of the sacred scroll and what a job I'd had getting out! Today I was relieved when he came back.

"So you were thinking about the last time—" Bayle began, with that devilish gift he had for reading a man's thoughts.

"I might say that the airshaft wouldn't be so good a place to ride out in these days. I've had upright spikes fixed at the bottom."

I could feel the blood pounding in my ears. Some day I'd choke Harden Bayle till that evil tongue of his lolled out onto his chin.

"That was a telephone call from Sands Sherman," said he. "Your work is to be much easier now. He induced Perry to send his wife home over the week-end with her people. It is out in the country a few miles distant. And Sands and I and Perry, the three of us, are staying at the country club tonight, then off for a day's fishing trip tomorrow. This removes all chance of Perry's wife's coming across the bids in the bedroom safe."

"Perry's wife?" I repeated inquisitively.

"Well, she's a sort of a feather-brain, you should know the kind. Anyway it is better if she knows nothing at all about this affair. So I'll be driving down right away, in time for dinner with them at the club. I'll take you along part of your way."

TWO hours took us to the outskirts of the city, into a suburban development where Perry Sherman lived. Bayle indicated their house as we passed it, then dropped me off a quarter mile farther at a house that took in tourists. I asked him if he'd pick me up here when the time came; he thought I'd better get back by myself. "Go up to the mansion on the Barrens," he directed, "and wait there for me. I'll be back there Monday morning."

I worked up a plausible good yarn to tell the lady of the tourist house; yes, I always plan on a good alibi. Told her my friend who'd dropped me off had business in town and that he, too, would be back here later on for a room. I paid her then for two rooms.

I'd scarcely stretched out for forty winks when I was called to the phone. It was Bayle. He was at the club. Pretty guarded in what he said, too, but I gathered that the Shermans were around him and that Perry had come straight from the office. Also, he had the bids with him. Knowing of the two safe-cracking schemes, his father urged Perry to get the bids into the bedroom safe before he returned for the night at the country club. When he did so, Bayle was to slip me the word; otherwise our game would seem to be washed out.

I told the landlady I'd just heard from my friend and he might be delayed, but I expected another call. You see, I didn't want anything in my behavior to seem unusual; if anything went wrong in the vicinity, I didn't aim to stand out as a stranger who acted queerly.

About nine, after dark, I got my call to go ahead. Perry had just departed to carry the bids home; he was coming back directly for a game of cards. Then it was that I told the landlady my friend had found he couldn't make it so I was going in town myself to see him. I asked her where the nearest bus stop might be. She hurried me off, obviously hoping I would not ask for the money back on the other room. I didn't.

I was behind a shrub near the park entrance when I saw a car drive up and Perry go into the house. Lights came on, went off. He was soon back outside, whistling as he went down the walk and drove away.

It didn't take me long to open the back door with a master key. The safe was child's play. Inside five minutes I was out of that house, chuckling to think of the surprise Vanner's man certainly was going to get, sometime this very night.

I walked around some to kill time, then returned to my room and turned in. I took my time, on Sunday morning, getting back to New York and up the Hudson to the Barrens and Bayle's place.

To my astonishment, he was there ahead of me!

"Well," said I, "I thought you weren't getting back up here till tomorrow. Now what the—"

He merely held out his hand in a de-

mand. I produced the two envelopes and handed them over. He went upstairs to deposit them in that secret room. All of which, as pure dramatics, left me puzzled. But there's no explaining Bayle. I sat down to wonder what kick he could get out of double-crossing his friend and putting the man in so embarrassing a position—the deep pile of the rugs deadened his footfalls as he returned. It gave me a distinct start to look up and discover him eyeing me coldly.

"You're getting heavy handed," he said. "That affair last night——"

What the devil could this mean? The job had been simplicity itself, had gone through as smoothly as grease.

"What's the point?" he demanded. "If you had to brain your lady friend, why do it there?"

"If I had to—what are you talking about?" I demanded, and even Bayle squirmed when I resorted to that tone.

"The woman you killed, there in Perry Sherman's house."

"Mister, if you've planted a murder on me," I declared, "I'll blow the works. I'm about fed up with your orders and threats and be damned 'f I'll have a charge like this hung on me."

"So you don't know a thing about it," he said softly, and I could see he believed me.

"All I know is that I went into the house and got those bids. I was away in five minutes after young Sherman left the house. What's all this about anyway?"

"We went up to Long Pond for the fishing early this morning. About eleven we got a call to come back into the city to Perry's house. It seems that Mrs. Sherman forgot the Sunday hat she wanted and drove in for it. When she entered the house, there lay a strange woman, her head bashed in, sprawling on the living room floor. Someone had taken a heavy vase from the table and hit her over the head. The jonquils that had been in the vase were scattered all over the floor, and the pieces of the vase, and a lot of blood—oh, a messy sort of thing to walk into!"

"I understand," said I. "And you presumed I'd leave a situation like that behind me?"

"Did seem clumsy for you," he admitted. "Anyhow, it must have been the work of Vanner's man when he came for the bids. And nobody knows who the woman is—she was a fearful sight, all right. The young people almost passed out when they laid their eyes on her. But it's a break for Sands; there'll be such a to-do over the killing that the bids will slip into obscurity and he'll be able to cover up. Huh. Anyway, our part in this is over."

I returned to New York, wondering what it was all about, yet feeling that, hell, we'd cast off our lines. I began to consider the affair in that suburban home somewhat like the passing of some distant ship below Matanilla Buoy.

But Monday morning's papers brought that ship close within hailing distance. Big headlines read:

YOUNG LAWYER, SON OF MOST PROMINENT CITIZEN, ARRESTED FOR MURDER OF FORMER GIRL FRIEND

Young Perry arrested; I didn't know the fellow, but I'd gathered that he was a rather decent sort, in fact associated with a group of reformers. The way he had run down his walk Saturday night, whistling, happy—that's not the kind who kill a woman. And, anyway, I had been in that house after he had and there was no body sprawled on the living room floor then. I know; I went through that room myself. After Perry. Vanner's man must have done the killing.

But this newspaper headline: "his former girl friend." Yeah? I read on. It appeared, as Bayle had said, that no one had recognized the woman till the police got around to put her description on the radio. Then a Mrs. Shaunessey who "worked out by the hour" came and identified her as her niece. "Yes," she said, "it is her, my niece. And 'twas me that was

always knowin' she'd come to some bad end and— Her name? Ann Ryan."

The paper went on to say that while no one else had apparently recognized the victim, the name meant something to Mrs. Perry Sherman. "The sweet, girlish little woman," and all that, showed me that already she was being built up as a betrayed wife. Mrs. Sherman had cried out, "That woman!" and burst into tears. Perry Sherman stepped toward her and tried to get in a word, but she pushed him away and refused to listen to him. Well nigh incoherent, she had sobbed out that her husband had confessed to her before their marriage that he'd had an affair with a cheap woman in New Haven named Ann Ryan. "That's why he wanted me to spend the week-end at my mother's, so he could have that woman here. I hadn't planned to go, but he called me yesterday about noon and fairly insisted on it. He told me he was staying at the club and going fishing Sunday."

Perry Sherman then owned that he had recognized the woman. She was in truth Ann Ryan and he had known her briefly in New Haven. He and another student had had a couple of dates with two waitresses, nothing more than that. It had been his only escapade and he had told his wife before their marriage. "I have never seen her since," he said, "and I haven't the slightest idea why she was here." On a bit of cross questioning, he explained that he hadn't wanted to publicly identify the body before his wife, adding, "I know it was foolish of me to lie and I shouldn't have done it, but this question about Ann Ryan has been a sore point between us ever since I first told my wife about her. I shouldn't have done that."

Mrs. Shaunessey backed up Sherman. She spoke sharply to his wife. "It's the truth he's telling and it's ashamed I'd be to be saying things like that about a good man like Mr. Sherman. He did not know she was here; she hatched it up all by herself, that Ann. She was by when you called me up Saturday and she was that nosey she wanted to know who it was and all the likes of that. And me that always had a loose tongue in my head! I said, 'That's Mrs. Perry Sherman, no less, where I go on Mondays and Thursdays. She's going out to her mother's and won't be back till come Monday late. She leaves the key under the mat when she's gone.' Then Ann said, 'Perry Sherman? Oh, I used to know a man by that name!' And I said, 'You did not know this Perry Sherman, he's a gentleman. His father's a lawyer; so's he and the likes o' you wouldn't be knowing the likes o' him.' I said all that— God forgive me my loose tongue—telling her that Mrs. Sherman had gone to her mother's because Mr. Sherman was going fishing Sunday with friends. Yes, that's what Mrs. Sherman told to me.

"Later on I saw Ann looking into the telephone book but she shut it up when I came along. She went out after supper, said she was going to look in on a friend —an old friend—and give him a surprise. I didn't realize what she was up to. It served her right, what she got, trying to make trouble."

The paper continued its story: Perry Sherman insists that he did not see the woman Saturday night. "I went directly from my office to the club where I had dinner with my father and a friend from New York, Harden Bayle. After dinner

we got Frank Birkenhead to make up a table for contract. We played until midnight when we went to bed. Early in the morning we went fishing. Any of those men can substantiate my story."

HARDEN BAYLE, sought and located in his mansion up the Hudson had told the same story. Young Sherman had come to the club in late afternoon—long before Ann Ryan had left her aunt's house —had dinner and spent the evening in the card room, retiring after midnight. Early next morning the three men, the two Shermans and Bayle himself, had gone out to Long Pond fishing and were there when they received the call to return to the city. There had been nothing out of the ordinary in young Sherman's manner the night before; in fact, he had seemed to be in very high spirits.

Frank Birkenhead told the same story, especially mentioning Perry's carefree manner. "We had to wait a few minutes, fifteen, maybe twenty, while he wrote a letter and mailed it. This was after dinner. Then he came down and joined us. He appeared to be"—the same words that Bayle had used—"in high spirits; and he had put a yellow jonquil in his buttonhole." No, he didn't remember that he had seen one there during the dinner, but Perry had worn it when he had come down and rejoined the others to play cards.

It was this bit of casual information that had marked Perry Sherman for the killer; for, among the flowers scattered on that blood-soaked floor, one stem had been found from which the blossom had been broken. Bouquets are not made from blossomless stems.

The next edition of the newspapers was even more damning:

YOUNG SHERMAN ADMITS HE VISITED HOME SATURDAY EVENING

It was God's truth he spoke when he told the entire story of the bids and of how he had put them away for safekeeping. But it only added to his seeming guilt. He *had* been in the house that night and he *had* tried to cover it up. And when the safe was opened to support his story, the bids were not there. His wife refused to speak to him when they led him away; she had gone to stay with her parents. It beats all hell how hard a good woman can become.

It looked almighty tough for Perry Sherman.

I went down to Harden Bayle's office and got the cool reception I had anticipated. I wasn't supposed to come around Bayle's office; all our dealings were carried on in the mansion up the river.

"What do you want here?" Bayle demanded as soon as we were alone.

"This mess Perry Sherman's in. They've got him for murder."

"So what?"

"But he didn't do it. You and I both know he didn't. It'll mean the chair."

Bayle relaxed backward in his swivel chair. Idly he ran a sharp paper cutter through fold after fold of fine bond paper. My temper was ragged enough and every rip of that sharp blade tore at my nerves. "To begin with," said Bayle, "they do not electrocute them in that state. To finish with, Perry'll never get a sentence. Old Sands has got too many wires to pull."

"But even if he does get off, he'll carry the stigma with him all his life; and his wife—"

"I trust, mister, you're not getting into one of those golden rule spells of yours," came with a sneer. "Whatever mess Perry Sherman is in happens to be his own affair and we can forget it. Remember, that woman was killed in his house; Perry has owned up that he was there; somebody killed her; you say it was not Perry. Okay then, who did do it? You don't know and nothing you can say will do him any good. So, forget it. Old Sands will fix it, trust old Sands."

But old Sands could not fix it. The hearing was held and Perry had to face

trial for the murder of Ann Ryan. And within the hour of that decision, old Sands had a stroke. He lay helpless as a log, only his eyes gave any visible evidence of life.

I wondered how his mind was, if he was realizing the momentous events about him, lying there imprisoned in a virtually dead body, suffering the torments of the damned because his own boy would pay the price of his own, Sands's, double dealings. Did the stricken father sense it all now?

If so, how his mind must be beating against the walls of impotence. Vanner could clear up the whole matter; and had Sands been able he might indeed have forced the entire story out of Vanner. But of course Vanner was not going to speak of his own will. Bayle, too, knew the story; but in his case, even if he were to divulge it, he would say only that he knew about the bids being at young Sherman's house. He would never give up the bids for evidence.

So you can see where all this left me; I was the only person who could fit the keystone into the arch. I alone could testify that Perry had left the house, carefree and happy, with a jonquil in his buttonhole. I alone could swear that at that particular time there was no bloody figure sprawled on the living room floor. Ah, yes, but to support my story I'd have to have those bids.

BAYLE was not in his office when again I called there. He was up the Hudson. He was surprised—or so pretended—when he saw me. "How is this?" he demanded. "I thought your ship was due to sail at four."

"She is that," I answered, "but without me this trip. I am going to do something about the Perry Sherman case. You've seen the papers, you know what they are saying."

Bayle nodded. "Oh, yes, rather interesting to see what a picture they can build with only a few details to start on. Yes, 'Jonquil Murder Case' and 'Boldly flaunts flower from death-dealing vase' and 'Betrays trusting wife' and 'Leading citizen stricken by son's shame' and 'Fantastic lie about city bids.' Oh, yes, I have been reading the papers."

I was in a boiling rage. I managed to say, "It may sound 'rather interesting' or anything else to you, but that is the way the case is going to be presented to the well-known 'twelve good men and true,' so-called, who'll try that boy for his very life. But they're going to hear another story. My story. And I am here after those bids to back it up!"

Bayle's eyes were cold as death; he shook his head slowly. "Did you ever know of anything coming out of my secret room after it once got in there?" he demanded.

"Yes. I came out when I escaped down the airshaft. I ran a risk then and I am going to run one now."

"You certainly will run risks if you go into court to tell that you were in Perry Sherman's home after he was there. You might as well confess you killed the woman."

"I shall tell the complete story."

"Including my part? Oh, no. Even a good practical joke among friends would not hold water in this case. And you are too close to the fringe of the law to get yourself tangled up inside any court. That is out. I'll never be a party to it and—I won't release the bids."

"You mean to tell me that you'll see the son of a friend pay the price for a crime he did not commit?"

"Sands Sherman was not my friend, he was only another crook. And I'm getting fed up with this discussion; you'd better hurry back aboard your ship."

I started for him, but he made a lightning quick move. I fetched up abruptly with his revolver a few inches from my nose. "Back up against that wall," he ordered. "Up with your hands and keep them high."

I don't argue with anybody at the business end of a gun. I backed up.

"This is a peculiar weapon," said Bayle. "I am going to shoot you with it."

I can't recollect what happened then, it came so fast. I did let out a howl that must have rattled the rafters and I did make a lunge for him. The gun spoke. Something hit me in the chest—

THE rolling of the ship was the first thing I sensed. In time came the throb of the engine and that peculiar smell of bilge which was the *Edgemont's* personal perfume. Ah, but my head was thick as Amazon mud; I couldn't so much as start constructive thinking.

Yet, out of the confusion and my whirling senses something seemed to be urging me, calling me. It was similar to that experience in the little house on the west coast of South America. Something was wrong, something that I must attend to at once. After a fashion and considerable effort I got out on deck, but my mind and legs refused to coordinate. Outside it was night. I lurched and hauled myself up to the bridge and the skipper gave me the fishy eye.

"Better go on back below and sleep it off," he complained. "You're no living use here like that."

"If you think I'm drunk—" I commenced, but my words came thick and halting.

"You cert'nly are. Held up sailing for four hours and then you come aboard so dead to the world it took two sailors to help the taxi driver load you on here. Get outa here, quick, 'fore I have to——" You see, I was showing definite symptoms of sickness.

I made it to the rail in time, but did not feel much relief when it was over. And always there was that nagging urge to remember—what? The deck appeared to rise; I had to sit down. What must I remember?

My head cleared abruptly. The first idea that came into it was Perry Sherman! Oh, Lord, I recalled, I remembered it all as clearly as daylight. I must do something about Perry Sherman; I was the only person who could do anything for him. Bayle would not turn a hand; Bayle had shot me—then how the hell could I be off here at sea feeding the fishes over a rail when I had been shot in the chest?

With hands still fumbling, I pulled my coat away from my chest and felt across it. There was a small hole on the right side. My shirt, of course, also had a hole and there was that crusty feel like dried blood. But it couldn't have been a very deadly missile, it hadn't killed me at so close range, even though I had been unconscious all the way down the Hudson and back here aboard ship. I caught the helmsman watching me; his face in the dim binnacle light wore a grin and his eyes plainly said I was picking cooties. I felt foolish.

Ordinarily I'd have tanned that rascal for his impudence, but now—well, I couldn't bother. I must get ashore again. I lifted my head and peered out over the sea—lights to starboard, land lights. They looked like Staten Island—sure! Over the other way was the mass of lights, New York. The big city was just astern, we were putting to sea.

Mister, I saw but one thing to do. I dragged myself up tall. I threw my whole soul and being into one immense heaving, straining motion. It almost set my stomach adrift again and everybody stood clear. I lurched toward the rail, got there and—I heard shouts behind me, then down I plunged and the shock of the cold salt water slapped me sharp awake. It set my arms and legs into quick, regular strokes, it urged me on into the night.

I was halfway to the nearest land before they got the old *Edgemont's* engine in reverse at full. The puny light they played on the water didn't once come directly on me. Maybe they didn't bother over much and I resented that; I was a good mate if I do say so.

I had the dubious pleasure of reading my own obituary in the papers the next

day. Frankly, it was brief. The mate of the *Edgemont* had been "ill" and fallen headfirst overboard — even a landsman could get that inference that I had been drunk. The body had not yet been recovered and the story read as though it was not at all likely to be.

Well, thought I, probably nobody but Bayle would read the item and I wasn't so sure he'd believe it if he did; Bayle did know I'd be one hard kitten to drown. And he would not want me to drown, he had other work for me to do, other loot to bring in. Yes, and if he'd really wanted me out of the way permanently he'd have used a real bullet instead of that cute little knockout contrivance.

Now that I was over the effects of a stiff swim and drenched clothing and salt water in that wound—now I got to thinking more normally. And one thought quickened my pulse. It was a new possibility, a big opportunity. You see, I was a new individual now; officially I was deceased, no less. So it was a good time to quit this hazardous game forever. And why not? Plenty of cash in the bank to begin almost any career so far from New York that my trail never would cross that of Harden Bayle's again; plenty money banked in a

name that was neither my own nor one by which Bayle knew me.

Oh I'd long planned for just such a break as this, saved money for it—and here it was!

But Perry Sherman would be tried for murder and break or no break, I couldn't vanish until I'd done what I could for him. You can't see a decent man downed for what you're convinced he didn't do.

No use trying again to get those bids from Bayle. Never would he loosen his grip on them; it would be my word against his, and who was I? With no plan at all, I returned to the city — to the city where the crime had been committed—and found myself groping in a cluttered mind for some inspiration, some gleam of light. In newspapers I read that the bids were to be again submitted for the hospital annex. The original bids had been misplaced; no doubt Vanner was lying low for awhile.

I took a room in a poor locality and settled down to face this thing out. After all, as Bayle had flung at me, I had no real proof that Perry had not killed the woman, none unless I was willing to stick out my neck by owning that I had been in the house after Perry. Even with the bids in my hand I couldn't actually prove anything except that the story Perry had told about them was true. That was not the murder. No, to clear Perry I had to somehow uncover some other suspect. I didn't doubt that Vanner's safe breaker was the murderer, but how could I hope to discover that individual? Never would Vanner give him away, it would show up his own crooked system for getting bids.

Could I bluff Vanner into giving himself away? I walked past the office of the Vanner Construction Company, inventing and discarding one plan after another. How about going in and springing something about those stolen bids? Could I learn anything that way? I doubted it. Moreover, Vanner would probably tip off his man to skip out—indeed, the rascal probably had gone already. Never had I been up against so hopeless a proposition; despite my good intentions I could see nothing I might do to help Perry Sherman.

Again it seemed the sensible course to vanish from Bayle's orbit and make a fresh start. Believe me, that jolted my pride. When I recalled how I had secured the

scroll, the Empress' earrings and so many other priceless things in various parts of the world—never before had I been downright beaten in any bold venture. Only in the matter of life itself had I taken a licking; but one gets accustomed to that in time and the thrill of unlawful action served to spice up the strange existence. But there was no possible solution to this situation and I recognized I was beaten, damn it!

Feeling extremely low, both mentally and physically, I endeavored to put the discomfort aside, to ignore it all, never once recognizing that fate—or was it what's called coincidence?—was knocking at my door with every twinge of the pain on my chest. That spot from the wound Bayle had inflicted was kicking up. It was red and inflamed and the pain was spreading and intensifying like the devil.

Came the hour when I simply had to have it seen to. I went into the street and located a doctor's shingle nearby. It looked very new on a shabby old house. Good. That implied a young fellow, eager for patients, not too fussy about the reasons for wounds. A man starting practice in this locality wouldn't expect a select clientele.

As I expected, I found a small dingy waiting room without attendant. The thin, harried-looking medico stuck his youthful head out of an inner room. "Be seated," said he. "I'll be with you as soon as I finish here."

Presently, out of that room came a tough with his right hand swathed in bandages. He gave me a sharp glance and grunted in response to the doctor's, "Come tomorrow at the same time." Then I was showing the medico my wound and feeding him an offhand yarn as to how I got it. I didn't propose to tell him about Bayle's shot; after all it wasn't his affair and all I sought of him was treatment against infection.

His examination was very detailed. "You are not telling the truth," he accused. "This wound wasn't made by running into a stake in the dark. Something has been deposited here, some chemical that still irritates it." Suddenly he began to rave, his face flushed, he glared angrily. "In God's name how can I treat your wound correctly if you lie about it to me? What are you lying for? Why don't you out with the truth? All I get for patients is bums that lie! Mister, a chemical has been blown into your blood stream. I'm a doctor, I must know what happened or I can't treat it correctly. Lies! Sneaking out of something, that's why you come down here to me. That's all I get, those too poor to pay and those who sneak here to lie. That patient before you lied, said he'd rammed a rusty nail into his hand. I probed the wound and removed a great sliver of glass. Glass doesn't chip off of rusty nails, why didn't he come clean? Supposing I hadn't probed and found the glass? He's got a bad hand there, why didn't he tell me about the glass?"

Well, the doc was right. I admitted that someone had shot some kind of knockout stuff into me.

"Very well," he responded calmly, "now I can get to work."

BACK in my cheap room, I got to thinking about how that other patient had leered my way, how he had lied, and about glass. I got to thinking back and beyond the doctor's office into the same old problem of Perry Sherman's trial. That's what a photographic memory will do to you; a man who lives by his wits has the faculty developed to a high degree. A furtive tough, hand wounded with glass, had lied to a doctor. Sliver of glass—glass! I jumped up and stifled a yell.

Half that night I thrashed around. Hundreds of people get glass in cuts. Did hundreds lie to doctors about it? That guy hadn't wanted it known. Rusty nail—why had he tried to hide the truth? How had the glass got there? I took one of the doctor's pills and got to sleep.

Early next morning I hustled around to

do several errands before seeing the doctor. Already I felt better—and the doctor's business looked to be booming. One man was waiting. Another came in while the tough was being treated again. Still another arrived and we talked of the usual small chatter while waiting. No one could have guessed that a short time before then the three of us had put our heads together and worked out a plan.

I sweated plenty, all the same; things might break right—and they might go completely wrong. If wrong, I'd have a lot to explain to these three men and I was a bit leery of them, even though on their side now; because under their coats they wore certain badges and they were the class of men I'd been dodging ever since I'd worked for Bayle. I mean the Law.

The inner office opened. The tough patient emerged. The doctor followed with a pleased look at sight of so many waiting. The tough gave all hands the once-over and his shoulders hunched instinctively as though against a blow. I spotted that at once. Whether he was my man or not, he was furtive.

One of the three waiting said loudly, apparently to the others, "That's what Vanner told me!"

The tough froze in his tracks. His face turned ashen. He almost dived for the door. But somehow one of the three managed to get in his way and he was a huge bulk, too.

"Sure," he said to the others, "Vanner spilled everything and was glad to clear hisself doin' it. He's sore about the bids." He turned directly on the tough, aimed a finger and shouted, "What did you do with those bids?"

They'd keyed the man up so tightly that he let go, "I never had those bids, they wasn't there, Vanner's a liar. He knowed they wasn't in that safe. He—" the tough broke off abruptly—too late.

You could have heard a feather hit the floor—until that fellow, awake to his predicament, slugged his way to the door. But the others came into it and they tied him up. It was easy, too; the man's hand was a big drawback to him.

"Never mind, tell it to Headquarters," one of them shouted when the prisoner raved too late. "We know you killed 'er. Come along." They lurched him away.

I knew they'd get his story, they usually do. I've often wondered if they'd ever got me in my work for Bayle, how long I would have held out against them.

"You'll read it all in the papers," I assured the dumbfounded doctor afterwards.

OUT of that doctor's office into the street was, for me, like entering a new world. I was in the pink and sure that Perry Sherman would be exonerated. A new life beckoned, and Bayle was not in it. I'd like to have seen Bayle's face when he learned that the murderer had been caught —mind, I'd left no mark of my own on the case, I'd only told Police Headquarters what I'd overheard in the doctor's office. Hadn't even told them my name; that is, no name Bayle would recognize.

So-o-o, was I free and safe and comfortable and entering respectability? I sure was—and how almighty dull! Where is the spice in respectability? Where is the satisfaction in safety? In comfort for comfort's sake? Me never again to measure strength and wits against some law? For a sacred scroll, a refectory table, a panel of treason, a—? Hell, man!

I headed up the Hudson. If Bayle wasn't there, I'd wait for him.

His Father Was a Sheepman; and It Had Been Said the Cattlemen Were So Hard They Clanked Like Chain When They Walked

STRANGERS IN WHITE

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

"I WANT some grub and tobacker," the boy said. "Charge hit to m'pappy, John Tyson, which the tobacker is fer him. He'll be smack out and a-perishin', I bet, when he comes home."

The old storekeeper looked his puzzlement. Twelve to fourteen, the boy was, a thin barefoot ragamuffin, with hair sunburned to tow and eyes as blue as sapphires in the fresh clean tan of his face. While he waited, the lad hummed a lively tune.

"I git it," at last said the store man, his billygoat-beard bobbing in the funniest way. "You mean the Tyson on Powder Branch, that Tennessee pilgrim who thought he could raise sheep in cow country and keep his health. I didn't know he had a youngster, and reckon nobody else much did. Son, listen. This is Arizona, not Tennessee. Shoot up our towns, drink all our liquor, eat us out o' house and home, even run off with our wives; but don't try raising woollies here!"

The youngster broke off his tune to say, "That there's 'zackly why m'pappy tackled hit; kaze the whole county as good as dared him to. But we never had but a few sheeps. What's wrong with 'em, nohow?"

"My land o' goshen!" The oldster was properly aghast. "Your daddy knowed, for he was told plenty of times. Why, woollies eat even the roots of the grass; plumb ruin any feeding grounds. Let one sheeper git by with it, and— Say, kid, wait right here a minute."

He went clumping out to the dusty street and bawled the name, Ab. A lank and grizzled man with a nickeled star on his shirt hurried to him, and they held brief conversation in low tones. When they stepped into the store, the ragamuffin boy sat on a counter with his tired bare

feet swinging. He had put words to his tune:

" 'All-a-way 'round Sourwood Mountain—
Heigh-ho, honeybee, doodle-um-a-dey!
Big dog'll bark and little dog'll bite you;
Big man'll run and little man'll fight you;
Wimmenfolks wears the menfolks' britches—' "

"Howdy," he said to the sheriff, grinning. "Nice day, ain't it?"

"A mite warm," Ab Runnells said. Runnells' face had been long. Now he found himself able to smile. "Glad to see you happy, bud, singing that way. A Tennessee song, wasn't it?"

The lad nodded quickly. "Yeuh; brang from ole Smoky Thunder Bald. M'poppy teached me to sing. He allus 'clared fellers which sings a heap gen'ally ain't in no devilment."

Sheriff and storekeeper looked at each other. That from a sheeper!

The officer put questions in a row, and the lad answered in the same fashion. He was all John Tyson had, and John Tyson was all he had, yeuh. John went off three days ago and never did come back. The sheeps were gone too, and the ole dog, Shep. All but one lamb which its mammy had died, that is. Then he'd run out of grub, and so here he was in town. But his pappy would come back, all right. Always had. Yeuh.

Again Ab Runnells swapped glances with the old store man. They didn't believe John Tyson was coming back. Runnells shrugged as though to rid his shoulders of weight, and stood a little straighter. It was not that he didn't take his sheriff work seriously. Pinning goods on cowmen who made war upon sheepmen was a difficult job; conviction in court was very nearly, if not wholly, impossible. Runnells spoke again:

"You didn't tell us your first name, bud, did you?"

The youngster drew a long breath. They could see him stiffening as though for an ordeal. His grin was weak when he said, "Hit's Robert E. Lee Stonewall Jackson. M'mammy died when I was borned, but she'd already named me that; dunno how she knowed I'd be a boy. But m'pappy, he allus jest called me Little Feller."

Presently the grizzled sheriff said, "I must look up Frank Luther. This will be news to him too, I guess."

"Frank's in town," the storekeeper said. "I saw him and Irb Greer not half a hour ago."

Runnells went out.

Little Feller Tyson had heard of Luther, the county's boss cattleman, and of Irby Greer, Luther's bucko ranch foreman. But he hadn't heard much about them, for cow folks didn't linger in talk with sheep folks.

"Anybody could see you're half starved," the old man said, proffering an open tin of sardines and six crackers. "Wrap your little belly around them, son; eh?"

The boy thanked the storekeeper. He golloped the food. His sapphire eyes lighted up. He was humming

" 'Did you ever see the devil
With his pitchfork and ladle
And his old iron shovel—' "

when two men came into the store and halted squarely before him.

In Frank Luther's lean countenance there was grief, but not new grief. His tawny hair was tangled, half a week's tawny beard burred out from his chin. The very good clothing he wore was much rumpled; he had slept in it. Although his twenties were not far behind him, he looked all of forty. The lad's grin evaporated at bare sight of this man. He scarcely saw Irb Greer, who was squat, wide through the shoulders and dark.

"How many woollies did you have, kid?" barked Frank Luther.

"Thutty. Not countin' one lamb."

"Think your daddy didn't just run off and leave you?"

Little Feller boiled up fast. But he didn't say the thing that popped to the tip of his tongue. Instead, "I sure don't think it, kaze m'pappy ain't put together that way," he told Luther.

"You don't even know which way he went?"

"Nurry. I jest woke up that marnin' and he was gone, and his rifle was gone, and the sheeps too, and the old Shep dog. But he'll come back, all right. And hit mought be he'll make somebody smoke. Back yan' on Smoky Thunder Bald Mountain in Tennessee he whupped six men to once, one time. And I mean he whupped 'em, yeuh!"

FRANK LUTHER turned to the storekeeper, gawping nearby.

"Take the rags off this kid and put decent clothes on him from top to toe. He's going home with me."

"Don't reckon I ain't gonna have nothin' to say about that!" flared Little Feller Tyson. "Well, you'll see, big ike!"

For one second's time steel-gray fire showed in the cattleman's eyes. The old store man beamed upon the youngster, and tried to make his voice sound convincing. "Jest until your pa gits back, son. Fine chanst to dig up a big friend for your pa; you do it!"

Irby Greer had been uneasily shifting the heft of his body from one thick leg to the other. Now he said, "Frank, I'll bring the buckboard around," had a nod in reply, and hastened toward the street. Little Tyson's stare followed him, turned suddenly cold. Oddly, little Tyson's keen and lasting dislike of Irby Greer began in that moment.

It was because he thought he'd be helping his sire along in unfriendly country that he agreed to put on the new clothing and stay with Frank Luther for the time being. The rather striking metamorphosis was soon complete. They were leaving the store when the billygoat-bearded oldster called, somehow fearsomely:

"I—I nearly forgot to ask you, Frank. How's Miz Luther?"

The cattleman stopped short on the sun-warped sidewalk. His slow answer had a bleak ring. "I don't know." Then with his juvenile companion he went on to the buckboard.

Greer had the reins. "Get it," Luther said to the boy.

"We hafta go to the Powder Branch shack fast, and git that one lamb," the boy said. "I wouldn't nuver leave no lamb to starve that way or git kyote et. Hit follers me like a dog, and air plumb cute."

"A woolly?" Irb Greer spat. "A woolly on your place, Frank?"

"Get in," Luther said to the boy. "Irb, we'll drive to the Tyson shanty first, and pick up the little merino."

John Tyson's son was so glad that he couldn't help singing, as he lolled there behind matched bay horses that trotted fast enough to make the wind blow sweetly.

" 'Molly had a dream last night;
Hit's a pow'ful droll one;
Dremp she had a petticoat
Made o' her mammy's old one!' "

The sun was flinging shadows far when the buckboard drew up at ranch headquarters.

The home was big and white, and Little Feller hadn't known there was such furniture anywhere in the world. His new brass-toed boots made no clatterment whatever on the thick carpets. Tiny cut-glass bangles rimming the opalescent shades of lamps in living room and dining room must be diamonds, he thought, and fine diamonds at that. But the best surprise was supper.

Only Luther sat at table with him. An old Chinaman named Wung helped their plates. The boy gorged. The cattleman ate little. The boy kept watching through an open window.

"Glad this yere yard air fenced in, Frank," he said, after he'd had to loosen

the waist of his new blue trousers by one button, "on account hit makes sech a dandy place fer m'little sheep. Nice grass, too, yeuh. He can sleep under the po'ches. Sure art to be satisfack to the little sheep. Bet he blats fer me though, soon as dark comes. He gits lonesome then."

Luther smiled faintly. Perhaps he wondered what other sheep haters were going to say about this. As for his big range crew—well, they weren't going to say anything, for they'd know better. It had been told that Frank Luther was so hard that he almost clanked like a chain when he walked.

"Where air the yether folks, Frank?"

There was no answer. Little Feller half thought he saw the man's worried look deepen. They rose from the table then, and the man beckoned, and Little Feller went with him to the front end of the upstairs hallway. Luther tapped on a closed bedroom door lightly, spoke in measured low tones.

"You'll have the run of the house, kid, all but this one room. Usually it's locked, but I forget sometimes, and so does old Wung. Even if you find the door open, you're not to go in. I want you to get that!"

"What's in there, nohow?"

"Mostly—" Frank Luther said, and he seemed to be looking at something a thousand miles off—"mostly just pictures, I guess."

THE youngster had had a busy day. He was tired, and, gorged, he honed for sleep. But his curiosity held. "Frank, I heared you tell the store feller you didn't know how Miz Luther air. Ain't she here?"

"No."

"Why?"

"You wouldn't understand, Little Feller."

"They air a heap," Little Feller said, after a heavy moment, "which I don't understand. This yere, now. You takin' sech a big likin' to me all of a sudden, spendin' money on me, brangin' me home with you, and promisin' me a fine saddle and pony to ride—S-s-s-say," as a red horror came out of nowhere to seize him by the throat and by the heart—"you nuver k-k-k-killed my pappy, did you?"

The iron will and iron strength of Frank Luther served him well in that tight minute. His voice was quite even. "Why no, kid. I do like you. And for God's own sake I want you to like me. Think you will?"

"Yeuh." The son of sheeper John Tyson was tremendously relieved. "I do a'ready. Plumb to beat hell. Y'not only tuck me in. Y'tuck in my lamb too, Frank. Huh?"

"I'd always wished I had a boy of my own. You mustn't let yourself get to fretting, kid. When your daddy comes back, he'll easy find out where you are."

Luther must have seen that this was only putting it off. But what else was there? Now the boy stared as though at something miles away. He didn't even know that habit had set him to humming a foolish little thing that his daddy had liked:

" 'I'll eat when I'm hungry,
And drink when I'm dry!
Ef trouble don't kill me,
I'll live till I die!' "

Twilight was making the house gloomy with shadows. Down in the yard the lamb blatted, as the boy had said it would. He found the lonesome little stranger in white standing bandy-legged at the front steps, pulled grass and made a bed for it under the edge of the gallery. Laughter and banter from the rear drew his attention then. Curious, he went back to discover a lighted bunkhouse and, inside, a dozen or so cowboys engaged in their regular after-supper horseplay.

At sight of him they froze. None of them spoke. They knew. He asked, "What's eatin' yuns?" and still none of them said anything.

He returned to the big house. Old

Wung piloted him to a small bedroom upstairs in the rear, lighted a lamp for him, grinned and vanished. Little Tyson took off his boots and trousers and went to bed. It was the nicest bed he'd ever been in. He hated having to get up and take his hat off and blow out the lamp. Bothered-like, he was.

Sleep claimed him promptly. He dreamed of fighting in which his tall, gaunt mountaineer sire had a part, and woke shivering in cold sweat.

WHEN he woke again, full daylight had come. The Luther day crew was swinging up to saddles and riding off rangeward. Last to go was the stocky, wide-shouldered foreman, Irb Greer, whose manner was dejected and who had an eye so discolored and swollen that the lad could see it from his window.

At breakfast Little Feller noted that Luther's right-hand knuckles were skinned. "There's my dream," said Little Feller. "What was you and that boss cowboy fightin' about, Frank?"

"Never mind," said Luther in a savage tone. He seemed to regret this, for he went on instantly, "I think you'll like your pony."

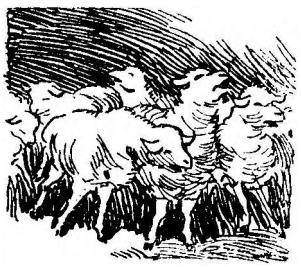
It was of the breed known as palomino, pale gold in color except for flaxen mane and tail. The youngster was so delighted with it that he quite forgot the lamb. At noon he had ridden over miles and miles of his cattle-dotted grassland.

"Don't believe I thought to tell you—" the ranchman said, just before Wung called them into the house for the mid-day meal. He stretched a long arm westward. "Kid, you see that dim green line away over there where the earth and sky are touching? That's cottonwood trees on a creek, and the creek separates my range from another range. Ride where you please, so long as you don't ever cross that creek, kid."

"Same as I ain't nuver to go in that front room upstairs," muttered the blue-eyed boy. The room had stuck in his mind. Pictures in it, Frank had said. He liked to look at pictures. "What's beyan' the cottonwoods, nohow?"

"Nothing that could possibly interest you."

When they had eaten, Luther caught out and saddled a horse and headed toward



town. Little Feller remembered the lamb then. But he couldn't find it anywhere! There were three gates in the yard fence, and probably somebody had left one open.

"Watch me track hit up," he told himself.

HIS daddy had taught him to be good at that. In tramped sand between the front gateposts he found tiny spike prints. A short mid-day shadow, much thicker than his own, fell beside him. Without looking up, he inquired, "Will sheeps go home from a fur place the same as a hoss will?"

It was the sneering voice of Irb Greer that answered the question.

"Yes, but that 'un won't. He'll be drownded in the rain, even if he makes it through the creek. What rain?" Greer nodded toward a long bank of dark clouds a little above the horizon. "You're not a bit weatherwise, kid. That'll be a gully buster. Just forget about the lowdown woolly."

The boy jerked up straight. Greer laughed at the deep concern in the sapphire eyes. Little Feller's instinctive dislike of the squat range boss blazed up fast under this new fuel, and he cried, "I bet you let my lamb out a-puppose! Ef I was half as big as you, I—I'd—but you jest wait till m'pappy gits back!"

Again Irb Greer laughed. "Still think he's coming back, do you?"

"Sure do. And he'll mash that yether eye fer you!"

At this the range boss sobered. "Look, young'un. It's no disgrace to be knocked down by Frank Luther's fist. He even knocks a steer down with his fist sometimes."

Little Tyson went to thinking of the lamb again. The dim trail was lost in grass at the farther edge of the road, but it lay straight to that point and gave him direction. He hurried for his pony, clambered into the saddle and galloped off toward the western boundary creek and the forbidden land that lay beyond. The cloud line crept steadily higher.

He rode the creek bank listening for blats and watching for little prints where the ground was bare; kept riding, watching, listening. Then he came to a wide break in the cottonwoods, and there leading to the water's edge he found the tracks that he had been looking for. Lifting his gaze quickly to the other bank, he saw plainly the fresh hoofprints of a shod horse coming in and going out. These signs were as an open book to him. Yet he was puzzled. A man from the other cattle range saving a sheep! Something funny there. And yet, the sheep had been saved, and the boy was happy about it.

Joab Martin, tall old man with a full gray beard, lived in a large but rambling old house not far west of the boundary creek. He sat on the front gallery, meditatively smoking a pipe, his still keen eyes now on the range that stretched out before him and now on the glowering third of the heavens. In spite of himself he jumped at a distant lightning flash. Then he listened for thunder and heard, instead, the Tyson boy singing:

" 'Old Granny she lived
Down under the hill;
Put a cat in her stockin'
And sent it to mill!
The miller he swore by
The p'int of his knife,
He never had ground
Sech a turn in his life!' "

He halted the palomino near the steps, Martin said, " 'Light and come in, little feller," in the friendliest way.

"How'd you know my name?" asked Little Feller. He didn't wait for an answer. "You seen any sheeps anywheres?"

The rancher sat up in his wide rocker. "One, yes. It's here safe. Nan, my daughter, she heard it blatting back there at the creek, and thought I ought to fetch it in. We felt sorry for the little thing somehow. Big rain coming; hadn't you better take your pony around to the barn?"

The boy hadn't forgotten Frank Luther's telling him that he must not cross the creek. The lamb and the rain made pretty good excuses, he figured. Martin went with him to put the palomino up. Little Feller had liked old Joab on sight.

"Till m' pappy gits back," he said, "I air stayin' over at Luther's. Hit was Frank which gimme these yere nice clo'es and that pony."

Cow country grapevine already had brought that and much more to the cattleman's ears. Thoughtfully, he said, "Frank would be one o' the finest living mortals, if he just wasn't so full of fire. He sure does hate sheep. Well, I do myself. But one lamb now, that's different. Maybe we ought to go in, son, for that rain is coming fast. It'll be heavy, too, washing out new gullies."

And washing things out of old ones—ghastly things, sometimes—he might have added. One method of burying all that was left of a despised sheepman was to drop it into a gully and kick an overhanging bank in upon it.

Little Tyson followed old Joab into the living room, which was furnished as comfortably, though not as expensively, as Luther's. In a big chair beside a window sat Martin's daughter, Nan. She was ma-

ture, really handsome with her thick chestnut hair and eyes the color of amber and as clear. She smiled at the boy. There was pride even in that. There was grief, also, in her smile.

"Come over here," she invited, and pointed to a nearby chair.

Little Feller sat down awkwardly, took off his hat and awkwardly tried to claw his towhead into better shape. Martin, too, sat down. The air had turned close and still. The lad fidgeted. Nan spoke again.

"You like it over there?"

"Why—why, yeuh, reckon so. You 'quainted with Frank?"

"I certainly am acquainted with Frank. I married him three years ago."

He stared at the Miz Luther that the old store man in town had asked about. He saw through it easily now. "And so yuns wasn't satisfack and split up. Well, air hit got anything to do with that there room upstairs, in the front on the left, which Frank said I ain't nuver to go into no time ner nohow?"

Her smile went out like a light. She was hardly one to make bones of things. At that, though, probably she wouldn't have told the lad if she hadn't known enough concerning him to be much in sympathy with him. Just then a gust of wind shook the old house, the first raindrops pattering like birdshot. She spoke into that.

"It was my room when I lived there. Each of us was strung too high, and we quarreled sometimes. Months ago we had a hot one, and I came home, and I gave him my word I wouldn't go back to him until he begged me on his knees—and he'll never do it."

"Afeared not," the youngster said. "Yuns didn't have no childs?"

She straightened quickly in her chair, slowly shook her head.

There were other blasts of rain. A young Sonoran woman who did the cooking and housework ran in for a look at the windows and doors, and ran out. Soon the full storm broke; wind threshed, and water poured from the low-blanketing clouds; now and then there was a muffled thunderclap. For an hour those in the Martin living room didn't even try to talk. The boy could scarcely hear his own droning voice:

" 'Purty Molly, purty Molly,
I'll tell you no lie!
Ef trouble don't kill me,
I'll live till I die!' "

When the lull came, old Joab got to his feet and went to an east window. "If it rained as hard as this above, we'll have high water." The wet pane was dim, but we could see a yellowish cast to the ground light; the creek was already out of banks. "Nan, when I built on this little rise I knew what I was doing. We'll be safe here."

THE lad said, "Miz Luther, I ask Frank what was in that room, and he tole me mostly jest pictchers. What sawt o' pitchers?"

Amber eyes glowing strangely, the woman bent toward him.

"Pictures? There were only two or three. Pharaoh's horses; flowers." She turned her gaze, and spoke softly, to nobody at all. "I wonder— Man of iron and rock, so little sentiment in him. He couldn't possibly—couldn't possibly have meant—"

"What did you say, mam?"

She was not aware of his presence now. Her lips formed words without sound. *He couldn't possibly have meant memories.* Suddenly then the sheepman's boy saw Nan Luther go very pale. Her father noted it too, and hastened to her. "Son," old Joab said quickly, "wait for me in the kitchen. Tell Faquita to fetch a glass of water."

It was not a long wait. Martin came putting on his hat. He was talking fast. "I'm riding for the doctor, kid, and I'll

have to swim a horse across that high creek. No cowboy anywhere near; bunkhouse cook with only one leg"—both Mar-

tin and Little Feller were now running through a drizzle toward the barn—"I want you to watch me, son, and if I don't get through the creek you must try on your pal—"

"Hit's already saddled," cried Little Feller Tyson. In that moment he seemed almost to grow up, and saw his big chance. Running on ahead of old Joab, he yelled back: "I'll show yuns they can be right stuff in a sheeper! The doc's in town, ain't he?"

Martin ran faster. It was his duty, not the boy's. But when he reached the barn Little Feller was in his saddle and gone by way of the rear. The old man followed toward the creek.

"The doc's in town," he shouted. "It's —it's a baby, son, and for the love of God do your very best!"

"A—a baby—"

Something stuck in the lad's throat. His mother had passed at his birth, and now Death—a stranger in white that was not a sheep—waited for Frank Luther's Nan. She was sweet, too. Like his own mammy, it occurred to him. He remembered, as the pony's hoofs struck the edge of yellow water, Frank's saying, "I'd always wished I had a boy of my own." This meant something now. And everything depended upon his getting across that wild creek. It looked bad! He swallowed, his cheeks blenched, his spine chilled.

He kicked the pale-gold flanks. The pony leaped, splashing, and was in to its belly. Martin halted where mud and water came together.

"Take a long angle, kid; don't buck the current too much!"

Water swirled around little Tyson's waist. The pony swam, feet and legs beating as rhythmically as pistons. The boy wisely slackened the rein. He gripped the saddle-horn with his right hand, and began watching the greater menace—swiftly coming debris—logs, rails, stumps, uprooted cottonwood trees, timbers that had been in a bridge.

Then the rain struck again. Little Feller jerked his wet face around in the smother for a last glimpse of Joab Martin, and there was old Joab on his knees in the mud. It reminded him of the time his pappy had got religion in the Smoky Thunder Bald log meetinghouse. Because he wanted to make sure that he humbled himself properly, John Tyson had gone out to the road and knelt in a mudhole to pray—he roundly whipped all six of the men who laughed at him for it—this same John Tyson who later elected to run sheep because a whole county full of cattlemen said he couldn't.

"Little hoss," breathed his son, sapphire-blue eyes brighter than stars, "fellers like them jest cain't be beat nohow. They pine blank cain't. My pappy will come back."

Storm water hurled a log at him. He dove from the saddle, though he clung tightly to the rein, and yelled at the palomino. The log was quickly lost in the dimness below. They fought on gamely, pony and boy, and at last the small hoofs reached bottom. He called over to tell Joab Martin.

Half an hour later, in blinding rain, they found a road. The pony wheeled to the left, homeward. Its bedraggled rider surged against the other rein. He rode as fast as he dared through the slippery mud.

When he galloped into the main street of the town, the skies had begun to clear. People were coming from houses and

stores to view the storm damage, and among them was Frank Luther. Little Feller Tyson kicked the pale-gold flanks again, and shouted:

"Frank! Frank! They want the doc fer Miz Luther!"

The tall, sun-bitten cowman jumped as though a bullet had hit him, turned and saw the sheeper boy. He tore across the muddy street and vanished inside a narrow building that was wedged between the bank and a store, came out half dragging a bespectacled little old man who carried a worn black bag. They ran to the liveryman's and got horses. Little Tyson, riding hard up the street behind them, called out:

"Yuns'll hafta swim the creek!" and he heard Luther say:

"Doc, we'll cut across the range to my place—it won't be any farther—and pick up Irb Greer on his big roan. With us two siding you, you'll make it across the creek all right."

They galloped on, Little Feller trailing close on his pony. Again the boy lifted his voice above the sloppy fast padding of the dozen hoofs in mud: "You tole me nuver to go over there, Frank, and I wouldn't, but that there lamb—"

"Faster, Doc!" he heard Luther say.

BACK in the business section a tall and gaunt, unshaven man in wet tatters, his touseled head wearing a blood-stained bandanna bandage, made an appearance as suddenly as though he had popped out of the ground. The dog at his heels would have passed for a collie, had its body been proportionately a little longer and its nose slightly more pointed.

"Who air them?" he inquired of a townsman, pointing toward the now distant riders.

The townsman told him who they were, and immediately he began trying to borrow a saddled horse.

The flood was still wild and high, with debris still running.

Frank Luther hadn't thought to tell the boy to stay at the house and find dry clothing of some sort, and the boy was still along; had to see whether they made it across. Frank rode on the doctor's right; Irb Greer was at the doctor's left. Greer's countenance showed dislike for the job.

The three were about to head into the fast yellow torrent when there was a flurry of hoofbeats on the wet grass behind them, and the glad voice of the boy: "Pappy! I knowed you'd come back!"

John Tyson's borrowed horse stopped on its haunches close beside Irb Greer's roan. Tyson knew nothing of the woman in the shadow. His fist drove to the Luther foreman's dark face so hard that the blow fairly cracked, and the foreman wilted out of his saddle as limp as a scalded weed. The next thing Little Feller knew, his daddy had dragged Frank Luther off his horse and the two were on the ground fighting fist and skull, tooth and claw. For once the county's scrappy boss cattleman had his match. He may have been amazed at seeing this man who was resurrected from a gully grave, but he didn't show it.

"Don't pappy!" screeched the lad. "Don't!"

The doctor also was yelling. Together they were able to make Tyson hear and comprehend. Thinking of his own woman, too, Tyson paled, gasping, "Lordamighty!" Thirteen years ago, yet he still woke at night and called her name. Luther's saddler had run off a dozen rods; Luther dashed red from his eyes and hurried for it. The gaunt, disheveled man from Tennessee's Smoky Thunder Bald Mountain leaped astride Greer's big roan horse, took the rein in his right hand and with his left reached for and got the doctor's rein.

"Come on! Hold tight to that bag!"

He kicked the roan into the flood and pulled the doctor's mount in after it. The little old practitioner shuddered as cold yellow water closed about his thin middle. Frank Luther's horse plunged in thirty feet behind them, swam hard and gained steadily. Irb Greer sat up mumbling. The boy

on the palomino spat words down at him: "Tole you m'daddy would mash that yether eye fer you, didn't I?"

Little Feller kept watching the debris menace. The hard-swimming horses had reached the center of the current when the boy loosed a yell of warning a—cottonwood tree was rising from the depths just above the riders, up-ending; its sprangly top came flailing down upon them. The doctor lost his hold on the saddle-horn and went under—both Tyson and Luther made for him—it was Tyson who rescued him. In that floundering battle for life, none of the participants saw the doctor's bag go bobbing swiftly away on the torrent.

But the boy had seen. Somehow he realized the tremendous importance of that bag. He drove his palomino down the bank and into the flood below it; the pony collided with a sunken log and lost yards in the race. Then there was a weary but joyous bark, another, and Little Feller saw old Shep swimming valiantly beside him! Although the dog was much winded from his long run, he was still able to fight water.

The lad would have recovered the bag himself, perhaps. But there was no need. The dog did it for him. They finished the crossing.

Left to themselves, father and son went to the Martin bunkhouse and there got into odds and ends of ill-fitting but dry cowboy clothing. The cook fed them and the shepherd dog. Slickered cowboys were drifting in. Nobody had much to say. Night gathered, and from the barn came the plaintive blatting of a lamb. The Tysons and Shep found it on a bed of hay that old Joab Martin had made for it in the harness-room.

"Luther said not to leave till he seed me," drawled John Tyson. "Reckon we 'uns as well do our waitin' right yere, Little Feller."

They sat down with their backs to a wall, and the dog stretched out at their feet. The lad was asleep in no time. Four hours later he woke blinking in moonlight that streamed through the doorway, and missed his father. The voice of Frank Luther came from a point close outside.

"I know, Tyson, but Irb Greer and the men with him didn't have orders to kill you. Their orders were to scare you out and run your woollies off, that's all. Greer claimed that it wasn't him who hit you with a gun barrel, but you swear it was, and I'm going to fire him."

"A dozen men was too many fer me," Tyson said. "They'uns stamped a gully bank in on me, thinkin' I was dead, and I might' nigh smothered afore I could git out—my blesset dog's diggin' gimme air and helped a sight. I trailed my sheeps into a desert and fin'lly lost 'em. I ain't no quitter, Luther. I'll raise rattlesnakes, ef I want to. You'll pay me cash fer my thutty sheeps—not countin' the one lamb —so's I can buy me thutty more!"

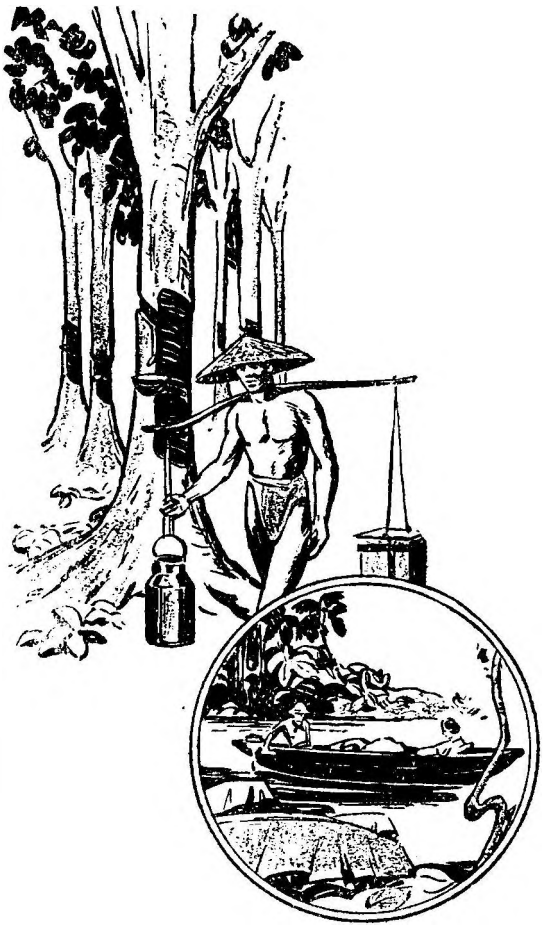
"All right," Luther said quickly. "And you'll not be bothered, Tyson. Owing so much to you and your boy, I'd planned to start you off with forty or fifty cows, but—"

"Take the cows, pappy!" shrilled Little Feller, stepping into the moonlight. Wonderful thought. He'd be a cowboy.

"B'lieve I would druther," his pappy decided, for now there was nobody telling him that he couldn't run sheep.

Queer tiny sounds came from the house, and the youngster froze, mouth wide. Frank Luther seemed very proud and very happy when he said, "That wasn't your lamb, sonny, but mine and Nan's. It wasn't counted until lately either, suppose we say; made all the difference in the world! I've already started calling him little feller, and what do you think of that?"

Nemesis Has an Unpleasant Habit of Catching Up... Even With a Man Whose Sanctuary Is the Steaming Heart of the Bolivian Jungle



ESCAPE FROM LIMBO

By

KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "Little Brother Hurricane," "Deputy Preacher," etc.

THE BOLIVIAN jungle helped Larkey forget those smoky, hard-riding Texas days. And doubtless he was forgotten by the marshals and rangers and circuit court judges that had wanted him. A rubber plantation is a sort of limbo which can work that way in the affairs of men—rubbing them out from life and history.

But Jim Larkey wanted something else besides this barraca. Ranch, farm or plantation, it did not matter as long as there was a girl who would make it a home.

When he gashed the hevea trees, collected the sap, made his rubber, he imagined what this girl would be like. An American girl perhaps. But the States were in another world. The dense clouds of coagulation smoke shut out the jungle, smothered him, screening him from life, even from his memories. He had coffee at four, went out with a gang of native collectors with cups and knives. The day broke, the slashed trees dripped, latex flowed, buckets brimmed at noon. Then came the two hours of that nearest approach to "limbo" known to man—the fumigation. But through the rifts in the smoke one afternoon there emerged a girl's face.

Jim Larkey could not believe it, but she was real. She had come in the Concession launch, a mat awning shading her, although her skin still seemed to have light on it. Pompous little Bryson, Jim's employer, had brought her up from Villa Bella where the rubber was exported through the National Custom House. When he jumped ashore Bryson called Jim aside. "I've got a woman here hunting for that fellow Davis."

"Somebody else is hunting for him too," Larkey said. "I heard an American with

half a dozen Zambos went up-river yesterday. The Zambos were armed. What's this girl want him for?"

"She wants to marry him."

Jim looked back to the launch. She was the kind of girl you might see at a school picnic or in a restaurant in an American town, or in a ticket booth of a picture house—and that's what thrilled Larkey. In other words she was a composite of five years of dreams. The kind of home she would make could never be destroyed, for she had followed her man, it might be said, to the end of the earth. Through the Canal down past the coast of Columbia, Ecuador, Peru, and then a journey from Mollendo to Bolivia's rubber jungles—and it was a journey few white women would attempt.

They went to the launch and Bryson helped her ashore. She was nervous, irritated by the eternal clamor of the macaws and parrots. She kept watching them instead of the faces of the men. In the main house of the barraca the heat of the galvanized roof beat her down so that she sank on a hammock. Larkey brought her a drink.

BRYSON was a blunt, straightforward man. A girl like this should have the unadulterated truth. He gave his customers unadulterated rubber—no "vegetable" or milk tree or dry leaves to puff up the balls. "Miss Heath," he said, "I suppose you know the man you're hunting is being hunted by someone else?"

She jumped up, gasping. "They didn't find him!"

Larkey told her about the American and the bunch of armed natives. "All we know is they went up-river."

She said, wringing her hands, "Then let's go on! I've got to get to him! He's helpless and doesn't know he's being trailed! What are we stopping here for anyway?"

Bryson explained that there would be a delay while the mestizo deck-hand got gas from the drum on the wharf. "We'd like to help you. Except you've kept us in the dark. Or is it a secret?"

"What do you mean?" she said. "You think he's a fugitive is that it? Well, all right, he is. But not a fugitive from justice, don't think that!" She sat down again, but just on the edge of the chair, her shoulders tense. "He left New Orleans because some gangsters were after him. He told the police about a kidnapping plot. They called it squealing because he wanted to save a child."

"Then he's all right," Larkey put in. "Saving a child is all right." He felt a surge of sympathy, not only for this girl, but for the man she was hunting. It was easy to slip into that man's boots. It took little imagination, because of Jim's past. He thought for a quick ecstatic flash that this girl had come down for his sake—not for her fiancé's.

The girl chattered excitedly, "He left the night before we were to be married. I had a flat picked out. I had a job. He didn't. He said the best thing was to skip out." She raised her voice as if trying to argue against the parrots out there in the corral. "I heard that a stranger followed him a month later on the same boat. The purser of the boat came and told me. He was a friend of ours. I knew then that the murder ring had sent a man down to kill him. It was the purser who told me where I could find Tom."

"They must have wanted him pretty bad," Bryson said, "sending a man this far."

"It was a big ring that had lots of money and Tom's testimony got life terms for six of them!"

THE mestizo boatman came in from the river wharf. The girl could not understand what he said to the two white men, but she knew there was to be a delay. "What's wrong now?"

"Just a complaint about the collectors." Bryson said. "They're cutting the trees too high up." He nodded to Larkey and kept

talking as they went out. "An old trick of the natives, Larkey, to make the latex flow faster. But it's strangling your trees." When they were out of earshot he spoke from the corner of his mouth. "You heard what he said?"

"Sure. He's jimmied the launch's motor."

"He didn't put it that way. But he's alibiing—can't take us up-river. The natives got wind there's going to be a gun-fight—and between white men."

"I'll take the girl up myself—a canoe and my outboard."

"I hate to see you step into this mess, Larkey. You're a valuable man here."

"Hell! Isn't that girl in trouble?"

Betty Heath had followed them out and was pacing up and down the wharf.

Bryson said in a low voice, "Can you shoot pretty straight, Larkey?"

"Tolerable," Jim Larkey smiled out of the side of his mouth.

The girl got into his canoe. They transferred her two satchels from the launch, packed some tinned beef, water and that dried meat called charque. With the outboard started, they chugged up-river and the jungle closed on them in green clouds.

At the end of a five mile reach Larkey shut off the pop of his motor, hearing voices in the mists ahead. Forms loomed upstream. Men like mushrooms in wide sombreros seemed to walk on the water until the mists thinned, disclosing the rafts on which the men stood. Larkey slipped the clutch enough for steerageway and came alongside the rows of rubber balls which made the first raft. More rafts followed, the balls strung together with liana so that they looked like counting tables strung with beads, except that the beads were the size of barrels.

Larkey called to the one white man of the fleet. One of the concession partners always accompanied these rafts down from the estradas. "Hi, Mr. Carlow! Hear anything of a fellow named Davis up-river?"

Yes, Carlow had heard a lot about him. "He's living at a forsaken rubber post up the West Fork. But listen, there's a fellow from the States hunting him—got steered up the East Fork somehow—"

Larkey introduced the girl and explained everything. The main point he brought out was that she was hunting for her fiancé. "Figure we can reach the other Fork before—well, what I mean is before this bird from the States gets him?"

"Sure, but I want your opinion of this rubber."

"We haven't time! Please!" the girl put in. But Larkey sensed a cue and leaped aboard the big raft.

"Looks like second grade Caucho to me," he said—for the girl in the canoe was close enough to hear.

"I had a lot of bark and residue from my Fine Para this year. Listen," Carlow said quietly, "this guy Davis has a woman —some girl who came down from the Canal Zone. Living with him."

"Nothing but sernamby rubber is my opinion," Larkey said aloud.

"Well thanks. I won't keep you. Sure swell seeing a lady from back home! I'm leaving for the States myself next month."

LARKEY jumped in his canoe, kicked the motor and stood off. The jungle poured over the river's edge. A row of huge birds pounded along so low that their wings flashed back from the patches of mirror between the scum.

After this long silence, Larkey said, "You sure about this man of yours?"

She gave a frightened start and looked back over her shoulder at him. It was a big jungle and it had swallowed them both.

"What do you mean? What are you talking about!"

"It's a long way to where Davis is hiding. There'll be three nights camping before we get there." He nodded to the wave after wave of tangled timber rolling toward the Andes.

She swallowed, clutching the gunwhale as if balancing herself. The motor kept up its drone. Crocodiles, frightened by the

sound, kept sliding into the water ahead of them with long splashes.

"You're taking a big chance," he said steadily. "Want to turn back?"

"Turn back! After I've come this far!"

He nodded, satisfied. She would brave anything to get to Davis. He—Larkey—must get her there. After all, the point about the Canal Zone lady was not important. It was an incident. The woman could be gotten out of the way somehow.

THREE days later a wise macaw started a clatter of gossip to the effect that things were not as they should be. Parrots and toucans and crows flopped off into the air, frightened. The macaw knew that two human beings lived in that wreck of a house which was strangled by brown furry creepers and tangled trees. One of the beings had two legs and was the color of khaki. The other may have had legs but they were covered with skirts, sometimes blue, sometimes red. Now this man and woman, the macaw had observed, were harmless, but two more human beings coming up from the river added something new to the pattern of life.

This newcomer—a lean burned man with a gun nosed to his long thigh, leaped out of the brush at the edge of a clearing and headed for the house at a fast slouch. Jim Larkey had told the girl to wait for him under a calabash tree until he met Davis. His trumped-up excuse for the precaution was reasonable: Davis might take a shot at anyone who came near his hideout.

Tom Davis, warned by the clatter of the birds, got his rifle but he sensed—with the prescience of the hounded—that his visitor was one of his own feather.

"Let me in, Davis!"

Davis' head jerked back. "Who are you?"

"Larkey, sub-overseer for Penn-Titicaca Rubber."

Davis could see the concession's name painted on the side of the canoe, but he called out, "Where'd you hear *my* name?"

"I'll tell you—after I get a drink."

Larkey took a quick survey of the abandoned rubber, barraca, the hevea and caucho trees drained long since of their latex and their life. Old coagulation pots brimmed with weeds like urns in a formal garden.

Strange ferns like the tails of birds filled the buckets and tijelina cups in which rubber had once dripped. In the background a swampy lake simmered from underground volcanic fires.

Davis opened the door. Even in the tropic noon the jungle creeping over the roof made a twilight. Inside, the first impression was not of sight but of smell—the smell of a smoky kerosene lamp and cologne. Then Larkey saw a woman gaping at him.

She was handsome in a shopworn, chalky-faced way, but there was no color to her despite the skyblue wrapper and the feathered gilt mules on her feet.

Larkey faced her down as he said, "There's a girl across the clearing wants to see you, Davis. Her name's Betty Heath."

Davis gaped, started to pant. Larkey still faced the woman. "How about it?"

She began flapping her palm leaf fan with jerks. The man, Tom Davis, said to her in a tight voice, "Hide down by the lake."

"Not hide. Pack!" she said, smiling cynically. "That's what I'm doing. This guy looks smoky to me."

"No time for packing," Larkey snapped. As she said, there was danger and smoke in his voice.

The skyblue wrapper and the gold mules

flashed off into the green smother behind the house. Jim Larkey leaped for the wall, snatched the gowns and serapes hanging there and threw them behind a bunk. Then he came out on the veranda and waved.

But Betty Heath was already running, wildly eager. Double twisted creepers caught her feet and threw her like a noosed calf, but she was up again, leaping, her arms outstretched.

"Some men came in a launch!" she gasped. "They've landed down there—men in green coats and a white man!" She was in Tom Davis' arms before he knew what had happened. He stood dazed while she crooned his name and wept with joy—and also with pity. For he was shaking in his bones.

The shake in his mouth went into his body. It got to his knees and he sank. Betty Heath held the kneeling man. "Tom! Poor Tom! Don't be so scared! I'm here. There're two of us here to help you."

"But what are you here for? How'd you find me? And how'd *they* find me? They followed you—that's it!"

"What do you mean, Tom? It was me who followed them!" Her arms dropped as if the life had gone from them. "Are you blaming me for coming, Tom?"

He wiped his nose whimpering. "No, no. I'm just going crazy, that's all. And I'm scared!"

Jim Larkey spoke up. "Scared of what? Those spigs can't shoot. There's two of us. We'll salt 'em."

Davis looked up. The rum in his eyes made them unsteady like the rest of him. "I don't dare, Larkey! I can't. Look at my hands."

The girl glanced away purposely. Her eyes fell on the bottles of vermouth, the shelves of tinned beef, a palm leaf fan and a silk one, a fringed shawl. It was not exactly the home of a jungle hermit.

Her eyes flicked back, puzzled, at her lover.

Davis looked badgered. He was beset on every side—those men coming to gun him down, Larkey telling him to fight, this girl making discoveries.

"I want to get out of here!" he burst out.

"Not a bad hunch," Larkey said. "You two go, I'll stay here. I'll pretend I'm you. I'll hold 'em off. They'll have to surround the place. It'll give you time. Go on, slope."

Davis' mouth broke, grinning weakly. He tried to whimper his thanks, but Larkey turned him to the back door and shoved him out. When the girl ran after him Davis whirled on her, again with that badgered look in his eyes.

"You can't come!" he cried. "I've got to cross that swamp. There's yellow-beards. If they sting you—"

"I'm not afraid."

That's all Larkey heard for a few moments. He took a swig of rum then went out in front. Beyond the clearing the snake-birds that roost in dead rubber trees skittered across the solid roof of the jungle. An old macaw dropped the monkey apple it was eating and flopped into the mist. Smaller birds—the green quetzals—flicked away, merging into a like element of emerald air. Their furor marked the passage of men acting unnaturally—not like beasts crawling on hands and knees.

When Larkey turned into the room again for another drink to cool his nerves, the girl was standing at the back door.

"He wouldn't let me go with him. He said he'd be caught if he had to drag me along. He can swim the lake but the water's hot and would burn me. He said if I loved him to let him go alone. He'd send for me at your barraca when it's safe."

She came in and dropped wilted into the fibre hammock. Larkey, staring at her white skin, thought there was much to be said for Davis' plan. Those yellow-beards can paralyze and the bushmasters kill. But he swore. "How the hell can I fight with *you* here!"

Her eyes were huge. "You mean you stayed here to take Tom's place!"

"Sure, I'm taking his place. It's all right. I been wanting to be him all along."

He went to the door of a side room, searching for a safe corner to put her. He guessed that Davis might have had some sort of a barricade in case of a siege, and he was right. He found the room walled with sheet iron plates evidently gathered from the kitchens of the other shacks—the sort of sheet iron cooking places used everywhere in tropical America.

"I'll let you stay," he said, "if you get in here the minute I tell you."

He poured her a drink and it made her eyes bright and hot. They were fixed on him. As he felt that clinging gaze it was very easy to believe his dream had come true. He was Davis now. She had come down here a great distance for *his* sake! She was his woman and had given up everything in the world to be near him. He was a fugitive, that was truth. She had come following a fugitive, that was also truth. The rest was a dream.

The dream broke when he saw her eyes shift baffled until they lit on that fringed shawl slung over an old dynamite box.

"He bought it for you," Larkey said quickly. "He told me when I was here with him alone. He'd bought a lot of stuff for you. You see he—" He checked himself, finding his statement irrelevant.

She got back to the point. "You're pretty good, letting Tom Davis run away while you stay and hold off maybe a dozen men."

Larkey muttered that Davis couldn't handle a gun. He'd have been shot down. Any man will help a sick puppy. "Don't worry about what I'm doing. It's what I wanted." She could not understand what he said then. "It's fun pretending I've got a home."

"You've done this before—this gun-fighting?"

He nodded.

"Killed men?"

Again he nodded.

"Is that why you're here, in this country I mean?" She had sized him up pretty well—better than the Concession men who employed him. Perhaps it was the smell of smoke that changed him back to the kid he was in Texas and gave him that same look. He saw the gape of her lips. At least she was interested for the moment not in her lover but in him

He scowled out at the clearing, searching for the tamest of the birds. But the old macaw had vanished. That meant the men must be at the clearing's edge now, lying on their stomachs, sizing up the lay-out.

He went on casually. "It wasn't murder exactly, don't go getting shocked. I did a lot of it, more'n just one. That's back down the years now. We rode with some pretty tough outfits. That was in Texas. They hired fellows to do their fighting. Bums that didn't have any home, young kids. I wasn't twenty."

He knew she was looking at his mouth although he was watching the trees. An iguana ran out of the brush, twigs crackling as if under horses' hoofs. The attackers would be rattled at that. They would have to wait for things to quiet down. Larkey kept talking softly.

"Fighting a range war was all right when you had the law on your side. We let the cow bosses worry about that. All we did was shoot. But bosses changed, sheriffs changed, so did the judges, so did the ranges with more and more homesteading. A couple of us got ten years, the rest drifted to Texas and Mexico. I busted jail and had to drift farther."

There were no birds anywhere now, the air hung dead and thick. Only a bugio monkey stayed at a safe distance, knowing there was going to be a good show.

After a moment Larkey turned, seeing her eyes still staring.

She said, "You're a fighter. You like it. You'll fight off those men. I guess there's no doubt. It's written all over you—*that you can't lose!* But what are you doing it for?"

"For you and him—" he nodded in the

direction of the steaming lake behind the house. "Only I'm him now. And you came all the way down here to see me. That's what I'm doing it for. The idea's pretty mixed up—I can't explain it now."

He jerked his eyes away from the still brush for a split second. An instinct more of an animal than of man warned him that someone in the brush had scrambled upright. He turned, clutching the girl's hot arm, and swung her spinning into the inner room. When he dashed back to the door a shot banged, shaking the thick jungle air like a curtain.

From their roost where the birds had gone to hide many wings flickered up like smoky flames. The clatter and squawk mingled with the echoes from the gun's throat. From this discordant crash a man's voice called:

"Throw your gun down, feller, and we won't hurt you!"

That shot and that warning were just what Larkey wanted. They had made a mistake in their man. It gave him a certain moral edge—and the right to defend himself. He threw one shot where the flash had come from and heard the sag and crack of lianas and a muffled thump.

He shook the heat out of his gun and fired at the three blinks of light from the brush. At his feet adobe spurted up as if hit by an underground sledge hammer three times.

A Zambo in cottonade breeches whirled out into a band of green light and tumbled hard. Two others crashed off, running low, their backs like fleeing tapirs.

Shots barked from just one gun now, cutting the wall at a certain height until the wattle lining which was a guard against earthquakes, was sliced fresh. The pattern was definite, as high as Larkey's gun hand, and it was closing to a smaller pattern at each shot. Someone out there was good.

Larkey could not find him for the marksman knew enough about flash defillade to fire unseen. One of his shots smashed Larkey's long fingers and the gun kicked itself out of his hand like something alive. He snatched it up with his left hand and fired. That same unseen man was picking at him. Lead scraped up his left forearm, but he fired again, forcing the cramped muscles.

The echoes died down. His left arm was wet, his right thumb and fingers cracked. He felt sick and stupid. He wondered why it took him so long to realize that the fight was over.

A short khaki clad figure helped a wounded man over the lianas. Larkey watched the spot a long time while flies and winged ants danced before his eyes and the sunlight slugged at him. He caught another glimpse of men at a distance, doctoring their wounds. Then he heard a squashing of rotted leaves in back of the house. Someone had crept up close to the lean-to kitchen. He tried to lift his gun as he turned, but its astonishing weight anchored his arm at his side.

Luckily he did not need it, for his eyes, swimming, met only a splash of silken watery blue. A perfume sharper than the jungle vapors struck him.

He asked wearily, "What do *you* want back here?"

The Canal Zone girl said, "I want my boots and mosquito netting. I'm clearing out."

"I know you are." He looked down at her feet which were spotted with leeches. Those feathers on her slippers looked like wounded birds dragging themselves over the ground.

She stared at his hanging hands. "You're a pretty good fighter, Mister. But you better get yourself a drink."

"God, will you go! Get out before she sees you! Can't you get that into your head?" He lurched against the wall heavily.

"Give me your hand." She ripped a piece of silk from her wrapper.

Another voice said, "I'll tend to that." The voice came from the pile of ferns and

creepers on the veranda. Betty Heath, as was to be expected, had come out hunting for Larkey now that the fight was over. And thus she came face to face with Tom Davis' sweetheart.

"Sorry, little kid," the woman said. "I didn't want you to see me. But now we've met, I may as well tell it to you: Davis is waiting for me down at the lake with a canoe.

"He knows a way out and says we could make it—since this long gent here tended to the Federal."

Larkey's eyes glared hollow and murderous. He caught that word "Federal," but there was something more important. Betty Heath, pretending not to listen, twisted a tourniquet of liana on his arm. He gasped, looking at the other woman—the one from the Zone. "You mean he's taking *you* instead of—"

"He thinks he's taking me, that's all I mean," the woman said. "Only I'm not going. He's too hot, what with a G-man coming all the way from the States for him. I'm through!"

"A G-man!" Betty gasped. "It was a gangster trailing him—"

"He's a gangster himself, you poor little kid! I know the story he told you. And you believed it! Can't you stack this game up at all!"

Betty's eyes hardened, staring like blue stones. She shook her head distractedly. "It isn't true—anything you're saying!"

"I'm telling you he was the head of that kidnap gang. Not true? Where'd you think he got his money?"

"He didn't have a cent!" Betty almost screamed. "I loaned him twenty dollars two nights before he left me—"

"Twenty dollars, when he had twenty grand!" the Canal Zone lady laughed. "Not local silver either, or monkey money. American gold, what I mean! These spigs thought he was a rich Americano looking for a rubber concession." She saw Betty Heath wince under this blow. "Listen, you're the kind that sticks, aren't you?" Her voice went low suddenly. "I'm sorry for you, little kid."

Jim Larkey stood dumb, wondering why her voice had drifted off, leaving only its echo thrumming in his skull. He thought, in his daze, she must have left. Then he was stupidly aware that Betty was tending to his wounds, saying nothing.

BUT the other woman came back. With his chin resting heavily on his breast, he could only see her feet at first. She had on a pair of those high dashboard boots that Creole overseers wear on the rubber estradas. His eyes lifted heavily and he saw the mosquito netting over her head and shoulders like a Spanish mantilla. She must have gone into the house and rushed out again.

"I'm telling you just one thing more," she said to Betty Heath. "You. Little kid. Look at me. If you still want Davis, go down to a tin roof at the lake. It's half in the swamp. He's hiding under it. You came a long way for him. Go tell him I want you to have him." The lady seemed to tend toward heroics, but she was also frank. "I've got enough of his money." It spoiled her speech even though it gave it a touch of integrity.

Larkey stared at the sky. It troubled him that with the exception of the half tame macaw, the birds still held off. Perhaps they were too thoroughly frightened at that acrid gun smoke hanging in the jungle mists. Or else there were men, still crawling, very close.

He felt the girl leading him into the house. Vaguely he guessed that his enemies were merely binding their wounds getting ready for another attack. He reached for rum but could not hold the bottle. There was no longer any chance of holding his gun. He could not fight. For that matter there was no longer any use in fighting.

Betty Heath held the rum to his lips and then led him to a hammock. "Guess everything's fixed now," he said, sinking heavily.

"I'm all right. You go on and meet your man."

He looked up after a long time and saw her sitting on the box next to the hammock. Her pale hands rested in her lap, the palms up. She must have known the truth a long time. The smell of it was in the air, cloying, outlasting the smell of smoke, over-riding the fragrance of the giant orchids. And there were many other signs. But she was the kind that would blind herself. It was an ancient reaction, as old as the first legends of the race about blindness and love.

"You've fixed me up all right," he said, "nothing else to do."

"But there is. You can't change those bandages. You can't even cook your meals."

"Some Mixco Indians live up-river. They'll take care of me."

"You can't go hunting up any Indians. Don't tell me! I'm staying here—at least until you can take care of yourself."

The silence outside broke with the soft crack of a twig. Larkey had been listening tensely, even for the whir of a bird's wing. He reached for his gun which was under the hammock, but he merely touched it. The movement sent the blood pounding into his useless hand. He wondered if he could get up and run for the brush and crawl off into the jungle—and bleed to death. A long chance and not worth taking.

"All right, let him come."

A stocky man with a muscled jaw stood at the door. His eyes, black squinting dots, must have pierced the gloom of the house before this, for doubtless he had seen from some distance what was going on inside.

"Had enough?" the man asked.

"What you doing trying to shoot me up?"

"Thought you were somebody else. But one of my spigs said you were a gent named Larkey." He turned and beckoned into the brush. A squad of constabulary, indifferently disguised as rubber collectors, shambled up. He told them to search the house. "They said you were Jim Larkey. That's why I only tried for your gun hand."

"You're a good shot."

"So are you."

He looked at the white-faced girl, then pocketed his gun. "Who's this?"

Larkey said simply, "She's my girl."

"Don't tell me! The fellow I want had a girl living here. I heard about it."

"I tell you she's my girl, you dope! Your man had someone else—another kind of a girl."

"All right, all right! I won't even ask her any questions. I'm asking you. Where's this guy Kreig?"

"Never heard the name."

"Maybe so. He used Tom Davis as an alias. We'll call him that. Where's Davis?"

The macaw gave a screech of laughter. "Hear that laugh?" Jim Larkey said. "That's me answering you. Get it?"

THE stocky man nodded unperturbed, for he knew all these answers well enough. But the muscles bunched around his mouth as he took out a pair of handcuffs.

"My name's Casson, Larkey. Government man. I mean the States. I came down here to get Davis. Looks like I won't go home empty-handed anyway—even if I don't get him. I happen to know about you."

"You G-men have pretty good memories. You remember way back when I was a kid."

"I'm not that good. It's just that New Orleans and Texas are pretty close. I looked over the files, checked up on some of the Bad Bunch that drifted down here. I'm taking you back to the States."

Larkey's eyes were gray from his bleeding. "I been hankering to go back," he said truthfully.

"But I'm not hankering to take you. It's Davis I want. What you did is pretty much forgotten, Larkey. You kids that outlawed yourselves were bad enough maybe,

but it isn't what we're after. We're after rats." He shrugged. "But since you want to go back—"

"You aren't putting handcuffs over those bandages!" the girl said hotly.

Casson swung the cuffs, jingling them, thinking. "Look, Larkey. You say you want to go back home. And why not? I mean as long as you stay out of Texas. I make a report that it was you glommed onto this kidnaper. He's big stuff. Papers full of him, the whole country outraged, see what I mean? You come home a hero, get that, no kidding. Course what I mean is—you get that break if you tell me where Davis is hiding."

Jim Larkey said, "I'm still laughing—only louder."

Casson said honestly, "You aren't the kind that would take to that sort of dicker, I can see that. But what the hell are you shielding that crook for? Is he your brother or what? Or maybe—" His eyes went from Larkey to the girl.

And Larkey's hollow eyes crept to her at the same time. She could answer this question if she wanted. She had stood there clinging to every word the two men said as if to the last shred of a hope. Her face was haggered white, the skin tight over her cheekbones. The heat of the air or the heat inside of her had brought out one delicate vein across her temple. It throbbed fast. Larkey imagined that invisible fists had pounded at that fragile head beating the truth and tragedy into it.

He watched her facing Casson, her eyes level, for the two were of a height. Her lips trembled when she said, "What are you going to do with Tom Davis?"

"Take him to New Orleans on the next boat. He gets a fair trial, if that's your worry."

Jim Larkey saw that her breath was spent in the fight and she was weakening. Those blows were too many and too telling: Davis did not want her. He wanted that other woman. But perhaps Betty Heath still loved him when she said, "If I wanted to save Tom Davis from you," she faced Casson steadily, "I wouldn't let someone else like this man here give himself up in Tom's place."

She looked down at Larkey. "You got into this scrape because you wanted to help me. You were sorry for me and for Tom—because you know what it's like to be down. But I'm not going to let you do what you're doing."

She kneaded her hands and bit her upper lip to stiffen it. Casson had to prompt her. "Good! What I said still goes. Larkey gets a break even though he dummied up. That is, if you help us catch Davis. You'll do that?"

She nodded gradually.

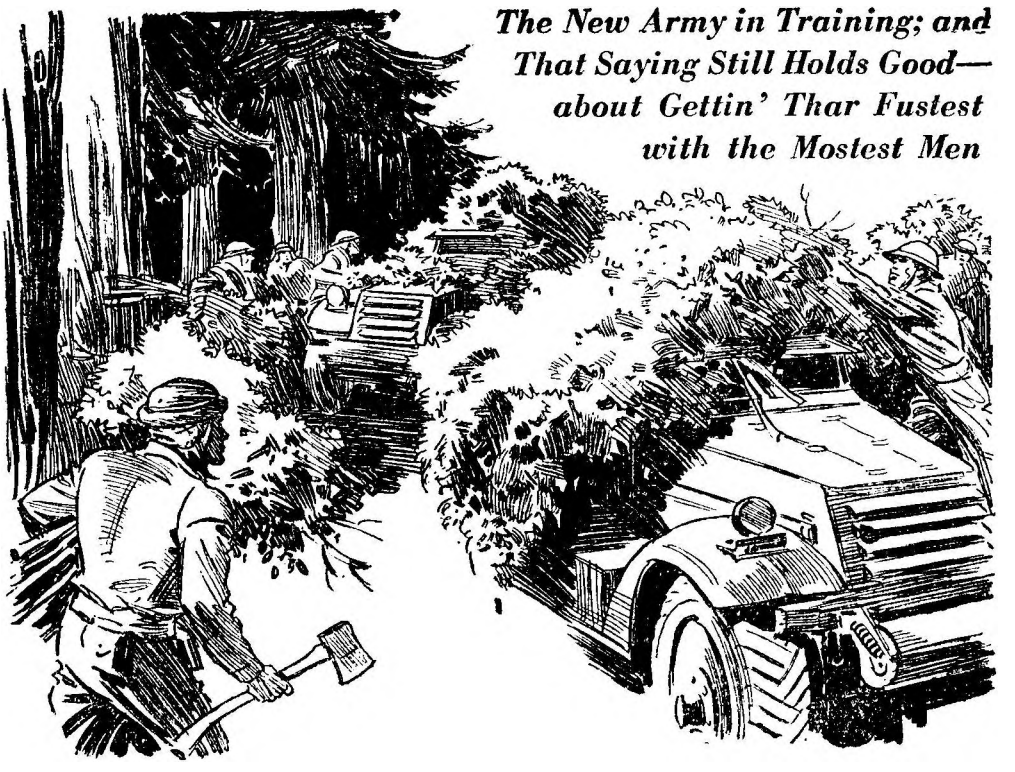
THE birds were slow in coming back. From their high coverts they saw a simmering galvanized roof discarded in the swamp, and men creeping there, rooting under the iron like the jungle's wild hogs. They saw a woman in sky blue, paddling off alone in a dugout, vanishing in tangled shade. At the river's edge a launch barked, men got in in a disordered way. All this was uncommon and hence the birds watched out of the sides of their heads.

Casson's launch put off down-river. They were taking the wounded first, while Casson and three of his constabulary remained with the captured Davis.

"The Concession will send a doctor to my barraca," Jim Larkey said. He sat in the bottom boards, his shoulder against the girl's knee. "Bryson will see that you get down to Villa Bella."

"Who, me?" She said in surprise. He caught the new note in her voice. Until now it had been anxious, high-pitched and then hard. But now it was tuned to the hum of jungle and river. "Remember I said I wasn't leaving you until you could take care of yourself."

Down the first long reach Jim Larkey dozed off, his lips still moving. "It'll be a ranch—a farm, a little one, maybe a plantation—"



The New Army in Training; and That Saying Still Holds Good— about Gettin' Thar Fustest with the Mostest Men

GET THAR FUSTEST

By SAM CARSON

SERGEANT RUFUS FERN peered from the turret of the scout car as the dive bombers came over the crest of a steep hill. He kicked Driver Nowlin's right shoulder.

Ahead, Captain Parkins' steel monster of equal weight bolted sharply to the left. Blitz buggies, those amazing bantams of the U. S. Army, left the highway like a covey of quail flushed in thin cover. The dive bombers, five in number, came on.

From Corporal Franke's turret tracers sped from his .50 millimeter gun. And as the scout car's rubberized cleats dug into the sides of the highway cut, chewing, clawing, till the machine was through a fence and well off the bombing path, Sergeant Fern held the wad of chewing tobacco clamped tightly. Then he laughed. He laughed because a row of whitish blobs rose harmlessly from the highway surface. Those whitish blobs were flour bombs, and the bombing attack had failed.

From the same direction as the dive bombers had come, whined sleek pursuit planes, tracers spitting in the wake of the departing bombers. In moments the column reformed, speeding on down the highway, curving into a valley, toward the scene of a simulated clash between two forces of soldiers, American soldiers, seventy thousand strong in these Tennessee hills.

Yes, Sergeant Fern laughed as the air-attack ended. He had his pay in his pockets, a recent advance in rating, and as a member of the 375th reconnaissance echelon, part of the "Blue" army desig-

nated to defend the "Red" invasion already under way, Fern felt he was sitting on top of the world. He stood upright, exposed from waist up, his sole means of contact with Nowlin, hanging on to the two driving levers of the roaring Diesel motor, a system of foot signals. But everything was jake, except—

Sergeant Dawson — Sergeant Gaylord Dawson, late of the cavalry and Fern's senior in rating! Dawson was up the way, commanding a scout car of the 391st reconnaissance echelon. The 391st was a spearhead of the attacking Reds, and the long existing feud between Sergeants Fern and Dawson, dating from cavalry versus field artillery days had flared again. Fern spat out his cud as he thought of that bet Dawson had maneuvered him into. That was ten days before, when the two had met by chance in Nashville. The bet was twenty dollars on the line if one sergeant captured the other. Really, it meant a lot more. For Captain Parkins, in charge of the echelon, which is another name for the mechanized detachment, had been drawn into the argument.

"I wish," Fern reflected, as he tapped Nowlin's right shoulder to give way to an approaching commercial truck, "I wish I hadn't told Cap Parkins a damn thing."

That was the trouble. Captain Parkins, red-haired and willing to fight or bet on his outfit, had promptly challenged the commanding officer of Dawson's outfit for a similar bet. Captain Linebaugh, C. O. of the 391st, had promptly covered, then raised. And here they were, Captain Parkins' 375th reconnaissance echelon, squared off to collide with Captain Linebaugh's 391st in this very first clash over hill and dale once the scene of fighting between the Blue and the Gray.

THE column left the main highway, plunging down a dirt road. Dust boiled in ropy waves and Fern heard his crew protesting within, above the din of engine and clank of metal. If anything, the lighter reconnaissance car, with its wheel instead of tread drive, opened up even more. They splashed across a creek ford, roared up a rocky grade to thick woodland free of undergrowth. Here the column quitted the road, units crawling beneath trees. Men erupted from machines, dashed to tool containers and began slashing foliage with which to decorate their vehicles. Before Sergeant Fern reached his captain, half the machines were already made invisible, except as huge mounds of green foliage.

"Do we rest here sir?" Sergeant Fern asked.

Captain Parkins had out his maps. He looked up, grinned. "Hell's bells man. Inside forty minutes we should be tangling with their advance units. Intelligence radioed me the Reds are miles and minutes ahead of schedule. They're out to take this valley—see—Fairfield Valley on this map. Oak Grove's our base. It's two miles ahead—northwest."

Fern glanced back at the laboring soldiers camouflaging the machines. "Maybe there ain't any use in that then. If we're pulling out right quick."

"Let 'em practice. Won't hurt. Sergeant, we have two scout cars, six blitz buggies and a reconnaissance car. We've got two .37 millimeters, the machine-guns and emergency tommies. We've got to hold Oak Grove till Brigadier-General Austin covers eight miles cross country with his tanks, artillery and two infantry regiments. We've got air support. In all, we have thirty-two men."

"What if they fooled Intelligence, sir, and slip in a dozen tanks or so?"

CAPTAIN PARKINS lit a cigarette, squinted at his map more intently, then laughed. "We'd be ex-defenders of this valley, Sergeant. Probably in the custody of Captain Linebaugh and your friend Dawson. They'd have that luck to be facing us."

Sergeant Fern nodded soberly. "I guess we asked for it, sir. But if the umpires

don't get there first, we'll maybe give 'em a helluva scrap to remember us by."

Captain Parkins unfolded another map, spreading it on the grass. "Take a good squint at this, Sergeant. Right now, till Lieutenant Fisher gets back, you're second in command. They're using Fisher till ten or eleven o'clock tonight, I just got notified by radio. He's guiding Austin's force in. See this horseshoe curve of Fairfield Creek? It's really a good sized stream along there. Has a deep bed and rocky banks. The water curves sheer against a high cliff, doubles back around a backbone three hundred feet high and hits another cliff beyond. A half hour ago the engineers theoretically blasted Fairfield Creek bridge to hell and gone. So, from Oak Grove to this backbone, the army hasn't got a tank they can get across till a new bridge is thrown up."

"Then our job's easier, sir. Oak Grove by this map, plugs a gap between high hills."

"Correct." Captain Parkins folded the maps. He smiled as a slow moving observation plane crawled into sight. After lifting his field glasses a moment for identifying the craft, Captain Parkins nodded. "There's a choice of locations for us," he said. "That ship is going to let us know whether we flank Oak Grove just back of the gap, or drop back to the backbone and destroyed bridge."

Sergeant Fern felt a premonitory chill chase along his spine. He knew what that meant. They wouldn't go into Oak Grove and plug the gap if the tank forces of the Reds should have made a river crossing despite the simulated destruction of Fairfield Creek bridge. He was on edge when the captain's radio operator sent a runner over with a message. Parkins read the flimsy. "The road's open," he snapped. "Oak Grove."

As other noncoms scattered, setting men to tearing down brush screens, Sergeant Fern sprinted toward his own scout car. He stopped, to erupt in profound language.

Driver Nowlin and Corporal Franke were on the bank of the stream, each with alder poles to which were attached fishing lines. "My sainted grandpappy," Sergeant Fern yelped. "We're trying to pull a war and my outfit goes fishing."

Nowlin's round face showed hurt. "Aw Sarge, we thought we was staying a while—"

"Get going, you dimwit. Jumping grasshoppers! Look—Cap Parkins is already moving. Scram!"

Nowlin was still muttering sadly as he clambered into the steel recesses of his machine. Franke, a reticent fellow, merely grinned and faded from sight. At Fern's order the scout car simply burst forth from its brush heap. "Fishing!" Sergeant Fern repeated as he tapped Nowlin's shoulders to straighten out their course. "I'll bet if I do have a chance to head off Dawson, Nowlin would be digging worms somewhere, for bait."

FAIRFIELD VALLEY looked placid enough as the short column wound down a steep hill. Oak Grove's two stores and church steeple was visible, flanked by a score of houses, a half mile ahead. Fern saw the rocky eminence of the ridge, thrust out like a giant knife blade from high hills. This he saw clearly before utter confusion took possession of Fairfield Valley.

Like magic, blitz buggies, two tanks, an entire battalion of infantrymen all materialized, in Oak Grove, charging from covert along the hillsides. Vehicles flew red pennants, one with the umpire's large white flag. Sergeant Fern didn't need any radio order from Captain Parkins. It was every man for himself. The reconnaissance car shot from the road, smashed a fence and vanished in tall corn. Blitz buggies followed suit. The lead scout car blasted with all machine-guns, raking the blitz buggies, at least theoretically, and supplying enough noise to satisfy all hands. As for Sergeant Fern, he elected to jam

his right foot against Nowlin's shoulder. The scout car wheeled, till Fern let up, then kicked sharply with his left foot. Fern wasn't trusting the scout car in a cornfield, not with a well placed ambush into which they had run, plus vigilant umpires.

He sought the shelter of trees lining a tributary of Fairfield Creek. The narrow, high ridge Captain Parkins had mentioned, lay ahead. And Fern hung on grimly, as cleats tore at soft earth and saplings crashed before them in their wild ride. They raced along a narrow bottom, burst through a thin barrier of second growth timber and Sergeant Fern slammed down with the stop signal, heart in mouth. All too suddenly they were on the bank of the stream, the wall of the cliff ahead. Fern studied the shelf between stream and cliff, finally sending the car along it, following an inside curve of some hundred yards. Then he called a halt.

Members of the crew crawled out, perspiring, dusty. "What happened?" Person, the radio operator asked. "We're bumping along real nice, and bam—! Nowlin tries to take off."

"You'd take off too," Nowlin said, "if you'd happened to run smack into half the Red Army. They got Cap Parkins, didn't they, Sarge?"

Fern cocked an ear. He heard firing back along the road they had taken. "He's still going. Took it on the lam, I guess."

"Bet he figures they captured us," Corporal Franke put in. He looked up at the steep cliff wall, then at the stream. Between Franke and Nowlin there passed significant looks. "No you don't drop a line in this water," Fern said. "I'm telling you. We got to get out of this pocket."

"Yeah. Phone for a service wagon from a filling station," Nowlin grunted. "They'll guide us out. Listen, Sarge, you spot a certain feller in that lead blitz buggy back there?"

Sergeant Fern nodded grimly. "It had to be Dawson, blast his hide! Him and Captain Linebaugh damn near cashed a bet. Talk about breaks. They spotted us coming and just waited in the bushes."

"And here we come," Nowlin murmured. He glanced at wristwatch, then sun. "We gotta stay here till after dark. Then who guides us back along that catwalk of ground? After dark? Personally I don't crave being in the insides of this baby, and in ten feet of water."

"We'll figure that when the time comes," Fern answered. He turned to the radio operator. "Persons, you got that pack transmitter you and Cap Parkins' operator been fooling with lately?"

"Got it."

"Harness it on Nowlin. We're climbing this ridge to see what's what. You stick with your set."

"Aw, Sarge," Nowlin protested, "I got to stick by the car. It's in the rules."

"There ain't no rules now, punk. You climb."

SOME ten or twelve minutes later two perspiring men rested on their bellies, peering between boulders toward Oak Grove. Fern had his glasses. "They laid down a bridge," he said. "They're coming in along a gravel road other side of this ridge. That's why they fooled our planes. By not using the main highway through the gap. They went around it and down the hollow."

Artillery pounded beyond the valley. They heard the roar of heavy motors beyond the gap at Oak Grove. That meant support for the advance echelon which had ambushed them. "If we're smart, we'll travel, and not fool with our car," Nowlin said.

"One way of using your head," Fern admitted. "We'd be justified, too. Only," he added, "we ain't."

"But, Sarge—"

"Look." Fern pointed toward the gravel road below them, leading to Oak Grove. "The bozo in that blitz buggy going back up the hollow is Dawson. Means the 391st

pulled this job. Means Linebaugh's probably still chasing Cap Parkins, too."

"So it's your pal Dawson with the full strength of the 391st around Oak Grove," Nowlin asked, "and we're split up and ain't more'n half strength? And now we're split up again, down to one scout car, do we capture Dawson and his cap'n?"

"We might," Sergeant Fern grunted. He reached over for the pack radio mike set. "Persons," he said, "use your Morse key and tell Major Hale at echelon headquarters we're okay. And find out what happened to Cap."

Sergeant Fern took a final squint at the vanishing bantam car with its hated occupant. Through his glasses he watched machine and passengers enter a side road leading to a farmhouse. There dense woods blocked further view. "So, they got Headquarters up there," Fern reflected. He reached for the radio set again. "Persons," he directed the operator at the scout car, "soon's you hear about Cap, cut off. Play deaf, dumb and blind."

"What's the big idea?" Persons' voice came back.

"Two things. To keep 'em from locating us with a direction finder. Other's to roll our own and not get some fool order liable to get us in a jam."

"It's getting late," Nowlin complained, "and I personally could use some grub."

"Baloney." Fern handed over the mike set. "What's a single meal? Comes real war and you'll know how to fast, and like it."

Nowlin shook his head. "We got Reds thick as hops below, and if we don't watch, they'll catch us and the car. We start hoofing now and we can make a company kitchen somewhere while they still got some warm chow."

"You get that pack radio set down all in one piece," Sergeant Fern ordered. "Anyway I got some grub in my musette bag. Franke and me snitched a wad of stuff this morning. So we eat."

"Glory be," Nowlin said, with enthusiasm as he retraced his steps.

Fern remained for some time. From an oilskin pouch he carried, the sergeant produced a sheet of paper and pencil. One of Fern's talents was the ability to make good contour maps. The sun was dawdling atop a ridge when he came down. Nowlin and Franke had vanished. Persons insisted he didn't know their whereabouts. "If you don't, you're dumber than I think," Fern said. "And if they don't catch any fish, they'll be sorry."

He found them, upstream, using a plug of Corporal Franke's, and good linen thread attached to a makeshift pole. They had a couple of bream. "Okay, you two," Fern said. "You got fish. What next?"

"Aw, we can fry 'em easy," Nowlin said. "Clean 'em, then fry 'em on a junk car fender we found on a sand bar."

"Yeah. Just like that. You pinhead. Don't you know smoke in daytime, or fire at night would bring observation planes and men in here?"

"Listen," Nowlin pointed out, "there's an old mill upstream. This side of the water. We can cook up there. Lemme do it, Sarge. I can cook fish swell. Got any coffee? We can use that empty oil tin Persons has for his dry batteries."

"Okay," Fern said. "Yeah, I got coffee. Franke, you dig up our bags. If Nowlin comes through, we'll have chow. I'll keep Persons down here till you two fix things up. We'll put up stakes to line the car on when we back out after dark."

Persons had news. Captain Parkins had escaped in that wild flight, but he had abandoned his car in a dead end hollow. He had made contact with Major Hale. "He just said to stand by," Persons continued. "Said look for the code rockets, whatever he meant."

"I know," Fern told him. "Red and green. Means they'll counter attack tonight. So we watch for red and green rockets, back our jalopy out and head for trouble." He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "Wish I knew where he left that scout car. Bet Captain Linebaugh's got his tag on it somewhere." Fern smote a palm. "Yeah, and parked, across the ridge by now, I'll bet."

The sergeant led the way to the abandoned mill, conscious of a thin scent of coffee and frying fish. The plan already born in his mind, he kept to himself. But Sergeant Fern wasn't thinking primarily of salvaging crew and scout car this night. He was thinking of Sergeant Dawson, holed in across the backbone of sheer rock, and of a plan to jolt Dawson loose from money.

On an abandoned stone, Nowlin had cooked his meal. Fern had to admit his driver was no liar. He knew how to cook. Thus they feasted, drank coffee and forgot their plight while night came on. Fern was in the act of instructing their return to the car when a terrific roar filled the narrow gorge. In the glow of a handful of coals Fern's men stared at one another. Then Nowlin let out a yell. "They got our car—it's the scout car!"

Dawson and his Blues! Fern beat them to the entrance. There he held Nowlin and the others back. "They found the car, then they know we're close," he snapped. "We got to hide."

THEY crept into the hazel bushes lining Fairfield Creek. It was too dark to make out the strength of the Blues. A blue light flashed, then another. Experienced hands were stealing that scout car. Fern led his party. Above the tumult he recognized Sergeant Dawson's voice. The car backed, along its narrow pathway, with numerous ghostly blue lights, used at night to escape airplane detection, waving the course. "Must be a dozen," Fern decided. "Maybe more. We can't jump 'em, dammit."

"Who's gonna jump 'em?" Corporal Franke wanted to know. "The question is, do we wade this creek. They'll be after us next."

That observation had its answer immediately. A flash beam cut the bushes just overhead. Sergeant Dawson shouted an order. They heard footsteps racing toward the old mill.

Sergeant Fern's decision was automatic. "Cross water," he hissed in Corporal Franke's ear. "Pass the word along." As he spoke, Fern grasped the corporal's wrist. Loss of the scout car wasn't bothering Fern so much now as his imminent danger of capture, and at Dawson's own hands. He wasted no time at damning his luck. Fern sank into the water, felt it reach his chin before the bottom checked his descent. "Hold Nowlin up," he whispered to Franke. "He's shortlegged. Over his head."

Persons, bringing up the rear, was climbing out when he slipped, hit the water with a resounding splash. A beam of light picked him up. "Run," Fern yelled. He tripped over a grapevine and fell headlong. Persons was on him when Fern, swearing, reached his feet again. Nowlin and Franke could be heard, thrashing in undergrowth.

"Let 'em go," Dawson called in loud tones. "No use searching that wilderness before daylight."

Five minutes later Fern ventured a low whistle. At once a pebble struck nearby. "Sarge," came Nowlin's whisper, "here's me an' Corporal Franke."

"Crawl over here," Fern said. "And keep as quiet as you can. Persons is with me."

"Heck, we're safe," Nowlin protested, as he arrived, sat down, with Franke mov-

ing in from the other side. Fern had discovered a log, by stumbling against it. They heard the scout car, moving along at a neat clip, its motor humming. "They got around the corner," Nowlin said. "Break out your flashlight and let's find where we are."

"Don't be a simp all your life. They're hunting us."

"Listen, Sarge, me'n Corporal Franke both heard Dawson call the chase off. They didn't want to get wet."

"Huh. Sure Dawson yelled that. To make us believe him. So he could send men up and down stream, to get across and cut us off. I'm worth a damn sight more to him than capture of a Blue scout car."

"Got any ideas?" Franke inquired. "Like drying out somewhere?"

"Maybe. Persons, shuck your shirt."

"Shirt?"

"Yeah. I made a map. Got to look at it with my flash. Need your shirt to shield me. Unshirt."

With the others hovering, Fern lay prone, scanning his map. He switched off the light presently. "Way I got it," he whispered, "we're two hundred yards directly east of the south end of the backbone. We got to climb, pick up some rocks and make our own ambush. We can handle any squad Dawson sends, if we work it right."

Nowlin touched Fern's arm. "Listen. Right out ahead."

Fern listened. "The saps are beating the bottoms. Acres of bushes and blackberries to worry 'em. Let's climb."

As he led the way, Sergeant Fern mulled the daring idea born in his brain earlier. It might be better discretion to lead his crew out, then hole in toward Oak Grove till the counter-attack began.

It was conceivable that the Blues' counter-attack might result in captured equipment. On the other hand, the Reds would be more than likely to withdraw, taking the captured scout cars and blitz buggies with them. Loss of their two cars right now was a major mark against Captain Parkins. "And not so hot for me," he reflected. "And they're going to ask why wasn't a looie up with us, and more of the echelon."

A SUDDEN cessation of noise stirred Sergeant Fern. "They're parking our car acrost the ridge," Nowlin said mournfully.

"Keep climbing," Fern ordered.

"Gosh," Franke put in after a hundred more yards, mostly upgrade without mistake, "this must be as high as that backbone we hid under."

"Leads to it," Fern grunted. "But we got to hike a mile—maybe more."

"But you said we'd fix up an ambush," Nowlin protested. "Let's rest, a little while."

"You mean sleep, you lazy hunk of tissue. I've changed my mind. We're going around to the backbone—by way of the back door."

"And I volunteered!" Nowlin observed.

"What interests me," Persons put in, "is what we're going up on that backbone for? If we're scramming from that bunch of Red soldiers other side of the ridge, we're going to one helluva place to hide."

Fern called a halt. They had reached the crest of the hill now, comparatively safe for the present.

"Okay," he said. "I'll let you have it. Say we take it on the lam. We got to cross Fairfield Valley and dodge patrols. Maybe a lot of soldiers stretched across the entire valley. It's two miles. Okay. Now listen. The Blues counter-attack tonight."

"How'd you know?" Nowlin demanded.

"What Captain Parkins said about the signal rockets. We got to take Oak Grove and hold that gap."

"Looks like to me the Reds got there—or here first," Corporal Franke murmured.

"Yeah. They got here first. But old General Forrest said 'git thar fustest—

with the mostest men,' didn't he? We didn't. Not this afternoon. But if the brigade moves up, this valley will be swamped with tanks, big guns and scout cars."

"So we stick our necks out, by sticking on top of that backbone ridge," Nowlin observed. "I don't get it."

"Baloney," Fern snorted in disgust. "Listen, rookie."

"I ain't no rookie. I've been in five months."

"Okay, Civil War veteran. When hell busts loose with that counter-attack, and Cap Parkins signals with his rockets, we're going down to get our scout car back. That make sense?"

"No," came a chorus.

"Well, you'll come along and like it," Fern snapped. "If you don't," he added darkly, "none of you bozos are going to like life in the 375th."

"Aw, if you have to threaten," Nowlin answered, "we ain't got any choice. But if we get caught—"

"That's my funeral," Sergeant Fern said. "Let's get going."

SAVE for a distant rapids of Fairfield Creek, there was silence, broken now and then by the pop-pop-pop of a speeding motorcycle and the occasional hum of an airplane. Sergeant Fern's detail stumbled along the narrow crest of the hill till they reached the base of the backbone ridge. Stealthily, since the gravel road used by the Red forces descended the nearby hill, was at hand, they worked their way outward. Once in a while they heard voices below. Fern was conscious of a low roar, hardly audible, reaching him more through the earth. He recognized the sound for what it was, the steady approach of motorized forces. Airplanes came nearer. Fern glanced at his wristwatch. The luminous dial told him it was almost ten o'clock.

"I hear something, far off," Corporal Franke whispered.

"The Blues," Fern answered. "You keep your eyes peeled. For rockets. They'll be moving in more than one column toward Oak Grove."

It was Nowlin who overtook his sergeant, having lagged back. "Sarge," he said, "there's a wad of machines coming in back of us. Must be the Reds."

"Hell's bells!" Fern exclaimed. "Both sides got the same idea."

"What'll we do?" Persons inquired.

"Sit tight, till something blows up in our faces. They'll meet around Oak Grove. We ain't got a chance to warn Cap—or have we?" Sergeant Fern jumped to his feet as inspiration struck him. "Why not?" he said.

"Why not what?" Nowlin demanded.

"Time for a huddle," Fern said briskly. "Gather around. Listen, if we sneak straight down this ridge we hit the Reds' camp. Chances are nine out of ten they ain't guarding our car. Except a sentry around the whole business." Fern paused, then, "Persons, we'll locate our own car and you get a message through to Cap. Tell him the Reds are attacking, too."

To Fern's surprise there was no objection. "We can spot our own car by the Indian head insignia," he added.

"Or by the smell," Nowlin put in. "No kidding. The 375th outfit's got a new paint job. Listen, Sarge, I got a coupla starting cartridges in my pocket. In case we start the Diesel—"

"That's an idea. Minute we spot our car, Nowlin, you and Persons scram inside. Franke and me'll stick around. We might have to conk a sentry or two. Maybe Dawson," he added hopefully. "But first off, Persons does his stuff. We got a chance to get our car, we take it. This time we git thar fustest."

"And maybe stay lastest," Nowlin murmured. "If we're prisoners, at least we get a chance to sleep."

A COLUMN of blitz buggies poured along the winding road from the head of the hollow, passing the Red camp. Now

the roar of heavy motors, coming from scout cars and tanks, was audible upgrade. Fern led his men down the steep ridge. Being in the van, he was first to swear when he found Fairfield Creek again, where it doubled back from the main hill exactly opposite a similar turn over the backbone. "We gotta take a ducking," he reflected. "No chance to find a shallow crossing. Join hands and let's go."

Dragging his comrades up by the gnarled roots of a sycamore, Fern had a narrow view of the lower valley, leading to Oak Grove. He froze, because two rockets speared the heavens. One was green, the other red.

"Attack's on," he exclaimed. "Now we got to hurry."

There was activity in the Reds' camp. A whistle blew. From the last turn a quarter mile away came the sound of a scout car, and there were other noises, betokening the approach of a motorized column. Fern dashed across the road. He was gambling now on confusion, and the fact that bold appearance in the darkness, was better than stealth. Franke had the others in close formation. They saw the blue lights of the oncoming scout cars. A scout car motor roared within the camp. And it was Nowlin who let out a whoop and turned off. "There it is," he cried. "Follow me." Fern saw too, one brief stab of light from a distance, as it cut across the Indian head insignia of the 375th, painted upon the turret of the captured machine.

Nowlin scrambled inside. Persons followed. "Hey," a figure yelled, "you're getting in the wrong car. That's—"

Bop! Fern swung from his heels. This wasn't simulated battle. From the recesses of the scout car Persons could be heard at the radio. The Red warrior struggled to his feet, let out a yell. His second outcry was choked off as Corporal Franke came around the machine. But other figures had come surging toward Fern and the corporal. "Get aboard," Fern shouted. "Tell Nowlin to do his stuff." He knew the driver would have to fit his cartridge into the starter, firing it like one would a sawed-off shotgun, to get the Diesel going. Anything could happen in this confusion. Tanks were going by now, roaring down the road. Men were yelling. And as Franke scrambled to the sponson step of the scout car, preparatory to shoving through the turret, since the side entrance was closed, Sergeant Fern backed up, to face the foremost of the Red detail. "Hey you," a voice bellowed, "what goes on?"

"Sergeant Dawson," Fern murmured. "As I live and breathe."

"Yeah, and you're captured," Dawson retorted. "Hey Smithers—Binkley—" No more names were shouted because Sergeant Fern tackled Sergeant Dawson about the waist, bringing him to the ground. As if that were a signal, the Diesel motor roared as Nowlin did his stuff. Persons was squawking. All this flitted through Fern's mind as Dawson, howling in wrath, bounced to his feet.

Fern saw reinforcements and chose discretion. He leaped for the sponson step. Dawson followed. He lunged for Sergeant Fern, clutched his trousers. Fern grasped the turret rim, pulled with all his might and Sergeant Dawson came along. "I got you," Dawson howled exultantly. Fern wasted no breath. He hooked a leg over the turret side, jammed his foot up against the opposite wall. With that he grabbed Dawson's shoulders and heaved. Swearing, clutching, the two men were

packed into narrow space, while the reinforcements waited helplessly outside.

In that moment, the scout car lunged. The men beside leaped outward. Slewing on one set of tracks, the machine shot toward the road. Dawson was yelling. But Corporal Franke deserted his post, groping past Fern till he obtained a grip on Dawson. He grunted as he gave aid and comfort to his sergeant. Dawson piled to the floor, in behind the turret step, whereupon Persons, at Fern's command, deserted his post and promptly sat upon Sergeant Dawson.

Back in temporary command of his car, Sergeant Fern took his stand. Starlight and the dim, weird blue running lights of the tanks showed the road. There was a gap of better than a hundred feet between two of the Red machines. Fern sent Nowlin into the gap. "It's our big chance," he thought. "If we make that column till we meet the Blues, we got a break. If we don't—"

Red and green rockets showed at a half dozen points. From directly ahead came the scream of dive bombers. They plummeted earthward as two great flares blossomed above Oak Grove. But Sergeant Fern didn't exult over the attack of the Blues—his own forces. The Indian head insignia of his car was visible, if some vigilant pair of eyes should be turned their way. Fern dropped his body. "Franke," he shouted, "guard Dawson. Persons, stick by the radio. If you get anything hot, like a message from Cap, let me know. We'll make for him."

"Okay," floated up a vague acknowledgment. Nowlin yelled something, obviously a protest. Dawson was yelling. Franke was having a time with the prisoner. Fern felt rather than heard the concussion of .37 millimeter guns. The crack of machine-guns, firing blanks but with tracers, was also dimly audible. But the sergeant's pulses quickened, if the pace of the tanks was slow. Now a column of blitz buggies raced by, men shouting. Lights blazed in houses near Oak Grove as the civil population roused to view the strange spectacle.

ALL at once the tank column sped up. Fern kicked Nowlin, to relay this news. More flares showed in the sky. Fern saw the flash of a big gun beyond Oak Grove.

That came from a medium tank—of the Blues, he decided. The attack was bound to come from that direction. As he made that conclusion Fern chose to quit the tank column, burst through a corn field and reach the nearest Blue force.

He forgot, or didn't have time to transmit change of directions to Nowlin. There drifted out of the interior of the scout car sturdy noises of battle. Fern wavered, then chose to drop down inside the armored hull of the car. He yanked out his flashlight, but his beam fell, not across Franke astride Sergeant Dawson. Instead, Dawson was upright, and his automatic was leveled at Sergeant Fern's stomach. "I got you," he shouted. "You're dead, like Franke, and Persons. I could blow you to pieces. Stop the car."

Sergeant Fern swallowed hard. He told Nowlin to sign off. It wasn't easy to do. But Fern went by the rules, and it was obvious Dawson was speaking true words. He didn't need a strong light to note Dawson's jubilation. Anyway, Fern reflected, they never could have made it.

"Hey," Nowlin yelled, "they're flashing lights—must be the umpires. There's tanks, jeeps and scout cars all around us."

"Don't make a break," Dawson warned Fern. "I'll cite you for breaking rules."

"I know 'em as good as you'll ever know 'em," Fern retorted. He raised his shoulders from the turret, blinking in the shaft of light from a nearby bar. "What goes on?" he demanded. "Ain't this a war—a blackout?"

"Sergeant Fern!" At the sound of this voice the noncom gaped. "Cap Parkins," he said fervently. "Hey gang, Cap Parkins' here with the whole damned Blue army."

"Huh—whazzat? The hell you say? Cap Parkins!"

Forgot was Sergeant Dawson and his threats below. Sergeant Fern clambered out. Somebody followed—Nowlin. Captain Parkins trotted up, and he was accompanied by other officers. Fern recognized Major Hale, then a brigadier-general, not to mention a bevy of lieutenants belonging to the Blue force. They had captured Oak Grove, cutting the Reds to pieces, by flank and headlong collision. The tanks into whose company Fern had wandered, were likewise captured, engines idling now as the umpire officers went from machine to machine, checking them off. "Cap," Nowlin shouted, "we got back our car."

"What else did I expect?" that worthy retorted. "Sergeant Fern, that was well done, getting your radio message through. We improvised an attack on the basis of your word. It worked. Incidentally," he added, "we took Captain Linebaugh and I got back my other equipment."

Sergeant Fern heard someone crawling out through the turret. He grinned down at Captain Parkins, revealed in the illumination of flash and blue lights. "Yeah, and I got Dawson, sir." So saying, he reached back and his fingers clutched the seat of Dawson's trousers. "When we got cut off, they swiped the Indian head car, but we found her. And Dawson, too."

"I'll send a corporal over to guide you to our column, Sergeant. We're holding Oak Grove tonight with a superior force. Man, we busted 'em wide open. As soon as you find the echelon, take your men back and feed them. By then we'll have some certain arrangements completed with Captain Linebaugh and your friend, Sergeant Dawson."

"Aw, don't rub it in," Dawson growled. "You was lucky."

"Lucky?" Sergeant Fern laughed. He released the seat of Dawson's trousers. "Okay, feller, there comes the umpire. You're a prisoner of war and I get my dough. Lucky? Feller, I just got thar fustest, that's all."

THE MAN OUT YONDER

By CADDO CAMERON

Author of "The King Dies Hard," etc.

CHAPTER I

WAR TO THE KNIFE!

A DRY norther moaned across the Texas Panhandle this December night, lifting its voice to a shriek whenever it encountered resistance. It howled through an acre of hide ricks near the infant town of Sweetwater a few miles below Fort Elliot and tore viciously at the flimsy buildings—two restaurants, one buffalo hunters' supply store, three saloons and a large dancehall. The norther sucked sparks from their stovepipes and tossed them in the air like fireflies. It whistled into the unceiled rooms and set every lamp to smoking its chimney, drove red sand through cracks in the walls, and it probed with icy fingers for the men and women behind them; but the freezing wind failed utterly to spoil the fun of those who were in a mood to frolic, or to cool the passions of the quarrelsome ones.

Over in Dan Wheeler's saloon Fate had gathered the ingredients and the Devil was compounding trouble.

After having followed the northern herd on its annual migration southward from Canada and intermediate points, ten buffalo hunting outfits were camped at Sweetwater replenishing their supplies before continuing their hunt in the lower regions of the northern range or moving south to the Brazos country where the southern herd habitually wintered. They averaged five men each, fifteen of whom had holed up in Wheeler's for the night where they would sleep on the floor, if they slept at all, and take turns keeping the stove red hot.

The hunters were drinking along more or less easily and no one was particularly tight. In the meantime, they entertained themselves and a number of unclassified spectators with a form of kangaroo court

that was popular on the buffalo range, everyone present being required to contribute a variety act of some description—sing, dance, tell a yarn, or whatever else he chose to do for the amusement of the crowd. Those who failed or refused to perform were supposed to be punished in some ludicrous fashion by the court.

pers of hair-trigger men who would fight without thought of the odds against them. Johnny had a sharp tongue and more than once it struck fire from the flint in a plainsman who wouldn't permit a joke to be carried too far. Through the pacifying influence of several good-natured hunters, however the show had moved along with

. . . . Cut His Teeth on a Six-shooter, and in a Comparatively Short Time Left a Lot of History Behind Him Shrouded in Gunsmoke

Tonight the man who started the thing and appointed himself judge and jury was one Johnny Redfish, owner of a prosperous outfit—a broard swarthy fellow of medium height, noted for his great physical strength, skill with weapons and inclination to use them. Johnny was half Indian and half white, and known to be all bad. His right-hand man was with him, Les Lenair—a tall, hawk-faced person who had the looks and actions of an Indian and swore that there wasn't a drop of red blood in him.

Redfish proved to be a tough judge. He put on airs that his make-believe position didn't justify and he took dangerous liberties with the personal pride and hot temlots of fun and no violence although the spectators had literally held their breath and waited for the shooting to start when Redfish made some unnecessarily caustic remarks about the singing of Shad Lester.

A COMPARATIVE newcomer on the buffalo range, Shad was a young hunter of medium build with brown hair, a smooth-shaven face that bore the marks of premature age and was somewhat too thin to be called handsome. His eyes were his most striking feature. Blue, very light and set deep, they somehow gave the impression that while they were not fearful or on the alert for anything in particular, nothing whatever was permitted to escape

them. He was called cat-eyed behind his back and men wondered about him. Other hunters treated him courteously for his orderly behavior and unfailing generosity entitled him to it, but, in two years' time no one of them had offered the boy the comradeship that these rugged frontiersmen shared among themselves. He had remained a mystery, a topic of cautious conversation, a man fit to be handled as if he were powder and likely to blow up in one's face.

They had little factual justification for such treatment inasmuch as Lester habitually went out of his way to avoid trouble, having been involved in just one fight since making his appearance on the turbulent range and that was forced upon him. In Dodge City eighteen months ago he had shot a man in defense of his own life. But the ease and absolute composure with which he had killed this dangerous and generally feared desperado marked him as a boy who had cut his teeth on a six-shooter, made a lot of history in a comparatively short time and left it behind him shrouded in gunsmoke.

Shad Lester now stood in the outer part of the group around Wheeler's stove, smoking a cigar, watching and listening with a lively interest, speaking to no one because no one spoke to him. It was ever that way. Politely they always kept him just a little on the outside of their society and he wouldn't try to force his way into it.

By midnight there remained but one performer to be called upon. He and a boy as thin and cadaverous and inadequately clothed as himself, obviously his son, were standing in the northwest corner apart from the others—the coldest spot in the cold room. The place wasn't crowded and timidity was the only apparent reason why he hadn't moved closer to the stove. With his bashful eyes and sunken cheeks, straggling ash blond hair and mustache and beard, stooped shoulders, hands and feet that were awkward and self-conscious in their movements, the man was the personification of humility—a living apology. He shrank from the gaze of the audience, especially the formidable black eyes of the judge. A timorous grin uncovered gaps in his front teeth and louder than words it seemed to announce that he humbly apologized for being there, or anywhere else for that matter.

A moment after Johnny looked at him he touched the boy's arm, and said in a thin voice, "Bud, I reckon we'd better go back to the wagon."

The youngster had cowered before the attention of so many people until the back of his faded ducking coat pressed against the cold wall. Its dull red lining showed where it hung open. The fleece had long since worn away, leaving the flannel threadbare.

He lifted his pinched face, and said wistfully to his father, "It's nice and warm in here, Pop."

The man sent a quick, shy glance at the glowing stove. "Shore is—nice and warm."

"Betcher it's cold in the wagon, Pop, awful cold."

"Uh-huh, but I reckon we won't freeze."

Johnny Redfish left his seat on the end of the bar and swaggered over there. The man hitched his weight from one leg to his other, his timid eyes roved apprehensively in their deep sockets. He tried to

grin again. The boy moved a little closer to his father.

Redfish folded his big arms, and demanded, "What's your name, feller?"

"Why—uhhh—mistah," stammered the other, "it's Johnson—Ezry Johnson. Ever

since I can remember folks have called me Easy Ezry."

The breed chuckled, and said, "You sure look it."

At once it became apparent that he intended to torment the bashful man by making him talk. "*You* don't belong in this tough country," he said scornfully. "Where did you come from and what're you doin' down here."

Easy Ezra swallowed, groped for words, then broke into excited speech like an embarrassed child that had suddenly found his tongue. "You're right, all right, mistah. I ain't a fightin' man. I've taken many a lickin' in my day, but I ain't never fit back. Somehow or other I can't. I don't want to hurt nobody. I just want to get along the best way I can. I—"

He stopped in confusion as if it had dawned upon him that he was talking and a lot of people were listening.

Johnny winked over his shoulder at Les Lenair, then demanded gruffly, "This court asked you a question. Answer it!"

The backward man shifted his feet, looked down at them. In a moment he got control of his voice again and his words tumbled out, "Mistah, honest-to-goodness I clean forgot! It's like this. Two year ago come spring I moved out west from Tennessee and homesteaded me a quarter section up in Kansas. It's been tough sleddin' tryin' to open a farm, but I reckon I ain't much of a farmer nohow. Ain't never been able to get ahead. I couldn't make enough off'n the land to feed the young'n's. We got six of 'em, all boys. This'n is the oldest. He's goin' on thirteen. So me and the Old Woman—we talked it over and figgered maybe I could pick up 'a little money on the buff'ler range. Back East I used to hunt a right smart and I'm sorta handy with a rifle."

His weak face brightened momentarily, his shoulders straightened a trifle. "We done purty well, too, me and Bud. We taken fifty hides up on the Republican, but somebody stole 'em off'n us. Then we taken all of a hundred more between the Smoky and the Arkansas and got good money for 'em. I sent upward of two hundred dollars home to the Old Woman. She'll make it go a long ways. I got a *good* woman. She can do with mighty nigh nothin'."

Again Easy Ezra suddenly awoke to the fact that he was holding the center of the stage. He stammered to an incoherent halt.

A hush had fallen upon the room. Hardy and aggressive men listened to the story of a failure, noted the pitiful pride with which this man told of taking no more hides in half a season than some of them had taken in a single day, and their rugged faces showed a genuine sympathy for him. Shad Lester was particularly touched.

In many ways he was a soft-hearted fellow and, moreover, he couldn't help thinking that he and Easy Ezra had much in common—each being an outcast, though for entirely different reasons.

THE wind screeched and hurled itself against the north end of the building, driving jets of sand through the boards onto the back of the boy's neck. He turned up the frayed corduroy collar of his jacket, held it there with a hand that was reddened and cracked by exposure to the weather.

Easy Ezra placed an arm around his son's thin shoulders. "Come on, Bud. Button up your coat and we'll go back to the wagon. Gotta hit south for the big herd in the mornin'."

They started to move away.

Johnny Redfish halted them sharply. "Hold on there! Nobody gets off without doin' his stuff when I'm judge of a court. What can you do?"

The man looked down at the floor. "I kinda hate to say it, Jedge," he stammered, "but I can't do nothin'. Always did want to play on a Jew's harp and never could get the hang of it."

"Can you sing?"

"No, sah. Shore wish I could. I like singin'."

"Can't you whistle?"

"Nary a note, Jedge. Can't even carry a tune."

The breed grunted disgustedly. "With them spindlin' legs and big feet you'd ought to be able to dance. Give us a double-shuffle."

Where the tips of Easy Ezra's ears showed through his straggling hair they turned a deep red. "I'd give a pritty if I could, mistah, but to save me I can't. My old woman tried her level best to learn me, but it wa'n't no go. She used to be the best dancer I ever seen. That was before she broke herself down a-raisin' chillun and workin' in the field."

Redfish chuckled as if he were enjoying himself hugely, but this torture of a helpless man wasn't going over with the majority of the hunters. Although they liked their fun rough and might be plenty hard on a fellow who could defend himself, they'd never bully the weak. Several now yelled at the breed to stop it. Others invited Easy Ezra to come up to the bar and have a drink before he went out to buck the norther.

"Fetch the boy along!" boomed white-bearded Smoky Hill Thompson, "and I'll buy him all the sody pop he can hold."

"I'll buy him some warm clothes," growled John R. Cook, a young hunter. "Damned if I don't!"

Shad Lester said nothing aloud, but he told himself that he'd do something about it pretty soon.

The breed wouldn't listen to the audience. Their sympathy for his victim seemed to make him all the meaner. "Be still!" he barked over his shoulder. "I'm bossin' this court."

Fixing his gaze on the man, he growled, "Looky here, you! If you didn't aim to do your part you had no business to stay and watch the fun. Now, dance!"

Easy Ezra made an obvious effort to obey the command, but his self-conscious feet were momentarily paralyzed by embarrassment and stuck to the floor as if nailed there. Buddy held tightly to his father's sleeve. The man lifted his head and looked slowly around him, stark fear in his deep-set eyes, an unspoken plea for help in his gaunt face.

Shad Lester moved leisurely out onto the floor. His glance met Ezra's and his thin face broke into a reassuring smile that momentarily made him look years younger. The attention of the crowd centered upon him. Some of the spectators whispered excitedly to their neighbors, others stood with faces grim and lips tightly locked.

Again Johnny snarled at the bashful man, "Damn it! You heard me. Dance!"

Easy Ezra cowered a trifle. Otherwise he neither moved nor answered the command. His eyes clung to Lester's as if he had discovered a ray of hope in them.

While still ten feet away, Shad quietly asked, "Judge, don't you sorta think that Ezra has already done his part?"

"Hell, no!" snapped Redfish. "He ain't done nothin'."

The young hunter ambled ahead carelessly. Str'ikes me that Ezra has done more than any of us," he drawled. "Betcha we all remember his story longer than anything else that we've seen or heard in here tonight."

He glanced around at the crowd, and asked, "Ain't that right, fellas?"

A chorus of positive affirmatives answered him.

During that brief interval the breed whipped out a six-shooter and fired. No one could tell whether he intended to hit the floor between Johnson's boots, or deliberately shot him. At any rate Easy Ezra staggered, then crumpled with a bullet through his foot. The boy cried out and dropped beside his father.

An instantaneous change came over Shad Lester. Having given the impression that he was unhurried in movement, he now acted with the speed and certainty of a panther. His gun seemed to leap into his

hand from the holster on his thigh. He sprang at Redfish, struck downward with the weapon at the precise moment that the breed whirled to face him. Johnny's pistol slammed on the floor. He whipped out a knife with his other hand. So swiftly as to escape the eye of some spectators, Shad lashed at the swarthy hunter's jaw with the barrel of his Colt. The blow went home with an unpleasant crunch. Redfish fell like a stunned buffalo.

Meanwhile tall Les Lenair had evaded the grasp of two hunters who tried to stop him and shoved away from the bar, anger blazing in his dark high-boned face and his eyes fixed upon Lester's back.

"Look out!" roared Smoky Hill Thompson at the instant that Redfish went down.

Shad spun around in a crouch. "Drop it!" he commanded without lifting his voice. "You're plumb slow, Lenair. Drop it, I said!"

In the act of drawing a pistol from his shoulder holster, Lenair let it slide from his fingers as if the thing were too hot to handle. It clattered on the floor, a loud noise in the silence that had gripped the room.

Shad Lester's light eyes were several shades lighter now, his thin face hard all over. Holstering his six-shooter, he remarked quietly, "Far as I'm concerned you can pick up your Colt and put it back where it belongs."

He folded his arms and waited while the tall man recovered his weapon and returned it to its holster. Then he drawled softly, "D'you aim to leave it there?"

Les Lenair flushed, growled something in his throat and stalked away.

Shad hurried over to Johnson. After a glance at the wound, he called out, "I saw the army doctor in town a while back. Somebody ought to go find him."

Three hunters left promptly.

THE balance of the spectators gathered in the corner where Easy Ezra was seated with his back to the wall, holding onto his leg while Lester cut away his old patched and half-soled boot. The bullet had splintered a bone in his instep. Buddy's face paled and his lips trembled when he saw the wound, but he made no sound. Johnson neither complained of the pain nor showed any sign of anger at the man who had shot him. Instead he examined his foot curiously, then looked up at Shad with a dazed and inquiring expression on his face.

His voice held the forlorn note of one who had grown to expect nothing other than bad luck, "What's botherin' me—maybe I'll lose my foot. D'you reckon I will? Then I couldn't hunt no more, could I? Been makin' good money, too. First time I ever did."

Shad Lester looked away. He had to. His eye fell upon the unconscious breed and he cursed under his breath. Afterwards he glanced up at the rugged faces around him. He saw his own feelings mirrored in them. He saw Smoky Hill Thompson take off his hat, drop some gold coins into it, then go to passing it from man to man without saying a word to anyone. The big-hearted hunters gave freely and mostly in silence.

A short time later the white-haired plainsman came over and emptied the hat onto the floor beside Johnson. "Ain't got no idee how much there is of it," he said, "but I calc'late it'll buy a smidgin' of grub for yo' old woman and chillun until you can go to rippin' hides again."

Easy Ezra stared in wonderment at the generous pile of gold, silver and paper money—a large sum to a man like him. He brushed the back of his hand across his eyes, went to speak and choked up. His head sank forward.

More than one hard-bitten hunter turned and walked away.

Easy Ezra looked up pretty soon. Notwithstanding the moisture in his eyes and the pain from his wound, the man's haggard face was shining with a light that had not been there before.

"Men, nobody ain't never done nothin' like this for me since the day I was born and I'll never forget it," he said brokenly. "But I can't hardly believe that the jedge went for to shoot me and even if he did, 'tain't your fault. I dassn't take your money thisaway 'cause I didn't rightly earn it. My old woman wouldn't take it neither. We'll manage to get along somehow, God willin'. We always have."

SMOKY HILL and several other hunters vigorously demanded that he take the money and forget about it, because if he didn't they would simply throw it away on liquor and gambling. The bashful man listened in silence, smiled apologetically, shook his head. They were starting in on him again when Shad Lester put a stop to their arguments.

"Leave him be, boys," he said. "Can't you see that he's the kind of a fella that always kills his own buff'ler?"

The look that Shad got from Easy Ezra would long remain a pleasant memory.

Old Smoky Hill Thompson stroked his white beard for a moment, snorted, then went to get the money. While kneeling beside Johnson he looked the wounded man in the eye, and said gruffly, "What I mean—they's a heap of man behind them moth-eaten whiskers of your'n."

Easy Ezra tried to say something, failed, then glanced shyly down at his son as if to make certain that the boy had heard.

Buddy asked, "Does it hurt awful bad, Pop?"

"Huh! I'd mighty nigh forgot it."

In the meantime two men had carried Johnny Redfish to the back room, having announced that they'd try to bring him to.

A short while later the doctor came. After a brief examination he declared that he'd have to take out a piece of bone, but the foot would be all right in time if properly cared for. A murmur of relief rippled through the spectators, most of whom had waited there to get the verdict.

Although a load seemed to lift from the farmer-hunter's stooped shoulders, he inquired anxiously, "Doctor, will I be able to get in some more huntin' before summer? I been makin' good money and—"

The blunt army medico interrupted. "No! This wound will heal slowly. If you go to dragging it through snow and slush and freezing weather you may lose your foot."

That which he saw in Easy Ezra's face wrenched an oath from Lester.

"Hell, man!" he exclaimed. "Don't worry about huntin'. There's plenty of work you can do with a crippled foot. I need another man for camp tender and I'll hire your wagon and team with the boy to drive it until the end of the winter hunt on the southern range."

After making the offer, the young hunter arose quickly. He got to his feet before Easy Ezra had time to catch his breath, stood there for a moment looking down at the astonished man and his wistful son.

Shad Lester's thin face broke into a slow, whimsical grin. "I gotta go now," he went on to say. "You think things over while the doctor is whittlin' on you. I'll pay you more than you'd figger to make in the balance of the season. We won't hit south until the norther breaks, but I'll be seein' you in the mornin'."

He turned and walked hurriedly away, apparently deaf to the remarks of other hunters who tried to tell him how they felt about what he had done. Shad didn't like to get thanked for anything. Smoky Hill Thompson took after him and caught him at the door.

With his left hand on Lester's shoulder the dean of plainsmen put out his right, and declared, "Shake, boy! You done noble. Maybe you're plumb p'izen to monkey with, but I know damned well that this tough country needs more men like you. And from now on I'll be right proud to have you dry yo' moccasins at my fire and smoke a pipe in my teepee whenever you're a mind to."

The young hunter couldn't find words

to express his feelings, for this was the most comradely advance he had met since coming to the buffalo range and it took hold of him. He tried to pass the whole affair off casually.

"I'm sure much obliged to you, sah," he said quietly, "and I'll take you up on that invite first chance I get. But I didn't do anything worth mentionin'. Ezra and his outfit are just what I been needin' 'cause I'm short handed with only a camp-tender and one skinner."

Smoky Hill grunted. "Boy, you ain't a-foolin' me none. Now bend a ear to this." He glanced around, dropped his voice. "You done made this here country damned hot for yo'self and you're in for it. That there breed has got him a big outfit and they're all bad. He don't never forgit nothin'. He'll get square with you if it takes him a year to do it. Yo' hair is loose, young fella, and mark my words —you'll need a troop of hoss-sojers to keep it on yo' skull!"

Lester already knew plenty about Redfish. He had thought of all this before going to the defense of Easy Ezra and, moreover, he had thought of many other things of which Smoky Hill knew nothing. His chief concern had been the danger of starting a feud with the breed and his friends. He detested the thought, for he was now trying to lose himself on the buffalo range in the hopes of escaping a family feud that had started in the East before he was born.

SHAD was a product of the Lester-Grandon feud. He had grown up with a rifle in his hands, a pistol and knife on his belt and for him life's most vital essential had been skill with his weapons. He had practiced incessantly to develop it. With the threat of death constantly hanging over him while he worked and played on his father's Southeast Texas cow ranch he had become cat-eyed and wolf-footed, peculiarities which he couldn't hide from the observant hunters. At length the boy's better nature had revolted against the bloody and senseless war. He told his father how he felt about it, whereupon old Bull Lester had called him a traitor, ordered him off the ranch and sworn that he'd be shot if he ever came back. As he rode bitterly away from home the young gunfighter had vowed that *his* quarrels would always be settled on the spot one way or another—no hangovers.

And tonight in Sweetwater, almost three years later, he was still firmly fixed in that determination. If there was anything he could do to prevent it, the Lester and Redfish outfits wouldn't go up and down the buffalo range killing one another off as a result of his purely personal quarrel with Johnny and Lenair.

Smoky Hill Thompson eyed him sharply, waiting for him to say something.

In a moment, Shad drawled easily, "More'n likely you're dead right, Old-timer, and I aim to see if I can't sorta patch things up with Johnny. Don't want this fuss to go any farther if I can he'p it."

"How d'you figger to do the patchin'?"

A slight grin touched the corners of Lester's thin lips. "I'll apologize to Johnny."

Smoky Hill's bushy white eyebrows shot upward. "Er-huh? I reckon my ears is doin' me dirt."

Shad's grin expanded to full proportions. "No, sah, they ain't. It won't hurt me to apologize a little and it may save a heap of killin'. Ain't no sense in tryin' to talk to him while he's hot, so I'll go over to the Panhandle and wait for him. He'll show up in there pretty soon 'cause he's got a girl in the place. If I do my apologizin' before her, he may be easier to handle."

The old hunter placed a gnarled hand on his shoulder, and said in a deep voice, "I don't think none the less of you for tryin', young fella, but may the Good Lawd he'p you!"

When Shad Lester went into the Panhandle dancehall and slammed the door in

the face of the norther he found the eyes of six women and at least twenty men upon him. They were not behaving in the customary manner of revelers in a frontier bawdy house. Gathered at tables along the space reserved for dancing in the rear of the room, standing in groups at the bar and around the stove, they had the air of serious people discussing matters of grave importance. A bored three-piece orchestra lounged idly in its chairs against the back wall. Although an occasional voice came through the thin partitions that formed small adjoining rooms, sound in the main hall practically vanished when the young hunter arrived, signifying that he had been the topic of conversation. No doubt they had him just as good as buried, he thought sardonically.

While ambling toward the bar Shad spoke to a few acquaintances. On the surface their polite aloofness was no different from what it had always been, but somehow he seemed to sense a warmth of approval in many of the faces that turned his way. Probably imagination, he reflected, but just the same it made him feel good.

Presently he caught the eye of Johnny's girl—Martha Smith, blond, buxom and smart—whom he had known casually at Fort Griffin. In fact, if Martha could have had her way he would have known her better, for she—like the hunters, had recognized him to be a gunfighter and jumped to the conclusion that he was some famous badman temporarily on the dodge and therefore a desirable companion for an ambitious woman of the underworld. Shad, however, had side-stepped the partnership.

Beckoning to her with a lift of his brows and a slight backward motion of his head, he turned to a vacant table in the front part of the room and somewhat removed from the others. She got there shortly before the waiter arrived.

Shad pulled out a chair for her, smiled, and drawled, "Howdy, Marty. Sit down and have a hot toddy with me."

Her eyes were cold, blue and calculating.

She studied his thin face curiously for a moment while he held the chair, then asked sharply, "I need a drink all right, but why should you buy it for me?"

"Because I want to."

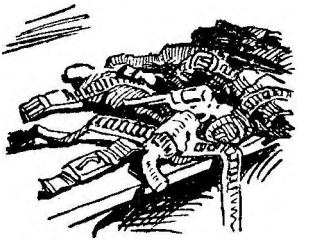
"After the trouble you've just had with Johnny?"

"Yes'm."

The girl sat down. A waiter came, took their orders and went away. The room fell to talking with exaggerated carelessness and a nervous undertone. Obviously ill at ease, Marty kept a close watch on both front and back doors.

As soon as the waiter was out of hearing, she said cautiously, "I'm a damned fool to be seen drinking with you."

Shad grinned dryly. "How come?"



She pointed at some dark spots on the floor nearby. "See those?"

"Uh-huh. Floor needs a good scrubbin'."

"Don't be smart-alecky!" snapped the girl. "Not long ago Sergeant King came in and found Alice Cole dancing with Bat Masterson. King shot her. There's where she fell. She died. Then he shot Bat in the knee. He fell over there. Bat stayed down, but he shot the sergeant. This big spot here is where King bled to death. So I say that I'm a fool to sit here and drink with you."

The young hunter nodded carelessly. "Uh-huh, I heard about that killin'. And I still say that the floor needs a good scrubbin'."

"Damn you, Shad Lester!" she ex-

claimed. "Haven't you got no feelings? Don't you know that some of Johnny's men are liable to come in and take a shot at you—me, too, more than likely?"

Shad smiled with his steady, untroubled eyes. He drawled calmly, "I sure have got feelin's, Marty. I'm feelin' mighty sorry that I caught Johnny when he wasn't lookin' and busted him in the jaw with my Colt. I had no call to do that."

The girl stared hard at him. Her lids narrowed, her lips tightened momentarily. "I think you're a liar."

"Most generally I am," admitted Lester, "but not now. I wish you'd get word to Johnny that soon as ever he shows up in here I aim to apologize to him before everybody. Will you do that, Marty?"

"Hell, yes!"

She got up and walked quickly to a small, swarthy man at the far end of the bar. They talked earnestly for a few moments, then he left through the back door and she returned to the table.

Shad again held a chair for her. As she sat down, Marty said, "Now you've got your foot in it, Mister Badman. Johnny and his boys will expect you to eat crow and you'd better do it."

"That's exactly what I aim to do," he declared seriously. "A little crow meat never hurt anybody and it would do a lot of folks a heap of good if they only had sense enough to know it."

"Maybe that's so," said the girl doubtfully, "but I can't imagine Shad Lester backing down from anybody. If you do, it'll be fun to watch; but if you don't, I know I'll wish I was some place else."

He laughed quietly. "You'll be plumb safe in here if you don't hang 'round with me too long. Swaller your drink and scoot. I look for Johnny to show up pretty soon."

Marty emptied her glass and they rose together. The girl looked up at him, frowning speculatively as if she had finally run onto a man whom she couldn't see through at a glance.

"Gamblin' Man, I'd ought to hate you," she said slowly, "and damn you I can't!"

"Much obliged, Marty," drawled Shad dryly, "but I'm a hunter—not a gambler."

"Don't fool yourself!" snapped the girl. "Tonight you're taking the biggest gamble a man can make."

Maybe she was right, thought Lester as he sat down again; but he'd go through with it regardless, simply because he figured it was the smart thing to do.

A short time later Redfish and Lenair came in through the back door. They immediately joined a small group at the bar and a few men hurried over there, but the majority of those present remained where they were. Shad sat still for a few moments, waiting to see what happened. Soon it became apparent that nearly everyone else was waiting, too, for the sound of conversation died rapidly and the eyes of the spectators alternated between the men at the bar and the young hunter sitting alone at his table.

Lester didn't wait long. When satisfied that Redfish was not going to start anything he arose and walked leisurely toward the rear end of the bar where he was standing. Most of the spectators obviously had no idea what Shad intended to do. In many faces he saw surprise that bordered upon consternation and a number of them flashed him a silent warning. Hy Schmidt even went so far as to ask him to stop and have a drink.

Shad paused, grinned down at the bearded hunter, and drawled loud enough for everyone to hear, "Much obliged, Hy, but I done Johnny some dirt and I've got to see if I can square myself with him."

Evidently none of the listeners believed that he meant it and some of them chuckled as if the remark were a grim joke.

Elbowing away from the bar Redfish swaggered onto the dance floor and struck a belligerent pose, feet spread, one hand on his hip near his holster. He wasn't a pleasant sight. The whole of his face was puffed, his eyes bloodshot, and the white bandage that was court-plastered to a sec-

tion of his jaw made him look darker than ever.

Lester cocked an eye at him, waited to hear what he had to say.

"I'm listenin', feller," growled the big breed, "but you'll have one hell of a time squarin' yourself with me. Talk!"

Shad Lester stiffened, flushed to the roots of his hair. He saw at a glance that Redfish intended to make it tough and he only hoped that he'd have the nerve to go through with it. Biting down on a hot retort, he ambled over toward the breed and halted six feet away. Men and women moved hastily out of the possible line of fire and the noise they made was the only sound now audible above the howl of the wind.

Steadying his voice with an effort, Shad remarked quietly, "I can't hardly blame you for feelin' that way, Redfish, 'cause I did sorta catch you when you weren't lookin'. I was plumb hasty and I want everybody to know that I apologize for it."

Johnny's thick lips twitched scornfully. "So you'd rather eat crow than to fight. Is that it?"

"In a way it is—yes."

"Ain't you ashamed to admit it?"

Lester slowly shook his head. "No, I'm not. Better men than me have done it when they thought they'd ought to."

HIS apparent humility was like oil on the fire of the big hunter's wrath. He squared his wide shoulders, and growled, "Suppose I tell you that you've got to fight or take a lickin' before all of these folks?"

Shad folded his arms to keep from clenching his fists in sight of everybody. "I don't want to fight you, Johnny," he said calmly. "I think it's plain damned foolishness for us to go on with a quarrel that may wind up with our two outfits killin' one another off. I've apologized and I hope you'll let it go at that. Let's have a drink and forget it."

At a nearby table, an old freighter muttered, "Fair enough."

Standing with her back against the wall opposite the two men, Martha Smith called out anxiously, "Take him up on that, Johnny, please! He's sorry. He told *me* he was."

Her plea merely spurred the breed to greater cussedness. His fingers moved tentatively where they hung in his belt above his holster.

"If you're too yellow to fight, I can't shoot you down like a dog," he snarled, "but I can buffalo hell out of you with my Colt!"

Shad Lester's thin face suddenly went perfectly blank. There wasn't a particle of feeling in his voice, "Don't you try it, Redfish. I've bet my limit."

The crowd caught its breath, clenched its teeth, waited. The wind screeched and wrenched at the building and peppered its windows with gravel that sounded like buckshot in the dead silence of the room. An over-wrought girl giggled hysterically. Another cursed her in a rasping whisper. Martha Smith cursed them both in a nearly normal voice.

Then she spoke up sharply, "Don't be a fool, Johnny! He's poison now. He'll kill you!"

Shad caught a flicker of doubt in the breed's swollen face, an instant of uncertainty that might be made to decide the issue.

He continued in the same level voice, "She's talkin' sense, Redfish. Battered up the way you are, you're in no shape to shoot it out with me tonight. I'll kill you."

His bluff having been called, the bully seized upon a chance to back out gracefully. "Damn your soul, Lester! My head's spinnin' and my eyes are foggy or I'd cut you down right here. I've got to let you off tonight, but I'll be on your trail in the mornin'."

The hard lines in Shad's face relaxed. He grinned faintly, and drawled, "It's a long time till mornin'. Let's see if we can't get good and tight before sunup. I'll buy the first round."

Redfish abruptly turned on his heel. He growled over his shoulder, "To hell with you!"

"Then it's got to be war?"

"Yes, by God! War to the knife!"

The young hunter stood without moving a muscle for a moment. His light blue eyes went icy cold, his lids drew slightly downward over their pupils as he gazed at Johnny's broad back.

"Redfish!" he commanded crisply. "Looky here!"

The breed halted, glanced around.

Although Lester's voice now came flat and emotionless, it carried a fatalistic note that gave it a chilling effect. "I came to this country to hunt buff'ler," he said quietly, "and I won't spend the balance of my days on the range a-dodgin' your lead. We'll settle this thing tonight. If it's *got* to be war between you and me, Mistah, one of us will eat his next breakfast in hell."

Redfish slowly turned around to face the gunfighter. He moved reluctantly as if forced to do so by an unseen hand. That which he saw in Lester's fierce eyes and stern features caused the blood to drain from his swarthy skin.

"I—" he faltered, "I ain't fit to tangle with you tonight. You said so yourself."

Shad's thin lips tightened for an instant, then he declared coldly, "That's your tough luck, fella. You been askin' for it. But I aim to give you a break. We let all these other folks take cover, then I shoot it out with you and Lenair. He tried to bushwhack me and you want war, damn your infernal heart!"

Standing at the rear end-bar, Les Lenair seemed to lose inches of his unusual height. He began to edge away toward the back door.

Johnny Redfish had the look of a bear backing into its den, snarling at an enemy whom it wouldn't meet in open conflict. He shrugged his big shoulders, and said without a trace of shame, "When I fight a gun-sharp like you, Lester, I fight him in my own way."

He walked off as if that settled the matter so far as he was concerned.

Shad Lester's muscular body sagged for an instant, his face relaxed and fell disconsolately, then he turned and left the room without a word to anyone. The norther tore at his skin with icy claws, and he thought that it howled in his ears, "War to the knife!"

CHAPTER II

THE MAN OUT YONDER

THREE weeks later Shad Lester walked his horse down a shallow draw in the wild country between the Pease River and its south fork. The sky was cloudless and a mid-morning sun dulled the edge of the crisp winter air. Dismounting at a small hackberry he tied his pony and proceeded up a gentle slope toward the crest of a knoll carrying his buffalo guns, a canteen of water for cooling the rifle, rest sticks and a haversack containing extra cartridges. He crawled the last fifty yards to the top. Lying prone in short grass he looked down the opposite slope and out across level prairie where a band of two hundred-odd buffaloes were grazing in their usual loose formation. A gentle breeze met him squarely in the face and he hoped that it wouldn't change.

Although this business of stalking a herd had grown to be a commonplace thing for Shad, he nevertheless experienced the thrill that came to every hunter regardless of age or past experience and the mild excitement erased some of the lines of care with which the preceeding twenty-one days had scored his face. For the time being he lost sight of the threatening cloud of vengeance that had scowled down upon his little outfit on its journey southward from Sweetwater. His mind was free of the worries that had kept him awake twenty out of every twenty-four hours, ambuscades, stolen stock, night raids, and at the moment he was not viewing with suspicion

each place where a man might lie hidden within dangerous rifle range. Therefore, he failed to see the rifleman who was stalking him with caution and skill equal to his own.

The stranger had ridden from behind a ridge into the draw a half-mile below, left his horse in a clump of chinawood and was now making his way afoot to an outcropping of rock four hundred yards northeast of the hunter and due north of the herd—the only available cover offering a fair shot at Lester. Forced to cross a long stretch of comparatively open ground, he advanced with the patience and craft of an Indian. His half naked body and deerskin leggings blended perfectly into the colors of leafless shrubbery, dead grass, hummocks of reddish sand, and once he lay for fully a minute behind the bleaching skeleton of a buffalo while Shad made a perfunctory survey of his surroundings before going to work on the herd. The stalker behaved as if he knew that it would be dangerous to take chances and he had time to burn.

Lester knelt just below the crest of the knoll with the thick barrel of his eighteen-pound Sharp's .50 in the fork of his rest sticks and held his fire for a moment while appraising the herd with the trained eye of a man who knew the peculiarities of the huge brown beasts. This band was composed entirely of bulls, everything from stubhorned old patriarchs down to spikes, the sexes having separated after the summer breeding season. At this range—150 to 300 yards—an expert rifleman such as Shad could unerringly drive his bullets into a vital spot the size of a Stetson hat immediately behind the shoulder blade and by selecting his targets with care, killing those on the outside and any others who showed a disposition to bolt, he might slaughter a large part of the band before the stupid animals stampeded to temporary safety. Here was a ruthless business devoid of sportsmanship and the young hunter now went about it in businesslike fashion.

Shooting by instinct as to muzzle eleva-

tion and windage as did most frontier riflemen, Shad lined the fine buckhorn sights of his Sharps at a magnificent bull on the southern fringe of the band. The gun's terrific recoil jarred him to his heels, its ounce and one-quarter or more of lead plunged through the bull's thick hide into its vitals. The great beast staggered, caught and braced itself with legs spread. Frothy blood welled from its mouth and nostrils. It shuddered, swayed, but remained on its feet. Its massive head sagged, weaved from side to side and its beard brushed the ground. Presently its legs folded and it sank down slowly. The nearest buffaloes glanced curiously at the dying bull, but the balance of the herd grazed on.

While the thunder of the hunter's rifle reverberated up and down the draw and its smoke rolled over him, the stalker darted boldly into the rocks.

A shaggy giant in the prime of life shambled to the fallen bull, sniffed the warm blood, gored its paunch with his smooth sharp horns, rumbled like distant thunder, then went to pawing the ground and tossing dirt and grass onto his curly hump. Shad quickly drew a bead on the trouble-maker. Again the big rifle roared, momentarily deafening the hunter to all other sounds so that he could not possibly have heard the shot which came from the rocks an instant after smoke burst from the muzzle of his gun. A bullet bit into the ground between his knees and the rest sticks, but he neither heard its snarl nor saw the gash it made.

Keeping his eyes on the herd and watching the second bull go down almost in its tracks, Lester reloaded swiftly so as to be prepared for the next buffalo that showed signs of creating a disturbance. In a moment a moth-eaten old stubhorn took a notion to leave his group, heading into the wind as buffaloes usually did because of poor eyesight and keen noses. Although the oldster's sorry hide wouldn't be worth much, he had to be stopped, otherwise he might start a general movement and spoil what promised to be a stand with a chance for a big kill. Since the old fellow was walking straight away from him, the best that Shad could do was a rump shot. Once more the blast of the Sharps ripped across the prairie and echoed up and down the draw. The young hunter squinted through the smoke, reloading as rapidly as he could. He saw the bull plunge headforemost, roll over and stagger to its wobbly legs; but he failed to hear the boom of a buffalo gun in the rocks, saw no smoke other than his own and was wholly unaware of the bullet that cut grass less than a foot behind him.

Lester's second shot at the wounded bull came too quickly for the distant rifleman to match it. The terrific shocking power of the big slug knocked the old buffalo down and it lay on its side, lifting and dropping its head, switching its short tail, kicking feebly. In a moment its struggles ceased entirely.

The balance of the herd went on feeding unmindful of the invisible menace that had struck down three of its members, even as the hunter himself remained unconscious of the fact that he had been marked for slaughter and the would-be assassin was getting his range.

Shad now set about the delicate task of holding the band and making his kill. With extreme care he took aim at the most distant buffalo, a large bull grazing on the far edge of the herd three hundred yards or so away. An instant after pressing the trigger he thought that the rifle had exploded in his face. Its recoil made him sway backwards from the waist as usual, but this time the force was so great as to knock him sidewise and down and the gun literally tore itself out of his hands. Dazed, he lay still for a moment. The breeze whipped the smoke away. Upon opening his eyes they were looking straight at the rocks. He blinked, shook his head a little, for he couldn't believe that he had seen a blue cloud swirling around that red pile over yonder. The wind took it away,

too. It behaved like smoke, he reflected, and it was smoke—gunsmoke!

Shad Lester's befuddled senses cleared instantly. He became conscious of a sting in his left arm and discovered that blood was dripping from a tear in the sleeve of his ducking jacket, a short distance above the elbow. A cautious test proved to his relief that the arm was not disabled. Without moving he stole a glance at his rifle, saw where the bullet had gouged a chunk from its walnut stock near the butt plate and thanked his lucky stars for an escape from death by a margin of four inches or less. The young hunter muttered an oath, scowled at the rocks and grimly thought that this was like old times.

Although it would have been a simple matter for Shad to roll to safety in a shallow wash on the slope a few yards behind him, he resolved to try a dangerous stratagem that had once enabled his feudist father to square accounts with a bushwhacking enemy. He lay like a dead man. With his eyes fixed upon the rocks he estimated the size of the target he offered while lying on his side that way and gambled his life against the skill of the hidden rifleman. The fellow would certainly take another shot at his victim to make sure before exposing himself. While waiting for that shot to come and wondering whether the bullet would find its mark Shad felt every hair on his body come to life and go to crawling, and he hoped to hell that the man out yonder wouldn't put it off too long.

In a moment the rocks again erupted smoke. Lester's eyes snapped shut, his body shrank inside his clothing during the fractional second that elapsed before the bullet ripped through the skirt of his jacket and his woolen pants and burned the skin over his hip joint. Quick as thought he rolled partly onto his back, made his wounded arm flop limply up and down again, but his eyes remained glued to the rocks.

Presently a rifle barrel appeared, followed by a man's bare head and shoulders. Obviously he had risen so as to get a better view of his target and for a long moment he seemed undecided whether to burn another cartridge or to take it for granted that Lester was dead. The young hunter scarcely breathed, held his lids open until his eyeballs smarted. At length the bushwhacker propped his gun into the crook of his arm, stepped boldly from behind the rocks and walked away with no sign of fear or haste.

Shad didn't move until the man was well clear of cover, then he cautiously slid a hand along the ground to his Sharp's and dragged the weapon toward him taking care to change his position as little as possible. Halfway to the draw the bushwhacker halted, looked around, stared intently. Lester instantly froze, cursing the luck that let him get caught with an empty shell in his rifle and he calmly estimated his chances of being able to reload and snap a shot at the fellow before he could reach cover. Better wait, he decided, and make certain. Evidently something aroused the man's suspicions for he lifted his rifle part way to his shoulder, then suddenly changed his mind and walked on.

The young hunter now went into action like a panther that had waited impatiently for its prey to come within striking range. He had never reloaded faster. As he shoved home a fresh cartridge and snapped the breech block into place the bushwhacker again glanced back. He may have been amazed at sight of his dead coming to life, for he stood as if rooted in his tracks. After a momentary pause, however, he dropped to one knee, whipped up his rifle and fired with almost panicky speed. Meanwhile Lester moved swiftly, but coldly deliberate. Remaining prone he took an elbow rest and, heedless of the bullet that split the air inches above his head, he lined his sights on the small brown figure with as much care and composure as if he were aiming at the vital spot behind the shoulder blade of a mov-

ing buffalo. The stranger was in the act of crouching lower when Shad fired. A slug that would knock down a bull weighing more than a ton seemed literally to pick the man up and fling him backwards. He lay dead still for the space of five seconds, then struggled to all-fours.

While reloading, Lester peered through the smoke. He saw the man pick up his rifle and settle back onto his haunches as he had often seen a dying buffalo do when fighting to stay on its feet. The hunter waited. Powder stains and dust failed to hide the lines in his thin hard face while he lay there, grimly watching his enemy take aim at him. Presently a burst of smoke hid the bushwhacker, a bullet gnawed at the ground yards in front of Shad and snarled away. He didn't move. He saw that the big gun had kicked the wounded man down, but the fellow wouldn't stay down. He rolled over, heaved himself to hands and knees—even tried to gain his feet, then sat back as before and fumbled with his rifle. It took him a long time to reload and he had trouble lifting the weapon to aim it. The hunter lay perfectly still, waiting. The breeze stopped as if it, too, were waiting. Shad saw the burst of smoke, heard the roar of the gun, but he couldn't tell where the bullet went. Again the recoil knocked the man down. He turned onto his face, raised to his elbows as though he were resting that way.

The breeze came to life, having changed direction so that it now blew directly from the bushwhacker to the buffaloes. A deep rumble reminded Lester that he had completely forgotten the herd. He got to his knees and looked over the knoll. Several of the bulls had lifted their heads, swinging them slowly from side to side as they tested the wind, and he saw at a glance that they had caught the man-scent. An instant later the herd stampeded.

The wounded man lay squarely in its path!

In the excitement of the moment Shad Lester sprang to his feet, flourished his rifle over his head, yelled with all his might —a useless thing, since the roar of the stampede drowned his voice in his own ears; but, next to Indian torture, the death most feared by hunters was that which rode on the horns of a stampede and as far as he was concerned the treacherous enemy out yonder was just another man now—a man to be saved from the dreadful fate that was thundering down upon him.

Lester came to his senses quickly. He dropped on one knee and went to pouring lead into the stampede, shooting buffalo faster than he had ever before shot them, shooting to kill, cripple, split the herd or turn them—always the leaders. But this band had gone crazy. When one went down another plunged into the lead and they ran as straight as if confined by canyon walls, their lumbering rocking-chair gait carrying them over the ground at deceptive speed. Shad clenched his jaws, cursed the shaggy beasts in his thoughts and made every bullet count, but failed to turn or split them. Soon they were thundering down the slope to the draw, straight at the man out yonder.

He hadn't moved other than to reach and get his rifle again. Lying on his elbows he was reloading and having trouble doing so. There was something desperately intent in the way he worked on the gun without more than a single glance at the oncoming herd. Lester hated to look at him. When certain death was a matter of seconds away he lifted the barrel of the rifle, laid his cheek against its stock and took aim. Shad dropped prone on the ground.

The man was aiming at *him!*

Lester could not, of course, hear the shot. Neither did he see the smoke. The stampede had passed on before he looked that way again.

The hunter went and got on his horse and rode down there. He found all that was left of a man dressed and painted like an Indian warrior — enough to identify Johnny Redfish!

LESTER headed for his camp and rode hard. The fact that Redfish was made up as a full-blood caused him to fear that this might be another instance where a mixed band had disguised themselves as Indians and staged a raid for which the redskins would be blamed. No telling what had happened while he was out of gun-hearing. However, he got some comfort from the thought that all of his men were at camp, having skinned out the previous day's kill and hauled in the hides the evening before: Easy Ezra, who was getting around right well with the aid of a crutch fashioned from a forked limb; Buddy, a plumb nervy boy and mighty handy; Sam Vasquez, formerly camp-tender, now a skinner and always dependable; and Humpribs Jackson, the regular skinner, so named because of his appetite for hump meat, a fighting fool. If they had not been caught napping, reflected Shad, that outfit would make it hot for any band of daylight raiders.

Upon topping a rise that gave him a view of the camp five hundred yards distant, Lester heaved a big sigh of relief. Everything looked natural — the hut, a framework of poles covered by eight layers of dry hides that would turn almost any bullet, a smoking campfire, stock eating grain from canvas troughs on the sides of the wagons, a hide rick, many green hides staked out flesh side up and gleaming white in the sunlight, and a man moving around—walked like Humpribs. Shad grinned dryly to himself. While he was shooting and getting shot at these scalawags of his had been taking it easy, staking out hides, fleshing and stacking a few—maybe, but mostly they'd been smoking and playing the coffee pot.

Pretty soon Humpribs sighted the horseman, waved his hat and bellowed like a buffalo bull to which he bore a slight resemblance, being nearly as broad as he was tall and hairy all over. The others waved, too, one of them seated near the fire with his back against something. Shad returned their salute. Damned triflin' pups, he thought affectionately, after all he'd been through he'd rub it in about lazying around camp. In fact he started to make his big talk immediately upon reining in where the grass had been scalped off to form a front yard, then the words stopped in his throat, changed entirely and came out in the shape of an explosive curse.

Shad saw three dead men!

Dressed and painted like Indians they were lying in the shade on the far side of the hut. Two were unmistakably white, the third was Les Lenair.

The young hunter stayed on his horse. He forgot to get off. Glancing around at his companions he noticed that Easy Ezra was leaning heavily on a roll of hides and the man was pale.

"What the hell?" snapped Lester, dismounting. "You been hurt, Ezra?"

The bashful man grinned timidly, made a false start, then blurted out, "None to speak of, boss. A bullet gouged my hide and sorta shook me up and maybe it cracked a rib—I ain't certain. But it don't amount to much."

"He's a liar, Shad!" rumbled Humpribs Jackson. "That there slug busted no less'n three of his ribs and it ripped off more'n a pound of good side meat. Skinny as he is, Old Easy cain't noways afford to lose that much beef so I claim that he's damned bad hurt."

Mexican Sam vigorously nodded his black head.

Lester turned to the boy. " 'Tain't never safe to believe a word these fellas say. Is your pa hurt very bad, Buddy?"

HAVING been treated like one of them by these rugged men, the boy had steadily grown more sure of himself. He answered promptly, "I don't think so, Mister Lester. My mamma could fix him up in no time if she was here."

His alert eyes caught sight of the blood on Shad's sleeve, "Why—*your* arm's bleeding!"

"Uh-huh, but it's stopped now," said the hunter carelessly. "Just a scratch."

He scowled at the grinning Humpribs, and demanded, "What happened here? Talk straight!"

The burly skinner hunkered down beside Easy Ezra. "Move over!" he growled. "Maybe *you* ain't bad hurt, but *I* am. The boss-man jest as good as called me a liar and I ain't shore but what he's right, so my feelin's ache and I got a misery in my conscience."

He brought out knife and plug, chopped off a mighty chew and passed them to Johnson. "Whittle yo'self a leetle sliver, Ezry. Not *too* much. It's powerful hard to get in this country and you ain't got the strength to handle a big chaw nohow."

Afterwards he cocked an eye at Shad, and went on to say, "What happened here? Huh! We done fit a battle that makes old Gettysburg look like a campmeetin' far as bloodshed is consarned. You see, it's like this—"

They had been attacked and almost completely surrounded by a band who dressed like Indians and rode like white men. The camp was holding its own all right when Easy Ezra thought of their horses and mules, staked on the spring branch out of sight of the hut from which they were fighting.

"D'you know what this here hongry-lookin' fool went and done?" continued Humpribs. "He crawled outside a-draggin' his busted foot and he climbed onto the hide rick so's he could keep our stock kivvered."

The bashful man looked very uncomfortable.

"Which reminds me," growled the big skinner. "I swore I'd paddle the sap out'n Buddy."

Shad grinned at the boy, then asked Humpribs, "What for?"

" 'Cause he didn't have no better sense than to foller his old man, a-packin' a Sharps and a sack of ca'tridges!"

Buddy put on a lot of color. Nevertheless, he spoke up, "You and Sam were mighty busy and Pa couldn't carry 'em and get along with his busted foot."

"You heard me tell yo' pa that I'd fetch the truck to him," barked the skinner, "but you went and snuck off while I was takin' a shot at a painted polecat. I fetched the skunk with a clean lung shot, too. Anyhow and re-gardless—"

Easy Ezra had caught two men in the act of making off with the stock. He killed them both, one being Les Lenair. Soon thereafter the others gave up the fight and rode away.

At the conclusion of the story Shad Lester placed an arm around the boy's thin shoulders.

Ever since that night in Sweetwater they had been covered by woolen underwear and shirt, and a fine new fleece-lined ducking jacket.

"Much obliged, Buddy," said the hunter.

Afterwards he reached down and shook hands with Easy Ezra. "Good work, Ezra. Thought you said you couldn't fight?"

The bashful man grinned sheepishly. He crossed and uncrossed his legs and pulled at his straggling beard. "Well, sah—I—uh-h-h," then his words tumbled out, "I'd been sorta thinkin' about that Johnny Redfish and what he done, and I reckon I *did* get kinda mad at him and his outfit. But it's just like I told you a while back, Mister Lester. I hunted a right smart in my day and I'm sorta handy with a rifle, but I ain't no fighter. No, sah, I ain't!"

Always Consult Your Horoscope as to What Days Are Lucky for Deals in Precious Stones

WYATT'S PEARL BUSINESS

By CAPTAIN FREDERICK MOORE

Author of Many Stories of Singing Sands Island

WHEN I went down into the bar of the South Seas Eagle House for breakfast, I found Wyatt standing over a stranger at a table, pencil poised over pad, saying wrathfully, "I want twenty-one bucks for a week's board and room in advance. This hotel, Cap'n Johansen, is run strick'ly on a cash basis, and unless I git it this is the last meal of vittles you git in the place."

Captain Johansen was eating fried eggs in a platter with a spoon. Half a bottle of trade gin and an empty tumbler were alongside the platter. He was a big man in wrinkled duck, flaxen hair that almost hid his blue eyes, and freckled hands.

A schooner had come in after midnight and left three men at Singing Sands Island. Snake Eye Smith and I heard the tumult but remained in bed. The three had been drinking and my impression was that an annoyed skipper had dumped his passengers on the beach and took his vessel out to sea.

"Hah? Vat you says?" demanded Captain Johansen. He threw his head back to shake the hair out of his eyes, tried to focus them on Wyatt, failed to see the Cape Codder, and resumed the job of chasing the last egg yolk across the platter with the spoon.

"You heard what I said! You slep' here last night, drinked up a quart and a half of my best imported gin, and you've et a dozen eggs for breakfast. Naow, I've got

to have twenty-one bucks for the comin' week."

Johansen looked at Wyatt, waved the dripping spoon at him, and remarked, "Ay ban goot for gusoline enschines."

Wyatt's thin face twisted in disgust. He hitched up his bar apron and wet the pencil on his tongue. "We ain't got no gasoline injines on the island. If we did, it wouldn't make no difference. I'm ready to give you a receipt for a week's board and room."

Johansen regarded the yellowed platter solemnly. His wind-dried face was etched with a network of genial lines. His flaxen eyebrows were bushy and resembled filigree ivory carvings stuck on his brows with glue. He took a swig directly from the gin bottle.

"Ay vant six mor schicken eggs!"

"You can't have no more eggs till you pay up."

Johansen wrinkled his brow in thought. "How many schickens you keeps?"

"I don't keep no chickens."

JOHANSEN turned and tried to stare in astonishment but his eyes refused to go into gear. "Vat? No schicken eggs! But Ay ban eat schicken eggs! Vhere you gets 'em, you no keeps schickens?"

"My Chink cook keep chickens and I buy the eggs off'n him."

"Hah! So you gets your eggs scheap you buys 'em from Chinks!"

"They ain't cheap at all. The hens lay wild in the jungles, spite of hell, and it's dangerous to hunt the eggs like that."

"Vat! To pick schicken eggs up is dangerous?"

"Ayah. P'int is, the jungles on this island are just crawlin' with head hunters. Mostly, they stay up in the mountains, but in the dark outside, they're likely to be under foot, and they're jumpy about gittin' stepped on."

Johansen's big face showed a spasm of astonishment. He even tried to see me across the table, but his wavering eyes missed stays and he gave up the attempt. "Goot Gott!" he roared. "Het hunters! Ay am not likes het hunters!"

"I don't give a damn what you like. Don't try to change the subject, neither, but show me the color of your cash."

SNAKE EYE SMITH came down the stairs. The former vaudeville hypnotist looked at Johansen with a wary eye and took the chair next to me.

"Don't bodder me vit cash talk," said Johansen. He gave Snake Eye a glassy stare and demanded, "Hah, Mister! Does you likes to keep schickens for laying eggs?"

"I've always wanted to but never got around to it," said Snake Eye. "Ought to be an interesting business."

Johansen wiped egg yolk from his chin and waved the spoon at Snake Eye. "Hah! It is werry, werry goot pusiness! One shicken, one day, one egg! One hunnert schickens, one day, one hunnert—"

Wyatt took a stab at his pad with the pencil and broke in, "You pay your bill for a week and never mind the chicken business!"

"Fife-teen hunnert schickens, one day, fife-teen hunnert—"

"Twenty-one bucks, spang down, here and now, Cap'n!"

Johansen took another swig from the gin bottle and slammed it down hard on the table. "Hah! I tells you not to bodder me vid money. Ay ain't got no money!"

"Godfrey mighty! Who's goin' to pay—?"

"Take it easy with this bird," cautioned Snake Eye. "If he started to wreck the place, he'd do an expensive job."

"Ayah, and I'd cut him in two with my shotgun." Wyatt went on with Johansen. "What do you think this hotel is? A pore house?"

Before Johansen could answer, a resonant voice came booming down through the split bamboo flooring over our heads, saying, " 'Tis all men's office to speak pa-

tience to those that wring under the load of sorrow."

"That's Shakespeare!" said Snake Eye in astonishment. "And I know the guy! Last time I saw him he was up in Burma when I was selling elephant hooks to mahouts."

"That ain't his name," said Wyatt. "Haow I happen to know, when he got here last night, he was too boiled to sign the register, so I writ the name down for him. It's Rook."

"Sure!" said Snake Eye. "Cato Brutus Rook, the Shakespearian actor! Last job he had was as a barker for a circus side show over in Australia."

Chang Su came in with another platter of fried eggs. Johansen took the platter and started in with his spoon.

"By Godfrey, the *Hussar* brings me the champion three-ring egg eater of the universe, and he's busted, and it's likely that the show feller recitin' po'try up in my four-dollar room ain't got a red cent to his name.

"The other jasper may have a pair of nickels on him, but I dunno as any of 'em can pay their keep." Wyatt threw pencil and pad on the nearby bar.

"Hah! Ay bet you nobody got any money!"

"You mean that the little squirt in the derby hat, name's Beamish, ain't got any money, too?" demanded Wyatt.

"Ay bet no, if you likes to bet."

"How can you bet with no money? Tell you one thing! Somebody's goin' to pungle up some cash out of this *Hussar* lot of passengers, or I'll have the hull kit and kaboodle of you put in jail over on Lantu Vanna Island."

"Yale!. Ay don't likes yales."

"Pay up, or you're headed for one, Cap'n."

Rook's voice drifted down through the split bamboo floor in a sonorous cadence. "Tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps in a stealing pace from day to day." Then he hiccoughed.

Sundown Skelly, the professional wrestler, who was in the room next to Rook's, woke up and demanded of his wife, "Babe, I didn't know that he was in a theater in Boston like we are from hearing actors while I'm asleep and all." They were on their honeymoon from Shanghai.

"You big lug, let me sleep! We ain't in no the-ater in Boston, but in a hotel on a wild island, and don't I know they're both wild."

"But, Babe, you don't hear no actors rehearsin' like that on wild islands what have got hotels."

"You lay off gin or you'll be seeing things as well as hearing, Hon. And shut your trap or I'll sock you one."

Sundown turned over in bed with sound effects like a grampus coming up through a thick field of floating seaweed. "It must be somebody's got a bum needle on that phoneygraft that was playing last week."

Rook sounded off again. "Trifles, light as air, are to the jealous, confirmation strong as Holy Writ."

"Slap me down!" cried Mrs. Skelly. "If that ain't Cato Rook, I'll drink the oil out of the lamp!"

"Is that Clarice, the Venus Fire dancer?" demanded Rook in astonished tones. "Clarice darling!"

"How'd you get to this wild island, Cato?"

"Taking my sabbatical year. Are you still in vaude with your fire dance, darling?"

"No, I'm on my honeymoon with Sundown Skelly. The Shanghai cops was mean to him, so I married the big lug."

"That's wonderful, darling!"

Sundown growled through the braided wall, "I'm the only one that calls me wife darling and all, so pipe down, or you'll be givin' me a slow burn."

"Aw, Hon, Cato don't mean no harm. You know we been on the same bill together many a time when vaude was good."

"We ought to have a spot of gin to celebrate our being in the same hostelry

together," said Rook. His rattan bed creaked as he climbed out.

We heard Sundown's feet hit the flooring like an elephant gone *amok*. "When an actor buys a drink I'll be at the bar," declared Sundown. "Come on, Babe—I'm dry."

"All we need now," said Wyatt, "to be a three-ring circus, is a twenty-four piece band and some ladies in tights."

Captain Johansen finished the platter of eggs with a flourish of the spoon. "Fife t'ousand schickens, one day, five t'ousand eggs. Ten t'ousand schickens, one day—"

"Ayah. You quit the chicken business, pay your bill, and git back to sea, Cap'n."

"Ay don't like the sea," said Johansen sadly. "Ay don't like pearlin'. Ay don't like fishin'. Schickens! If Ay had me some schickens—"

"All I gits is show folks and busted sailors," said Wyatt. "I'm workin' my fingers down to stubs goin' bankrupts with this hotel."

"Ay am tired of schooners. Ay am tired of ships. Ay am tired of stimmers, but Ay am goot for gusoline enschines. Hah!"

"I'm tired of gab," said Wyatt. "You've et all the eggs of the other boarders and Chang Su's got to start all over again."

"Ay vant me sax more schicken eggs."

THE whole hotel swayed as Sundown Skelly came down the bamboo stairs. He burst in on us, wearing the polo shirt he had stolen in Shanghai and the white pants he had stolen on a ship. The Japanese girl tattooed on his chest danced mincingly as he swung his shoulders and went around the end of the table.

"Cato Rook and me and me wife is coming down for some gin in our coffee to wake us up and all. Cato'll pay for the round," Sundown told Wyatt.

"Ayah," said Wyatt: "If he's got any money he'll pay for my gin, but he's likely busted. If it ain't one damn thing around here it's another."

Mrs. Skelly came in. She wore a blue mandarin coat with dragons embroidered in gold and red slacks. Her red hair was high on her head. She smiled at Johansen. He waved his eggy spoon at her as he tried to get his eyes into focus.

Sundown scanned the empty platter. "Who scrammed the scrambled eggs, if it ain't polite to ask, but it looks like the gazook wit' the spoon has had his turn at 'em."

"Bigger the appetite round here," said Wyatt, "the less money they got."

"Yerp," agreed Sundown. "Pass the gin."

"That's Cap'n Johansen's private bottle," said Wyatt. "Don't gum the game up drinkin' none till he's paid for it."

"We want some strong gin with some weak coffee into it," said Sundown.

A tall thin-faced man with long white hair, wearing a derelict morning coat, striped trousers and cracked patent leather shoes bowed in the doorway. He was well past seventy, and his faded eyes resented the strong morning sunlight.

"Hello, Cato!" said Snake Eye.

"By my halidom! The king of the stage hypnotists, Snake Eye Smith, who played the same kerosene lamp circuit with me from Bangor to Barstow!" They shook hands. "And Sundown Skelly, the sultan of stranglers! And Clarice, the fire dance Venus!"

"Yerp," said Sundown, as he reached for Johansen's gin bottle. "The last time I seen you you was recitin' the 'Rock of the Hesperus' in the depot in Manchester New Hampshire at three in the mornin' and you was good on account of you was drunk."

Wyatt thrust out a restraining hand. "Just one minute, gents! Thar ain't nobody goin' to lap up my best imported gin 'thout they show me some cash!"

Captain Johansen, who had leaned back in his chair and fallen asleep behind the hempen hair falling down over his forehead, said to an imaginary seaman, "Take in the yib sail."

"This is Cato Rook, in poison," said

Sundown, "and me and me wife pays for what he eats."

"Is the board good?" asked Cato.

"The best meals I ever drinked," said Sundown.

Rook sat. "As Shakespeare said, sometimes I am a king, then treason makes me with myself a beggar."

"Yerp," said Sundown, filling a glass with gin, "I always liked your riddles. Me uncle in Brooklyn, when he was sober, was fine at makin' up riddles. He had one—"

"Now, Hon, we don't need no cracks about Brooklyn."

"I wasn't makin' no cracks about Brooklyn, but he had one that goes—"

"There is ladies present, Hon."

"It goes like this—the oily boid catches the woim when he toins."

"Splendid," said Rook, as he lifted his glass.

"Naow you show folks hark to me," insisted Wyatt. "This ain't a oprey haouse, and I like po'try and riddles good as anybody, but this seafarin' man, Cap'n Johansen ain't paid for that gin. What's more, he ain't got no money, or so he says."

Johansen shook the hair away from one eye and glared at Wyatt. "Ay got frents —they pays you." He pointed at Sundown.

"Me friends is personal," objected Sundown. "You is a stranger."

"Hon, you shouldn't ought to have stuck your neck out like that for trouble."

"You wake up and gimme twenty-one bucks," said Wyatt. He shook Johansen's shoulder.

"Ay ban't asleep." Johansen cleared the other eye and stuck two fingers into the watch pocket under his belt. His knotty fingers tonged up a small roundish pink object. He thrust it toward Wyatt. "It's a pearl. It pays for my schicken eggs."

Wyatt took the pearl, staring in astonishment. So did Mrs. Skelly and Snake Eye and myself.

"A poil!" said Sundown, his eyes wide as he looked.

"Buy it, Hon. I need me some more pearls."

"Babe, you don't need no more poils. I brung you four from Thursday Island that time I went and come back in a ship."

"Hon, I'm collecting pearls to make me a necklace like that Russian dame had her in Shanghai."

"Babe, you shouldn't ought to be like Roosian dames."

"Godfrey mighty!" said Wyatt. "This looks vallybel! What you think of it, Snake Eye?" He handed it across the table.

Snake Eye scanned the pearl in the palm of his hand. He said to me in an undertone, "It's worth a couple of thousand bucks." He handed it back to Wyatt and nodded approvingly to the Cape Codder.

"You want me to hold it for security, Cap'n, that it?"

"Ay sells it to you for fife-ty dollars. Don't bodder me vid money."

"BUY it, Hon, for fifty bucks," said Mrs. Skelly.

"Naow, wait a minute," said Wyatt. "Thar's a ketch into this somewhars, Cap'n Johansen. You come in here with the schooner *Hussar* as a passenger, and you're busted flatter'n a skate fish. Whyn't you sell this pearl afore you got here in the fust place?"

Johansen opened his eyes and brushed away his hair. "Ay tells you. If I goes to sell it, pipples says Ay schteals it. So vat do I do? Vell, Ay comes here busted. Ay don't bodder vid money, like I tells you. A vants more schicken eggs."

"I knew thar was a ketch," said Wyatt.

"When I was on the stage," said Snake Eye, "sawing a lady in two, I bought a pearl for ten bucks that I thought was a bargain until I found out that it had been made in a glass works in New York."

Mrs. Skelly glared at Snake Eye. "That's just to scare my hubby off buying this one, you big chiseler!"

Sundown spoke. "You never sawed no lady in two. She come out of the box like

she went in, healt'y. You can't fool me—I peeked."

"Hon, dear, shut your trap and think of pearls."

"Babe, you don't need no necklace for your neck."

Snake Eye asked Johansen. "How many you got, Cap'n?"

"Ay tank Ay got fife more."

"Could I have a look at 'em?"

"The big foot in the door, like when you was selling pills in Yonkers," said Mrs. Skelly to Snake Eye.

Johansen fished a second pearl from his pocket and held it it the palm of his hand, squinting at the pinkish gem.

"Three thousand for a pearl like that is pew rent," Snake Eye whispered to me from behind his hand.

"Hon, whyn't you ask the man to look at a pearl yourself?"

"Babe, we don't want no pearls."

"Fife-ty dollars," said Johansen.

"Godfrey mighty, he's got a hull pocket full of 'em."

Johansen brought a third pearl out and laid it in his hand with the other.

Mrs. Skelly raged, "Pearls kicking around like shirt buttons in a Chink laundry and my hubby has a mouth full of mango!"

Johansen found two more pearls and handed the four over to Mrs. Skelly. "You looks at 'em, Missus! Fife-ty dollars for one, a hunnert dollars for two, a hunnert and fifty dollars for three—"

Mrs. Skelly spoke to Wyatt. "My hubby wants you to get two hundred bucks out of the safe to buy me these pearls."

Sundown dropped his mango. "Babe, we ain't buyin' no pearls wit' no two hundred bucks, so—" He stopped to inhale coffee.

"Hon, don't slup your coffee! Didn't I read to you out of a book by a lady that gents don't slup?"

"I don't want to be no gent and buy pearls that—"

"Captain Johansen, my hubby's taking four pearls at fifty bucks a throw."

"Don't bodder me vid money," said Johansen from behind the fringe of hair over his eyes. "But if you wants to buy the pearls—"

"Will you give me fifty bucks for this one, Snake Eye?" asked Wyatt. "I dunno nothin' about pearls, but I need some cash."

Snake Eye hesitated. "I'll look up my horoscope for the day," he said, taking a little book from his pocket and thumbing the pages.

I knew that he wanted time to think over the business of the pearls. They were such bargains that I was suspicious myself, and more than one man in the islands has found himself in jail for buying pearls at prices too low. There was also something fishy about the way Captain Johansen had arrived at Singing Sands Island loaded with pearls and short of cash.

THERE was a gentle cough at the foot of the stairway from the upper rooms. A gnome-like little man, wearing a battered suit of seersucker cloth with brown stripes, walked into the bar. He had on a flat-brimmed straw hat that had been turned into a visored cap by cutting away the brim except in front.

He took the nearest chair at the table and oozed his knees under the hanging end of the cloth.

"By Godfrey, I forgot all about you, Mr. Beamish," said Wyatt, as he came from the safe and laid four fifty-dollar banknotes alongside Mrs. Skelly's plate.

"Good morning, ladies and gents," said Beamish. "Hope I ain't too late for a cup of corfee."

"You might take off your hat at the table," said Wyatt. "This hotel ain't the depot quick lunch counter at Nashway, New Hampshire."

"No," said Mrs. Skelly. "This is what you might call a roughfined place We keep cockroaches as big as mud turtles."

"Don't knock the joint, Babe," said Sundown.

"Hon, I'm buying pearls—and don't slup your coffee, like I told you."

"We ain't buyin' no pearls, Babe, didn't I say onct."

"If you got other ideas, Hon, I'll slug it out with you." Mrs. Skelly picked up the banknotes and counted them.

Beamish took off the hat and threw it out on the veranda. "Did I hear something about pearls?" he stared at the banknotes in Mrs. Skelly's hand and then shifted his swift eyes to the pearls on the table before Captain Johansen.

"Yerp," said Sundown. "We was talkin' about pearls."

"And if I might ask, polite as hell, what is it to you?" Mrs. Skelly demanded of Beamish.

Wyatt asked Beamish, "While you was listenin' to gab about pearls, did you happen to hear any remarks about us being gummed up about board money?"

Beamish picked up the coffee pot and poured himself a cup. "All I heard about was pearls."

"Want to make anything of it, bud?" demanded Sundown.

Beamish sucked coffee from his saucer and replied, "Not exactly, but I'll remark to the cockeyed world this morning that I'm buying no pearls, even at bargain prices."

"Mebbe that's because you ain't got no money," said Wyatt. "It's a p'int I'd like to clear up before you've et too much. Go ahead with the coffee on the haouse but don't start reachin' for vittles till we know more about your pants pocket bank balance. This is a hotel and we got rates."

Snake Eye looked up from his horoscope book. "Might I ask, Mr. Beamish, what's wrong about buying pearls—if you happen to know anything about it?"

Captain Johansen stirred uneasily in his chair and said in his sleep, "Ve put her on the shtarboard tack, Mister, so stand by the yib sheet."

Beamish flattened his ears like diving rudders and submerged again into the saucer of coffee. He surfaced, and said, with a thumb pointed at the napping Johansen, "I ain't buying no bargain pearls because I come here in the same boat with *him,* that's why."

Snake Eye turned his basilisk gaze on Beamish. "You mean that the pearls are not safe to buy?"

Beamish finished the coffee in the saucer and answered in a careless tone, "Don't put words in my mouth. I didn't say that."

"You hinted that something was terrible wrong," charged Mrs. Skelly. "Don't you try to slick over what you said! And don't crab the party when I'm buying pearls, Mister."

"Want me to lick him, Babe?" asked Sundown.

Beamish took a nervous gulp of coffee directly from his cup.

"He slupped, Babe!"

"That's because he ain't a gent, Hon."

"The pearls may be a good bargain," said Beamish. "But at Lantu Vanna they've got a good jail."

"Yust a leedle schmall yale," said Johansen in his sleep.

"What's your horrorscope for the day, Snake Eye, before we buy that pearl?" asked Wyatt. "I'm in on the trade, fifty-fifty with you, if the stars are right."

"Ay don't like schmall yales."

Snake Eye read from his book. "For this date, Gemini is in the ascendant. Not a good day for bargaining. Act with caution. Delay all financial matters with strangers."

"Hell!" said Wyatt. "That sounds dangerous. We better go slow with this pearl business."

Snake Eye pocketed his book and swung to Beamish. "Why do you make cracks about jails when we're going to buy pearls from the man who owns 'em?"

"Owns 'em!" said Beamish, in pretended amazement. "Oh, in that case, it's okay by me. Go right ahead and buy 'em. I wouldn't know a thing about the pearls, seeing that I was only a passenger with

Captain Johansen in the schooner *Hussar* from Thursday Island."

"Just the same, you shot off your trap," said Mrs. Skelly.

"Yerp," agreed Sundown. "When we was buyin' pearls and all."

"What you mean, Beamish, is that the pearls were pinched."

"How would I know?" demanded Beamish with an aggressiveness that was startling from such a little man.

"You know something or you wouldn't be making cracks," said Snake Eye. "Just what is your line, anyhow?"

"Collar buttons and firecrackers."

"Oh, is that so?" asked Mrs. Skelly scornfully. "Happen to have any suspension bridges in odd sizes?"

"Are you kidding me?" demanded Snake Eye.

"I kin lick him," said Sundown.

"I'm not kidding anybody," protested Beamish, now alarmed. "The gents in these islands buy collar buttons and the Chinkies buy firecrackers to scare away the devils."

"You're crawling out of that crack you made about jails," said Mrs. Skelly.

"Listen, lady! I could've bought them pearls cheap before I got here. I come in the same boat with him, didn't I? Think I'd pass up any bargains in pearls?"

Mrs. Skelly handed her banknotes back to Wyatt.

"Bed down the cash in the safe again. Snake Eye's book said that Gemini was against a cash deal for him today, and I've a hunch that the dame's right, even if she has got a name that sounds Russian."

"I've got a right to take a pearl against a board bill," said Wyatt, who hated to let a bargain get past him.

"Mister," said Beamish. "You got a right to do anything you want to till John Law tells you different. Anybody with a pinched pearl can't argue with the law in these islands. If you've got a hot pearl, you're in the same boat as the guy that pinched it in the first place. Ain't I right?"

Snake Eye pushed the pearl before him back toward Wyatt. "The man knows his law, I'll say that much. And my horoscope for the day seems to run right along in the same groove. I'm not buying any pearls."

"You hark to me, Beamish," said Wyatt. "Johansen ain't got enough money to buy a pair of swimmin' pants for a mosquito's brother. There's a law about payin' for board and room at hotels in these islands, includin' of this one."

"That's not my troubles," said Beamish.

"By Godfrey, don't you try to talk me out of any board and room. And you pay me twenty-one bucks yourself for a week in advance, or git away from the table!"

Beamish took out a wallet, stripped off a thick wad of banknotes a pair of twenties and laid them on the table. "That's for Johansen. I'll back him on his board. And here's two more for my board and room. Let me know when I've used up my forty —and when Johansen's at the end of that other pair."

"That," Snake Eye said to Wyatt, "looks as if the man's got sense about pearls. He could've bought 'em himself before he got here. Mr. Beamish, I apologize if I've questioned your integrity and truthfulness."

"Don't mention it," said Beamish. He picked up the coffee pot.

"Fair and squar'," said Wyatt, pocketing the cash. "You're a gent, Mr. Beamish. Now I don't have to git in no trouble 'bout the pearl business."

"As the Bard of Avon says," remarked Rook, "our doubts are traitors and make us lose, by fearing to attempt the good we oft might win."

"I dunno 'bout that," said Wyatt. "Looks to me like we got out of trouble with these pearls just in time."

"Time," said Rook, "shall unfold what plaited cunning hides—"

Wyatt broke in, "Eat your vittles and never mind the po'try." And he added to Snake Eye Smith, "That Jiminy in your horrorscope book got the shadder of that Lantu Vanna jail off'n my neck, and that's all I give a damn about."

Johansen woke up. "Yale?" he demanded. "Vat Yale?"

"You put these here pearls in your pants pocket and don't ask questions. Your board is paid and I'm shut of a dicker that could've got me in a mess with the police." He gathered the pearls and put them into Johansen's hand. The big man pocketed them and lapsed back into slumber. When he began running gasoline engines in his sleep Beamish helped Wyatt carry the big fellow up to bed.

SNAKE EYE was mopey after breakfast. He walked around in the palm grove muttering to himself about how tough the luck was that his horoscope for the day prevented him from picking up a fortune in pearls from a very small investment.

"That big chiseler and his book that kept me from getting more pearls," Mrs. Skelly complained out on the veranda. "He's always pulling the stars on us when we want to do somethin' that puts us in the dough."

"Yerp," agreed Sundown. "But you didn't need no pearls, Babe, like I said, and we got in the safe them two hundred eatin' bucks."

Before tiffin time Beamish went up to his room for a nap. He was still asleep when a schooner came into the bay. Wyatt woke him for he had remarked that he wanted to run over to Lantu Vanna if a boat came in.

By the time the vessel tied up, Beamish was on the rickety pier with his suitcase. It turned out that the schooner was not going to Lantu Vanna, so Beamish came back up from the beach with two men. But he left the suitcase on board.

We were all on the veranda as the three walked up to the bamboo steps of the hotel. One man was tall and he had a set to his shoulders that suggested a uniform as his usual garb. He scanned us all with severe gray eyes before he mounted the steps.

Sundown whispered to Snake Eye, "Them two is bulls."

"Looks like it—one is a cop in plain clothes. Beamish looks worried."

The other stranger had a sun-blackened face, wearing white drill, and he walked with the limp knees and wide gait of a sailor. Beamish was behind them, and as Snake Eye had noted, I felt that the little man did have a worried look.

"Come right in and set, gents," said Wyatt.

They walked into the veranda and the tall man looked us all over in a swift glance. He seemed to miss somebody. "Isn't Captain Johansen here?"

"W'al, yes, he is, but as he's a little behind in his sleep he's takin' a nap."

"Wake him up," said the tall man, grit in his voice. "It's important. We've come from Thursday Island to see him."

"W'al, gents, if you want to be polite, you might say who you be."

"My name's Hutton," said the tall man, his voice still gritty, "and this is Captain Neilsen. The schooner can't wait but a few minutes. So you just dig Johansen out of bed."

Wyatt's face twisted in sudden anger. "I don't take orders 'round here less'n I feel like it, gents. And Cap'n Johansen's

board and room is paid for a week, so I don't feel like trottin' after him jist on your say-so to wake up a boarder that's paid in advance."

"Mr. Hutton's connected with the government," said Captain Neilsen.

"Ain't that nice," said Wyatt. "And jist what's your business on this island?"

"Captain Johansen has some pearls that belong to me."

"Eh, what's that?" demanded Wyatt. "You mean—police?"

"I've police authority if I have to use it," said Hutton sharply. "Our business is with Johansen. You call him, and we can attend to it without any advice from you."

"W'al, if you've got authority, that's jest a mite different. I'll see if I can whistle him up. Come along into the bar and set a spell while you have some cold beer on the house." He led them into the bar, Beamish tagging along, looking more worried.

"Beamish was right," whispered Snake Eye. "Them pearls Johansen's got are hot."

"YERP," said Sundown. "He'll be took by the law."

"Hon, I'm glad them pearls ain't on my neck—and you was right for once, you big lug."

Wyatt stepped to the speaking tube that went up to Johansen's room, took a deep breath and blew hard. The whistle at the end not far from Johansen's pillow gave off a blast like a wailing banshee on a dark and rainy night in Kerry.

"Stharboard your hellum!" yelled Johansen. "Ve got a vhistling buoy to poort!"

Wyatt bawled up at the bamboo ceiling, "Thar's gents here from Thursday Island to see you!"

"Ay don't vant to see nobody from Thursday Island."

Captain Neilsen bellowed, "Come below, Johansen! I've come for my pearls!"

"Hah! Pearls! Ay haff no pearls from you."

"No nonsense! I'm Neilsen and I want my pearls."

"Ay selled the pearls. Don't bodder me."

"No, you didn't sell no pearls!" yelled Wyatt. "You got 'em in your pants pocket—the watch pocket. And thar's a man here from the police."

"Ay don't vant to see no police yentlemen."

"Git along down here!" Wyatt yelled. "This is a respectable hotel and we don't want no monkey business with the police."

"Vell, Ay comes. Anyvay Ay vants a trink of chin."

We heard Johansen roll out of bed. He started for the stairway, made a bad course, and had to start all over again, before he finally came blundering slowly down the creaky stairs. He staggered in to the bar, sleepy eyed, holding his white pants up with one hand, his feet in socks. He looked at Neilsen, then turned and tried to focus his eyes on Hutton. "Vat you vants?" he demanded.

"Captain Neilsen is here to get his pearls from you. My name's Hutton, and I'm the collector of customs at Lantu Vanna. Major Swift, chief of police at Lantu Vanna sent me along with Neilsen."

"Ay don't like police," said Johansen.

"Maybe you don't, but you sold a pearling lugger to Captain Neilsen, didn't you?"

"Sure! Vat is it to you?"

"I owe you three thousand dollars on the lugger, and I've come to settle up. You've got pearls that I gave you as security for the balance due on the boat."

"And I'm here," said Hutton, "to witness the final payment on the vessel as the law requires."

Captain Neilsen took out a fat wallet, extracted a packet of banknotes and laid it on the bar. "There's three thousand—and I want my pearls."

"Hah!" said Johansen, waking up abruptly at sight of the cash. "Sure! Ay vas ashleep! Ay treamed I selled the

pearls! Ay got 'em." He stuck two fingers into the watch pocket—then a look of horror crossed his face. "Yumpin' Yiminy! De pearls is vent out from my pants!"

"I'll bet they're up in your bed," said Wyatt.

Johansen clutched at his shirt breast pocket. "My vatch, too, is vent! Look! All I got is some of the schain!" He pulled a few links of gold chain from his pocket, the end being toggled to the buttonhole.

Wyatt thrust a finger toward the sign that warned guests not to keep valuables in their rooms. "This hotel ain't li'ble unless cash and jewelry is put in the safe. You can't hold me responsible for anything you've lost while you're asleep."

Beamish began to edge out toward the veranda. Snake Eye was looking into the bar through the open kajang. He rose swiftly and stopped Beamish in the doorway. "You stay here, Mister!" said Snake Eye.

"What is it to you where I go?" demanded Beamish.

"Plenty! You said them pearls were hot to keep us from buying 'em. Now they've been pinched from Johansen—and I've a hunch that you didn't want him to sell 'em because you were set to pinch 'em yourself."

Beamish cried, "Don't you talk to me like that!" Then he swung his right for Snake Eye's jaw.

The hypnotist ducked and sent a right and left to the little man's chin. He rocked back on his heels and fell inside. Snake Eye frisked Beamish and from his pockets took a small silk handkerchief with the pearls knotted in a corner—and handed to Johansen his watch.

"Hah! Ay get my vatch! And my pearls! He takes 'em vhile Ay schleeps!"

"Make a charge and I'll arrest him," said Hutton.

"Ay scharge him yust twanty dollars he pays for my board."

"Put that bird in jail!" said Wyatt.

"Vat is the goot to put him in yale? It is yust a schmall leedle yale."

Beamish got to his feet, rubbing his jaw, and edging back from Snake Eye. We heard the tramp of heavy feet behind us. A big man in a white coat and a limp straw hat roared, "Any time today, gents! I hold my schooner while you come up here for some kind of a bear dance! Come on, git goin', before I lose that draft of air I need to get out of the bay." He was the skipper from the schooner.

Hutton thrust a document before Johansen and handed him a fountain pen. "Sign that! All right, Captain, we're all set to go along."

Johansen signed. Then Hutton and Neilsen ran down into the palm grove after the irate schooner skipper. And Beamish followed them.

"You can see," said Snake Eye to Wyatt, "that my horoscope for the day was right. This is the eighteenth of the month and—"

Wyatt reached for the calendar pad behind the bar, and tore off a page. "This is the nineteenth, Snake Eye. I should've tore that page off this mornin', but it's just been one damn thing after another around here."

"Then I had the wrong day!" said Snake Eye. He pulled out his horoscope book. "Let me see what the aspects are for today. Here we are! An auspicious day for all transactions, especially favorable for anything pertaining to precious stones."

"Them is pearls," said Sundown.

"You are right again!" said Mrs. Skelly. "Nothing like brains, Hon."

Captain Johansen stuck his roll of banknotes into his pocket. "Ay neffer bodders vid money," he said. "Ay likes a trink of chin. Ve celebrates. Giff everybody a trink."

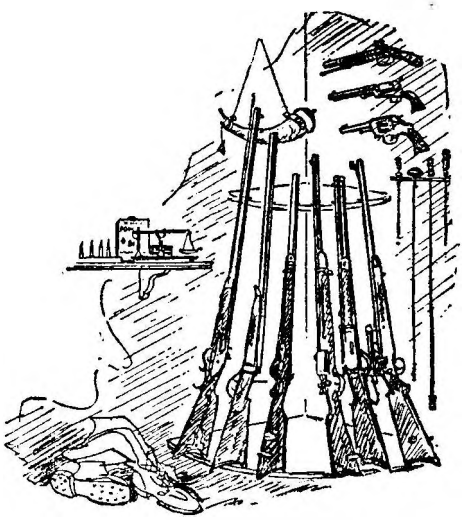
Wyatt reached for the gin bottle on the shelf behind the bar. "I was a mite sharp about you payin' your board and room in advance, Cap'n. Naow, what is it you'll want for tiffin?"

"Ay vant sax more schicken eggs."

We lined up at the bar and glanced down at the beach. Beamish was going up the gangplank of the schooner as the stern line was being cast off.

"Some day, Hon," said Mrs. Skelly, "you'll have a chance to buy me pearls again like you started to this morning."

"By Godfrey!" said Wyatt. "That was a narrer escape for everybody. If you don't mind, Cap'n, I'll take a shot myself on this round you're payin' for, jist for the wear and tear on my heart in this pearl business I've been through."



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by

PETE KUHLHOFF

Bullets Speak for Themselves

THE Ballistic Bureau of the New York City Police Department is sompin mighty interesting, believe me!

"What's that?" some lug asks in hushed tones. "Is it where the empty hulls are reloaded for the boys of the department to use in making their marksman and expert ratings so's they'll get a little more paid vacation each year?"

Well, you've got something there—but the Ballistic Bureau is nary sich place. It is a very scientific and important section of a fine police force.

The ballistic boys are in on any crime that is perpetrated with the aid of a firearm. And it is their job to arrange ballistic evidence in a form that would be presentable in court. And I'll say this is a heap of responsibility.

First of all, let's take a peak at the Bureau collection of hand-guns. They have everything all the way back to the flintlock, and each and every one was used in the commitment of some crime.

Included are some weird home-made jobs dreamed up by would-be inventors, several of whom I'm sure were dropped on their respective heads when just out of the incubator.

For instance, there is one nifty that is constructed of dime-store curtain rod parts —a crude-looking contraption which was made to handle (?) the .38 caliber pistol cartridge. I know one thing for sure. You guessed it! Not just once would I shoot it.

Another "much ado about nothing" is a "brain-child" that cost quite a tidy roll of green stuff. It consists of a new Camp Perry model Colt .22 caliber pistol with the muzzle end of the barrel threaded for about an inch and a half to take some special precision made dies. To operate this gadget you place a piece of copper wire and a small washer in the die—load the pistol with a blank cartridge and pull the trigger. Lo and behold, the washer is crimped to the wire! Bet this Rube Goldberg set the inventor (?) back at least 200 simolians.

In the exhibition cases are shown the results of experiments to determine the amount of burn or stain left by a gun fired at various distances. These displays are used in court when necessary.

Strange as it may seem, a pistol, using smokeless powder, fired at two feet leaves practically no mark on cloth.

Various tests were made on so-called "bulletproof" vests—not one of the ones tried held back the ordinary .38 Special pistol bullet.

A section of bulletproof glass one and one-half inches thick which bounced off the .38 Special and .45 caliber pistol bullets was neatly pierced by the .357 mag-

num which is the most powerful of all handgun cartridges.

One of the many interesting jobs the ballistic boys do, is that of handling the

"comparison" microscope. Essentially, it is merely a pair of matched microscopes, fitted with rotators, stages, etc., for handling bullets, and hooked up over the top of the two is a prismatic connecting eyepiece. This picks up half of the field seen with each mike, brings it to the single eyepiece, divided by a thin hair line down the center. So the operator can watch the lines from one bullet seen in half the field, blend or run into the same lines on the portion of the other bullet in the other half of the field—if they were fired from the same gun.

Hey! wait a minute. First of all, maybe you didn't know that in the manufacture of guns there are many very small tool marks left in the barrel, on the breech faces, extractors, firing pins, ejectors, etc. These marks are not always discernible to the naked eye, but under the microscope it is a different story. Thus each gun leaves its own fingerprints not only on the fired bullet, but also on the case.

I'm told that the hardest bullets to identify are the ones shot from a much fired target gun—the many bullets going through the barrel polish away the factory characteristics.

The easiest to identify seems to be jacketed bullets fired from automatic pistols, which, in the smaller or commercial sizes at least, come very rough in the bore, the rifling of which is made with a hook cutter, and are not lapped for finish. The theory being that the copper-jacket bullets will polish it fast enough.

Photographs, of course, are taken through the "comparative" miscroscope, of corresponding portions of bullets and used to show to the judge and jury.

I wish we had a lot more space so we could go into detail on the various activities of the Ballistic Boys but we gotta call a halt for now!

This and That

The Fall of 1941 catalog of L. L. Bean, Freeport, Maine, just came in. It's a book of 80 pages, crammed full of Sportsman Equipment and is a neat item to have conspicuously around the house for the eye of the Christmas gift shopper. (Mark the items you like best!)

C. C. Johnson, the well-known gunsmith of Thackery, Ohio, has taken over the Red Head reloading press business of my friend, Earl Naramore, who is in the Service. As was announced in these columns the vertical Red Head tool is adapted for Ideal dies and tool parts.

If you want to handle a nice .22 caliber semi-automatic rifle, hightail it to the nearest gun store and take a look at the new Remington model 550. It's a honey!

I hear the army has taken on the new .45 caliber automatic rifle, as predicted in these columns some time ago—or did you get that message from the oracle?

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

The King's Man

C. F. KEARNS whose story "The King's Man" is in this issue is now the king's man himself—back with the R.C.A.F. as instructor. "Things have changed since the last war," he comments in a recent letter. "A typical flying field of my youth was simply an animated madhouse and the personnel prided themselves on being a bit whacky—the pop-

ular impression being that a man had to have a few cogs misplaced to be a flyer. They have gone scientific in the intervening years, and practical and most efficient, also. It is rather an eye-opener for those of us who were born thirty years too soon!"

Letter from Caddo Cameron

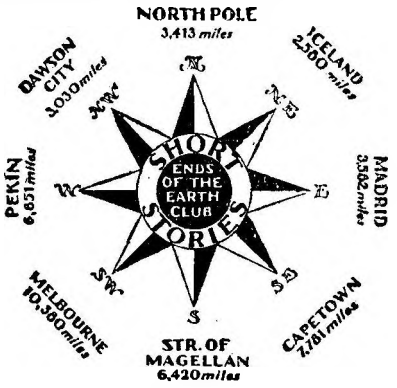
LIKE a good many old-time Texans, the place where my story, *The Man Out Yonder,* opens had occasion to change its name. When some of those who participated in the Adobe Walls battle in June, 1874, moved south and settled on Sweetwater Creek they took the name of Hidetown. Along in 1875 Fort Elliot was built a short distance from the place and it changed its name to more dignified and less odoriferous Sweetwater. It got along all right with that name until 1879 when they went to establish a postoffice there and it was learned that Texas had another Sweetwater; whereupon the good citizens of Wheeler County simply switched to another language and called their county-seat Mobeetie, which is Comanche for Sweetwater.

My wife and I got caught by a norther up there some time back and while waiting it out in the comfort of a well-heated room, I imagined what it must have been like in the old days—hence the brief description with which my story opens.

Not changing the subject—but don't let the disparaging remarks of old-time civilian Indian fighters give you an idea that the army of those days didn't carry some plenty tough men on its muster rolls. Sergeant King was one of these. A non-commissioned officer in the cavalry, he used to take a furlough during the cattle shipping season and help his cowboy friends to raise hell up and down the line in Kansas cowtowns. King was bad, too—notches on his guns and he had earned them. But his hectic life came to a sudden end in old Sweetwater when he tangled with young Bat Masterson as related in this story and for the reason given. The

surroundings were slightly different, however, and in the interest of brevity I omitted certain facts. Other troopers were present and when they showed a disposition to finish Bat off while he lay on the floor, the famous gambler and gunman, Ben Thompson, jumped onto a faro table with two six-shooters and a line of straight talk that held them until Masterson could be moved to safety. *Caddo Cameron.*

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, c/o Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Your handsome membership - identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

Button, Button, Who's got a Button?

Dear Secretary:

Please enter my name in your Ends of the Earth Club. I do enjoy writing to members the world over and your club seems to have a good list of world-wide members. Your stories are different—full of pep and action. I would like at least one story of the South Seas in each issue as they are

always exciting. My son (16) thinks your magazine surpasses them all.

My hobby is buttons, and more buttons.

Respectfully,
Alexander Vient.

P. O. Box 943
Jackson, California.

From a Uruguayan Stamp Collector

Dear Secretary:

I would like to be considered as an applicant for membership of the Ends of the Earth Club. Being an assiduous reader of your magazine, I take the liberty to write you this letter.

I am a Uruguayan very much interested in making acquaintance with persons who might be kind enough to do me a great favour.

I would very much appreciate knowing someone who would care to send me new or old magazines, catalogs or photos showing the interior of Sport Clubs, that is to say, where there appears photos of swimming pools, gymnasiums, courts for basket ball, badminton, and showing the apparatus used. Also pictures of any kind showing the interior of American quick restaurants and soda fountains.

My chief hobby is stamp collecting, so I would be more than glad to forward to those that care to write me, stamps or postal cards of the River Plate countries.

Cordially yours,
E. Bentancourt.

Calle Manuel V. Pagola No. 3336,
Montevideo, Uruguay, S. America.

Wants Job in South America

Dear Secretary:

I would like to register in your Ends of the Earth Club. At the present time I am working in Chicago. I arrived here from Denver, Colorado, just about eight months ago, mainly looking for a break to come for a chance to get work in South America. It happens my father spent most of his early life in S. A., and Portuguese East Africa, so I decided to take my chance.

I am now waiting for the next issue of

SHORT STORIES, and also my membership-identification card from your club.

Sincerely yours,

H. R. Peterson.

Crest Hotel, 1519 W. Adams,
Chicago, Illinois

ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB MEMBERS

WITH hundreds of letters from new members coming in every day, it is obviously impossible to print all of them in the columns of the magazine. The editors do the best they can, but naturally most readers buy SHORT STORIES *because of the fiction that it contains. Below are more names and addresses of Ends of the Earth Club members. Most of these members will be eager to hear from you, should you care to correspond with them, and will be glad to reply. Note these lists, if you are interested in writing to other members. Names and addresses will appear only once.*

C. I. Anderson, 550 W. 20th St., New York, N. Y.
M. Arnett, Sublett, Kentucky
S. Arnett, Royalton, Kentucky
Paul Biederstadt, Gen. Del., Port Orchard, Washington
Hamilton Girkhimer, Box 116, Idnio, Calif.
V. M. Bistline, Hazel St. Cleaners, Danville, Illinois
Percy G. Bresee, Waterloo, Que., Canada
M. Brimlow, 8431 113th St., Richmond Hill, N. Y.
H. C. Bring, Arpin, Wisconsin
Elmer Brown, 1126 S. 10th Ave., Arcadia, Calif.
John J. Burke, 608 Wilson Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.
H. Cloninger, Box 8, Bessemer City, N. C.
E. J. Cole, Carver, Kentucky
George H. Courtin, 2307 Cannon St., Danville, Illinois
Oliver B. Crosley, Hq. Battery, 1st C. A., Fort Sherman, C. Z.
Norman L. Dawson, 669 N. Union St., Phila., Penna.
Lew Dick, 42-60 Bowne St., Flushing, L. I., N. Y.

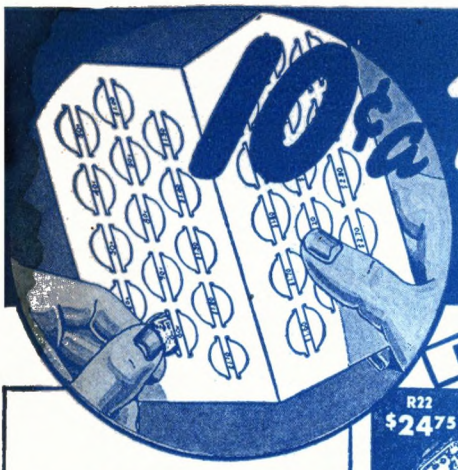
James Hanover,
SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

I enclose these four coupons from SHORT STORIES.

Please send me a list of Ends of the Earth Club members interested in stamp collecting.

Name.....

Address.....



10¢ a Day buys a Watch on Our SAVINGS BOOK PLAN

BULOVA ELGIN GRUEN KENT BENRUS

Yes—only 10c a day on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN will buy your choice of these nationally known watches. It's simple—here's how you go about it...

WHAT YOU DO:

Send coupon below with a dollar bill and a brief note telling me who you are, your occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. Indicate the watch you want on coupon, giving number and price.

WHAT I'LL DO:

I'll open an account for you on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN, send the watch you want for approval and

10-DAY TRIAL

If satisfied, you pay 10 monthly payments. If you are not satisfied after wearing the watch for ten days, send it back and I'll return your dollar on our

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

A Savings Book will be sent to you to help you save your dime each day. YOU PAY MONTHLY by money order or check. Try this easy, convenient method that has helped thousands to own fine watches without burden on the pocket book or savings.

Jim Feeney

FREE TO ADULTS

A postcard brings my complete 48-page catalogue and full details on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN. No obligation.

R22 $24.75

M17 $24.75

R22 — Ladies' BULOVA; 17 J. 10K yel. gold plate. $24.75
M17—Man's BULOVA; 15 J. 10K yel. rolled gold plate case; bracelet. $24.75
$1 deposit $2.38 a month

L140 $37.50

S141 $37.50

L140 — Ladies' ELGIN; 17 J. 10K yel. gold filled case. $37.50
S141 — Man's ELGIN—sturdy 10K yellow gold filled case; 17 jewels. $37.50
$1 deposit $3.65 a month

P143 $15.95

K166 $15.95

P143 — Ladies' tiny KENT. 7 jewels. Guaranteed. $15.95
K166—Man's KENT. Guaranteed. 10K yellow rolled gold plate case; 7 jewels. $15.95
$1 deposit $1.50 a month

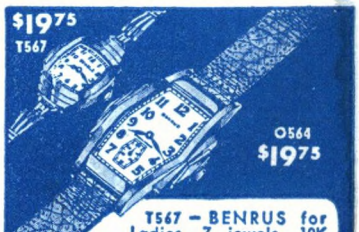
$29.75 T67

O68 $29.75

T67 — Ladies' GRUEN. 15 J. 10K yel. rolled gold plate. $29.75
O68 — Man's GRUEN Verithin: 15 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate. $29.75
$1 deposit $2.88 a month

K273 $19.75

K273 — Service Watch — new radium dial, easy-to-see. 7 Jewels, sturdy 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. Made especially for Army and Navy men.
$1 deposit $1.98 a month



$19.75 T567

O564 $19.75

T567 — BENRUS for Ladies. 7 jewels, 10K gold plate; bracelet. $19.75
O564—Man's BENRUS: 17 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate; leather strap. $19.75
$1 deposit $1.88 a month

JIM FEENEY
L. W. Sweet—Dept. 761K, 1670 Broadway
New York, N. Y.

Enclosed find $1 deposit. Send me Watch No. _____ Price $_____. I agree to wear the watch for 10 days. If not satisfied, I'll return it and you will refund my dollar. If I keep it, I'll pay balance in 10 equal monthly payments.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

L. W. Sweet

MAIL ORDER DIVISION OF FINLAY STRAUS, Inc.
Dept. 761K, 1670 BROADWAY, NEW YORK

Genuine-Late UNDERWOOD NOISELESS

Now $37.85 CASH

MFRS. ORIG. SELLING PRICE $125.00

OR EASY TERMS **While THEY Last!**

Truly an outstanding offer! Only because of an exceptional purchase can I sell these rebuilt Noiseless machines at the sensationally low price of $37.85 cash, or at only 70c a week on my easy term price. Each one carefully rebuilt so that it looks like a new machine costing three times as much. *The mfrs. orig. selling price on this Underwood was $125.00.* It's sent to you in Underwood packing box with Underwood book of instructions on care and operation.

A NOISELESS MACHINE

Latest achievement in typewriters! Provides writing perfection with SILENCE. For those who want the advantages of a quiet home or office. This Underwood's Noiseless mechanism eliminates the nerve shattering clatter common to many models. *An aid to better work because it allows clear thinking, reduces fatigue, improves accuracy.* This typewriter disturbs no one, for it is almost impossible to hear it operate a few feet away. You get all the features of an Underwood **PLUS Noiseless typing.**

FIRST CHOICE OF TYPISTS

OVER 5,000,000 UNDERWOODS NOW IN USE. Recognized as the finest, strongest built! Here is an office size Underwood with late modern features that give you **SILENT TYPING.** Has all standard equipment—keyboard, 2 colors, back spacer, automatic reverse, tabulator, etc. **THERE IS NO RISK! SEE BEFORE YOU BUY ON MY 10 DAY NO OBLIGATION TRIAL PLAN.** If you wish send the machine back at my expense.

WIDE 14" CARRIAGES

Wide carriage machines for government reports, large office forms, billing, etc., only $3.00 extra with order. Takes paper 14" wide, has 12" writing line. **A Real Buy in a rebuilt Underwood Noiseless!**

International Typewriter Exchange
231 W. Monroe St. Dept. 1092 Chicago, Ill.

EXTRA VALUE!
TYPEWRITER STAND

For those who have no typewriter stand or handy place to use a machine, I make this special offer. This attractive stand that ordinarily sells for $4.85 can be yours for only $3.00 extra —payable 25c a month. Quality built. Note all its convenient features. (See coupon.)

NO MONEY DOWN
10 DAY TRIAL
Easy Terms—10c A Day

No obligation. See before you buy on wide open 10 day trial. Pay no money until you test, inspect, compare, and use this Underwood Noiseless. Judge for yourself without hurry and without risk. When you are convinced that this is the biggest typewriter bargain you have ever seen then say, "I'll Buy." Send only 70c a week or $3.00 a month until term price of only $41.85 is paid. Try it first, enjoy a full 10 days' steady use. **There is no red tape or investigation—My offer is exactly as I state it.**

2-YEAR GUARANTEE

I back this machine with my personal 2-yr. guarantee that it is in A-1 condition in every respect—that it will give first class service. Over 30 years of fair dealing and my 200,000 satisfied customers prove the soundness of my golden rule policy and prove that dealing direct with me saves you money.

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Touch Typing Course

A complete home study course of famous Van Sant Touch Typing system. *Learn to type quickly and easily.* Carefully illustrated. Written expressly for home use.

MAIL COUPON NOW - Limited Quantity on Sale!

International Typewriter Exchange, Dept. 1092, 231 W. Monroe St., Chicago, Ill.
Send Underwood Noiseless (F.O.B. Chicago) for ten days' trial. If I keep it, I will pay $3.00 per month until easy term price ($41.85) is paid. If I am not satisfied I can return it express collect. ☐ 10" carriage. ☐ 14" carriage ($3.00 extra)
☐ Check for typewriter stand ($3.00 extra—payable 25c a month). Stand sent on receipt of first payment on Underwood.

Name ..... Age.....
Typewritten signatures not acceptable
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CAUTION—For quick shipment give occupation and reference