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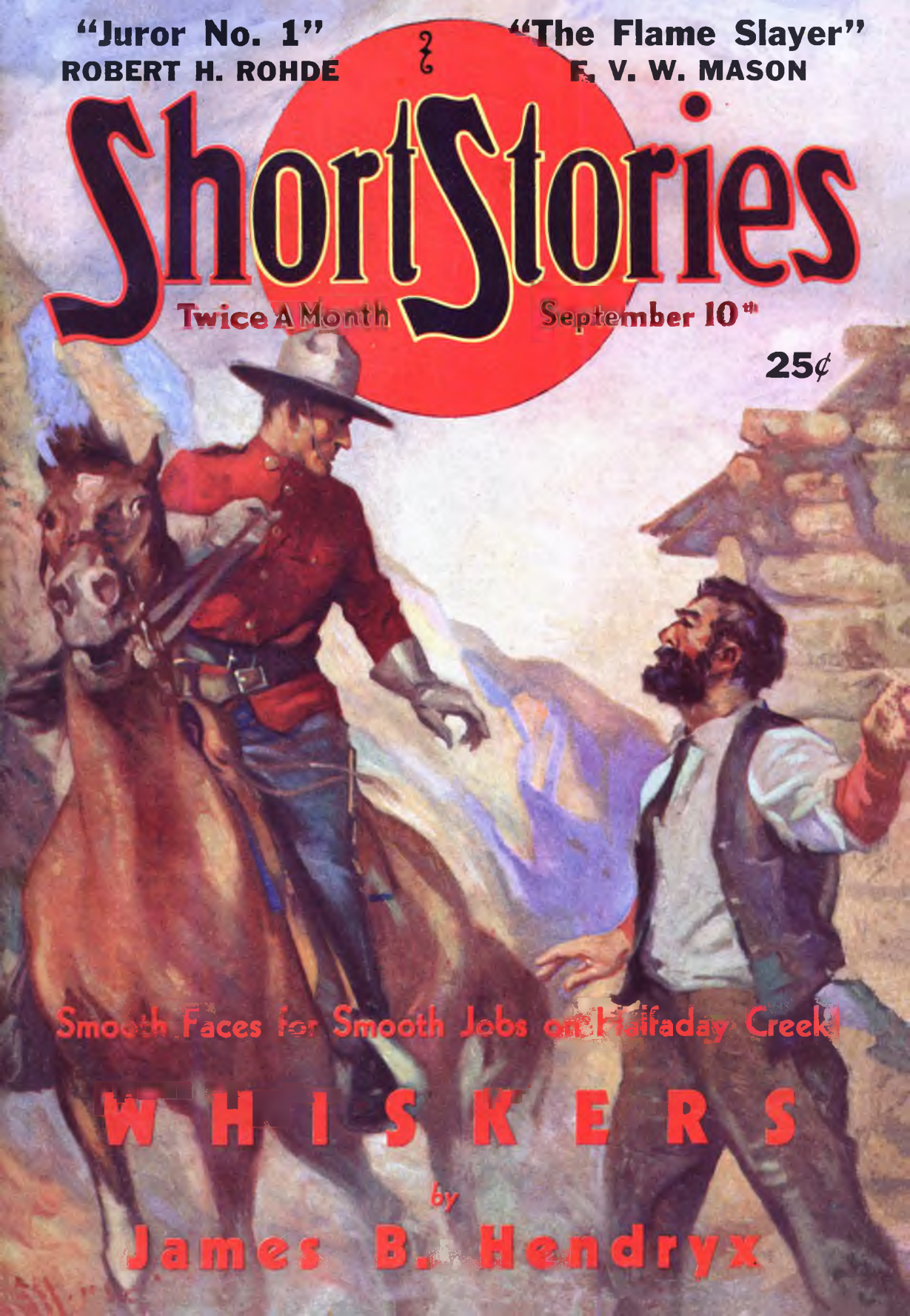

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by

James B. Hendryx

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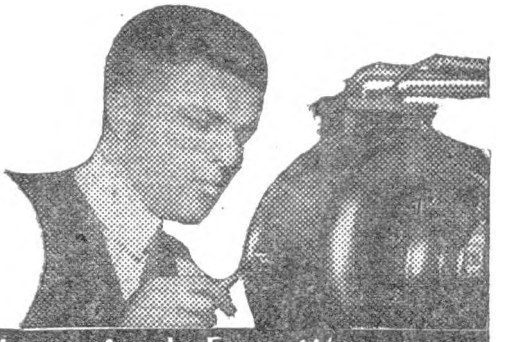

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29x4.75-20	2.50	.95
29x5.00-19	2.65	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.65	1.05
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.95	1.15
28x5.00-92	2.65	1.05
26x5.50-18	2.95	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.25	1.15
30x5.50-20	3.35	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.15
30x6.00-19	3.50	1.25
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.25
31x6.50-19	3.60	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.25
34x7.00-20	4.60	1.65
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6.00-16 ...	2.75	1.45
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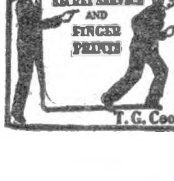

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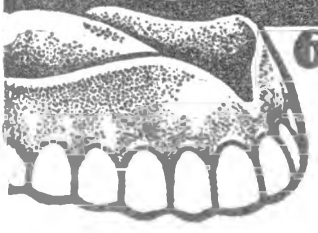

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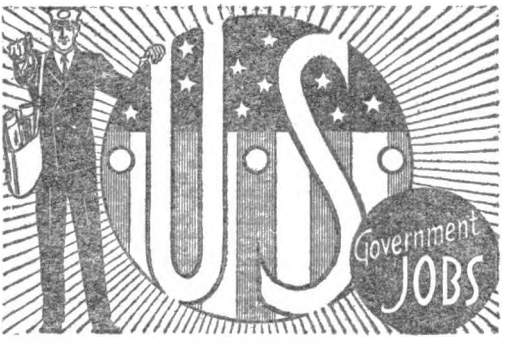

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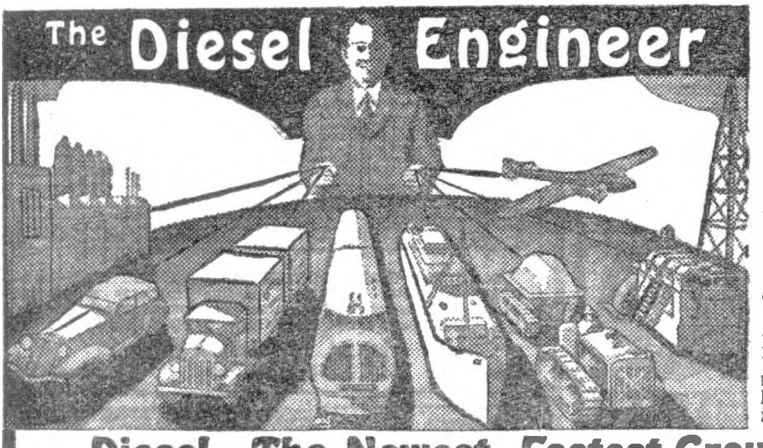

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29x5.00-19	2.25	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.40	1.05
5.25-17	2.45	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.45	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.60	1.15
5.50-17	2.75	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.75	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.75	1.15
6.00-17	2.85	1.15
32x6.00-18	2.85	1.15
31x6.00-19	2.85	1.15
32x6.00-20	2.95	1.25
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33x6.50-20	3.20	1.35
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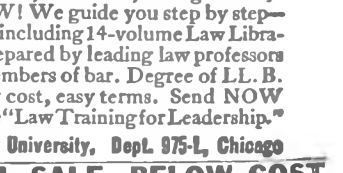

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WHISKERS

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Black John Advises," "Black John Helps the Police," etc.

WARM spring sunshine flooded the little valley of Halfaday Creek which harbored the little community of outlawed men who were wont to foregather at Cushing's Fort, situated on the verge of a high bank that commanded an unobstructed view of several miles of the creek, in convenient proximity to the Yukon-Alaska border.

It was mid-forenoon when Black John Smith strolled through the open doorway and approached the bar as Old Cush removed from the back bar a bottle, two glasses, and a leather dice box which he set out on the bar.

Black John picked up the box, rattled the dice, and cast them. "Three fives," he announced. "I'll leave 'em in one."

Peering through his square-rimmed steel spectacles, Cush verified the cast, and gathering the dice, shook the box, and spread them with a flourish.

"Four treys," he boasted. "Trouble with you, John, yer allus sendin' a boy to do a man's chore." Gathering the dice he cast again. "An' four sixes right back at you. See what yer law of averages yer allus talkin' about, kin do to them in one shake."

Black John eyed the four sixes sourly as he returned the dice to the box. "The drinks is on me," he announced, as he regarded the two pairs that showed after the cast. "But after this you keep yer thumb away from in front of that box when you throw."

"My thumb! What in hell's a thumb got to do with it?"

"I don't know. But it looks like you been practicin' up on some kind of shenanigan. It don't stand to reason a man could throw four of a kind in one throw, twict in succession. The law of averages——"

Old Cush chuckled audibly, as he shoved the spectacles from nose to forehead, and set the dice box on the back bar. "Yer law of averages is jest like any other law —it works all right until someone comes

along an' breaks it. Looks like you slep' kind of late, this mornin'."

"Yeah, the stud game didn't bust up till around three o'clock. The boys plays later now that the spring clean-up's about over."

"Looks like four, five hours would be enough fer a man to sleep. I been up sence seven and I got the bar chores done."

"Well, that's good. I come to remind you that it's about time I was takin' some dust down to Dawson to exchange fer bills. The safe's gittin' crowded agin, what with all that new gold. It's a nice day, an' I'll be startin'. Weigh out a couple hundred pound of dust, an' I'll throw my outfit together."

II

BLACK JOHN, like many of the residents of Halfaday Creek, banked his dust and his money in the huge iron safe that stood back of the bar at Cushing's Fort. Each spring after the clean-up, it had become customary to remove most of the accumulated dust to Dawson and exchange it for paper money, and by unanimous consent this duty had devolved upon Black John Smith, the dictator of Halfaday, and a man known to be scrupulously honest in his dealings with his fellow outlaws —providing, of course, that such outlaws were themselves on the up-and-up with their fellow members of the community.

Black John, however, was canny. While he banked most of his wealth at Cush's, he always had a goodly sum in his own private cache which consisted of certain sealed glass jars buried deep in the mud at the bottom of the spring where he kept his meat.

Patience and quiet observation had enabled him to locate the caches of nearly all the residents of Halfaday who did not bank with Cush. These caches remained Black John's secret, and were never molested so long as their owners remained in good standing on the creek. But let a man break the code—and the contents of his cache almost invariably disappeared.

No one else on the creek, not even Old Cush, suspected that Black John had a cache, as he was careful never to visit the spring unless it was to fetch a pail of water, or a cut of meat, or to deposit some meat for cooling.

Returning from the saloon for his stampeding pack, he visited the spring and returned to his cabin with fresh meat for the trail, and also a package wrapped in moosehide that contained a thousand ounces of

A Very Close Shave on Halfaday Creek

dust. This he placed in the bottom of his packsack. Returning to the saloon, he gave Cush a receipt for thirty-two hundred ounces, which the two carried down the steep bank to Black John's canoe and deposited in a packsack amidships.

"So long, an' good luck," said Cush, as the big man stepped into the canoe. "I'm glad it's you an' not me that's headin' fer Dawson with better'n fifty thousan' in dust, what with all the chechakos that's pilin' into the country."

"I don't figger any chechakos would try to bother me," Black John grinned. "The worst could happen, I might lose part of it to them sourdoughs in a stud game. But I've got more'n enough to make it good —if I lose the whole works."

With plenty of water in the creek the portages were few and short, and the big man took keen enjoyment in the swift, smooth course of the canoe between banks lined with the young green of birches and aspens and the blaze of countless wild-flowers.

Half way down the White River he camped, cached the gold, and spent four days prospecting a small tributary he had long suspected of harboring a pay streak. But the result was disappointing, and he gave it up after failing to find any spot where the top gravel promised wages.

ARRIVING in Dawson shortly after noon, two weeks from the day he left Cushing's, he drew his canoe from the water, shouldered his pack containing two hundred and sixty-two and a half pounds of dust, and half an hour later, with an empty packsack dangling from his shoulder, and sixty-seven thousand, two hundred dollars in bills of large denomination in his pocket, he entered the Tivoli saloon to be tipsily greeted by Old Bettles, who stood at the bar with Swiftwater Bill and Moosehide Charley.

"Hello, John! How's everything on Halfaday?"

"Belly up," invited Swiftwater. "I'm buyin' a drink. And how about the four of us startin' a stud game? Camillo Bill an' Burr MacShane'll be in this evenin'. They went up to look over a proposition on Bonanza."

"Stud would suit me fine," grinned Black John. "Come on buy yerself a stack of chips, an' we'll git started."

III

THE stud game, as always when a card game for high stakes started among the sourdoughs, drew its gallery of kibitzers from among the idlers and the casual visitors to the saloon. Early in the evening, when the four had been joined by Camillo Bill and Burr MacShane, the onlookers were crowded three and four deep around the table behind the chairs of the players, who with hat-brims drawn low over their faces to shade their eyes from the glare of the hanging lamp, played on in silence, save for an occasional short-clipped word, or a call to the bar for drinks.

Thus it was that no one noticed two men who entered the saloon hurriedly, stepped to the bar, swallowed a couple of quick drinks, and turned to leave. Nor did anyone notice that one of these men, glancing casually toward the card game, halted suddenly and, clutching his companion by the

arm, pointed toward one of the players. Nor that the two advanced to the outer edge of the rim of onlookers, stared fixedly at this player for a full minute, then turned and passed hurriedly from the room.

Fifteen minutes later the two returned accompanied by Corporal Downey, of the Northwest Mounted Police. Then everyone noticed them as the three paused at the

edge of the crowd and one of the men pointed a shaking finger at Black John, as his voice rose shrill with excitement:

"That's him! That's the damn cuss that robbed us! Robbed us of a thousan' ounces—an' hit right fer here to play our money in a stud game!"

And the other, no less excited than his partner, plucked at Corporal Downey's sleeve:

"Grab him, officer! An' look out! He's got a big revolver hid in the front of his shirt!"

To state that everyone now noticed the two strangers is describing the incident mildly. Everyone in the Tivoli stood, goggle-eyed, as glances shifted from the two men with the officer to the face of Black John, who, with the other players, had looked up as the hysterical outburst disturbed them.

Many of those in the room knew Black John personally, and nearly all knew him by reputation as the "King of Halfaday Crick", an appellation that clung to him along the big river, despite his repeated denials of any leadership over the outlaw community. They knew, also, that he was famed far and wide for his iron-bound determination, backed up at times by summary and high-handed measures, to keep Halfaday Creek free of crime. Also they knew that his efforts had met with marked success. And now they were hearing Black John Smith, the notorious king of Halfaday, himself accused of a crime by a couple of unknown chechakos! To most minds the idea was preposterous. To the minds of all the situation was dramatic. And in the death-like silence that followed the accusations, men strained forward tensely to see what would happen.

Black John smiled, showing white, even teeth behind the heavy black beard as his blue-gray eyes scrutinized first one, then the other of his accusers. "Jest when, an' where," he asked, in an untroubled, level voice, "was this here incident supposed to have took place?"

"You know where it was!" cried one of the men. "An' you know when! You opened the door of our shack up on Hunker an' pulled a gun on us when we was weighin' up our dust night before last. An' then you tied us up, an' beat it! You can't bluff out of it—nor lie out of it! There was others seen you besides us."

Old Bettles chuckled tipsily as he glanced at Black John. "Ain't you ashamed, John—robbin' them chechakos! Give 'em back their dust, an' let's git on with the game."

Swiftwater Bill, after a scornful scrutiny of the two accusers, turned to Corporal Downey, who stood beside the two, a puzzled smile on his lips.

"Throw 'em in the jug, an' let 'em sleep it off," he suggested.

The young officer's smile faded as he shook his head. "They ain't drunk," he answered. "They really believe John done it."

"Well, you don't believe it—fer Cripes' sake?" asked Burr MacShane, eyeing Downey sharply.

"No. Knowin' John like I do, I don't believe it. I believe these men are mistaken in their identification. But—they're makin' charges. They claim they've got other witnesses that seen the robber. It was bright moonlight that night, an' they claim that two other men on Hunker passed a stranger on the trail to these men's shack before the robbery—an' another man seen him leavin' the shack after the robbery. He didn't think nothin' of it at the time, not knowin' of the robbery till damn near mornin', when these men freed themselves."

"Chechakos is all damn fools!" exclaimed Camillo Bill, eyeing the two in disgust. "I wouldn't believe a hull damn crick full of 'em under oath."

"You ain't a goin' to arrest John on the say-so of a couple of yaps like them, be you?" demanded Moosehide Charley.

Downey nodded. "There ain't nothin' else I can do," he replied. Unless these men withdraw the charge."

"We don't withdraw it!" cried one of the men.

"Not by a damn sight we don't," echoed

the other. "He's the one that done it, all right. Cripes, you don't think we could be wrong, do you, when we both of us looked into that face over the top of a gun—an' then had to set there an' let him tie us to the bunk poles? I'd know the damn skunk if I seen him in hell. I couldn't never fergit them whiskers."

Corporal Downey turned to Black John. "I guess you'll have to come along down to detachment, John," he said. "Maybe them other witnesses will know the difference between you an' the man they seen. I hate to arrest you, but I've got to. It prob'ly won't take long to clear the matter up, onct we get at it."

"All right," replied the big man with a grin. "If it's whiskers they want, I guess I fill the bill. But it's hell to git pinched on a winnin' streak." He counted his chips and cashed them in. "Twenty-four hundred an' thirteen dollars to the good," he announced. "I s'pose it was them odd thirteen dollars that brought me bad luck." He rose from his chair, as the on-lookers made way for him, and grinned ruefully at the sourdoughs. "So long, boys. Come down to the jail an' see me sometime."

"Jail hell!" exclaimed Camillo Bill. "Hey, Downey—cut out this nonsense! How much bail do you want? There's enough of us here at the table to put up a million in cash—if you think John 'll skip out."

"I ain't got no authority to accept bail," Downey explained. "If he's remanded fer trial, the bail can be arranged later. In the meanwhile, he'll have to come along. That's the law."

"An' you know me, boys," Black John grinned. "Always ready to work hand in glove with the law. I'll be seein' you later."

AS THEY stepped out onto the street both accusers were careful to keep Corporal Downey between themselves and Black John.

"You better search him, officer," urged one of the men. "I tell you, he's armed!"

"Yeah?" replied Downey, without according the man a glance. "Well, the police was doin' business before you was here to tell 'em."

In his little office at detachment, Corporal Downey took the two men's statements, and sent them to bring in their other witnesses—the three men who claimed to have seen the bearded stranger in the vicinity of the robbed shack. When they had departed, Corporal Downey turned to Black John.

"Well—you've heard what they had to say. How about it?"

"Offhand," replied the big man, "I'm inclined to believe they was robbed. The man that done it was prob'ly hidin' behind a stand of whiskers that put 'em in mind of me."

"Where was you night before last?"

"About fifty, sixty mile upriver, campin' on the far side."

"Alone?"

"Shore I was alone. You don't suppose I'd be messin' around with none of them damn chechakos that's clutterin' up the river, do you? Cripes, if anyone had robbed me that night—they'd got 'em a real haul. I was fetchin' down a load of dust to trade in fer bills. Cush's safe was gittin' clogged up till he couldn't hardly git no more in it."

"How much gold did you have with you?"

"Forty-two hundred ounces. It fetched sixty-seven thousan' two hundred dollars." Reaching into his pockets, Black John tossed several thick rolls of bills onto the desk. "Count it up, an' give me a receipt fer it," he said. "I ain't takin' no chances of gittin' my pockets picked in yer damn jail. You'll find that twenty-four hundred an' thirteen dollars along with it that I won in that stud game—barrin' a few dollars I blow'd fer the drinks. Oh yes—an' here's the big revolver them chechakos claimed I had in the front of my shirt. They was right about that, anyway. What with all that dust I fetched downriver, I figgered I'd better go heeled." As he spoke the big man opened the front of his shirt and with-

drew a forty-five Colt which he laid beside the money on the desk.

Downey's face clouded. "The fact is, John," he said, "you ain't got no alibi. An' if these other three witnesses should identify you as the man they seen that night on Hunker, I'm afraid I'm goin' to have to hold you till this case is cleared up."

Black John nodded. "Shore you will," he agreed. "An' if them other three ain't got no better eyesight than them two that claimed I robbed 'em, the chances is they'll swear I was the one they seen. An' as a matter of fact, I ain't never set foot on Hunker Crick in my life."

That night Black John slept in a cell at headquarters, and the next day he faced the three witnesses from Hunker, all of whom unhesitatingly identified him as the man they had seen in the vicinity of the robbed shack, at the approximate time of the robbery. Also, there were two other men who said they had seen Black John lurking about the shack of an abandoned claim a mile or so below the robbed shack, during the late afternoon preceding the robbery.

A formal charge of robbery was placed against the prisoner. Constable Peters was dispatched to Halfaday Creek to check up Black John's story that he had come to Dawson to exchange gold dust for currency. And Corporal Downey, himself, visited Hunker Creek and then started a check-up of every suspicious character in and about Dawson.

Black John remained in his cell, reading the books and magazines furnished him by the sourdoughs, playing solitaire, kidding the policemen, and enjoying three huge meals a day.

IN DAWSON Black John's arrest was viewed from different angles. The sourdoughs, to a man, were convinced of his innocence. They ridiculed the idea that Black John would stoop to the common robbery of a pair of chechakos, but recognized the fact that Corporal Downey was pursuing the only course open to him in holding the prisoner during investigation of his case. At first, the other residents of the big camp were inclined to treat the matter as a joke, but as the days passed, with apparently no progress being made in the solution of the crime, men began to express the opinion that maybe there was something in the accusation. After all, they argued, Black John was an outlaw, wasn't he? Heretofore he probably had refrained from robbery merely as a matter of policy, and because of his realization of the efficiency of the Mounted Police. It was common knowledge that he had committed a robbery in Alaska. Various accounts of that episode were repeated in the saloons and magnified to include the robbery of practically the whole United States Army of its payroll, including the Civil War pension funds. This whispering campaign was cleverly fostered by Cuter Malone, proprietor of the notorious Klondike Palace, a low dive patronized by chechakos and tin horn gamblers. Cuter had good reason to hate and fear Black John, who despised him and had been instrumental in hanging several of Cuter's minions who had had the temerity to pull some crime on Halfaday. Black John was known to have stated publicly, and in no uncertain terms, that should Cuter, himself, ever show up on Halfaday, he would be hanged forthwith —on general principals, but technically for some violation of the so-called Skullduggery Act, a special provision invented by Black John for the punishment of any hangable offence not included under murder, robbery, claim jumping, etc.

So Cuter gladly fostered and abbetted the growing doubt of Black John's innocence.

IT WAS nearly three weeks later that Constable Peters returned from Halfaday. Next morning Black John faced Corporal Downey across the flat top desk in the little office.

"How much dust did you say you was fetchin' down from Halfaday?" he asked.

"Forty-two hundred ounces."

Downey's brow puckered, as he eyed the

other through narrowed lids, and picking up a scrap of paper from the desk, he drew it slowly back and forth between his fingers. "Do you recognize this?" he asked, abruptly, holding the paper up for observation.

"Shore. That's the receipt I give Cush for the dust I fetched down."

Downey nodded. "An' it's made out for thirty-two hundred ounces—not forty-two hundred, as you jest stated. Cush told Peters that the receipt is correct. Said he helped you carry the stuff to the canoe."

"Yeah, that's right," agreed the big man. "That's the exact amount we took out of the safe. The rest was some dust of my own that I had cached."

"A thousand ounces," reminded Downey, "is exactly the amount those two men were robbed of."

"Why—so it is!" exclaimed Black John. "Ain't that a coincidence fer you? Makes it look kind of bad fer me, too, don't it? Like I was really the one that held them two chechakos up."

"I thought you always banked your dust and money in Cush's safe."

"Yeah—a lot of 'em thinks that. Cush, he thinks so, too. But what I claim—a man hadn't ought to keep all his eggs in the one basket, as the Good Book says."

"Another thing," continued Downey. "Peters made the trip back from Halfaday in eleven days. He says he didn't hurry—jest kept pluggin' along. Now I know that you're a lot faster than Peters. Admit that you took your time, and that the water was about the same as now, you should have made the run in ten or eleven days. Is that right?"

"Oh, shore. I could make it in eight, if I hurried."

"You arrived in Dawson on the second of June. Cush told Peters that you left the fort on the seventeenth of May."

"Well, mebbe. I didn't give no heed to the date. Cush is prob'ly right. He notices them things more'n what I do."

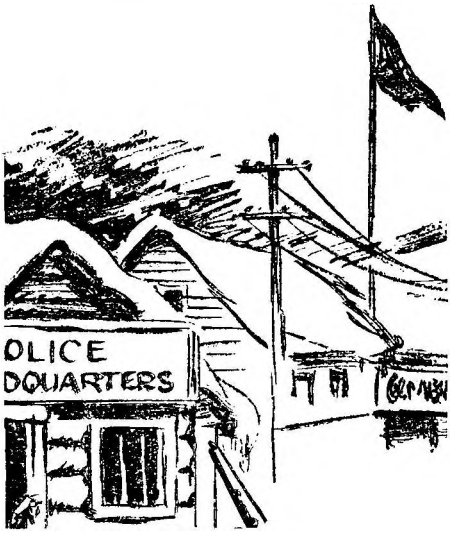
"That," continued Downey, "leaves three or four days unaccounted for—even admitting that you took your time."

"Yeah, so it does. Well the fact is, I shoved up a crick an' done some prospect pannin'. I stayed up there four days. But I didn't run onto nothin', so I come on down. Looks like that item don't help my case none, neither," he grinned. "Say, Downey, if you keep on pilin' up the evidence agin me, you'll almost have *me* convinced that I pulled that chechako job. It shore looks from here like I ain't gittin' the breaks in this case."

"It sure does," agreed Downey, his lips pressed tight. "Is that all you've got to say?"

"Well, there don't nothin' occur to me, at present. Except, mebbe, that it looks like I'm in a hell of a fix. But you know that as well as I do. Looks like it was up to you to hustle around an' git me out of it."

"I'm workin' on the case," replied the officer. "But so far, the harder I work, the deeper you get in. An' here's another



thing. A U. S. marshal showed up last night, with a couple of deputies. He's got a warrant from Circle City for the arrest of one John Smith, for a robbery and murder pulled off near Circle a month ago. A prospector was murdered and robbed of six hundred ounces. He stopped at Forty Mile, and fixed up the requisition papers with the inspector. The two men with him

are witnesses, who claim to be able to identify the man who shot this fellow when he robbed him. The marchal deputized them to help him make the arrest. He mentioned that old pay-roll robbery, too. Said information had reached him that the man who pulled that robbery was livin' on Halfaday Creek under the name of John Smith. He is wonderin' if the same man didn't pull both jobs."

"Nope," replied Black John. "He didn't. I pulled the payroll job, all right. But this here murder an' robbery, is somethin' else agin."

"Where were you on or about May first?"

"May first—that's a little better'n a month ago, ain't it? Well, let's see. I was off on a moose hunt along in there—yes, it would be jest about that time. I swung off into the mountains an' done a little prospectin', too."

"How long were you gone?"

"Oh, four, five weeks—some sech matter."

"Long enough," suggested Downey, "for you to have gone down to Circle City, and returned."

"Well—yes, I could go from Halfaday to Circle an' back in a month. It would crowd me a little—but I could make it."

"These men from Circle are waiting in the other room. They heard we had a prisoner named John Smith locked up, and they'd like to look you over."

"Well—tell 'em to come in. I'm here, ain't I?"

The men were ushered in by Constable Peters, and the moment the two deputies laid eyes on Black John, they both asserted positively that he was the man who had committed the Circle City crime. They emphatically declared that there was no possible chance that they were mistaken. Whereupon, the marshal demanded that the prisoner be turned over to him at once.

Corporal Downey, himself, escorted Black John back to his cell. "I'm sure sorry, John," he said. "But—I've got to honor those papers. There's nothin' else I can do. Tell me, John—man to man—are you guilty?"

"Guilty as hell—of the payroll job. Never heard of the other one, nor the Hunker Crick job, neither. That's straight goods, Downey. But unless you git busy as hell an' find out who did do it, it looks like I'm due to hang in Circle. I've got a hunch that when you locate the Hunker Crick robber, he'll turn out to be the one that pulled the Circle job, too. Git to work now, an' hunt you some whiskers!"

IV

THE marshal and his two deputies had come upriver from Circle City on the regular steamboat, and planned to leave with their prisoner on the downriver boat which was due on the day following. Arranging with Downey to hold their prisoner until boat time, the three proceeded to make the rounds of the saloons where, with each succeeding drink, the marshal boasted the louder of Alaska justice—and of how his prisoner, the notorious Black John Smith, would receive short shift, once they got him to Circle City.

"Yep," he boasted in the Tivoli, "the judge is due in Circle the fourteenth, an' court'll set on the fifteenth an' what with the evidence we've got, it won't take more'n a couple of hours to convict him, an' in the afternoon, we'll hang him higher'n hell. That's the way we do things in the U. S. A., gents. Betcher life—over in Alasky we don't fool. An' this here Black John Smith—he's got it comin', too. Yessir—when that there prospector got murdered on Wood Crick, jest a little ways out of Circle, they sent fer me. I was up to Fort Yukon, an' I hopped on the next boat an' come up to Circle. Didn't take me no time to round up my witnesses an' find out that the man that done it had hung around the saloon fer a day er two an' give the name of John Smith. Then I begun to hear rumors that a guy by the name of Black John Smith hung out on Halfaday Crick over here in the Yukon, an' that he was supposed to be the

one that pulled that army payroll job down to Fort Gibbon quite a while back. The witnesses claimed the man that murdered the prospector had a heavy black beard—an' that's the way this here Black John was claimed to look, too. So I says to myself, 'It's the same man, b'God—I'll go git him!' So I deputized the two witnesses, an' was hittin' fer Halfaday Crick, after stoppin' off in Forty Mile an' fixin' up my papers with the inspector, an' when I got here I finds out that Corporal Downey's already got him arrested." The man paused and surveyed the listeners magnanimously. "Yer Mounted Police over on this side ain't so bad. They've got a lot to learn, but they're pretty good, at that, fer a bunch of young fellers."

"Yeah," grinned Burr MacShane, "we think they're pretty good."

"Oh sure. They're all right—like I said. But they're mostly English, an' the English is a lot slower'n what we be, over on the American side. Somehow they ain't got the zip."

"It's a damn good thing," observed Camillo Bill, "that Downey saved you the trouble of showin' up on Halfaday Crick. Cripes—Black John would of took you apart an' tied knots in the pieces—you an' yer deputies, too."

"If yer a sportin' man," suggested Old Bettles, "I'll lay you even money, up to a couple thousan' ounces, that the three of you won't never git Black John to Circle. An' I'll give five to one, you won't never hang him, if you do."

"Hell," cried Moosehide Charley, "I'll go you even money, you won't never git him out of Dawson!"

"I'd like to take part of that, too," said Swiftwater. "I'll give odds you don't never git him on the steamboat."

TAKING their cue from the attitude of the sourdoughs, others in the crowd muttered threats and forebodings until the two makeshift deputies began to show decided signs of uneasiness. Even the marshal, sensing the undercurrent of hostility, abruptly turned the conversation into safer channels. At supper time the three officers repaired to the Gem Restaurant.

"Tellin' you about me, I don't like the looks of things," confided one of the deputies, as they waited to be served.

"What d'you mean—'looks of things'?" demanded the marshal.

"That's what I mean. Jest like I said. This here Black John has got too damn many friends in this man's camp to suit me."

"Yeah—an' they ain't chechakos, neither," added the other.

"S'pose he has?" blustered the marshal, pointing importantly to his badge of office. "I'm a U. S. marshal, ain't I? An' you two is deputies, ain't you? I guess these Canucks ain't goin' to raise no rookus of no kind that'll git 'em in bad with the old U. S. A.! Hell—we got the papers that says we kin take this here Black John back with us, ain't we?"

"Yeah," admitted the first speaker, "but if you ask me, a paper is a hell of a thing to go up agin a moose rifle with, in case any trouble is started."

"Listen," argued the marshal, albeit with a trifle less confidence. "Do you know what would happen if anything was to harm us in discharge of our duty?"

"No," the deputy replied, "I don't. An' the hell of it is—I never would."

"Well, I'll tell you what would happen—the hull U. S. Army an' Navy would come up here an' blast these damn Canucks clean off'n the map—that's what! It would be an international incident."

"Yeah, it might be," admitted the other without enthusiasm. "But I don't hanker to be no international incident—an' a dead one to boot. Prospectin' suits me. I wish to hell I hadn't never saw that murder. I'd like to be back on Wood Crick, right now."

"Me too," agreed his companion. "I ain't no hero—an' never was. I'm quittin', er resignin', er whatever you call it, right now. There's too damn many of these here Dawsoners to suit me—an' they've got a look in their eye. The odds ain't right."

"Gittin' cold feet, eh?" taunted the marshal.

"Yeah—mebbe. But if I quit now, they'll warm up agin. If I don't, an' them sourdoughs does what they look like they wanted to do, by God, they're liable to stay cold."

"D'you really figger they aim to start somethin'?" asked the marshal a bit uneasily. "They did look kind of ugly. An' wantin' to bet, an' all. They was offerin' odds, too."

"Shore they was. Why wouldn't they? What could the three of us do agin' a big camp like Dawson?"

"An' that ain't all," added the other deputy. "A guy told me, confidential, that all them Halfaday Crick outlaws would be on our neck by tomorrow. He claims all them pals of Black John's is aimin' to slip aboard the boat tomorrow, jest like common passengers, an' when we git downriver a ways, they'll jest nachelly toss us over the rail, an' take Black John back to Halfaday. I've saw enough right here in Dawson to chill my feet. An' these is all middlin' law-abidin' men. Hell, we ain't saw nothin', yet—them Halfaday Crickers is outlaws!"

"There's the Mounted Police," countered the marshal uneasily. "They'd be bound to help us."

"Yeah, that's what I told this guy, but he claimed that there wasn't only three, four of 'em in Dawson, right now—an' besides, he slipped me the word that this here Corporal Downey, which is at the head of 'em, is a friend of this here Black John. An' like as not, if anythin' was to start, they'd be busy as hell doin' somethin' else."

"This guy was prob'ly lyin'," suggested the marshal lamely.

"He looked to me like a man that was tellin' the truth. Old Bettles his name is, an' he's one of them sourdoughs. It was him wanted to bet them couple thousan' ounces we'd never git Black John to Circle. He ain't no damn fool. He wouldn't resk no two thousan' ounces, onlest he was shore."

"That's right," admitted the marshal, a worried look in his eyes. "An' there was plenty of others wantin' to bet. They was offerin' odds, too. What I claim, when they begin offerin' odds, a man wants to look out."

"Shore he does. What we better do, is to hit back fer Circle, an' leave this here Black John where he's at. You kin report that you couldn't find him. Hell, these Canucks has got a robbery on him—let them handle him."

The marshal frowned. "I can't do that. Them papers is all made out. They'll know damn well I located him. I'll lose my job."

THE other shrugged. "Well—suit yerself. If you lose yer job, you could go back to saloon-keepin'. If you lose out tryin' to take that hombre back to Circle, you can't go back to nothin'—you won't even be goin' back. Believe me—it's a chore I wouldn't want to tackle single handed."

"Single handed!"

The other deputy nodded. "Yeah, that's what it'll amount to. We've quit."

The marshal's eyes widened in sudden terror. "Listen—you boys can't go back on me that-a-way. It ain't legal. You can't quit!"

"Who says we can't? We already done so."

"Listen," said the marshal, his eyes lighting with an idea. "I been thinkin'. You boys leave this to me!"

"Oh, shore. We done that, already."

"But that ain't what I mean," persisted the harassed marshal. "Listen, you claimed these Halfaday Crickers was aimin' to pile on that boat tomorrow? Well—let 'em!"

"Yeah," replied a deputy dryly. "We aim to."

"What I mean," continued the marshal, ignoring the interruption, "we won't be on the boat."

"Yer damn right we won't."

"We'll already be a good ways downriver. It's like this—I'll slip out after supper on the q. t., an' pick up a couple of canoes, an' I'll git an outfit of grub, an' some

blankets, an' along about midnight, we'll slip Black John down to the river an' hit out fer Circle. We'll have start enough before anyone finds out we're gone so there couldn't no one overtake us. An' if them outlaws gits aboard the steamboat tomorrow, figgerin' on overtakin' us that-a-way, we'll camp an' lay in the bresh till the boat goes by. We'll have plenty of time to go ashore an' git hid when her smoke shows up, an' we kin gag Black John so he can't holler."

"Them sourdoughs back in the saloon would git onto it," objected one of the deputies. "If we didn't show up there this evenin', they'd suspicion somethin' an' go on a hunt fer us."

"No, I figgered on that. You boys go to the saloon, an' mix around whilst I'm tendin' to gittin' the outfit together. You kin tell 'em that my licker throw'd me down. Tell 'em I drunk quite a bit today, an' by suppertime I got sick, so I went to bed to sleep it off. Then at midnight you boys pertend to be soused yerselves, an' claim yer goin' to bed, an' then slip over to the police office, an' we'll slip our prisoner down to the river an' hit out. You two kin git in one canoe, an' I'll take Black John in the other one. That way's better'n gittin' a big canoe. He might tip us all over. This way, if he tips ourn over you two kin fish us out."

Plainly not relishing the arrangement, the two deputies finally agreed to the marshal's plan and, supper over, they proceeded to carry it out.

AT MIDNIGHT the three confronted Corporal Downey in his office.

"We've come fer the prisoner," said the marshal. "We're pullin' out."

Downey eyed the obviously nervous trio in surprise. "Pullin' out!" he exclaimed. "The boat ain't due till around noon tomorrow—er, today, rather," he added, glancing at the clock.

"Yeah, but we ain't waitin' fer the boat. We're pullin' out now. We don't like the looks of things."

"Don't like the looks of things? What do you mean?" asked the officer, eyeing the men closely.

"Well, there's a lot of talk around the saloons. They're claimin' we won't never git this here Black John to Circle."

"Who's claimin' that?"

"A lot of 'em is. They're sourdoughs, too. We wouldn't paid no heed if it was chechakos said it."

Corporal Downey grinned. "You don't want to pay no heed to those old badgers, either. They're tryin' to kid you. Go on to bed. It's their idea of a joke."

"Joke—hell! They're bettin' on it! A man don't try to put up good dust onlest he's shore. If we wait till tomorrow there'll be trouble. Them Halfaday Crickers is aimin' to be on that boat an' take him away from us."

The Corporal's grin widened. "There won't be any trouble," he said. "An' outside of Black John, there ain't a Halfaday Cricker within two hundred miles of here. I tell you those old timers are stringin' you. Don't get jumpy. I'll see that you get your man onto the boat."

"Yeah, but there ain't only three, four of you police in camp, an' there's a hell of a

lot of other folks—not to mention them outlaws. If they was to ondertake to git him away from us, you couldn't do nothin,' even if you——" The man broke off abruptly in evident confusion.

Corporal Downey's keen blue eyes narrowed slightly, and there was no smile on his lips as he said, "Well—go on. Even if I—what?"

"Why—er—what I meant," stammered

the flustered marshal, "the facts is—one of my boys, here—someone told him—er—anyways it don't make no difference. I didn't believe him, nohow."

The young officer opened a drawer in the desk and shoved a paper toward the marshal. "Jest sign a receipt for the prisoner, an' I'll deliver him to you right now," he said coldly. "You can take him to Circle any way you want to."

The receipt was signed, and a few moments later, the three American officers disappeared into the night with the manacled prisoner between them. Left alone in the office, Downey chuckled to himself.

"Those damn sourdoughs sure must have spilled those birds an earful. Prob'ly told 'em the police would throw in with the Halfaday Crick bunch an' take Black John away from 'em. They sure had 'em scairt stiff—whatever they told 'em." Then he added thoughtfully, "Maybe they wasn't so far wrong in their bettin', at that. I'm kind of wonderin' now—if those three damn fools ever will get Black John to Circle City."

V

PROCEEDING by a roundabout course to the river bank just below the saw mill where the marshal had concealed two canoes, one of the deputies spoke:

"What did I tell you? See how he tried to git us to wait over an' take the boat? That was to give them Halfaday Crickers a chanct to git on it, an' take him away from us. It was a smart trick. No one could of blamed the police—they wouldn't of been on the boat."

"Shore," agreed the marshal. "I seen through his scheme right on the start. He couldn't fool me! D'you notice how firm I was in demandin' that he should turn over the prisoner right then an' there, an' no foolin' about it? Yessir—an' d'you see how quick he done so, after givin' me that one look in the eye? He know'd his game was up. He seen at a glance that I wasn't no man to monkey with. We won't have no trouble, now. You boys jest leave things to me. Hell—as soon as I'd ketched on to what was goin' on, I outguessed the hull kaboodle of 'em—them sourdoughs an' the Halfaday Crickers an' the police, to boot. What I claim, if a man's app'inted marshal, he wants to be one—an' not no damn coward. 'Course I ain't blamin' you boys fer gittin' cold feet. You ain't no reg'lar marshals, nohow, only dupties, you ain't had no experience."

Arriving at the river bank the canoes were placed in the water, the supplies loaded, and the marshal ordered Black John to take his place forward as he settled himself in the stern and shoved off.

"You boys foller along behind," he ordered, addressing the deputies, "an' keep yer eye peeled. "If any canoes begin follerin' us, blast hell out of 'em with them rifles. One of you kin be shootin' whilst the other paddles. I don't expect no trouble—but you can't never tell." He turned to Black John who was regarding him with a grin. "An' you, you better not try no monkey business—like tippin' the canoe over, er somethin'. I kin swim, an' you can't with them handcuffs on. An' besides, the first crooked move you make, I'll wham you over the head with this paddle."

"There ain't goin' to be no canoe-tippin', nor paddle-whammin', if I kin help it," smiled the big man reassuringly. "Cripes, fella—I'm a damn sight more anxious to git to Circle City than you are to git me there! The fact is, I ain't guilty of the job you're takin' me back there fer, an' when the case comes up it won't take me no time at all to prove it. This here Hunker Crick case that Downey had me in fer is different. I ain't got no alibi fer that one. How the hell could I have—when I pulled the job? Yes sir—you don't need to worry about me tryin' to git away! Like I said, I'm anxious as hell to cross that boundary line. Onct I git over in American territory, I'll breathe free. They ain't got nothin' on me over there that they kin make stick. Here in the Yukon, it's different.'

Hell—I'm the last man in the world that wants to git rescued!"

"Well now, that's fine," said the marshal, evidently vastly relieved, and as evidently determined to foster the complacent attitude of his prisoner. "Fact is, we ain't got sech a hell of a case agin you. Couple of fellas claimed they got a kind of a glimpse of the fella that knocked this guy off, but they could easy be mistaken. It prob'ly won't be so hard fer you to prove you didn't have nothin' to do with it. An' that there old army payroll job—the marshals that worked on that, claimed the guy that done it got drowned tryin' to cross the river on the ice. I don't s'pose you had anythin' to do with that, did you?"

Black John roared with laughter. "Hell, fella—do I look like a man that could rob an army? I'm askin' you—do I?"

The marshal joined in the laughter. "No, I can't say as you do. I guess you won't have no trouble beatin' that case, neither."

"Shore I won't," agreed Black John, "an' believe me, I'm obliged to you boys fer showin' up jest when you did. I was in a hell of a fix, there in Dawson, without no way of beatin' that case. Yer friends of mine—you bet! If ever I kin do you a good turn, jest call on me. You'll find out I ain't a man that fergits his friends."

FOR five hours the two canoes proceeded rapidly with the current, Black John regaling the marshal with stories, and listening with uproarious appreciation to the stories told by the officer whose many years of saloon keeping had furnished him with an almost inexhaustible fund. As early daylight brightened, the big man turned frequently to scan the river in the rear, each time expressing satisfaction that there was no pursuit.

"I was kind of afraid that mebbe some of the boys would figger they'd be doin' me a good turn by tryin' to foller along an' take me away from you. But Cripes—that's the last thing I want! We've got Forty Mile to pass yet—an' all the police that's there." He paused and laughed. "An' here I be—goin' plumb out of the country, legal, right under their nose, an' they can't do a damn thing about it. That's a good one—they signed the papers theirselves that takes me clean out of their jurisdiction. I guess that's puttin' one over on 'em—eh?"

"I'll say it is," agreed the marshal. "An' I don't mind bein' a party to it. Them Mounted Police thinks they're damn' smart. How about landin' fer a bite of breakfast? I'm hongry as hell."

"Suits me," Black John replied. "An' how about takin' off these damn handcuffs while I eat? You know damn well I ain't goin' to try to make no git-away this side of the line. An' with my hands fastened behind me this way, it's damn uncomfortable. My arms is numb clean to the shoulders."

"Why—shore. I don't see no reason to keep you chained—anyways this side of the line. Like you say, if yer so hell-bent to git out of the country, why would you try to pull anything? After we cross the line I kin slip the cuffs back on—you might make a try then."

Black John grinned. "You're the doctor. I won't blame you none fer takin' precautions over on the Alasky side. Fact is, you couldn't hardly do nothin' else. You might git criticized fer fetchin' in a prisoner wanted fer murder without you had him handcuffed. A man in a responsible position, like you, has got to watch his step."

A landing was effected, the canoes pulled clear of the water and concealed in some brush, and the four proceeded into a thicket, built a fire, and prepared breakfast. The meal over, the marshal yawned prodigiously:

"I could do with a little sleep," he said. "Didn't git none last night. Guess we'll camp fer a couple of hours. Couldn't no one see us from the river, nohow. If anyone was follerin', they'd slip right on past." He turned to one of the deputies. "You set here an' stand guard fer an hour, an' me an' Bill will take a snooze. Then you wake Bill up, an' you kin go to sleep."

"Yeah," retorted the deputy, "an' you git

two hours sleep to our one. To hell with that—I'm jest as sleepy as you be."

"Me, too," chimed in the other. "I couldn't stand no guard. I can't hardly keep my eyes open as it is."

"Well, damn it! Yer my deputies, ain't you?" snapped the marshal.

"Yeah," retorted one, "but yer the marshal. Yer gittin' more pay'n what we be—an' besides it's yer job. We don't lose no job if this guy gits away on us—we're through anyways when we git to Circle."

Black John grinned. "Go ahead, boys, an' all take a nap. Hell I'll stand guard—an' if any damn cusses comes along an' tries to rescue me, I'll blast hell out of 'em. We've got three rifles here. They couldn't effect no rescue in the face of them."

The marshal blinked sleepily and grinned. "But hell— we couldn't do that! Who ever heard of the officers all goin' to sleep an' leavin' the prisoner stand guard? It wouldn't work. What in hell would you be standin' guard of?"

"That's so," grinned Black John. "I hadn't thought of that. I like you boys, an' I was jest tryin' to help you out a little."

"I've got it," said the marshal. "I'll handcuff you to a tree—put the chain around the trunk so you kin lay down fairly comfortable, an' we'll all take a sleep!"

THE others, even the prisoner, agreed, and five minutes later Black John lay listening to lusty snoring in three different keys. He grinned to himself as he figured his chances of escape. The tree to which he was chained was too thick to whittle through with a pocket knife, even if he had had one, and the light camp ax was well out of reach. Nor could he slip the chain up the trunk and over the top, too many branches. Neither could he reach the marshal to steal his keys. He studied the handcuffs, and decided that he might possibly pick them with a piece of tin or wire—but he had neither. So he settled himself for a nap with the thought that there would be plenty of time before reaching the international boundary line at Eagle.

Sometime later he awoke at a slight sound, and opening his eyelids just a slit, he saw the marshal sitting up, rubbing his eyes. The man consulted a thick silver watch, and roused his deputies by shaking them lustily. Black John feigned sleep.

"Come on, boys—wake up. Time to git a-goin'. We've slep' damn near three hours."

The men returned slowly to consciousness and they, too, sat up.

"Ain't sech a bad sort of a guy," opined one. "You wouldn't think a guy like him would murder anyone, would you?"

"No, mebbe not," admitted the other deputy, "but he did—an' you bet, if I was the marshal, I wouldn't of took off them handcuffs, even fer him to eat."

"You would if you know'd what I do," retorted the marshal. "Marshalin' is jest like anythin' else—a man's got to use his head. Not only I took off them cuffs fer him to eat, but I'm takin' 'em off agin so he kin help paddle. It's like this—" the man paused, and lowered his voice. "He claims he kin beat the case we've got agin' him in Circle, an' that army job, too. Claims he never pulled neither one of 'em. But we know he did—at least the Wood Crick murder——"

"Shore he did. Hell, me an' Bill here seen him plain as day."

"I know all that, an' I know it won't take hardly no longer'n to pick a jury before we'll have him convicted an' hung—but he don't know it. I let him think we didn't have much of a case agin him. You see, he admitted he was guilty of this Yukon job that the police had him in fer, an' he couldn't beat that one—so he's hell-bent to git out of the Yukon an' over into Alasky, where he thinks he'll git turned loose after the trial. He'll paddle like hell to git to the line, an' we kin make better time. Onct we git to Eagle, though, believe me them cuffs goes back on his wrists—an' he won't be gittin' no favors from there on to Circle. What I mean, it takes brains to kid a man

along so he'll paddle like hell to git to his own hangin'. He ain't got a show in the world of beatin' that case onct the jury hears what you boys has got to say. Go wake the damn fool up—an' we'll be movin' along."

Black John was awakened after much shaking, and the cuffs unlocked by the marshal who returned both cuffs and key to his pocket.

"I ain't botherin' to put them cuffs back on," he smiled. "Two men can git a hell of a lot more out of a canoe than one. If we make good time we ought to fetch Eagle sometime durin' the night—an' then you'll be safe acrost the line."

"That's right," agreed the big man, picking up a paddle. "Come on—let's go. I'll feel a hell of a lot safer onct I git out of the Yukon."

THE canoes made better time. Forty Mile was passed without a stop, and toward the middle of the afternoon, when a smudge of steamboat smoke showed far behind them, the marshal headed for shore. Again the canoes were concealed, and again, in the cover of the brush, a meal was prepared and eaten. Black John wondered at the air of genuine relief with which the three officers watched the boat pass and disappear downriver.

The two deputies stepped into their canoe and shoved off. As Black John was about to take his place, he spoke to the marshal. "We could make better time," he suggested, "if I was to take the hind paddle. I'm heavier'n what you be, an' the damn canoe don't travel good with the bow way down in the water. Ain't you noticed how hard she steers?"

"I'll say I have," agreed the other, "bein' as I've been the one that done the steerin'. I believe yer right. Head paddlin's easier, anyhow. Let me in the front, an' we'll give them two deputies a race. They was kind of growlin' about us not making better time. But by God, from now on they've got to paddle!"

"Yer damn right," agreed Black John heartily. "Let's go. I won't breathe easy till I git across that line where I know them Yukon police ain't got no authority."

The canoe shoved off, and swung in beside the other whose occupants were holding her in an eddy a few yards below.

"Hey," called the marshal, when the craft come alongside, "you guys was bellyachin' about us holdin' you back—what'll you bet we don't beat you to Eagle?"

"Bet you ten dollars you don't," offered one of the deputies.

The marshal promptly accepted, and the other deputy turned to Black John. "How about you? I'd like to git in on that easy money, too."

The big man grinned. "I'd like to bet all right—but I ain't got the ten. Them damn police up to Dawson took what change I had on me, along with my knife an' gun. It looks like easy money to me. I figger me an' the marshal here ought to paddle circles around you two."

"Is that so!"

"Shore it's so," grinned the marshal. "An' jest to make it some object to you to git down an' paddle, I'll take you on fer a ten, myself. Come on now—last one to touch the Eagle landin' loses."

The two canoes headed diagonally out into the current, and the race was on. At

first, the marshal paddled furiously as the other canoe drew slowly ahead, but Black John steadied him down.

"Take it easy," he advised. "This here's a long race. It ain't goin' to be won by sprintin'. Let them damn fools wear 'emselves out right on the start, an' we've got 'em. They can't hold that lick up fer very long. We'll jest shove along steady, an' let 'em tire out—an' then we'll begin leanin'

on the paddles a little harder an' slip past 'em like they was tied to a tree."

An hour later, with the other canoe only a speck in the distance as it disappeared around a wooded point at a bend of the river, the marshal spoke.

"Hey, we don't want to let the boys git too damn fer ahead! Don't fergit—I got twenty dollars on this race."

"Don't you worry none about them twenty dollars," reassured Black John. "At the clip they've been goin', they're gittin' tired, right now. We can pass 'em any time we want to. Did you notice how they hung way out in the middle of the river, goin' around that bend? Not only they're tearin' out the bone at the paddles, but they're travelin' two miles to git one, to boot."

"What d'you mean—two mile to git one?"

"Well—that's a wide bend, ain't it? It's a damn sight further around it, if you hold out there in the middle like they did, than it is if you cut in clost to the p'int, ain't it? Don't you rec'lect yer geometry?"

"My which?"

"Yer geometry—that you learnt in school—angles, an' segments, an' arcs, an' chords, an' all that stuff."

"Oh—like that. No, I didn't fool with that stuff. I quit in the sixth grade. What I claim, onct a man gits his education, it ain't no use he should go on crammin' his head full of stuff like that. Hell, I was makin' eight dollars a week in a paint shop when them other kids in my grade was still goin' to school yet. An'—look at me now. I'm a U. S. marshal—an' hell only knows what they're doin'."

"That's right," agreed Black John, grinning broadly at the man's perspiring back. "But you've seen bows an' arrows, ain't you?"

"Shore I have."

"Well, take the bow—the two ends of it is a certain distance apart—but you'd travel further to git from one end to the other if you followed the bow, than you would if you followed the string, wouldn't you?"

"Why—shore. The string's shorter."

"All right—then we won't travel so far if we start in now an' cut clost to that p'int than if we held out in the middle, will we?"

"That's right, we kin cut off quite a bit—onlest the river runs faster in the middle, er somethin'. I ain't much used to this here canoe work. I've mostly tended bar, an' run saloons. I ain't been a marshal only goin' on three months. They's prob'ly some tricks I ain't onto yet."

"Oh shore. There's bound to be," grinned the big man. "But you're learnin'—fast. Hell, take this here trip yer on now—I'll bet you'll pick up quite a few tricks."

"What I claim—a man ain't never too old to learn—if he uses his head. I can see now, we ought to gain damn near half a mile on them boys—the way we're headin'." The canoe was fast approaching the wooded point around which the other canoe had disappeared, and Black John was holding her well in. "I wouldn't go too clost," cautioned the marshal. "We might hit a rock."

"No rocks on this p'int. Speed her up, now—an' leave the steerin' to me. We'll shoot around this bend like a bat out of hell. When them birds sees us comin', they'll know they're licked."

The canoe shot ahead under the paddle strokes and it suddenly became apparent to the laboring marshal that if it held to its present course it would only miss the point by a matter of inches. The gravelly point was now only ten—five—three canoe lengths away. He turned his head in sudden alarm just as Black John, with a twist of his paddle sent the frail craft crashing onto the gravel with a force that pitched the marshal forward on his face, half out of the canoe. In an instant Black John was upon him, pinioning his arms, dragging him clear of the craft. A few moments of struggling, and the marshal lay glaring up into the grinning bearded face, his hands secured behind him with his own handcuffs.

"What the hell!" he roared, his face

purple with rage. "You damn fool, you ain't across the line, yet! Them Yukon police will be pickin' you up."

"Not," grinned Black John, "without a a certain amount of trouble. An' as far as crossin' the line—the last place I want to show up in is Alasky. Hell, man—you can't blame me fer not wantin' to git hung, can you?"

"Listen," said the marshal, regaining something of his composure. "You ain't in no danger of gittin' hung."

"Yer damn right I ain't—as long as I keep out of Alasky."

"I mean—we ain't got no good case agin you. You kin beat it easy. Come on, unlock these cuffs, an' let's git agoin' before some Yukon policeman comes along. We ain't got hardly nothin' on you at all over to Circle."

"Yer a damn liar!" retorted Black John. "I heard every word you told them deputies when you thought I was asleep. As a matter of fact, I didn't have nothin' to do with yer damn murder over there, but you'd shore as hell hang me fer it if you got me back there. I ought to knock hell out of you fer a damn dirty double-crossin' skunk —but it wouldn't be but damn little satisfaction beatin' up a man that was handcuffed."

"What you goin' to do with me?" asked the man, his voice dropping into a whine, as he stared up into the frowning face of the other.

"Jest teach you a few of them tricks you claimed you wasn't onto yet. Hell, you ought to be glad this here excursion turned out like it did. Look at the experience yer gittin'."

"Where's them damn deputies?" sniveled the marshal. "Why'n hell didn't they stick around?"

"What—an' lose them twenty dollars?" grinned Black John. "You ain't got no kick comin'; it was yer own proposition, this race—an' then bettin' on it. They're a good three, four miles downriver by now —an' goin' like hell. Looks from here like yer out that twenty."

"I was a damn fool to ever take them cuffs off'n you!" snarled the man.

"Yeah, it was a kind of an error in jedgment, at that," grinned Black John. "A list of the mistakes you've made would make a damn good record of this journey. But you ain't been a marshal fer long."

"By God, you can't leave me here to starve!" the marshal cried, as Black John proceeded with his preparations which included throwing the rifle and the bunch of keys far out into the river.

"Nope. You ain't in no danger of starvation. I'm jest makin' me up a light pack of grub, an' seein' we ain't got no packsack, I'll make one out of yer coat, here."

"Hey—give me that badge! I'll prob'ly catch hell if I lose that."

"Jest tell 'em it was stole off'n you. I'm keepin' it fer a souvenir—that an' the fact that I might find use fer it sometime. It's the only thing I'm takin', except the coat an' a little grub."

The pack made up, Black John lifted the man and laid him in the canoe. "You'll git to Eagle, all right," he said. "Prob'ly be a little late to win yer bet, but you'll git there. Jest holler when you go by, an' someone'll come out an' git you—that is, unless them deputies git worried an' start back upriver huntin' you. That don't seem likely, though—in view of that twenty dollar bet."

"But hell, man, a steamboat might hit me!" cried the marshal as Black John shoved the canoe out into the current. "I can't paddle with my hands behind my back!"

"Damn few men has been hit by steamboats," called the big man as the canoe floated downstream. "It's a chance you've got to take. So long—I'm hittin' back into the hills!"

VI

BLACK JOHN made his way swiftly afoot, holding close to the bank of the river. It was near midnight when he reached Forty Mile, and after some maneu-

vering, stole a police canoe, and headed on upriver. Toward mid-forenoon, he drew the canoe from the water, concealed it in the brush, ate a cold breakfast to avoid showing smoke, and proceeded to sleep till early evening. Then he resumed his upriver journey, arriving at the Indian village of Moosehide, some four or five miles below Dawson in the early morning. Placing the paddles in the canoe, he shoved it out into the river, and unseen, made his way to the shack of Owl Man, an Indian whose life he had once saved at the risk of his own. The Indian was delighted to see him.

"Ba Goss, me—I'm ain' t'ink I'm no see you no mor'. I'm seek in ma head 'bout dat. Yes'day in Dawson dey say you gon' down Circle City—git hung."

"You don't want believe all them rumors you hear," grinned the big man. "You got a pair of shears?"

"Got—w'at?"

"A pair of shears—scissors," explained Black John, making scissoring motions with his fingers at his beard.

The Indian grinned as he nodded his comprehension. "My sister got. Me go git. Liv' no far. You cut off w'iskers, huh? No look lak Black John no mor'. Mans t'ink mebbe-so som' nudder man, huh?

"That," agreed Black John, "is the impression I'm strivin' to foster. You got a razor?"

"No—no razor got. My sister got no razor. No Injun got no razor."

"Well, go git them shears, an' hurry back here with 'em—an' don't say nothin' to no one about my bein' here, er I'll throw you back in the river where I pulled you out of, that time."

The Indian returned shortly with a pair of shears, and Black John asked abruptly, "You got any money?"

The man nodded. "Got money. You want?"

"Shore I want it! How much you got?"

"Got hondre seex dolla. Got 'bout forty-wan ounce dus'."

"Git it," ordered Black John, and when the Indian returned from another room with a greasy sack, the big man counted it, and handed the Indian some bills. "I'm borrowin' this, savvy? You'll git it all back, an' plenty more along with it. Yer workin' fer me from now on till I fire you—savvy? But you keep yer mouth shet, an' don't let a damn soul know I'm back here. Go to Dawson an' buy a razor, an' a shavin' brush, an' some soap, an' hustle back here with 'em. In the meanwhile I'll git to work with these shears. An' when you go, don't fergit to put that padlock on the door an' lock it—I don't want no damn Siwashes buttin' in on me."

THE man departed, and Black John seated himself at the table, propped the cracked and distorted mirror before him, and proceeded to shear off his heavy black beard. When the Indian returned a couple of hours later, he finished the job with brush and razor to the vast amusement of Owl Man who stood watching each motion.

"There," grinned Black John, as he scrutinized himself in the mirror. "I wonder who the hell I look like, now?"

"Look lak damn chechako," chuckled the Indian. "No mor' Black John—damn chechako."

"That's a good idea. By God, I'll act like one, too. All I got to rec'lect is to do what a sourdough wouldn't—an' ask damn fool questions every time I open my mouth. I shore wish Old Cush could see me. He'd realize what a hell of a good lookin' young fella I used to be!"

"Too mooch look w'ite on de face," observed Owl Man, regarding the big man critically.

"That's right," Black John agreed, peering into the mirror at the contrast presented by his weather-browned forehead, and the white skin of his lower face. "I've got to lay around here in the sun fer a few days an' pick up a tan. You kin tell the Siwashes that I'm some chechako that's hired you to guide me on a prospectin' trip—an' I'm hangin' around waitin' fer my pardner to show up. In the meantime, you go up

to Dawson an' hang around the saloons an' let me know when the word gits back that I got away from that marshal. You savvy?"

The Indian nodded. "W'at de p'lice git you for? Mans say Black John rob chechakos on Hunker. Mor' mans say Black John keel man an' rob heem down Circle City. Me—I'm say dat de dam' lie!"

"Couldn't make you believe I'd pull jobs like them, could they, Owl Man?"

The Indian shrugged. "Mebbe-so keel mans—mebbe-so rob 'em—but you no git ketch."

"Oh, that's it," laughed Black John. "Well, in view of yer touchin' vindication of my character, an' yer firm belief in my rectitude, I'll tell you that I didn't have a damn thing to do with neither one of them robberies. But someone pulled 'em. An' from what certain witnesses say, the one that done it must look a hell of a lot like me. An' he's smart enough, er lucky enough, to keep out of the way of the police, too. Corporal Downey's no damn fool. He had to arrest me, an' hold me fer that Hunker Crick job, but he don't believe I done it—even after he'd worked on the case an' turned up a lot of evidence that got me in deeper an' deeper. An' he had to turn me over to them Americans, when they showed up with their papers fer that Circle job. Ever since he arrested me he's been huntin' the man that looks like me—a man with a heavy black beard—but he ain't found him—er hadn't up to midnight, night before last.

"While I was in jail Bettles an' the rest of the boys come to see me every day, an' they told me that Cuter Malone was spreadin' it around that it was me done them jobs, all right. He got a lot of folks believin' it. Cuter, he hates me—an' he's got damn good reason to. My hunch is that he knows who pulled them jobs, an' is either keepin' him hid—er knows damn well where he's hidin'. He figgers that if he could git me off'n Halfaday, an' git someone else in there, he'd git control of the crick. Then, with what he's got on some of the Yukon wanted's that's up there, he'd have things his own way—after buyin' Old Cush out er gittin' him knocked off.

"When word gits back to Dawson that I busted loose, I figger he'll pass it along to this bozo that done them jobs, an' tell him to pull another, an' then hit fer Halfaday, knowin' damn well that I can't go back there, with the police both sides of the line hot on my tail. That's the first place they'd hunt fer me.

"An' onct Cuter's man gits up there, it wouldn't take him long to convince the boys that they'd better play along with Cuter Malone. I've had a hell of a time keepin' 'em lined up on the side of rectitude.

"So as soon as you slip me the word that news of my git-away has reached Dawson, I'll slip up there an' hang around the Klondike Palace, like some green chechako would, an' mebbe I kin ketch me an earful. Cuter an' his mob wouldn't be so damn careful what they said in front of a chechako, 'specially one that was dumb as hell,

an' half soused, to boot. Meanwhile I'm goin' out an' expose my face to the sun, after burnin' up these here whiskers. If Downey was to come prowlin' around here an' run onto that beard he might git suspicious—knowin' that me an' you is friends." Black John paused, and fixed his gaze on the face of the Indian, who had been listening with the utmost attention. "You savvy what I've told you, eh?"

The man nodded. "Me, I'm fin' out when mans say you git 'way—com' back, tell you 'bout dat."

"That's right. Git a goin'. You prob'ly

won't hear nothin' till tomorrow er next day, but it won't hurt to make sure. An' you better take yer canoe up an' fetch back grub enough fer a couple of weeks stampedin' trip. We're liable to be pullin' out of here damn sudden, when the time comes."

VII

IT WAS in the afternoon of the second day thereafter that Owl Man reported that news of the escape had reached Dawson.

" 'Merican p'lice coom tell Cop'l Downey you git 'way on heem."

Black John grinned. "Come back himself, eh? Has the word got out? Do the boys know it yet?"

The Indian grinned. "De sourdough dey know 'bout dat. In Tivoli dey laugh lak hell on de 'Merican p'lice. He mad lak hell. T'ree 'Merican p'lice coom back."

"Did you hear what they said in Cuter Malone's?"

"Cuter, he mad, too. Den, bye-m-bye he ain' so mad. He say Black John no kin go back Halfaday Crick no mor'. Lot of mans talk. Me, I'm come 'way—tell you 'bout dat."

"That's right, Owl Man—you done fine. I'm goin' to Dawson now. You stay right here. I ain't acquired no tan, but my face is burnt red as a lobster. Anyway, it don't show white like it did. I guess it'll git by. No one looks twict at a damn chechako nohow. It's a good thing you're about my size. I've borrowed a pair of overalls an' a shirt off'n you, so no one would recognize my clothes. That damn fool marshal wouldn't notice 'em—but Downey might. Remember, now—you stay right here in yer shack, er within spittin' distance of it, till I come back. It might be an hour—er it might be a week. An' keep that stampedin' pack handy. When we go, we're liable to start in a hurry."

Black John, an unimpressive figure in patched shirt and faded overalls, pushed open the door of Cuter Malone's Klondike Palace, approached the bar with an air of diffidence, and in a voice slightly thick from evident indulgence in liquor, ordered a drink.

He filled the glass, clumsily slopping a portion of the whisky on the bar. As the frowning bartender mopped it up, he grinned foolishly:

"Jes' li'l ac'cent, brother. Have one on me."

The bartender's scowl relented somewhat, as he tossed off a short one and shoved the customer his change. "That's all right. You want to be a little careful—whisky costs money in this man's town. Jest get in?"

"Yeah, got in s'mornin'. Me'n my pardner. He's over to 'nother s'loon—Tivoli. We got kind of soused. He's over there yet. I says hell wish stickin' 'roun' one place—wan' to she the town. Nice place you got—lot of girls, eh?"

"Yeah, plenty of girls. We got anythin' a man wants here—women, cards, roulette, faro. We aim to show the boys a good time."

"Tha's right," assented Black John, staring vacantly around, and spotting Cuter Malone leaning against the safe at the far end of the bar in earnest conversation with three characters whom he recognized as habitués of the place. He swallowed his liquor, and moved away from the bar, to stroll aimlessly about, looking into the dance hall, and inspecting the idle roulette wheel, and the faro layout which some half a dozen chechakos were giving a desultory play. After a few minutes, he strolled again to the bar, this time taking his place close beside the men who were in conversation with the proprietor.

He beckoned to the bartender. "Give me 'nother li'l drink," he ordered, "an' have one yerself—an' ask these ge'men what they want. Drinkin' 'lone's too damn lonesome. After while I'm goin' to take a whirl at the wheel—feel kin' lucky today."

The bartender set out bottle and glasses, and Malone and the others joined in the drink. Malone bought another.

"Newcomer, eh?" he asked. "Well, stick around. We'll show you a good time here. There won't be nothin' doin' with the wheel, though, till after supper. Jest make yerself to home."

Black John mumbled an appreciation of the hospitality, and relapsed into silence, toying with his glass. Presently, the four resumed their conversation, evidently paying no further heed to the half drunken chechako, whose attention was centered on his drink.

Ten minutes later the men dispersed, and, downing his liquor, Black John sauntered about the place for a while and unobtrusively slipped out the door. As he strolled aimlessly toward the Tivoli, he grinned to himself. He had not learned much from the occasional words that reached his ears. However, he had heard his own name mentioned repeatedly, also Halfaday Creek, and knew that the four had been discussing some definite plan.

"Hadn't ought to be long before my namesake an' double will be pullin' another job. Then he'll hit fer Halfaday, where, accordin' to reports, I don't dare to be."

Momentarily he stiffened, then resumed his slouchy walk. Coming directly toward him down the street was Corporal Downey. Here, he realized, was to be the supreme test of his disguise; if Downey didn't recognize him, nobody would. As the officer was about to pass, Black John stopped him, eyeing the uniform with undisguised admiration. "'Scuse me, Cap'n, you in the p'lice?"

"Yes," answered Downey, eyeing the tipsy chechako with bored tolerance. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Yeah—that is, mebbe you c'n tell me good place to go to dig me some gold. Been out here on a crick, but wasn't no good. Hell of a lot of sand, an' no gold. My pardner quit on me so I come to town. Got a li'l drunk, but I'm good fella, all right. Tell me where's good crick, an' I'll buy li'l drink."

Downey grinned. "There's a lot of good cricks," he explained. "What you chechakos ought to do, is to hire out for wages till you get onto the hang of it. There's tricks in gold diggin', same as anything else. Go get yerself a job somewheres."

Black John blinked as he considered the advice. "Guess that's right, Cap'n. Much 'blige—come on over to s'loon, an' I'll buy a drink."

"No thanks. I'm busy. See you some other time, maybe. So long, an' good luck."

THE officer hurried on, and Black John proceeded to the Tivoli, where he found the marshal, flanked by two huskies he had never seen before, loudly explaining to a bunch of grinning sourdoughs, for the hundredth time, how Black John had effected his escape.

"Yessir; if them two damn fools I had fer deputies had minded their business it would never of happened. They wouldn't hold up like I told 'em to—keep their canoe clost behind mine. They went on ahead. I had him handcuffed, an' he claimed he had to git out on shore fer a minute. Well, if he had to, he had to, so I landed—an' the next thing I know'd I was handcuffed, an' he was loadin' me in the canoe an' shovin' me off. What happened, he'd brought them cuffs down on my head an' knocked me out. Then he took the keys out of my pocket an' onlocked 'em an' slipped 'em on me. I hadn't ought to have cuffed his hands in front of him, but I'm a humane man, gents. He claimed they hurt him the way I had 'em—behind him. So I changed 'em, an' that's what I git fer it. Believe me—next time he don't git no favors. An' I fetched a couple of deputies this time that'll tend to their business. Them other ones was more witnesses than deputies, anyhow—I fetched 'em along to identify the prisoner."

Black John had edged in between Bettles and Swiftwater, jostling each of them. Both gave him a dirty look, but paid no further attention to him.

"Well," chuckled Bettles, "you got him

identified, didn't you? You'll know him agin if you see him."

"Yer damn right I will! I'd know them whiskers if I seen 'em in hell. An' believe me, the next time I git holt of him I'll keep holt till he's hung!"

"Who you huntin', mister?" asked Black John, awkwardly shifting his stance to bring his heel down on Swiftwater Bill's toes.

"Look out where yer steppin', you clumsy loon!" cried Swiftwater, giving the offender a shove that nearly bowled over Old Bettles, who in turn pushed him against the marshal, with the remark that, "there ought to be a law agin' chechakos mixin' around where folks is, anyhow."

With a well simulated grin of drunken good nature, the offender retired to a chair, satisfied that his disguise would answer his purpose.

"Beauty," he observed philosophically to himself, as he eyed the sourdoughs and the irate marshal, "ain't only skin deep, as the Good Book says. But it seems like friendship an' animosity don't even git past a man's whiskers."

Black John hung about Dawson, mingling unobtrusively with the men in the saloons and listening to the talk which ran mostly to the escape of Black John Smith from the American marshal and his deputies. He listened with amusement to a hundred garbled accounts of the incident, and enjoyed hugely the preposterous speculations that were rife, as to what could be expected of the notorious outlaw in the future. Some predicted a series of crimes that would spread a veritable reign of terror throughout the Yukon. Others opined that the North had seen the last of Black John. While still others believed that he would slip quietly back to Halfaday Creek until the excitement blew over. This latter opinion was fostered by Cuter Malone, who further stated that, with as few police as there were in the country and as busy as they were, Black John was now in a position to organize the Halfaday Creek outlaws into a gang that could openly defy all authority. He pointed out that since the outlaw was now facing definite charges on both sides of the line, he would have everything to gain and nothing to lose by such procedure. This theory, with its apparent plausibility, was generally accepted throughout the camp. But Black John noted that the sourdoughs shook their heads, and for the most part reserved their predictions. As for the police—they, too, reserved their predictions, and went silently about their business.

ABOUT noon on the third day after Black John's return to Dawson, a wild-eyed prospector catapulted into the big camp with the story of how he had been held up and robbed, at the point of a big revolver, of seven hundred and twenty-one ounces of dust that he was bringing in for deposit. The man was a sourdough named Riley who had a claim on Bonanza. The hold-up had occurred on the Klondike, just below the mouth of Bonanza, and Riley stated unequivocally, and in no uncertain terms that the lone bandit was no other than Black John Smith. He had known Black John by sight for more than a year, having seen him in Dawson on numerous occasions. There was no chance that he was mistaken in this identification. In fact, the bandit openly admitted his identity when Riley told him he knew him. Not only that, he had told his victim to tell Corporal Downey, and all the rest of the police that from now on they'd better stay off Halfaday Creek.

This announcement created intense excitement in Dawson. Black John had hurled defiance into the very teeth of the Northwest Mounted Police. What would the police do now?

In the Klondike Palace, Cuter Malone and his henchmen openly opined that the police would not call the bluff. In the Tivoli, the sourdoughs shook their heads and wondered. It was up to Corporal Downey. What would Downey do?

Toward the middle of the afternoon Black John formed one of a group of chechako hangers-on who occupied chairs ranged

along the wall of the Tivoli when Corporal Downey entered and sauntered to the bar where some of the sourdoughs had foregathered. Abrupt silence had greeted the appearance of the officer—a silence that told more plainly than words that he had been the subject of discussion. Old Bettles shoved over to make room for him.

"Looks like Black John's runnin' hog-wild," commented Swiftwater Bill, by way of opening conversation.

"Sure looks like somebody is," grinned Downey.

"D'you reckon he'd hit fer Halfaday?" inquired Moosehide Charley.

"He might," answered the officer. "I'll swing around that way an' see, after he's had time to get there—if we don't pick him up somewheres else first."

"Goin' up alone?" asked Burr McShane.

Downey grinned. "Hell—there's only one of him, ain't there?"

"Yeah," chimed in the marshal, "but he's warned the police to stay off'n Halfaday. An' how about that gang up there?"

"There's only one gang," Downey replied. "An' besides, Black John ain't got no authority to order the police where to stay away from. I've got a constable up on Bonanza workin' on this last robbery. If he don't turn nothin' up in a week er so, we'll go up to Halfaday an' kind of look around."

"We!" exclaimed the marshal, his eyes widening. "You mean *me?*"

"Sure. You want him worse'n I do. You've got a murder charge agin him, besides a robbery—an' that escape. All we've got is a couple of robberies. Hell—you want to get yer badge back, don't you? I would, if I was you. There wouldn't hardly anyone know you was a marshal without that badge."

The marshal gulped and swallowed. "Mebbe," he ventured hopefully, "that Constable will pick him up on Bonanza."

"He might, at that."

"But if he don't, it'll be all right to take my deputies along, too, won't it?"

"Oh, sure. We won't be makin' no secret about the trip. Jest go on up an' get our man, if he's there. Fetch along anyone you want to. It's all right with me."

"What with bein' wanted both sides of the line, I don't believe he'd dare to show up on Halfaday," suggested the marshal eagerly. "I'll bet that warnin' he give was jest a bluff."

"Yeah?" drawled Old Bettles, eyeing the uneasy marshal, with a grin. "It's plain to see, brother, that you ain't never played no stud with Black John. When yer damn near shore he's bluffin', is jest the time he ain't. But anyways, you fellas'll be dyin' doin' yer duty—an' that's somethin'. Would you like fer the remains, if any is found, to be shipped back to Circle? Or Fort Yukon?"

VIII

BLACK JOHN left the Tivoli and made straight for the Klondike Palace where he found in earnest conversation with Cuter Malone the same three men who had been talking with him just after his escape had become known.

Making no attempt to overhear them, he bought a drink, stepped from the room, and struck out for Moosehide at a rapid pace.

An hour later he surprised Owl Man in his shack. "Come on—throw the stuff

into the canoe, an' we'll git agoin'! I've got a hunch that this hombre that looks like me will be hittin' fer Halfaday, if he ain't done so already. If he has, he ain't got no hell of a start an' we kin slip past him on the river. I want to be waitin' fer him on the White, an' kind of look him

over. We'll hit acrost an' hug the other bank."

TOWARD noon of the sixth day thereafter Black John, who was seated comfortably among some rocks screened by a clump of bushes at the foot of a portage on the White River, turned his head and called to the Indian, who was dozing on his blanket.

"Here comes a canoe," he said, "an' I mistrust it's the party I'm lookin' fer. You go back in the brush a ways an' wait till I holler fer you. Go back fer enough so you can't see nor hear nothin'. What goes on here ain't no one's business but mine—an', of course, the party's I'm speakin' of. We won't be needin' no witness."

Black John picked up Owl Man's rifle which rested against a rock close beside him, made sure it was loaded, and settled back to scrutinize the approaching canoe. It contained a single occupant who, a short distance below, shifted from paddle to pole and after a survey of the fast water ahead of him, headed for the portage trail straight toward where the man with the rifle was waiting.

"Well, I'll be damned," muttered Black John, as he stared at the lone canoeman. "Unless them bar mirrors all lies like hell, I can't blame them fellas that got robbed fer claimin' it was me that done it. He shore as hell looks like I used to before I shaved off my whiskers. I'm wonderin'," he grinned, "if he'll try to make me believe he's me?"

The canoe grated on the coarse gravel, and the man stepped ashore, stooped, and pulled it a little higher. As he straightened and turned to study the foot rail, he found himself looking squarely into the blue-gray eyes of a huge, smooth-shaven man with a sunburned face. The man stood squarely in the trail, the barrel of a rifle lightly cradled in the crook of his elbow.

For tense seconds they stood, looking into each other's eyes. Then the bearded one frowned. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded. "An' what you doin' here?"

The smooth-shaven one noted that the canoeman's right hand was creeping slowly toward his shirt front which bulged near the waistline to show the outline of a heavy revolver. Casually the muzzle of the rifle shifted and came to rest on a direct line with the bearded one's heart. The creeping right hand dropped to the man's side.

"I'm jest some chechako that's restin' up a bit before tacklin' the portage," Black John replied. "Who are you? An' where the hell you headin'?"

"Chechako, eh!" The frown darkened, and the man's voice boomed threateningly. "Well, I'm Black John Smith—does that mean anything to you?"

The blue-gray eyes widened in surprise. "Black John Smith! You don't mean the Black John Smith that's king of them outlaws up on Halfaday Crick, do you? The one the police had in jail fer a robbery, an' give him up to a U. S. marshal fer to take down to Circle an' hang him—an' he busted away from the marshal! You don't mean *him!*"

"The hell I don't," thundered the man. "An' it was a marshal an' two deputies. Not jist a marshal. An' that ain't all; I've hung more chechakos on Halfaday, than I've let live—see?"

"What did you hang 'em fer?" queried Black John, the inquisitive chechako eagerness in his voice.

"Just fer bein' chechakos!" boomed the man. "Swing that gun off'n me, an' git to work an' help me pack this stuff over this portage. Yer lucky as hell I'm lettin' you live. We're bad men up on Halfaday—outlaws. We'd jest as soon kill a man as look at him. We're tough—hard—see?"

"Yeah, I see," Black John replied, a slow grin twisting the corners of his mouth, as he thumbed the hammer of his rifle to full cock, while its muzzle still covered the man's heart. "An' it seems like when anyone gits as tough as what you claim to be, it's time someone pinned his ears back. Fact is, yer too damn rough a character to suit me. I won't feel safe as long as I know a hard guy like you is packin' a

belly gun. Jest pull yer shirt out of yer pants an' let the gun drop to the ground —bein' damn careful you don't make no grab fer it in transit, as a railroad would say."

"What!" roared the astounded man, his eyes on the muzzle of the rifle. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I'm the same chechako you been talkin' to all along, an' I don't aim to git potted with no six-gun. Pull yer shirt out like I said an' let that gun drop—an' do it now. 'Cause if this rifle lets go, like it's bound to within the next few seconds, there's goin' to be a hole right through your middle you could throw a dog through."

ONLY for an instant did the man hesitate, as his eyes met the gray-blue eyes that gleamed cold as ice. Then deliberately the man drew the front of his shirt from his trousers, and allowed a forty-five six-gun to drop to the gravel.

"Now," continued the man with the rifle, "you walk out on the p'int there; go clean to the end of it an' set down in plain sight, where I kin keep an eye on you till I git through runnin' through yer outfit. I don't dare to trust a man as hard as you claim to be out of my sight. If you was as lucky in them hold-ups as what folks claims, you ought to be packin' considerable dust along with you. If I take that dust off'n yer hands, you won't need no help to pack the rest of yer stuff over the portage. I don't like to do this, you understand. Fact is, I'd heard Halfaday was a good crick to locate on, an' I was headin' up there to try an' make me an honest livin'. But if you men up there is as tough as what you claim, I don't want nothin' whatever to do with you. So I'll take what dust you've got, an' go somewhere's else."

"You mean," snarled the man, his eyes glaring with hate, "that this is a stick-up?"

"You ought to know, if anyone does," replied Black John. "From what folks say, yer pretty handy at it yerself. 'Course, I don't claim to be no professional at it—like you. There'll prob'ly be some little mistakes I'll make that you'd notice—me bein' jest a chechako. An' I'd take it kind of you if you'd sort of p'int 'em out, as I make 'em. You see, bein' as this here dust you've got is, what you might say, the fruits of crime, I don't feel no compunctions about takin' it—'specially as you've practically deprived me of a livelihood by scarin' me off Halfaday. Git along, now—an' go out on the p'int, before I have to kill you—like you done that prospector down to Circle. I wouldn't have no compunctions about that, neither."

The man obeyed, muttering curses as he backed along the narrow spit of sand.

Black John laughed. "No matter how tough a guy is, he don't look nothin' but funny with his shirt tail out. I'll bet even them outlaws would laugh, if they could see you, now."

It took him but a few minutes to locate the man's gold—fifteen small heavy moose-skin sacks of it—which he promptly transferred to his own packsack. Thrusting the man's revolver beneath his own shirt, he secured his rifle and regarded him with a frown.

"Near as I kin figger, from the talk around Dawson, you ought to have a little better'n twenty-three hundred ounces. The American marshal claimed you got six hundred ounces off'n the prospector you murdered over around Circle City, an' them two birds claimed you robbed 'em of a thousand ounces on Hunker. Then there was that last job near the mouth of Bonanza——"

"How the hell could you know about that?" exclaimed the man suddenly.

Black John grinned. "Why wouldn't I? This here Riley you robbed, he shore didn't make no secret of it. Hell, everyone in Dawson know'd it ten minutes after he hit camp. Man, I'm tellin' you—he squawked!"

"But—what I mean—I didn't hang around long after pullin' that job—how in hell could you git here ahead of me?"

"The answer," grinned the big man, "is simple. I come faster."

"You ain't no chechako!" exclaimed the man. "Who the hell are you? Mebbe we kin deal."

"Who I ain't, er who I am, ain't neither here nor there. An' as fer dealin'—we've already dealt. If I seem to have got slightly the better of the deal, don't let it sour you none. You got to remember that you won out on them last three deals you made—an' a man can't expect all the breaks. Besides, if you look at it right, this here deal is an even break fer both of us—our losses on it is almost identical. Think of my deep chagrin in gettin' less than a twelve hundred ounce profit, when I had every reason to expect better'n twenty-three hundred ounces. To say that I'm disapp'inted in you is statin' the case mildly. You ain't livin' up to yer reputation—by a damn sight! You ought to be ashamed of yerself. You ain't hardly no more than a common piker." Black John stemmed the torrent of profane objurgation that interrupted his words. "Of course, there might be some mitigatin' or extenuatin' circumstances—like folks exaggeratin' yer take on them three jobs, er the fact that you had to split with a pardner. Bein' as these was all reported as one-man jobs, the pardner, if any, would be a silent one. An' that's prob'ly the answer—Cuter Malone has collected his split."

"Cuter Malone!" cried the man, staring wide-eyed at the speaker. "What the hell do you know about Cuter Malone?"

"It would take too long to tell it."

"Who the hell are you, anyhow?"

Black John grinned broadly. "Names don't cut no figger in this country—it's faces that counts. Like I told you—I'm jest some chechako tryin' to git along. But we've wasted time enough, already. I don't want to detain you no longer'n what's necessary. I'm retainin' yer dust, an' yer rifle an' revolver. I know you must be anxious to be gittin' back to Halfaday Crick amongst them hard guys, so you'll feel to home. It must be kind of degradin' fer a tough hombre like you, the notorious king of the outlaws, to be associatin' with any common chechako he happened to meet up with on a river. I can understand that it would be right humiliatin' if anyone was to come along an' catch you at it. But I don't see no one comin', an' if you git agoin' right away, you'll prob'ly be spared the mortification. I'll promise not to mention the matter to anyone, if you don't. Sorry I can't help you over the portage with the balance of yer stuff, but I know you realize that it would be folly fer me to let go of these guns even fer a minute under the circumstances. There's times, you know, in this country, when a man is forced to forego the amenities, even at the risk of bein' thought crude an' boorish. So long, King—next time you hang a chechako, think of me."

IX

IN SULLEN silence the bearded man packed his outfit over the short portage trail and launched his canoe above the rapids. Black John watched until he disappeared around a bend of the river, and then called to Owl Man who appeared promptly.

Black John regarded him sternly, albeit with a twinkle in his eye. "Either you didn't go back in the brush as fer as I intimated; or else you come like hell when I hollered. Did you perchance see or hear anything that went on?"

The native shook his head. "No—no see—no hear. Me sleep. Wake oop fas' w'en you holla."

"You must of had a damn comical dream then—accordin' to that grin on yer pan. But whatever it was, you better fergit it. You're hittin' back to Dawson in a few minutes, an' git this straight—you've got to git word to Downey that Black John Smith is headin' up White River. Don't tell Downey, yerself. He'd figger it was a phony tip, because he knows yer a friend of mine an' wouldn't talk if you had seen me. There must be some of them constables around Dawson that don't know you, ain't there?"

Owl Man nodded. "Cop'l Downey know

me. Cons'ble Peters know me. Mor' p'lice don' know me."

"All right, you slip one of them others the tip that I'm headin' up White River. Tell him you was campin' at the mouth of the White an' saw me go by. If he asks yer name, lie to him an' slip away. All Siwashes looks alike to them rooky constables. He'll pass the word to Downey, an' Downey'll come up to Halfaday an' git this bird that looks like me. Mebbe the American marshal'll come along, too, if his guts'll permit it. You savvy what I told you?"

The Indian repeated the instructions, and glanced toward the canoe concealed in the bushes. "Only wan canoe. W'at you do?"

"You take the canoe. I'll hit fer Cush's afoot. I know a short-cut that'll git me there a good day ahead of this double of mine. I want to kind of wise Cush up to what's goin' on, before he does something drastic. Git goin' now. Here, hold on—what was it I borrowed off'n you?"

"Wan hondre seex dolla—forty-wan ounce dus'."

Reaching into his packsack Black John drew out two heavy sacks which he tossed to the Indian whose eyes fairly bulged from his head as he hefted them in his hands.

"Too mooch dus'!" he exclaimed. "Wan sack plenty. Wan sack too mooch dus'."

Black John interrupted him with a frown. "Quit yer damn quibblin'!" he growled. "Them sacks runs right around eighty ounces apiece. What I borrowed would run around forty-eight er nine ounces. The rest is wages an' interest—savvy? An' don't stand there an' give me none of yer back talk, neither, or I'll throw you back in the river where I pulled you out of that time. If I hire a man it ain't none of your damn business what I pay him. Shut up—an' git a goin'. I'm takin' grub enough with me to see me to Cush's."

SHOULDERING his pack, Black John struck diagonally into the hills, and five days later, he descended into the valley of Halfaday, some half a dozen miles below Cushing's Fort.

Pot Gutted John and Red John paused in their labor to eye the big smooth-shaven stranger who had halted beside their shaft.

"Is this Halfaday Crick?" asked the man. "An' could you tell me where I'll find Cushing's Fort?"

"Yeah, this is Halfaday," Pot Gutted John answered. "An' you can't miss Cush's. It's about four mile up the trail. Figgerin' on locatin' on Halfaday?"

"Well—I might, if I like it here. The name is Smith—John Smith."

Red John grinned broadly. "So's ourn," he replied. "That there's Pot Gutted John

—on account of him bein' that shape. An' I'm Red John, on account of my hair an' whiskers is that color."

"But," interrupted Pot Gutted John, "the name ain't allowed no more on the crick. Old Cush, he'll fix you up out of the name-can."

"The name-can?"

"Yeah, there got to be too damn many John Smiths on the crick. It's a kind of a handy name to think of, if a man wants a name right quick, an' most everyone that come to Halfaday claimed they was named that. So when we hung One Eyed John one time, he left some book behind. An' Black John an' Cush copied a lot of names out of it an' stuck 'em in a can—an' now when anyone comes along an' says his name is John Smith, he's got to draw some other one out of a can."

"Good idea," grinned the big man.

"You mentioned a Black John? I wonder if he could be the Black John Smith that they say is under arrest for a robbery, or somethin' down to Dawson?"

"Yeah, he's the one. But he never pulled no robbery down there. He's too smart to pull a job like that. There was a constable up here talkin' to Cush about it. He says the fellers that got robbed claimed Black John done it, but hell, them damn chechakos don't know one man from another nohow. Downey'll turn Black John loose pretty quick. He's bound to. Downey ain't no damn fool; he knows Black John wouldn't pull no job fer no thousan' ounces—an' he wouldn't."

"Accordin' to the talk in Dawson, Downey had to turn this Black John over to a U. S. marshal an' a couple of deputies that come to Dawson with papers. He's wanted fer a murder an' robbery over on the American side—Circle City, er somewheres."

"Well, I'll be damned," chuckled Pot Gutted John.

"It'll be fun hearin' him tell about it," grinned Red John.

"You don't seem to be very much worried about it," the smooth-shaven man said. "Ain't this Black John a friend of yourn?"

"Shore he is! But why the hell should we worry? We ain't tryin' to take Black John nowheres. That marshal an' them deputies is the ones that's got to worry. There ain't no three men livin' that's goin' to take Black John nowheres he don't want to go."

"Well, I'll be movin' along," said the big man. "I'll be seein' you later, if I decide to locate somewheres on the crick. So long."

As Black John passed on up the trail he chuckled to himself. When he reached a point within half a mile of the fort, he stepped from the trail, seated himself comfortably on a rock, produced a piece of wrapping paper from his packsack, fished the stub of a pencil from his pocket, and proceeded to write a note which he carefully folded and placed in his pocket. Then he resumed his journey, halting uncertainly some ten minutes later in the doorway of the saloon, to eye the somber-faced man with a drooping yellow mustache, who stood behind the bar intently reading the Bible spread open before him.

The man looked up as the shadow darkened the doorway, peering over the top of his square rimmed steel spectacles. Deliberately he closed the book, set it on the back bar, and set out a bottle and two glasses.

"Come on in, stranger," he invited. "The house is buyin' a drink."

"Is this Cushing's Fort?" asked the man, as he advanced to the bar, and swung the packsack from his shoulders.

"Yeah, this is the place."

"An' are you the proprietor?"

"I'm him."

"Sometimes known as 'Old Cush?'"

"Yeah, but I ain't no older'n some of the rest of 'em, at that."

"My name's John Smith. I——"

"Not on Halfaday, it ain't," interrupted the somber-faced one. He indicated a tin molasses can at the end of the bar. "Jest help yerself to a name," he said. "The name of John Smith has already been took —too many times."

The big man smiled good naturedly. "Oh, yes—I stopped and talked to a couple of men a few miles down the trail, and when I told them my name, they explained about the can. They said I couldn't use the name 'John Smith' on the crick."

"They was right."

Moving over to the can Black John thrust in his hand and drew out a slip of paper. "George Cornwallis," he read aloud.

The somber-faced one nodded. "Drink up, George," he invited. "The last man that draw'd that name got hung."

"Here's how. I hope I'll have better luck," grinned the other, swallowing his liquor.

"It's hard to say. You might."

"Fill 'em up again," said the big man, tossing a sack onto the bar. "An' if you're Old Cush, I've got a letter fer you."

"Who from?"

"All I know is an Injun that claimed his name was Owl Man, slipped it to me when I told him I was hittin' fer Halfaday. He says to give it to you, an' no one else. Here it is," the man removed the paper from his pocket and slipped it across the bar.

Cush took it, held it to the light, and studied it intently through his spectacles. "That's John's writin'," he muttered to himself, "an' Owl Man is a friend of his'n. But—I wonder what kind of tom-foolery he's up to now?"

"What's that?"

"Nothin'," replied Cush bluntly. "Except his writin' is hell to read. John, he kin talk big words till hell wouldn't have it, but he can't even write little ones so anyone kin read 'em without studyin' an hour."

"Mebbe I could help you," suggested the other.

Cush eyed him fishily. "If John had wanted everyone to know what he'd wrote down, he'd of put it in a newspaper," he said, and folding the note, slipped it between the leaves of the Bible on the back bar.

"Could a man locate on the crick?" asked the other.

"Help yerself," replied Cush. "There's some shacks up the crick that's empty. Move into one till you find somethin' you like."

"Thanks, I believe I will," replied the other, and an hour later, he left the fort after purchasing supplies to last for a couple of weeks.

WHEN he had gone, Cush retrieved the note, and pondered it intently. "It's bad enough readin' printin' with these here specs, but readin' writin' is hell," he grumbled to himself as he smoothed the paper out on the bar and bent over it, moving his lips as he slowly read aloud.

"Cush—

Some damn cuss that claims his name is John Smith an' looks like me, pulled off three robberies an' a murder. The victims, except the murdered one, an' some witnesses claims it was me that robbed 'em. Downey arrested me on a complaint an' then had to turn me over to a U. S. marshal who showed up with papers—one robbery an' the murder bein' pulled off somewheres around Circle. This marshal an' a couple of deputies started to take me to Circle, but they didn't have much luck at it. So I'm on the run till Downey arrests the real robber. That won't be long because he's hittin' fer Halfaday. Him an' Cuter Malone, believin' I won't dare to show up there, are figurin' on organizin' the boys into a gang of bad actors. When this bird shows up let him claim his name is John Smith an' let him move into my cabin. Slip the boys the word to string along with him till Downey comes, which won't be long, because he's already got the tip that he's hit fer Halfaday. Wish I could be there to see the fun when Downey picks him up.

(Signed) John."

Old Cush folded the note with a sigh, and slipped it between the leaves of the Bible. Then, shoving the spectacles to his forehead he shook his head forebodingly. "Things ain't never dull where John's mixed up in 'em," he murmured. "He kin git into the damndest jams I ever see. But he allus gits out of 'em—an' most times with a profit. It must be 'cause he thinks faster'n most folks—even the police." He was about to pour himself a drink, when the doorway darkened for an instant as a man strode into the room. Old Cush stared, slipped the spectacles back to his nose, and peered into the bearded face in undisguised astonishment, as the man faced him across the bar.

"This is Cushing's Fort—an' you're Old Cush," he announced, abruptly, and paused as though expecting a reply. But no reply

came: the solemn faced man behind the bar simply stood peering through the spectacles. "Well," rasped the other, "don't stand there gogglin' like a dummy! Am I right; er wrong?"

"I wouldn't wonder."

"You wouldn't wonder—what?" demanded the man with a scowl.

"If you was."

"If I was—what? Right; er wrong?"

"Both."

"How the hell could I be both?"

"Right this time; wrong most of the time."

"Is that so!"

"I couldn't say."

"Look here," rasped the man, "don't try to git funny with me, you damn old mossback! My name's Smith, John Smith—an' from now on Black John Smith, see?"

"There's already one Black John Smith on the crick," replied Cush mildly.

"That's right—an' I'm him. The one that used to be here won't be here no more. He's prob'ly plumb out of the country, by now. The police both sides of the line is huntin' him. He ain't got the guts to show up here—nor nowhere's else. He's afraid the police'll nab him. An' if he did show up, an' run into me—he'll wish to God the police had picked him up. Tellin' you about me—I'm hard!"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah—an' if you've got any sense you'll string along with me, see? You've got a good thing here, they tell me, an' you kin keep on havin' a good thing—if you watch yer step. You'll have a better thing than you ever had while the other Black John was here. Trouble with you guys was, you didn't have no guts. How many outlaws is here on the crick?"

"I couldn't say."

"Well—there's forty, er fifty, ain't there?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Well, that's what Cuter—that's what I've heard. That's the talk down around Dawson, an' I've got reasons to believe it's straight goods. A hell of a bunch of outlaws, I'd say, workin' claims like a bunch of damn chechakos, when there's a hundred cricks in the country full of chechakos—an' sourdoughs, too—that's jest hollerin' to be robbed. An' only a hundful of police on this side of the line, an' you might say none at all on the other side. Trouble is, you ain't had no one that know'd how to organize. Take me, I know. Split the boys up into small mobs an' put 'em on different cricks, with a connection in Dawson to keep cases on the police, an' act as a kind of a clearin' house—switchin' the mobs around from one crick to another, an' all that. Hell, the police won't never even suspect Halfaday, an' if they did, they wouldn't git time to come up here, we'd keep 'em so busy on other cricks. If they did, it would be jest too damn bad fer 'em, that's all. I've warned 'em to stay off Halfaday! Do you git the idee?"

"It sounds easy," admitted Cush. "Did you think it out by yerself?"

"Well, me an' one er two others that's smart enough to know a good thing when

they see one. How does it strike you?"

"All of a heap."

"Yer damn right! Hell—there ain't nothin' to it. We'll take this country like Grant took Richmond. Ain't you goin' to buy a drink?"

"Oh—shore." Cush replied, sliding a glass across the bar and indicating the bottle. "The house allus buys the first one.

I'd plumb fergot—listenin' to them plans of yourn. Drink up."

"Well," demanded the man, as he swallowed the liquor and refilled his glass, "ain't you got nothin' to say? No questions to ask, er nothin'?"

"I was jest wonderin' about this here Grant you spoke of. Has he still got it?"

"Got what?"

"Why—Richmond, didn't you say he took?"

"Hell—no!" exclaimed the man in disgust. "Richmond's a city, you damn fool. The Gover'ment's got it, of course."

"Oh—I was jest wonderin' if that ain't what would happen to the Yukon, if we was to take it."

"Hell, ain't you got no brains, at all?"

"I couldn't say. Not many, I guess—accordin' to Black John."

THE man grinned. "He was right fer onct in his life, anyhow. By the way—do you handle guns?"

"Pretty good. Black John's about the only one on the crick kin outshoot me."

"I mean—do you sell 'em?"

"Oh—yeah. I got a few rifles in the storeroom."

"How about revolvers? I had bad luck comin' up the White. I landed at a portage, an' a damn cuss throw'd a rifle on me, an' lifted my own rifle, an' my revolver, an' better'n eleven hundred ounces in dust."

"You don't say! I wonder who done a trick like that?"

"I wish I know'd. Claimed he was jest a chechako, but he didn't act like one. An' his eyes didn't look like no chechako's eyes I ever seen. He never give me a break."

"Well, you can't hardly blame him fer that—tough as you be. What did he look like?"

"He was a big smooth-faced guy—big as I am. Kind of red-faced, an' he had sort of blue eyes that could look plumb through a man."

"Did he come on up the White?"

"He better not! I'd know him if I ever seen him agin. He claimed he was goin' back to the big river. Why—d'you think you know him?"

"No. Only—folks don't allus go where they claim they're goin'."

"How about a revolver?"

"I don't sell none. I got one of my own, but I'm apt to be needin' it any time."

"Where the hell can I locate, here on the crick? You got extry rooms upstairs?"

"Nope. You claim Black John ain't never comin' back. Why don't you take his place? It's a good cabin, right handy to here—jest up the trail a few rod. You can't miss it—it's the first one you come to."

"That'll suit me fine," agreed the man. Guess I'll go throw my stuff in there an' kind of look the place over. See you later."

When the man had gone, Old Cush shook his head dolefully. "It beats hell," he muttered, "some of the folks that's runnin' loose. Guess I better lock up an' go tell the boys what John said in his letter—'fore some of 'em knocks this tough guy off. Downey wouldn't like that. He'd claim we was hasty." As he struck off down the creek he grinned to himself. "This here smooth-faced man that fetched John's letter—he must be quite a fella, after all—'leven hundred ounces ain't so bad."

X

NEARLY two weeks passed, during which the self-styled Black John hung about the fort getting acquainted with the men of Halfaday who, following Cush's instructions, accepted him at his own valuation. He even broached his plan of organization to several of the men, who accepted it with apparent enthusiasm. He established a credit of drinks and supplies which Cush readily granted, grinning to himself as he charged the items against Black John's account.

Then one morning when the saloon was empty save for Cush and the pseudo Black John, four men appeared suddenly in the doorway. Three of them carried rifles which were immediately trained upon the bearded

man who stood before the bar. The fourth wore the uniform of the Northwest Mounted Police.

One glance at the menacing rifles, and the bearded one reached high with both hands. Corporal Downey advanced, flanked closely by the riflemen. With a sly wink at Old Cush, the young officer paused directly before the man with the elevated hands.

"John Smith," he said, "you're under arrest, charged with the robbery of two men on Hunker Crick, and another near the mouth of Bonanza. It is my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used against you. Lower your hands now —an' try these on."

As the man's hands were lowered, the young officer slipped the cuffs on his wrists. "It is my duty, also, to turn you over to these American officers in compliance with the law."

"American officers!" cried the man, a look of terror in his eyes. "Not by a damn sight, you don't turn me over to no American officers! Listen, I'm guilty of them two robberies on the Yukon side. I robbed them two chechakos in their shack on Hunker—I took a thousan' ounces in dust off 'em. An' that guy on Bonanza—Riley his name is—I took him fer seven hundred an' twenty-one ounces."

"That checks," grinned Downey, "right to the ounce. Where is this dust? You got it cached?"

"No, I ain't got it, I was stuck up an' robbed comin' up here. A big smooth-faced guy done it. He claimed he was a chechako. I'm willin' to plead guilty, an' take my medicine on the Yukon side, but I didn't have a damn thing to do with that Wood Crick job. I don't know nothin' about the murder of that prospector."

"Who said anything about murderin' a prospector? No one's mentioned Wood Crick, er a prospector, either."

"I heard about it in Dawson," cried the man. "But you ain't goin' to pin that murder on me. It was the other Black John done it!"

"Oh," grinned Downey, "so there's two Black Johns, eh? Do you mean to tell me you ain't the same Black John Smith that I had locked up in Dawson, an' later turned over to this American marshal?"

"Sure I ain't! I never seen you before —nor that marshal, neither. It was the other Black John you guys had—an' it was him pulled that murder near Circle."

Corporal Downey turned with a grin to the United States marshal. "He sure looks like the same man I turned over to you. How about it?"

"I'll tell the world he's the same man! The damn dirty double-crossin' coot!" He glared at the manacled prisoner. "Worked me pretty slick, that other time, didn't you —claimin' you was hell-bent to git over to the American side, cause you know'd you could beat the case—an' then knockin' me cold an' makin' yer git-away?"

"I tell you I never seen you before," shouted the prisoner. "You got the wrong guy. There's another Black John. Ain't there, Cush?" He turned suddenly and appealed to the sombre-faced one who stood behind the bar, an interested spectator. "You tell 'em! There is another Black John, ain't there?"

Old Cush deliberately shifted his quid, and spat into a box of sawdust. "I couldn't say," he replied, eyeing the man steadily. "Yer the only Black John around here."

"It's a lie! It's a damn lie! Yer framin' me," cried the man, his voice rising almost to a scream. "I never seen none of you before. Take me to Dawson. Ask Cuter Malone—he knows!"

The American officer leered at the hysterical man. "Oh, yeah? Take you to Dawson, eh? Take you down where all them sourdough friends of yourn kin git you away from me. Not on yer life. You got away from me onct—an' onct is enough. Where in hell's my badge? Fork it over!"

"I don't know nothin' about yer badge. I tell you I never seen you before. It wasn't me got away from you. I ain't got no sourdough friends."

"Aw, hell," snorted the marshal, in disgust, "don't play me fer a damn fool! I'd

know them whiskers anywheres. Don't try to pull that fool stuff on me. Come on along—I'll have plenty time to search you fer that badge. We ain't goin' to risk no trip down the Yukon—not when we're this clost to the Alasky line, we ain't." He turned to the deputies. "Fetch him along, boys; we'll slip him acrost the line before these Halfaday Crickers go on the war-path. Downey here, he's agreed to stick around an' keep 'em good till we git a start."

Corporal Downey spoke as the two husky deputies seized the prisoner's arms. "Better jest slip yer own cuffs on him. I might be needin' mine."

"Sure," assented the marshal, producing a pair from his pocket. "An' I'm lockin' his hands behind him, instead of in front. That's a trick you ought to remember," he added with a superior smile, as he returned the young officer's cuffs.

"You better take plenty of supplies along," cautioned Downey. "It's a long way to the nearest tradin' post on the American side—a hell of a long way, an' the goin's rough."

"Oh, we've got all the supplies we'll be needin'," replied the other. "Come on, boys, yank him along. If he won't come peaceable, a few good swift kicks from behind'll make him step up. I'll tend to that part. You keep holt of his arms."

And so the squirming, cursing, protesting prisoner was hauled out through the doorway, and headed toward the gulch that Downey had indicated as leading to the line, only a mile or so distant.

WHEN they had disappeared Corporal Downey turned to Old Cush, who had set out the bottle and glasses. "How about it, Cush?" he asked. "Ain't Black John showed up on the crick?"

"Nope," answered Cush, "he ain't. An' that's a fact, Downey. I ain't saw John sence that day he left here with that dust to take it down an' trade it fer bills. What do you want him fer—seein' how that damn cuss confessed to them robberies?"

"Well," grinned the officer, "there's a matter of some sixty-nine thousan' dollars in bills we're holdin' fer him. I was jest goin' to suggest to him that he better stop in fer it when he gits time."

"Did you relly figger Black John pulled them hold-ups?"

"No, I didn't. But after seein' this other fellow, I don't know as I blame them witnesses none fer claimin' it was him. Damn if I believe I could tell 'em apart if I was to see 'em together."

"Me, neither," agreed Cush. "That day he come stompin' through that door braggin' how tough he was, I'd swore it was Black John—that is, till I heard him talk, I would."

"I sure hated to turn John over to that marshal that night. They might have convicted him over there—especially if we hadn't been able to pick up this other one before the trial. It's no cinch he wouldn't have been convicted in Dawson, on the evidence, either. I've heard of men havin' doubles before, but that's the first time I ever saw it."

"Listen!" exclaimed Cush. "Sounds like shootin'—back in the hills over on the American side."

"Good God!" exclaimed Downey. "You don't suppose some of the boys here are tryin' to rescue him, do you? Surely, even the dumbest of 'em must know that damn four-flusher ain't Black John."

Cush shook his head, and wangled a fresh chew from the corner of his plug. "No," he said. "It wouldn't be none of the boys. They all know'd he wasn't Black John. An' he ain't no one anyone on the crick would waste any shells over. Fact is, I seen blood in that marshal's eye when he was talkin' to that damn skunk. An' besides, I seen they never figgered on goin' very fer with what grub they had."

"You mean," exclaimed Downey, staring incredulously, "that they—they've murdered that poor devil?"

Cush shrugged. "They won't call it that. They'll claim he tried to git away on 'em—or attacked 'em, er somethin'. At that,

they prob'ly give him as much show as he give that prospector he murdered, an' look at the trouble they saved theirselves takin' him clean back to Circle!"

"But good God—they're officers, policemen!"

Again Cush shrugged. "Policemen is jest like anyone else—there's a damn sight of difference in the breed of 'em."

"But they're paid to bring a prisoner in—not to kill him!"

"Their pay goes on jest the same—either way."

The conversation was interrupted by a huge, smooth-shaven man who stepped into the room and advanced to the bar.

"Why hello, capt'n!" he exclaimed, thrusting out his hand. "What you doin' way up here? Last time I seen you was in Dawson. Bet you don't rec'lect me, at that."

"Why, sure I do," smiled the officer, shaking the proffered hand. "You stopped me on the street one day, and asked me where you could find some gold. I believe I advised you to get a job till you got onto the hang of things."

"That's right! That's jest what you said. I was a little bit soused that day, so I didn't pay no attention to that there advice, figgerin' you'd prob'ly feel different about it when I sobered up. So——"

"What?" interrupted Downey, eyeing the man with a puzzled frown.

"Yeah—you know yerself, capt'n, that you can't put no confidence in what a drunken man says, an'——"

"But," grinned the officer, "I wasn't drunk when I gave you that advice."

"'Course not—but I was. You can't believe what a drunk hears, no more than what one says, so I took that there advice with a dose of salts, an' come on up here. I figger I'm goin' to like it on Halfaday—onct I git acquainted."

Old Cush slid a glass toward the newcomer. "The house is buyin' one," he said. "Corporal Downey, meet George Cornwallis. But—it looks like you'd met before."

"Oh shore, but I didn't tell him my name, that time. Drunk as I was, it prob'ly wouldn't of sounded much like 'George Cornwallis', if I had. It's faces that counts—not names, anyhow. Ain't that so, Capt'n? Take you police now, I bet you don't never fergit a face, onct you've got a look at it. Spottin' me the minute I come in here proves it. You know'd right where you seen me before—an' what the both of us said."

"I wouldn't say I never forget a face—I've prob'ly forgot thousands of 'em—but a man sort of gets into the habit of rememberin' a lot of 'em. It often comes in handy."

"I'll bet it would," agreed the other. "By the way, I heard some shootin' a few minutes ago—back a ways off the crick. Someone must be huntin'. Mebbe I could git a piece of meat off'n him. I ain't had no time to hunt sence I come here. Been busy findin' a location."

"I don't think you want none of the meat they've killed," observed Cush. "Fact is, some American marshals jest crossed the

line a while back with a prisoner. He claimed he was a tough hand."

"You mean, mebbe this prisoner attacked 'em, an' they shot him?"

Cush replied. "If they shot him they'll be back d'rectly."

"What was his name?"

"He claimed it was Black John Smith."

"Prob'ly a good thing if they shot him," observed Cornwallis. "I heard about him down to Dawson. They tell me this Black John was a bad actor. From what they

say, I'll bet he's give you plenty of trouble, ain't he, Capt'n?"

Downey nodded. "That man has," he replied. "But, at that, they shouldn't have——"

The sentence was interrupted by the entrance of the marshal, followed by his two deputies. "Well, his hash is settled!" the marshal announced loudly with a broad wink at Corporal Downey as the three ranged themselves before the bar. "Belly up, boys—I'm settin' 'em up to the house."

"Meanin'?" inquired the corporal, meeting the other's glance squarely.

"Meanin' that Black John Smith won't never rob no more armies, nor murder no more prospectors, nor stick up no more chechakos. He's deader'n a nit—right now."

"You killed him?" asked Downey incredulously.

"Shore as hell we killed him!" boasted the marshal. Then, with a broad grin, he added, "He tried to git away on us. He pulled that git-away stunt jest onct too often—see?"

"Yeah," answered Downey, "I see."

"Well, come on, boys! Set out the glasses, barkeep. What you goin' to have?"

Both Corporal Downey and the smooth-shaven man stepped slightly back from the bar. "I ain't dry," said the corporal, his eyes still on the marshal's face.

"How about you?" asked the marshal, shifting his glance to the big man at the officer's side, as the smile faded from his lips.

"Dry as hell," replied the smooth-shaven one, contempt showing in his blue-gray eyes, "but partic'lar who I drink with."

The marshal shrugged. "Suit yerselves," he grunted, and turned to Cush. "The barkeep'll have one, anyhow. Right?"

"Wrong," said Cush, leaning against the back bar as the three downed their liquor.

"What the hell's the matter with you guys, anyhow?" demanded the marshal. "Here we come clean up here an' take a bad actor off'n yer hands, an' put him where he won't never bother no one no more—an' you practically insult us fer it." He turned to Downey. "I s'pose you'd of let him git away on you, eh?"

"No. I'd have taken him in to stand trial."

"Oh, you would, eh?" sneered the marshal. "Well, you've learnt somethin', then, in the way of policin'."

Downey nodded. "That's right," he admitted. "Only on this side of the line we ain't supposed to murder prisoners."

The man's face flushed. "Murder?"

"That's what we'd call shootin' down a handcuffed prisoner, over here. The officer that done it would be hung. An' he should be, too."

THE big man beside the corporal cleared his throat roughly. "This here murder," he began, "while it didn't come off exactly on Halfaday Creek was undoubtless committed in the immediate vicinity thereof, an' in sech case, would rightly come under the jurisdiction of a miners' meetin'. Of course the fact that it occurred on the Alasky side might complicate matters, in case anyone was minded to quibble." The big man paused, a twinkle in his blue-gray eyes as he was conscious that at the sound of his voice, both Old Cush and Corporal Downey were regarding him with open mouths and eyes that seemed to fairly pop from their heads. He turned to the astounded Downey, and continued, "So if the Yukon law would turn his back on the incident, an' head back to Dawson, we'd call a miners' meetin' an' go ahead an' hang about three so-called American marshals fer the crime of murder."

A look of sudden fear flashed into the marshal's eyes, as he appealed to Corporal Downey. "Don't go!" he cried. "Yer bound to stay here an' protect us! I've heard of these hangin's on Halfaday Crick! We're in a hell of a fix! We've jest killed the king of these outlaws, an' they'll hang us shore as hell! You can't go away an' leave us. We demand protection!"

"All right," replied Downey, his face purple with suppressed laughter, "I'll do

my damndest. But I wouldn't advise you men to go back down the crick. You'd better get supplies here, an' hit straight for the line—where you crossed yer prisoner—an' then hit for the Tananna. There's only one of me, an' there's lots of outlaws here on the crick—so you'd better not delay startin'. I'll keep this man under surveillance so he can't spread the word about the murder of Black John Smith. If that once got out on the crick, no one could foresee what would happen."

"I kin," scowled the huge man, "an' my advice is, that if you birds don't want it to happen, you'd better begin pickin' 'em up an' layin' 'em down as fast as yer conscience dictates—an' keep on doin' it fer as long as yer legs holds out. We ain't never hung a U. S. marshal on Halfaday—but a lot of the boys would delight to."

Half an hour later, after Cush had turned over supplies that would last them for ten days, the three took a hurried and fearful departure. When they had gone, the big smooth-shaven man turned to Corporal Downey with a grin:

"How about a little drink, Capt'n? The house is about to buy one. Ain't that right, Cush?"

"Well, I'll be damned!" breathed Old Cush, as he set out the bottle and glasses. "To think that you'd ever be able to fool me! I wouldn't never believed it."

"Oh, you wasn't so hard to fool, but Downey, here—what with the police trained to recollect faces, an——"

"You go to hell!" laughed Downey, "John, you'd have made a great actor."

"Oh shore—always wanted to be one, too. But actors don't move around as fast as I've had to, sometimes. I'm shore glad that Army pay-roll job is wrote off the books fer good. It was kind of botherin' me. Of course," he added, with a grin, "that marshal might hear that Black John Smith is back on Halfaday agin, but he won't hardly believe it. An' it ain't likely he'd come up an' investigate, if he did."

"I guess yer right," agreed Downey, his eyes on Black John's face. "But I was just wonderin' about that dust that the dead man took off those prospectors? He claimed he was stuck up an' robbed down on White River, by a big, smooth-faced chechako."

"He did, eh?" queried Black John, with undisguised interest. "Well—there's a job fer you, Downey. Policin' must be hell—first yer out huntin' fer a man with whiskers, an' the next thing you know, yer huntin' a man without none. It must be right discouragin', at times. Well, here's luck to you! An' speakin' of whiskers—I've got to git to work an' grow me a new stand of 'em."

"Yeah," grunted Old Cush, as he swallowed his liquor, and refilled his glass, "an' see that you don't fergit to put that there name you draw'd back in the can neither."

A Competent Court Had Convicted Young Johnny Vaeth, but——

THE FLAME SLAYER

By F. V. W. MASON

Author of "Special Warden," "Shanghai Sanctuary," etc.

WITH dignity the old setter raised his head and, looking towards the front porch, dark beneath its shroud of trumpet vines, uttered a faint growl.

"Can't say as I blame you, Duke," drawled Glenn Mayo glancing up. "Should have cooled off long ago."

But the dog growled again so Mayo took a deep pull on his pipe and, for all his fifty years, moved both quickly and silently to open the front door.

"M-mister Mayo?" queried a soft voice marred by frightened overtones.

"Reckon so." Corncob aglow in his big, freckled hand, Mayo pushed open the screen door.

"You—you're Mr. Mayo, the one who works for the insurance company?"

Nodding, the tall figure in shirt sleeves relaxed a little and a smile spread like widening water over his craggy features.

"Something wrong, Sis?"

"Ye-yes, sir, everything in the world." Hesitantly, a handsome young woman in an inexpensive but tasteful cotton frock stepped inside.

"That *is* a lot to have wrong."

Pathetic apprehension in her manner, she muttered. "You—you'll give me a few minutes?"

"Of course. But why do you think an old moss-back like me could help you?" he demanded, pulling out a faded blue bandanna with which he mopped features surprisingly suggestive of an American Indian's.

"Everybody in this part of Ohio knows about you, Mr. Mayo," gravely replied the girl. "It was you proved that awful Bill Pike drowned his wife for her insurance; it was you caught the men who burned down Eller's place, how——"

"Whoa! You'll be makin' a reg'lar detective out of me."

A tired smile flitted over the girl's face, gold-brown and delicately powdered with freckles.

"My dad says a lot of big cities have offered you charge of their detective bureaus."

"Some folks are mighty easy fooled by a bit of good luck," smiled the gray-haired adjuster. "Besides there's more need for reasonably capable fellows in little towns like Fortuna. You're not a local girl?"

"No, sir. During the school year I teach Fourth Grade in Horace Mann at Beltsville."

The yellow-haired girl paused and Mayo understood the depth of her agitation because when she entered she cast not a single glance about his comfortable little living room, only sank into the nearest chair and clasped nervous hands in her lap.

Old Mayo picked up a tinkling pitcher. "You look pretty hot, Sis; how about a glass of iced tea?"

"No thank you—help is the only thing I want." A desperate energy propelled her words as she went on. "I've tried to reach people—influential men—but, oh dear, once I mention my business they won't even listen. Because Johnny was kind of wild and irresponsible once, they're certain he set the fire, but he didn't, Mr. Mayo. I *know* he couldn't have done such a horrible thing! Johnny's kind—terribly gentle. Oh please—please don't let them——"

THE girl's nether lip quivered, sending a small pang to Mayo's heart. Even Duke, the setter, seemed to regard her with a restless intensity.

"I'm afraid you're kind of putting the cart ahead of the horse." Old Mayo's voice came as an anodyne to raw and quivering nerves. "You see, I really even don't know the name of this man you're so worried about. He's a brother?"

"Oh no, he—he's my fiancé, Johnny Vaeth."

"Vaeth!" There was that in Mayo's tone which made the dog raise his head. "I reckon, then, you'll be the Hurlock girl?"

Luminous gray-green eyes became suddenly drowned and her tawny complexion paled. "Oh God help me! You're like all the rest!"

Above the gray miasma rising from his corncob, Glenn Mayo's brows merged.

"I've followed the 'Flame Slayer' case very carefully, and I've heard no explanations for how that fire started—if Vaeth didn't do it. You see, Miss, Johnny knew his father napped there every day."

"Don't go on!" blazed the girl in the blue cotton print. "I know it all by heart! You'll tell me John intended to inherit his father's money, that he needed the insurance on the car he'd parked in the Argus building, that he hated Jessie."

Slim hands flew up to cover the blonde girl's ears and with eyes shut she rocked a little on her chair. "In two days more they—they'll kill John—take him from me, forever."

Troubled lines supplanted certain friendly wrinkles about the insurance man's mouth.

"But aren't you forgetting, Miss Hurlock, that the court, an honest competent court, in a very fair trial, decided that Vaeth set fire to that building? Remember, even Vaeth admitted that the cellar was locked in every direction. Four reliable witnesses saw the cond—your fiancé sneak downstairs."

Instantly, the girl's head snapped up. "John didn't sneak! He—he only went down quietly because he wanted to go fishing; he was afraid his boss was going to make him work late in the store on his half day off."

The shadow of Mayo's head, thrown gigantic against the ceiling, mimicked his slow shaking of it.

"Of course, of course, Miss Hurlock," he said soothingly. "But that don't alter the fact that he was alone in the cellar and that he must have known his father was given to snoozing in an upstairs office."

"So did half of Beltsville," countered the girl as if she were reciting a piece. Her hands became pallid tentacles of agony. "Why does everyone want to have John killed?" Nina Hurlock swayed blindly to her feet. "If *only* Mr. Vaeth hadn't happened to nap late that afternoon!"

QUITE deaf to the troubled thudding of Duke's tail, Mayo's caller buried her small freckled nose in a little Porto Rican handkerchief—ten cents at Woolworth's—and groped her way around a black walnut table towards the night and its droning swarm of insects.

Deliberately, old Mayo's voice overhauled her. "Hold on. You said the fire broke out after Mr. Vaeth's usual nap time?"

"Yes, but why ask m-more questions?" choked the trembling girl. "You—you're not going to help me—I know you're not."

"Maybe not," admitted the adjuster then, touched by the forlorn droop of her shoulders, he added, "However, you'd better wait till I ring up a man I know."

Listlessly, she obeyed, and at the end of several minutes the host succeeded in locating one William Hunt who, it seemed, was an insurance adjuster for the Interocean Assurance Society.

"Heyo, Bill, this is Glenn Mayo. Say, wasn't it you investigated the *Argus* arson case?—— A bad business, all right.—— No, the Aztec's got no interest—in a busi-

ness way—it's only personal curiosity.—— What made you suspicious?—— No.—— Traces of phosphorus in the basement, eh? Couldn't have been wiring?—— No, I suppose not, if the underwriters inspected it a month earlier. ——Well, doesn't look as if it could have been anybody else. ——Listen, Bill, I'm dropping over to Beltsville tomorrow morning. Meet me at the ruins, will you? ——Fine, thanks—— How's that pup getting on? ——Retrieving already, eh?"

Presently Mayo replaced the receiver and slippered over to tower above the girl's small and frightened figure.

"So your fiancé was proved to have bought phosphorus?" he remarked, dipping his corncob into a tobacco jar. "You'll admit that's not a usual thing for a young man to buy?"

Pale gold shimmered as Nina Hurlock's head flickered upwards. To his surprise she even forced a wan smile.

"If only everything else could be so easily explained!"

"Easily?"

"Yes. Last year at 'State' Johnny and some boys in his frat wanted to scare an assistant professor, so he bought some phosphorus to smear on a skull from the lab. That's what he got thrown out of college for. Really, that's all there was to it."

"Hardly all, Sis," corrected the host. "It established an 'unfortunate coincidence', as they say in the detective books."

Her face suddenly lost its flesh and blood look and took on the texture of stone; Nina Hurlock arose once more.

"If they kill John," her voice was a metallic monotone, "I—I don't believe I could go on living in such a rotten world."

"Such talk's nonsense," said the adjuster sharply, "sheer and utter nonsense!"

Old Mayo however was deeply alarmed; the character of this girl semed utterly unsophisticated, and otherwise ill-equipped to weather such an emotional cataclysm.

"If young Vaeth hadn't had a fair trial," the insurance adjuster went on a little helplessly, "we might get somewhere. However," he tried to inject a note of optimism, "I'll talk to Bill Hunt tomorrow, so don't go doing anything foolish."

Quite suddenly Nina looked fixedly up into his eyes, and at the same time taking a hand of his between both of her slim, cool ones. Puzzled, he waited for her to speak but she only shut her eyes and remained utterly still for some moments.

At last she sighed. "I—I suppose that was no use—just High School stuff, but I—I hope, somehow, unconscious vibrations are able to convey a conviction—maybe I can make you feel as I do—that they are going to execute an innocent boy."

Poor kid, how dreadfully in earnest she was. What a pity that young Vaeth would have to die just the same.

Before he could find anything to say, the slim figure in blue had flitted through the screen door and had leaped into some Beltsville grocer's delivery car. Unhappily, he heard it go rattling off down a maple-shaded street, silent now save for the sleepy drone of cicadas.

II

IF 'TWAS anybody but you, Glenn Mayo," the warden smiled, "I wouldn't let them in. As it is, Dunnigan will show you to the death house. You can have ten minutes and not a second longer; penitentiary rules."

"Thanks a lot, Charlie. I'll be seeing you when this sad business is over. Found a mighty likely looking bass stream over in Athens county."

"I'll be taking you up, Glenn," the warden sighed. "Executions are pretty near as hard on us as they are on the condemned. Now get along with you."

His nostrils assailed by the faint reek of chloride of lime, Mayo found himself before the closely barred door of a cell in which a pallid, attractively homely young man drooped on the edge of a cot.

"Mornin', John."

The tousled, sandy-colored head did not turn, but the prisoner mumbled, "Go to hell and leave me alone. I've told all there is to tell a thousand times."

"I'm here to help you," said old Mayo quietly. "I came because the girl you love asked me to."

A haggard and unshaven young face slowly lifted and it lightened a little when, in a hoarse undertone, the prisoner queried, "Nina? Who the devil are you?"

"Just an old codger from over Fortuna way. You'll talk?"

"Why not?" A sigh, indescribably eloquent of weariness, burst from him in the necktie-less blue flannel shirt before he began a mechanical recitation of the already familiar story.

"You're positive nobody else could have been in the cellar?"

"Positive. They've got me there."

Brown eyes with friendly little crow's-feet at their corners peered in at bloodshot gray ones framed between the bars. "Tell me in detail what happened after you went down the cellar stairs. Don't overlook anything, Son."

"I started for the back cellar door, sir,"

young Vaeth sighed, "because that old skinflint Davis was figuring to make me work after hours. If jobs hadn't been so hard to get, and if Nina and I——" He broke off, pushing a dank tangle of hair from his eyes. "Well, I was just going to shoot the bolts when Ferdie Leddon, my brother-in-law, called down for me to come back."

"Hold on, Son," Glenn Mayo held up a hand. "When Leddon called you, did he go to the top of the stairs?"

"No," came the bitter reply, "Ferdie just hollered down through the speaking tube. That's why I don't stand a chance; none of the four other men in the building was out of sight for a minute."

"Who were these other men?"

"Our Chief of Police—which didn't help my case any—and old man King, the banker. Against all those witnesses I didn't stand a chance." Gradually the prisoner's sullen truculence had evaporated until now he was simply a boy, terrified of what would soon be done to him.

"You're in a spot—a very bad spot," slowly admitted the insurance adjuster. "Am I correct in thinking that the burnt building was very old?"

"Sure, it used to be the old *Daily Argus* building. The paper moved about five

years ago to their new place on Centre and Columbus. It's a mighty handsome——"

"Yes, Son, I know. Who took over the old *Argus* building?"

"Reckon Sim Davis, my boss, owns the largest part, and Ferdie Leddon the rest."

"Any mortgages?"

"Round town they're sayin' old man King holds a pretty sizeable one."

The insurance adjuster absently jingled some change, then murmured, "I see. Did you know your dad intended to leave you some money?"

YOUNG Vaeth's prematurely aged features went white, then red. "Ye-yes. But don't fathers generally leave money to their children? Besides, my stepsister, Jessie, was to share equal."

Mayo interrupted his preoccupied parade up and down the corridor.

"Is it true your father was given to napping after lunch in his office?"

"Yes. He'd a couch in his office upstairs, but he generally was up and around by two."

Glenn Mayo's slightly oblique eyes narrowed. "Um. And on the day of the fire he was still sound asleep at half-past three. Can you explain this?"

The sullen, hopeless look returned to dominate young Vaeth's expression. "I can't. Dad, Jessie and I ate lunch together—we live only two blocks away."

"Your father acted naturally at lunch—didn't look sleepy or tired?"

"Oh no, sir, though he did complain about the heat."

"The district attorney," reminded he before the cell door, "claimed you drugged your father either at home or in his office."

Young Vaeth's hands at the bars grew white knuckled. "No, no! I admitted we didn't always get along, but shucks, sir, he was my dad!"

"You and Leddon were friendly?"

"Sure, real pals, 'cept when Jessie stirred up trouble. Please, can't you—don't you think there's a chance—just a small chance for me?" Ghastly fears were to be read in those bloodshot gray eyes. "I—I think I'll go crazy when they slit my trousers leg and shave my head." The condemned man passed a trembling hand over his eyes. "Only two days left. Oh God, to think I'll never fish again—never land another small mouth——"

The older man's leathery features contracted, how well he knew the ecstatic

thrill generated by the strike of a big bass! "You've got to face this like a man, Son. Right or wrong, Nina mustn't be ashamed of you."

"Nina!" groaned Johnny Vaeth and the starch went out of his rigidly held body. "They won't let me see her." Visibly the prisoner collected himself. "But I'll check out well, tell her that. Oh, Mr. Mayo, isn't there *any* hope?"

III

STANDING as disconsolate as Marius among the ruins of Carthage, William Hunt of the Interocean Insurance Company was waiting beside the *Argus* building's charred and tumbled remains. Mayo's colleague was unshaven and regarded the newcomer's gaunt form with a distinctly disapproving eye.

"Heyo, Bill," Mayo called as he untangled himself from behind his battered coupe's steering wheel. "Sorry to spoil your beauty sleep."

Yawning, the other held out his hand. "'F we hadn't been frien's for the last twent' years——"

"You've stood it pretty well," Mayo grinned, then drew a deep breath of the morning's freshness—this time untainted by chloride of lime.

"Tell me, Bill, did you adjust this claim by yourself?"

Hunt passed a hand over his pink and hairless scalp. "No. Tompkins of the Columbus office came down when they indicted young Vaeth. Had to be doubly sure, though it was a cinch case. Good Lord, Glenn, *you* know how easy it is to recognize traces of phosphorus."

"Where'd you find it?"

"Yonder." The other adjuster's stubby forefinger indicated a rusty tangle of pipes sprouting like gargantuan dried weeds from the ruined cellar.

It had, old Mayo noticed, been a remarkably thorough fire—as is generally the case with old frame structures—and only a chimney stack remained unconquered by the tide of ruin.

Together the two men went scrambling down among charred beams, blackened bricks and a rusty litter of radiators.

"Right here was where we found the incendiary pellets—two of 'em. Looked for 'em at dusk—like you did in the Eller's case."

"Um. Find anything else of interest?" Mayo demanded while with interest he examined the rust flaked clump of pipes and tubes.

"Nothing much. Only a lot of old newspapers. Believe it or not, those *Arguses* went as far back as Garfield and McKinley. Some of 'em are still there."

The plump little adjuster nodded towards a brown and black mound near the base of the pipes.

"Um. I suppose old Mr. Vaeth's body was totally consumed?"

Hunt frowned. "Not enough was left for an autopsy."

Using a charred stick, Mayo began to poke about the ruins.

"In whose favor was the insurance drawn?"

"Sim Davis and Ferdie Leddon were the beneficiaries," came the prompt reply. "Davis stood to gain a third more than Leddon—in case you're interested."

"And the Interocean paid them?"

Uttering a liquid note, a robin came fluttering down from a row of scorched oaks and began to examine the rubble stirred up by Mayo's stick.

"Not exactly, Glenn. Better than a quarter of the settlement went to old man King who held a fifteen thousand dollar mortgage on the property."

"But Sim Davis, the kid's boss, got the biggest slice?"

"Yes." An expression of disgust flitted over Hunt's good-natured moon of a face. "And that old skinflint wouldn't give a duck a drink if he owned a lake. Guess he was glad of some ready cash, though, 'cause they say his business has been falling off

something fierce since he refused to help the Community Fund."

"What about Leddon?" Mayo queried while peering into the mouthpiece of a half melted tube.

"Don't know much, Glenn. Only that Jessie Vaeth met him when she was at school up near Cleveland," Hunt explained.

"Pleasant enough feller, but he makes an oyster look like a carnival barker when it comes to talking about himself. They say old man Vaeth wasn't any too pleased at the marriage."

DUSTING orange-red flakes from his hands, Mayo straightened. "Is old man King's bank sound?"

Bill Hunt nodded vigorously. "We looked up that angle, but it's no go. Fundamentally, the Farmer's Trust is solid as a sod house, but right now they could be a bit more liquid—even if King has bought a new limousine."

A few moments later the two paused beside Mayo's coupe.

"Thanks a lot, Bill. You've been a big help as usual."

"Think nothing of it, my boy." Hunt smiled—people generally smiled when Glenn Mayo was around. "And drop in at the house for supper if you're still in town. I want you to see that pup of mine retrieve."

"Thanks, Bill. Reckon Duke and the pup will give the quail plenty of hell this fall. By the way, where does Sim Davis live? Yes, and Leddon and King, too?"

For some time after the other plump little claim adjuster had waddled off towards Beltsville's business district, Glenn Mayo remained in his car with unseeing eyes fixed on the speedometer. Dominating his imagination was a haunting vision of John Vaeth's frightened face.

Um. Was it pure coincidence that Beltsville's chief of police should have been on the premises at the time Johnny was supposed to have set his fire? And why should old Mr. Vaeth have slept a full hour later than usual on the quiet June afternoon? Coincidence again? Old Mayo snorted gently—long experience had rendered him as wary of coincidence as a horse of an uncertain bridge.

It was not an unpleasant ride through Beltsville's quiet, elm-shaded streets and, though it was barely seven, activity reigned in nearly every home.

The Vaeth residence proved to be a big yellow house serene in the dignity of four tall white pillars; characteristically a horse-block and hitching-post stood in front of it.

Though a frowsy negro maid informed him that the Leddons were at breakfast, John Vaeth's brother-in-law appeared almost at once. He proved to be redhaired and with an expressive, not unpleasing face which just escaped being really handsome.

"I'm a bit early, Mr. Leddon," Mayo apologized. "But hope you'll forgive me; I've a busy day ahead."

Ferdinand Leddon offered some cigarettes. "Early? Not at all, sir. In a tank town like this we race the chickens getting up." In frank curiosity he surveyed the adjuster's lean figure, so undistinguished in its baggy brown suit, then queried, "What can I do for you?"

Glenn Mayo shuffled a little and fumbled at a stained old tobacco pouch. "Well, Mr. Leddon, I was wonderin' if you figgered on selling the old *Argus* site?"

A subtle change came over Mayo's host and his bright blue eyes became pushing, penetrating as he lit his cigarette and then with a supremely dexterous twist sent the match stick flying into the narrow mouth of an iron pot set on the hearth.

"Why yes, we were thinking of selling it as soon as—well when the notoriety has

died down," Leddon admitted, and Mayo was struck with the clarity of his enunciation.

"I guess that trial must have been pretty hard on you all?" was Mayo's polite suggestion.

"It was a nightmare, sir," Leddon declared, "when it wasn't ten, twenty, thirty melodramas." Gloomily, he shook his head. "Believe me, I was sorry for poor young Johnny; the kid sure put on a bum act and his defense was so dumb that he had the jury rolling in the aisles a couple of times."

MAYO poised a match above his cob pipe. "Think I'll head the old girl up. Well as I was sayin' I fancy that piece of property even if it is a bit out of the main business district."

"Oh no, it's in a coming section of town. I tell you, Mr. Mayo, Beltsville's got a great future."

"Nothing like boosting the home town," smiled the adjuster.

"Beltsville's not my home town, but it's a nice little place and it rates fifty-two weeks with Jessie and me."

In his chair Glenn Mayo stirred.

"Been in the dry goods business long?"

"No, only about two years."

"Where did you say you were from?"

The redhaired man smiled as, pulling out a small gold penknife, he commenced to clean his fingernails. "I didn't say, but my headquarters were in Cleveland for a while. Fact is, I've traveled around quite a bit, Mr. Mayo; ever since I was a small boy."

Comfortably, old Mayo settled deeper into his rocker as he sighed, "Wish I could have done more traveling in my early days—it's very broadening, I suppose." He grinned reminiscently. "Nearest I came to it was trying to run away with a circus."

"Oh, did you?" As if impatient at his caller's digression, Leddon glanced up from his manicuring.

"Yes. I wanted to be an actor. I suppose you've never felt the urge."

Smiling, Ferdinand Leddon shook his clean-cut head. "Can't say I ever have. Near as I can see acting doesn't get a man much unless he's near the top."

"The trade probably wouldn't give a man all this." Mayo's glance swept the living room and its plethora of expensive furniture.

"Oh, we do well enough. Now how about that property, Mr. Mayo? Sim says it's worth every cent of fifteen thousand."

The older man's hands spread in a sharp gesture of disappointment. "Then I guess there's no use of our talking," he cried in gentle agitation. "For a fact I hadn't figured on going above ten."

"Ten?" Leddon's handsome face fell, but brightened presently. "Well, if you're willing to pay cash, maybe Sim's asking too much."

"I'd figgered to pay cash. But suppose I drop in on your partner and see what I can do?"

"Go to it, but you'll have a hard time getting him down," laughingly predicted Leddon. "He's a tight old rascal. He lives at 29 Woodlawn."

"Thanks. I'll 'phone later," Mayo promised and, catching up his hat, soon halted before number 29 Woodlawn Street.

Three hours later he left Mr. King's office in the Farmer's Bank and made his way to the railroad station where, with a deep frown of preoccupation, he bought himself a ticket.

IV

IN THE Beltsville Commercial House's seldom-used old taproom were gathered four men whose faces portrayed varying degrees of expectation and anxiety. Thanks to the slanting rays of a late afternoon sun, a fine sprinkling of sweat and certain rigid lines on old man King's face were revealed with pitiless efficiency.

"I—I can't get my mind off of it," he complained. "It's horrible to realize that, in a few hours now, Johnny Vaeth will be dead." He turned a gray face to the window. "Murderer or not, I've seen him grow up from a little tacker that high."

Sim Davis' parchment-hued face contracted across the paper-littered table.

"Ain't it a bit late in the game for you to start feeling sorry for him?"

"Maybe," grunted the banker, "but I happen to have a few sparks of pity in my makeup."

"He's a murdering whelp," snapped Leddon's partner, "and you know it, Lucius

King! You were plenty eager to see him convicted, so don't go pulling this sob stuff."

Leddon glanced sharply up from the papers he had been scanning. "God's sake, drop it! Here, Sim, better run over this contract—Mr. Mayo's in a hurry to get back to Fortuna and Jessie and I want to catch the 6.10 to Cleveland."

"If you feel like seeing a show when you get to town," Mayo began pleasantly, "there's—Tck! I forgot you're not much on the theater, Mr. Leddon!" He inspected his hands and sighed. "Look like a hod carrier's—excuse me." Followed by two pairs of eyes he skirted the table and crossed to a wash basin set in a corner of the grimy old taproom.

Wiping his hands, Mayo paused beside a pair of speaking tubes designed to communicate with a downstairs kitchen.

"Hello, down there? Send up four beers," he called into the nearest one. "We're getting mighty dry."

"Nobody down there," Sim Davis rasped. "New kitchen's on the other side of the hotel."

"Sorry," Mayo shrugged. "It was a good idea though."

King pulled out a fat, old-fashioned watch. "If you want me to witness, you'll have to get a move on. I'm due back at the bank by five."

"Be through in just a minute," Davis muttered. Then, as if to occupy the interim, Mayo drew from his pocket a long slip of pink paper.

"Funny thing," drawled the adjuster, "in Cleveland last night I ran across this. See if you don't think this fellow looks familiar."

THE pink slip proved to be one of those theatrical handbills such as are still used in rural communities, and at its top was the reproduction of a photograph. Though the pictured face was made up as Satan and adorned with a spiky goatee and mustache, not one of the three men failed to recognize the original.

The broadside read: "'Zoroaster, Lord of Fire.' Just returned from a triumphal tour of Europe, Zoroaster will feature the Gayety's bill this week.

"Zoroaster, whom no flame can harm, bathes in liquid fire, then drinks and breathes the consuming element. As Master of the Flames his performance will amaze and terrify you!"

"Well, Mr. Mayo," the banker demanded icily. "What's the meaning of this?"

Davis was staring stupidly at his partner. "Is that you, Ferdinand?"

"Yes."

"But, but," Davis sputtered, "this bill's dated 1930 and you told me you were in the wholesale meat business at that time."

"I was—supporting hams, as it were." Ferdinand Leddon's quiet laugh was devoid of alarm. "Don't you see, Sim, I couldn't tell people here I'd been on the stage? A lot of old fogies in Beltsville still think actors and actresses are the devil's first cousins."

"Here, here, gentlemen, I didn't mean to start a row—only thought it would amuse you," Mayo cried soothingly, then pulled out a fountain pen. "Let's get down to business and——"

"Not so fast," Leddon cut in in rigid indignation. "What was your idea in sticking your nose in my private affairs?"

"Please don't get mad, Mr. Leddon," old Mayo pleaded mildly. "Guess I'm old fashioned, but when I do serious business I like to know something about the other fellow—especially when he says he's never been interested in the theater but uses such stage lingo as 'tank towns', 'ten-twenty-thirty' and 'rating fifty-two weeks.'" Apologetically, the grizzled adjuster blinked. "It was that last which made me wonder if you maybe hadn't been in vaudeville some time."

A peculiar breathless silence invaded the taproom, an abnormal stillness only punctuated by the blasts of a traffic cop sweltering just outside beneath an orange and green umbrella.

DAVIS got to his feet, his expression that of a man who recalls having left his wallet on a hotel dresser.

"Look here, Leddon," he began, "I want——" He got no further because King had heaved himself up to stand above the table, sniffing loudly.

"I smell smoke! Look! Look!" Everyone spun about, following the line of the banker's quivering forefinger. Crawling leisurely under a door leading below was a gray tentacle of smoke!

Leddon sprang up, his sharply delineated

features gone an ugly red gray. "Maybe it's only the furnace."

"No, it's a real fire," Mayo's voice drawled. "I just now set it."

"You're crazy!" King sputtered. "How could you—you haven't been out of this room a second?"

His parchmentlike face paler than ever, Davis sprang forward. "Come on, don't sit there gabbling!"

Old Mayo, however, raised a restraining hand. "Don't worry, gentlemen, a couple of policemen are downstairs putting the fire out."

His face a livid mask of suspicion, Sim Davis halted in a frozen attitude. "How do you know?"

"Because I put them there when I planned to start this fire."

"But how could you have set that fire?"

"Through the speaking tube!" came the equable reply over sounds of activity below.

"That's sheer nonsense," Davis snapped. "I haven't had my eyes off you and your hands were nowhere near the tube."

"That's right, but they didn't have to be. Watch, please." Suddenly pursing his lips, Glenn Mayo turned his head sidewise and spat a small pellet of some substance into a wastebasket. Almost at once a tendril of smoke began to curl upwards.

"What was that?" King's voice was hoarse and he goggled in astonishment.

"A bit of phosphorous," replied the insurance adjuster. "Recently I was interested to learn that two or three bits of it can be carried in the mouth without suffering the least burn. Any fire eater or magician can tell you that the action of the mucous memb——"

Uttering an inarticulate bellow, Leddon leaped to his feet and snatched at his hip pocket, but even more quickly Glenn Mayo caught up his fountain pen to direct a needlelike jet of fluid into the fugitive's face. Shrilly, Leddon screamed and staggered back digging wildly at his eyes.

"Don't worry," Mayo coughed as he pinioned the helpless ex-actor, "it's only tear gas—and Zoroaster, the Lord of Flame, shouldn't mind a trifle like that."

The police burst in and there ensued as tumultuous a half hour as Beltsville had experienced since the Vaeth jury had brought in its verdict.

When the excitement had somewhat subsided, Lucius King at the police station sought out Mayo, very lanky in his baggy business suit.

"But I still don't understand, Mr. Mayo, what first roused your suspicions?"

"Well, come to think of it, it was the fact that old Mr. Vaeth chose that particular afternoon to oversleep," replied the adjuster with a slow smile. "A coincidence, Mr. King, and therefore to be investigated. Also Johnny's reference to a speaking tube interested me. Later on, I thought it odd Leddon didn't want to haggle about the property's sale price—he was ready to take $5000.00 below his regular price at once. Of course when I met him and heard him use all those theatrical terms, I thought I'd better look him up in Cleveland."

The plump little banker mopped a rather shiny red brow and looked his admiration as Mayo continued.

"That phosphorous trick is one of a 'fire eater's' favorite stunts; he just spits—a pellet of course—into 'water'—really kerosene—and presto, it bursts into flame! That's all Leddon did when he called down the speaking tube to Johnny. He knew there were plenty of old newspapers stacked directly below the lower mouthpiece."

"The cold hearted devil! And he'd have let that poor kid die!" King burst out. "Leddon's confessed, I take it?"

"Better than that," Mayo replied pulling out his corn cob. "In trying to save himself he has implicated his wife."

"Jessie? My God! In what way?"

"He blurted out how she'd put veronal in old Mr. Vaeth's coffee at lunch on the day of the fire. Apparently, she hated Beltsville and wanted to clear out for good and all."

Old man King got up and passing his arm through Mayo's started for the door. "Come down to the lodge, sir. The boys and I will be proud to drink your health! Believe me, Mr. Mayo, Beltsville's going to find a fitting reward for you if we have to mortgage the town hall!"

The first street lights drew silvery flashes from Glenn Mayo's head as he slowly shook it.

"Thanks for the thought, Mr. King," he chuckled, "but you see, I've already been given my reward."

"Eh?" the banker was definitely startled. "What do you mean?"

"It's over there."

On the opposite sidewalk Nina Hurlock was almost running towards the telegraph office, her eyes glowing beacons of rekindled hope.

YOU DON'T COUNT ANY MORE

By JOHN RANDOLPH PHILLIPS

Author of "Old One-Eye," "Some Day I'll Show You," etc.

IT WAS the supreme moment of the Old Man's life. Sitting in the dugout, he watched his tall young son wind up. No detail of the long backward sweep of that powerful right arm did he miss; tensely he watched the arm at last swing forward, slowly at first, then faster, faster, faster, till it was but a blur in the clear air of the stadium. Then the Old Man saw the white missile released, saw it whizzing plateward, a small, flashing rocket, and heard the umpire chant: "Str-i-ke one."

A little kid at his knee: "Daddy, when I'm a grown man, will I manage a ball club, too?"

"You can't tell, son. Maybe."

Strike two.

"He ain't a bit nervous," said Mullaney, the coach.

Strike three!

"Struck out his first hitter in the Big Time," said Kingman, the ace pitcher. "I guess you're proud of that kid."

The Old Man didn't say anything. He just sat there looking. Remembering. Once there was a tow-headed little rascal he'd spanked for knocking over a prize rooster. That was when he and Lance made their winter home in Alabama. Even then the kid could throw a rock like a bullet. But the Old Man hadn't really thought of him as a future Big League pitcher.

"There goes a hit," said Kingman. "No, Smitty's got it. Nice going, Smitty!" he yelled to the center fielder.

No, he hadn't thought of him then as a future Big League pitcher. He'd been just such a little kid, always throwing rocks; always, of course, throwing them where he had no business. He wouldn't let himself think of the kid in connection with the Big Time. That would be too good to be true.

The next hitter dribbled a useless grounder to short and young Lance Carter had pitched his first inning in the Big Time. The team came trotting off the field. The kid was smiling a trifle. Gannt, the first baseman, patted his shoulder. Kingman called: "Attaboy, Lance."

But Lance looked only to the Old Man. There was a brief grin on the Old Man's face, but he said, "That ball Wills hit and Smitty had to chase to the fence—you made it too good. If Smitty hadn't been on his motorcycle, Wills would of got a three-bagger."

The other players winked at each other. You couldn't do anything with the Old Man. The kid had pitched a swell inning, but Old Man Carter couldn't forget that one ball he'd made too good. Smitty said: "Well, that's what I'm out there for, Cap, to get on my motorcycle when some guy gets a holt of one."

The Old Man's team went out in order in their half. Lance walked back to the mound. Old Man Carter's physical eye followed every move he made, but his mind's eye was far back in the dusty past. He remembered Margie, the kid's mother, in a white dress and a pink picture hat. He and Margie hadn't pulled together—really, they had fought like cats and dogs—but Margie had left him the kid, priceless gift! She'd died the fall Lance was three. Thank God, the kid had never known how his mother and father wrangled.

FUNNY about Margie. He'd first taken her eye when he was the ace shortstop in the old Sally League. Met her in Columbia, South Carolina. He'd been a whirlwind in those days, in lovemaking as well as ballplaying. But after marriage Margie seemed to sour on baseball. Even when he reached the Big Time, she was still trying to make him quit and go into the lumber business with her brother.

Well, they just hadn't hit it off together after the first year. During the off season his hunting and fishing trips had interfered too much with Margie's parties and dances. In the summer she didn't like living in the North, didn't want to stay by herself when the team was on a trip and still didn't like to travel with the club. And after all she'd never known the difference between a steal and the hit-and-run!

After Margie's death he'd sworn off women. They didn't do a ballplayer any good. He was thankful, too, that the kid had never been a ladies man. Once in a while, maybe, he took a girl to a movie. But that was all. The kid thought about his career, possessing, undoubtedly, some kind of a sixth sense that forever warned him about women.

The first half of the second inning was over. Kingman said: "Sweet going, son," as Lance pulled on his windbreaker. Lance hardly heard him; he was too busy looking toward the Old Man. Between them there passed a look, a look of confidence and understanding. Then the Old Man winked.

Mullaney whispered to Varney, the catcher, "The Old Man's so proud he's about to bust."

"That kid's good," Varney murmured. "His curve's just as sharp as Kingman's right now, and his fast ball's better."

The Old Man was thinking about Lance's schooldays as the third inning opened. Even in prep school he'd had a fair curve and blinding speed. And Carter had imparted to him all the baseball lore he'd gathered during twenty years in the majors.

Only last week Lance had graduated from college, where he'd been a pitching sensation. Carter, turning over the team to Sam Mullaney, had gone south for the occasion. Tight-lipped and tight-throated,

he had sat in a huge auditorium and watched his son receive his diploma. After that they'd caught the first train north. Just himself and the kid. He and the kid together, in the way they would march down the years.

Maybe I ought to of give him one season in the minors. Hell, no! He pitched well enough in college to earn a crack at the majors right off the bat. If only he can stick!

THE kid stuck, all right. He won that first game 2 to 1. His next time out he hurled a shutout. Then hard luck hit him and he dropped an eleven-inning thriller to the league-leading Philadelphia club. After that he was victorious in three straight battles.

People would say, "Guess you're proud of that kid of yours."

The Old Man would turn quickly away then, not wanting them to glimpse how proud he really was, wanting only to hug his joy and pride to himself. A sensitive man shunning any display of sentiment. A guy with a dead pan. Why, that time in the World's Series when his pitcher walked in the winning run in the deciding game, he hadn't changed expression. Later, in the awful solitude of his hotel room, he had cried.

The team went west and the kid won a thirteen-inning game in St. Louis. That night he and the Old Man shot billiards together, and Carter was reminded of that time long ago when he had taught the kid how to shoot quail, in sunny, far-away Alabama.

"You're pretty good to your old man," he said, as they racked their cuesticks. "Lots of young sprouts would be off somewhere chasing a skirt."

"I'm not a skirt-chaser," the kid laughed, and never knew how that chance reply delighted the Old Man's heart.

They sat down in adjoining chairs to watch the straight-pool battle between Camp and Lacy, the second-year outfielders, and the Old Man whispered, "Going to let you in on a secret, kid."

"What's that, fellow?" They were intimate that way when alone.

"We're going to be hot next year. Ain't got much this season, but look out for next season. Camp and Lacy, now, they're going to hit their real stride then. With Smitty in between to steady 'em I'll have the best outfield in the Big Show. Then take the infield. Gannt and Markham are old heads. Palmer and Hunt are youngsters. Between them, by next year, we'll have one sweet infield. Those two kids will come through. Behind the plate, Varney ain't the best backstop in the world, but he's got that old winning psychology. As for the pitching, we'll have for first string you and Kingman and Yancey and Lowe. There won't be a better staff in the league, and the reserves won't be bad.

Lance, we're set for the flag next year. This season we'll finish about fourth. But I'm building, see? Next year, son, we'll be hot!"

"Boy!"

"You bet!"

"Letter from Dick Pogue the other day," the kid remarked. "He says the birds are thick on his place this year."

"We'll look into that this fall."

"I can hardly wait."

"Me, neither. Bet you five I get more than you the first day."

"Looking for a sucker? I never saw the day I could handle a shotgun with you. But I'll never forget the time you missed that gobbler."

"Shucks," said the Old Man, "nothing as big as a turkey has got any business flying as fast as that scudder did."

"Buck fever, Dad?"

"Hell, no! I've stood my ground at second when Cobb was coming in with his spikes flying."

"He was tight, wasn't he, Dad?"

"Ty was all right."

THE kid met the girl in New York. Her name was Madeline and she worked in a shop on Madison Avenue. The kid thought her curling brown hair and her red lips and her laughing brown eyes made her the loveliest thing on earth. She was a homerun with the bases full! He told her so and she laughed that half-husky, half-trilling laugh of hers.

"Maybe I'm a strike-out."

"You're the World's Series flag to me," the kid said.

And later, "Doing anything special tonight, Dad?"

"Only trying to figure out why you gave Diggs a fast one today instead of a low curve."

"Well, you rode me hard enough about that in the clubhouse. I'd like for you to meet a friend of mine."

They went for dinner to a restaurant in the Forties. But first they called at a certain apartment house and a brown-haired girl came down. The Old Man saw Lance look at the girl, he saw the girl look at Lance, and the Old Man knew.

"Madeline, this is my dad. Miss Cary, Dad."

The Old Man didn't enjoy his dinner.

"Is your team going to win this year, Mr. Carter?"

"Of course not!"

By September Lance had won eleven games while losing only three. By September he was seeing Madeline Cary every night the club was home. By September Old Man Carter was fit to be tied.

Then Lance and Madeline had their quarrel.

"If you're engaged to me, I don't want you running around with other fellows when I'm out of town."

"That's silly, Lance."

"I don't care if it's silly or not. That's the way it stands."

"Suppose I don't let it stand that way?"

"Then we're through."

"All right—we're through."

Considerable argument had preceded this interchange so that it was two o'clock now. Lance, retrieving his hat, departed. He did no astonishing amount of sleeping that night, and the next day Chicago knocked him out of the box in the third inning.

"You broke training," the Old Man said afterward in the clubhouse. "Got in at two-thirty this morning. Another trick like that will cost you money."

He spoke loudly and clearly enough for every man in the room to hear, wanting his club, his boys, to know that he played no favorites, that his own brilliant son must toe the mark as well as the lowest rookie. Lance, already in street clothes, marched sullenly out of the clubhouse, and Old Man Carter's heart went with him. He sat a long time unlacing his spikes and drawing them off. Small talk began to crop up around him.

"That Gost is the luckiest guy I ever seen. That grounder of his hittin' the bag and then rollin' out of Markham's reach!"

"Bergner was fast today."

"Aw, he just had you guys bitin'. He ain't so hot."

"I'm goin' to get that Ames guy if he tries to give me his spikes again."

But Old Man Carter took no part in the small talk. He sat there wondering where Lance was going. To see that girl, of course. She had him swinging. Damn her, everything had been so perfect till she came along. Then right away trouble. A coolness had sprung up between himself and Lance immediately after the three of them had gone to dinner that night. Lance was no dumbbell; he'd seen instantly that his father disapproved, and resentment had ridden a high horse into his heart.

Confound all women, the Old Man

thought. To play baseball, you had to have your mind on the game all the time; you couldn't afford to be worrying over some girl. Oh, yes, there were a few women who helped their men. Smitty's wife, for instance. But Smitty's wife was a special kind of woman, with a man's common sense and idea of proportion. Other women wrecked ball clubs. Mrs. Pitcher said to Mrs. Shortstop that if Mrs. Shortstop's husband hadn't fumbled that grounder in the ninth Mr. Pitcher would have won the game. Right there dissension darted in like a snake.

And here was Lance jamming his fool head into the ancient snare! Where were those dreams of his about Lance and himself marching down the years together? Just the two of them swinging along together had been his dream; just the two of them, with no one else to know or share their secret joys.

THE club traveled down to Philadelphia for a three-day stand. The first night there Lance caught a fast train back to New York. In Madeline's little apartment they almost managed a reconciliation. Then a chance remark flew off at a tangent and war was once more declared.

Lance stumbled into the hotel in Philadelphia just after daybreak. That afternoon the Old Man sent him in against that hot Philadelphia club. Using will-power alone, he got by the first three innings with but one run scored off him. In the fourth Philadelphia smeared him for two more. A lucky catch by Camp against the left-field wall saved him in the fifth. But in the sixth his control flew out of the park. Before Lowe could be rushed to the rescue, he had walked in two runs and still had the bases full.

"That's going to cost you fifty."

"Just because I lost a ball game?"

"No—because you came in after daylight this morning."

Next day the Old Man found in his own mail a letter to Lance, addressed in a feminine hand and postmarked New York. Carter knew one of the great temptations of his life then. His fingers itched to tear that thing to shreds. But he dropped it wearily into his pocket.

And somewhere during the morning luck kissed him. He lost that letter. Arriving at the clubhouse and seeing Lance for the first time that day, he said. "Had a letter for you, but I lost it somewhere. Looked kind of like a circular."

"Where was it from?"

The Old Man hesitated, then lied stoutly. "Dayton, Ohio."

Things were going to be all right now, he kept telling himself. He knew Lance well enough to realize that there was trouble between him and that girl. Soon the whole affair would blow over and Lance would be himself again.

And then on the last trip west Lance got drunk in Chicago. It was the first and last time this ever happened to him. Even then he couldn't explain it. He took a drink. And suddenly he was reckless. At two o'clock in the morning Old Man Carter found him in a bar and hauled him to the hotel. Next morning he said, "You're suspended for the rest of the season. No man on this ball club breaks training and gets away with it. I could forgive you anything," he continued, his lips drawing back sharply over his teeth, "but trying to take advantage of the fact that the manager of the team is your own father."

Hot words flew like sizzling arrows, like arrows dripping poison, and that poison seeped into the heart of each of them. The Old Man knew suddenly that all his happy years of care and love had been wasted on this son of his.

IMMEDIATELY after the World's Series he traded Lance to the Boston club. In exchange he obtained Stote, a crafty slow-balling left-hander, and Roy Thomas, the veteran secondbaseman. Stote would bolster the pitching staff, and Thomas would make the infield, Hurt having bogged down after the middle of the season and

definitely proving himself not a major-league second sacker.

The sports writers roasted him. They said that with Lance on the staff and the team's youngsters coming into their own Old Man Carter would have had a good chance at the flag the next season. They said that a personal feud between himself and his own son had made him spurn that chance.

Carter didn't care. To him the only thing that mattered now was the loneliness in his heart. He went home to Georgia. But Lance wasn't there. Somehow he heard that the kid was working for an oil company in Mississippi. There were no letters.

At long last the hunting season arrived and Old Man Carter had never seen so many birds. But the old kick was gone. He'd make an impossible shot, but Lance wasn't there to say, "Pretty lucky then, old-timer." He'd halt at certain loved and well-remembered spots and he'd be thinking, "Over there's where we found the big covey last year," or "Down by that water oak is where Lance killed two birds crossing," or "Yonder's the blind Lance had last season when he called up that old gobbler."

Old Man Carter suddenly gave up on everything and went for the rest of the winter to Cuba, where he won the International championship, in the opinion of many bartenders, for ability to hold his liquor.

Then came spring. Sunny days at St. Pete. The squad shaping up rapidly. Kingman and Yancey looking better than ever. Lowe looking good, too. Smith and Camp and Lacy murdering the ball and catching everything that stayed in the park. The infield finding itself. Varney throwing and hitting with more authority than at any time in his career.

The club opened in Boston that year, and it was then the Old Man saw his son for the first time since that tragic morning in Chicago. A photographer, with some idea of a picture captioned Loving Enemies, wanted the Old Man to pose with Lance.

"Get away from here," said Carter.

The Old Man saw that Lance was going to pitch for Boston. He watched the kid walking toward the mound. Halfway there, Lance hesitated and his eyes swung round till they gazed straight at the visitors' bench. But there was no recognition in the look that passed between him and his old man.

Lance, yielding only three hits, beat Kingman 1 to 0 that day, and after the game Mullaney ventured the opinion the Boston club was going to be hot that year.

But the Old Man's club was hotter. He'd known what he was talking about the season before. The team took the lead on the first of May and stayed there till July 16th when Philadelphia dislodged them for three days. Then they plunged back to the top, and Boston, coming with a rush, passed the faltering Philadelphians and took over second place.

By that time Lance Carter had pitched five games against his father's team and won five games. His ability to beat the Old Man's club was hailed by fandom in general as something uncanny. It was not, however, uncanny to the sports writers. Lance, they announced, was merely getting his revenge. He was so mad, so full of determination, when he faced Carter's club, that he couldn't lose.

"If we had Lance now," Mullaney ventured one day, "the pennant would be in the bag."

"We've got Kingman and Yancey and Lowe and Stote," the Old Man snapped.

"But we ain't got Lance."

THE two clubs fought it out down the stretch, with always the Old Man's team leading by a nose. And Mullaney would mutter to himself, "We could use them five games the kid's won from us. God, how he does pitch when we happen to be the other team!"

"You fellows act like you're in a trance," the Old Man would grumble, "when Car-

ter's pitching." He always referred to his son merely as "Carter."

"You'd be kind of dazed yourself," Smitty grumbled back once, "if you was facin' a guy that seemed to be throwin' birdshot 'stead of a baseball."

They went into the last week of the race, with the Old Man's club leading by a game and a half. In Philadelphia Carter's boys lost half a game in the standings. And now there remained only two games on the schedule, and these last two games of the season were against Boston.

"If we cop one game, we're in," Mullaney mused. "We'll still be a game to the good. But if that crazy bunch takes both of 'em, we'll be a game to the bad and the World's Series will have to get along without us."

"What the hell are you mumbling about?"

"Nothin', Cap—nothin' a-tall."

"I want you and Markham out to the clubhouse early tomorrow. Want to go over these two games with you." Markham was the captain.

"I'll tell Mark," Mullaney said.

The Old Man sat alone in his office at the clubhouse. Outside it was a clear, bright day. Outside there were cheer and gayety. But here, inside, it was lonely and loneliest of all was Cap Carter's heart.

"If only he was pitching the game for me instead of for that other bunch!"

At last he realized that someone was knocking on the door. Mullaney and Markham, of course. But it wasn't Mullaney and Markham. In response to his invitation to enter, a girl walked into the room.

"I think you'll remember me."

"I couldn't ever forget you," the Old Man said.

"That could be a compliment, or it couldn't."

"It isn't," said Old Man Carter.

"How well I know that!" She spurned the chair he placed for her. "I've come here to tell you what I think of you. I know now what became of that letter I sent your son last summer in Philadelphia. You stole it!" The words crackled. Old Man Carter had seen many a woman in anger, but never had he seen one whose eyes flashed so. He had resumed his seat, but now he stood up; this was something you couldn't take sitting down.

"I didn't," he answered, in the same patient tone he would have employed in ex-

plaining the simplest diamond problem to the simplest rookie.

"You did! Lance says you told him down there you'd got a letter for him and lost it. You stole it, destroyed it."

Lance says! Lance says!

"So you've been seeing him again?"

"Yes! We're going to be married right after the World's Series. And you—you kept us apart a whole year. I wrote him a letter that—that would have made everything all right between us."

"I——"

"And so I came out here to tell you what I think of you. It broke Lance's heart when you kicked him off the team, then traded him. Oh, I know. We met again last week by chance and he told me everything."

"That's a man habit," Carter said bitterly, "telling some woman everything he knows and a lot he don't know."

LORD, how her eyes flashed! He searched his neglected vocabulary for some adjective to apply to her, and at last found it. Gallant. Standing there like the last soldier of a lost battalion, she was nothing if not gallant. Mentally he paid her the tribute, for Old Man Carter had never failed to give an enemy his dues.

"You kicked him off the team when you might have given him another chance. You haven't got the reputation of a martinet." (What the hell did that word mean?) "You've given other players dozens of chances. But Lance was your son. You had to show everybody you didn't play favorites. But most important of all, he was in love, and in your scheme of things there wasn't room for a third party. You wanted him all to yourself. Well"—she paused, her bosom swelling—"well, he's mine now—and we both hate you for what you did down in Philadelphia."

"I kind of thought you'd finally get around to the hating part."

"And there's something else I want to tell you. Our team, Lance's team, is going to take these two games. We'll beat you. To start with, Lance is going to beat you this afternoon. After the Series we're going to be——"

"You mentioned that before."

"Well, it's true. I love him and he loves me. You—you don't count any more."

It was that last sentence which dropped the Old Man. Mute, he watched her sweep out of the office. *He didn't count any more.* He slumped back into his chair. This was a woman whose kind he had never known. She wasn't a Margie. She was more like Smitty's wife, only she had more fire, more —more glamor. Why, right now she'd probably gladly die for Lance. The kind of woman who would put her shoulder to the wheel alongside the man she chose. Grudgingly he granted that. But he hated her. Damn her, he hated her. She had said he didn't count any more.

WHAT'S the dope, Cap?" Mullaney asked.

"We're playing for just one game," Carter answered. "They'll pitch Carter today. He's beaten us seven times this year, beaten us every time he's pitched against us. Today we pitch Lowe against him. It's a five-to-one shot we lose this game—*but Carter will be out of the way.* Tomorrow we shoot Kingman at them."

"Suppose they pitch Carter both games?"

"They won't do that. He couldn't stand it. Overworked already. We won't take a chance putting our best against their best. We'll save the King for when Carter's out of the way."

It was good strategy. Well, he thought as his boys trotted to their positions, wasn't he called the foxiest manager in the majors? There went Lowe to the mound. The old boy looked good today. But it didn't matter whether he looked good or not. Ah, there went the side down and the Boston bunch was running out. There—there came Carter.

Halfway to the mound, Lance paused, then swung round. Carter saw him looking up into the stands. He saw Lance suddenly wave. And up there in the reserved section he saw a slender arm go up in answer. So she was sitting up there in the stands cheering her man on. They'd give their souls to beat him. Well, he wasn't so damn easy to beat!

Lord, the kid was fast today! His hard one crackled through the air to explode in the catcher's mitt like a charge of dynamite. And how that curve ball dipped and ducked!

The kid won his game that day 2 to 0. Carter forced cheerfulness in the clubhouse. Sure, he admitted, they were tied with Boston now, but tomorrow Kingman would tame those babies. "Tomorrow you handcuffed boobs won't have to look at Carter's fast one."

Warming up the next afternoon, Kingman had never looked better. A wisp of a smile eddied along the Old Man's lips. Over yonder Dansy was warming up for Boston. Next to Lance, he was Boston's best, but he'd made only a fair record against Carter's club and he never had beaten Kingman. The Old Man searched the Boston bench. But he didn't see Lance anywhere.

Kingman came walking back to the bench. "Yeh, I feel all right. There's a little wind blowing, though. I wish it'd die down."

The Old Man's bunch ran out on the field. Kingman was hot, getting the first two hitters on called strikes. Again that wisp of a smile on Carter's lips. Well, he'd foxed 'em, got young Carter out of the way yesterday and now had his best to shoot against Boston's second best. No, he wasn't so damn easy to beat. Ah, Smitty had made a miraculous catch to end the inning.

Dansy was pretty hot, too. He set the Old Man's boys down in order, while the Boston bench yelled encouragement. Kingman walked the first hitter to face him in the second, and after two were out the man stole second when Varney's peg went high. But he died there, because the King turned on the heat and fanned the next hitter.

And before you could say Jack Robinson, Carter's boys had two runs in their half of the second. Gannt opened with a single. Lacy sacrificed him to second. Then Camp caught a high fast one just right and pumped it into the bleachers for a homer.

"Looks like we got 'em, Cap."

"Yeh, we got 'em, with Kingman going like he is."

Boston went out in order in her half of the third. Then: "Look yonder, Cap, who's that comin' in from the bull pen?"

It was Lance. The Old Man's heart turned over. The kid was coming back, relieving Dansy. The Boston bunch, too, had used strategy, working Dansy for as long as possible, then shooting Carter in there to save the game. Well, they had a lot of nerve hoping he could save them now, two runs behind and Kingman going like a house afire.

THE kid stood out there big and tall and radiating confidence, grinning that economical little grin which, the older sports writers had noted, made him so closely resemble the Old Man in the days when the Old Man was the hottest shortstop in either league. He looked like the last defender of a precious rampart. His hard one came smoking in.

"God!" Mullaney breathed. "He's faster than he was yesterday! Cap, I got a shaky feeling 'bout this old ball game."

"I wish you'd shut your mouth!"

Lance was walking toward the dugout now, having just made three of Carter's hitters look like anything but hitters. Carter saw him hesitate, gazing up into the stands, then saw his arm go up in that well-remembered gesture of yesterday, and saw likewise a slender arm return the salute.

Yes, they'd give their souls to beat him. He felt suddenly old and very weary. Youth, they said, must be served.

As the innings whirled along, Kingman still pitched beautifully, but it was Lance who was superb. His smoking fast one and his razor-sharp curve left Carter's boys cursing impotently. He was invincible. But still there was that two-run lead and Old Man Carter took heart. The iron crept back into his soul. He was again the indomitable, resourceful fighter, asking no quarter, giving none.

In the seventh inning the Boston gang got to Kingman. A hit skidded through the infield. A pop fly made the first out. But the next batter slapped a single to left, and there were runners on first and third. Another pop fly contributed the second out. And now it was the kid's turn.

The kid was that rarity, a hitting pitcher. Kingman worked carefully. He pitched a strike, then a ball, another strike. Then the kid hit a line drive into the far left-field corner of the park. Camp chased the ball, took it on the rebound off the fence. The kid came thundering down to third. He turned third and came streaking home. Palmer got Camp's throw, relayed it to the plate. The kid hit the dirt in a cloud of dust. Safe! Varney rolled over and over from the impact, then groped to his feet. But the kid still lay on the ground, writhing.

His teammates were all around him now, helping him to rise. Somebody signalled frantically to the bull pen. Young Carter took a tentative step, stumbled, and went to

his knees. The Boston trainer had him by the arm. Suddenly the kid jerked loose from him and hobbled on alone toward the bench.

"Wrenched his ankle," Mullaney reported. "It's startin' to swell already. Well—he's out of the way now for good."

But he wasn't. He came back for the next half. Carter saw him jerk away from the remonstrating trainer. And there he went hobbling along toward the mound. A dead silence fell upon the crowd, then was shattered by the wildest ovation Old Man Carter had ever heard in the stadium.

If the kid had been the lowest criminal on earth, the Old Man would have saluted him then, as one fighting man to another. He stood up, making that salute silently, his eyes never leaving the stumbling figure. But after all this was a ball game he had to win, a ball game that had to be retrieved. And Old Man Carter knew how to do it.

"Bunt," he said tersely to Palmer.

"That's right," Mullaney muttered. "He'll have a hell of a time handlin' bunts on that ankle."

Palmer bunted down the third-base line. The kid lurched over there. A savage yell beat the air of the stadium as somehow he threw out Palmer by half a stride. Markham likewise bunted. Once more the kid miraculously got the ball and threw for a putout.

"Same thing," Carter said.

So Smitty bunted, too. This time the third-sacker came in fast and saved Lance the trouble of throwing out the man. The Boston bunch was yelling now. The third-base coach shouted a hard name at Old Man Carter and Carter replied in kind.

Boston didn't score. Carter's boys went to bat in their half of the eighth. Gannt bunted and Lance threw him out. Lacy bunted. The kid went down in a heap and Lacy was on first. Camp bunted up the first-base line. Lance stumbled and fell again. They were signaling again from the Boston bench to the bull pen. But the kid shook his head. Then he shot three pitches in there so fast that Thomas failed even to touch them. Varney fouled two. Then the kid "r'ared back," as they say, "and fogged one through there."

"I never even seen it," Varney muttered brokenly.

AGAIN Boston didn't add to her score. And here was the last of the ninth. The stadium crowd stood up to a man as Lance walked back to the mound. Carter thought the applause would never die out. That crowd sure loved a fighter.

The Old Man sent in a pinch hitter for Kingman. "Same old thing?" the pinch hitter inquired. "Bunt?"

Old Man Carter looked out there at the mound. All he could see, it seemed, was a white face, a face stark and drawn with pain. But in that face the eyes still flashed blue fire. The kid bent down and rubbed his ankle, swayed and almost fell, then straightened up. That was his boy out there. The bunts would finish him this time. Even from the dugout it was easy to see that the ankle had swelled tremendously

since the last inning. All he could do was hobble. Hell, it wasn't fair. But who ever said baseball was a fair game?

"Bunt?" repeated the impatient pinch-hitter.

And then Old Man Carter did something that forever afterward would be a bright memory with him, something that in all the years to come he would hug to his heart as a precious treasure.

"Hell, no. Hit it out!"

The smoke ball whistled in. The pinch-

hitter swung vainly. A breathless ripple went through the crowd. Old Man Carter had given orders to hit!

According to the best dramatic rules, there should have been nine pitched balls that inning, nine whizzing strikes from the long arm of Lance Carter. Glory waited round the corner for him, glory and the championship. But somewhere the rules got lost. Lance Carter pitched no more after that first superb strike. He fainted.

Old Man Carter stood outside a certain closed door in a long white corridor. "Broken bone in his ankle," the doctor said. "How he ever stood the pain as long as he did beats me. Yes, you can go in."

They looked at each other a long, long minute, the boy in the bed and the veteran standing just inside the door. Their futures hung quivering in the balance. By all rights some miracle should have happened that day, some dizzy climactic peak should have been reached, that would have made anything but beautiful reconciliation impossible. But there hadn't been any miracle. They weren't supermen, or gods. They were merely a boy with a broken ankle and a man who had won a ball game and wished he had lost it.

Then at last, "Well—hello, Dad. They—they tell me you finally beat us in the ninth."

"Yeh—yeh. Uh—they sent in Browning after you fainted. He got two out. Then Markham got on and—well, Smitty socked a homer."

"Well—congratulations and good luck in the Series."

There didn't seem anything more to say. Good God, was it going to end like this? Old Man Carter wavered on his weary old feet. Then he became suddenly conscious of another person in the room. She was standing now on the other side of the bed and her voice sounded clearly.

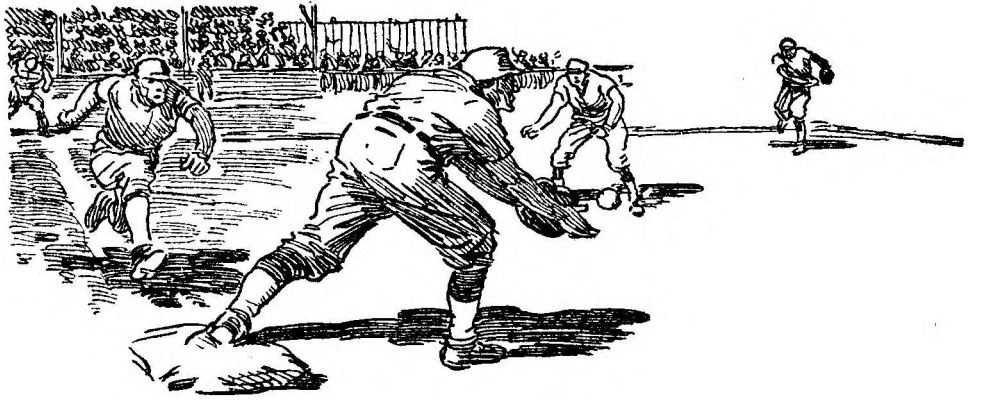
"Both of you want to make up and don't know how to do it." She came swiftly round the bed and seized Old Man Carter's hand, extending it to Lance. Carter felt the kid's sudden, definite pressure and once more he knew there was such a thing as sunlight in the world. And now Madeline was speaking again. "You know, it's a funny thing, but I've discovered that I no longer hate you and I lied when I said that Lance did. Want to be friends, old-timer?"

An hour later Carter left the hospital in a hurry, racing downtown to a certain hotel. There he entered the room of one Dave Garner, owner of the Boston club, a man he had befriended years ago.

"I'm buying my kid back from you, Dave."

"And what have you been drinking?"

"You'll sell him back, all right," Carter said, in that tone which men had long ago learned not to trifle with. "Listen, Dave. I guess you haven't forgot it was Cap Carter that went to bat for you years ago when the DuSoe gang was trying to run you out of baseball. Name your price, Dave!"



Adventurers All

ESCAPING FROM HEAD HUNTERS

THERE is a sound I cannot bear to hear. It wakes memories of cowering in tall grass, of murder, and deadly fear.

When I was very small I lived on my father's plantation in Silchar, in Assam. From our bungalow we could see in the distance a low-lying range of hills inhabited by Nagas who were head hunters and snake worshippers. At that time, 1880, these hills were not in British territory and the planters lived in fear of raids; but it was thought they feared the British too much to make any serious attempt on our lives.

It happened one day, however, that some Englishmen who went beyond the borders of the Silchar to hunt big game were unlucky enough to annoy one of the villagers, and while no affront was offered to the Englishmen who were a large party with guns, they showed their ill feeling in many ways.

Ayah, our Hindu nurse, used to tell us sometimes that if we were naughty the Nagas would come and cut off our heads. One night they came. It happened while my father was away in Calcutta. My brother and I were wakened by our mother who ran into our room with our baby sister in her arms. She told us that the Nagas were coming to kill us, and that we must go quickly with Ayah and Saku—my brother's man nurse—and do just what we were told, and we were not to cry or make a sound of any sort. Then she kissed us and hurried away. Ayah said that she was going to ride to Lakipur, our nearest town to get help and warn the constabulary.

This frightened us more than ever. We could hear the noise of the servants and plantation hands as they ran about collecting their belongings and made away into the jungle. Ayah and Saku nearly quarrelled. Saku wished us to follow the route taken by our mother, and Ayah wanted us to go to Mr. Blythe's plantation where she thought we would be safe because it was not on the highway, and had probably been missed by the Nagas, who would want to loot all the houses they could, and knew that most of them were on the main road. Saku finally agreed, and we left the house by a trail that led down into the dense undergrowth of the plateau on which our bungalow stood, and plunged into the jungle.

We moved cautiously for awhile, and then Saku stopped us, and we all held our breath. Up above us we heard an ominous sound that came louder and nearer, dreadful and menacing. I wanted to cry, but

Ayah suddenly clapped her hand over my mouth and smothered my head in her *chuddar*—the eight yards of muslin that serves for a robe for Hindu women—and implored me to keep still.

THE dreadful rythmic *Huh-huh, Huh-huh*, that the Nagas make when they run at a trot with their short curved swords and lances held ready for the enemy, came nearer and nearer. It is something never to be forgotten when one hears it as we did that night uttered by several hundred savages. We heard their shouts of rage and disappointment when they arrived at our bungalow, and a horrid scream that ended shortly, as some poor wretch who had gone back to loot something of ours, now that he had the chance, had his head severed at a blow.

We crouched in the thick tangle, clinging to each other, until the *Huh-huh* recommenced and died away in the distance. We knew the Nagas had gone on to the next plantation. Then, reassured since we were going in another direction, we fled along, having first found our ponies sent by my mother's command to await us below the road. Saku mounted my brother on his, and the groom, who had brought both ponies, bid Ayah get up on mine and hold me in her arms because we could get on faster that way. It was a bright moonlight night, and as we neared the bungalow signs of confusion told us that the Nagas had been there. Full of fear we entered the house. It was deserted; the doors stood open, and one of the servants lay headless on the verandah. We hoped that Mr. Blythe was hiding somewhere about, but as we entered the drawing-room, Ayah for the second time buried my head under her *chuddar* and said, "Don't look, *Baba*." But I did. Mr. Blythe's head lay on a table, and his body on the floor with blood all around it. Saku said they would not take a white man's head.

Trembling and shuddering with horror we took the road and hurried on to Lakipur where the constabulary were, and a division of English troops. We knew the Nagas would not return this way. It was eighteen miles to Lakipur and after riding a couple of hours during which I slept, I awoke to find that we had halted and that Saku was making us a bed in the grass by the road. We all slept for a while and were roused again at dawn to continue our way.

A little after the sun was up we entered Lakipur and were taken at once to Dr. Davidson's house where we found our mother eagerly watching for us. How she kissed and hugged us, and hugged Ayah too. But the troops were already on their way. They found all the bungalows looted, but most of the planters and their families had escaped, all but Mr. Blythe and one other whose name I cannot remember. The Nagas were heavily punished and their territory annexed, and since then there has never been another raid.

Giralda M. Forbes

$15 For True Adventures

UNDER the heading **Adventurers All,** *the editors of SHORT STORIES will print a new true adventure in every issue of the magazine. Some of them will be written by well known authors, and others by authors for the first time. Any reader of the magazine, any where, may submit one of these true adventures, and for every one accepted the author will be paid $15. It must be written in the first person, must be true, and must be exciting. Do not write more than 1000 words; be sure to type your manuscript on one side of the page only; and address it to: "Adventurers All," Care of Editors of SHORT STORIES Magazine, Garden City, N. Y. Manuscripts which are not accepted will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for that purpose.*

To Ride the River With

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

Author of Such Outstanding Range Country Novels as "Gone Bad," "Run of the Brush," etc.

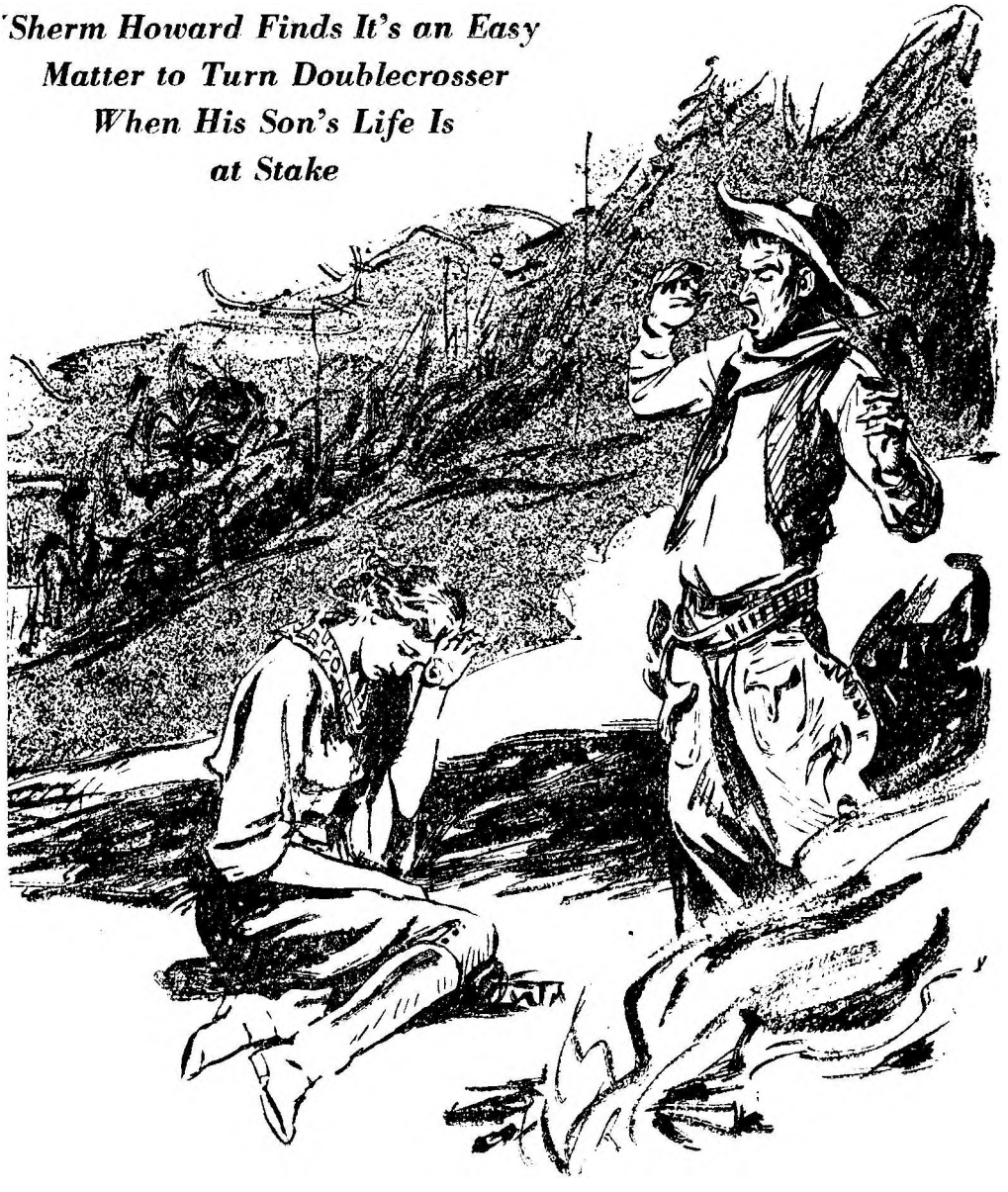
Part III

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

SHERM HOWARD and his band of outlaws were rustling cattle on the L C ranch, and Ruth Chiswick, hoping to solve her father's difficulties, planned an elopement with Lou Howard, son of the enemy of her house. The marriage did not take place, however, for Ruth discovered young Howard's lack of courage when he left it up to a stranger, Jeff Gray, to rescue her from a frightened horse.

Lee Chiswick the same day served notice

'Sherm Howard Finds It's an Easy Matter to Turn Doublecrosser When His Son's Life Is at Stake



on the Howard crowd, and upon learning his daughter was in town, believed she had followed him and she preferred to let him think it, though she did tell him about Jeff Gray. That evening someone took a shot at Lee and because Gray rushed toward him with smoking gun, he was suspected and had to leave town. Several days later when Ruth met Gray in the vicinity of the ranch, and when her gun was accidentally discharged, Gray received a leg wound. Leaving him at Pat Sorley's cabin she hurried home to tell her father what had happened, but when he went to have a talk with Gray, he had departed for parts unknown.

Gray returned to Tail Holt and succeeded in convincing the Howard crowd that he was Clint Doke, a desperate character wanted for a train robbery in Texas.

In an effort to learn something about the activities of the rustlers, Frank Chiswick took a room in town. This did not please Sherm Howard and when Gray warned young Chiswick that he was in danger, he refused to listen. In spite of Frank's at-

titude, Gray was responsible for saving his life. Gray's interest in his family puzzled Lee Chiswick and he couldn't quite figure out what side of the fence he was on, but he was willing to take a chance on him when he learned that Howard's crowd were planning to hold up smugglers at Live Oak Canyon. They did surprise the rustlers but were unable to prevent Morg Norris and Kansas from escaping to the L C ranch and kidnapping Ruth Chiswick.

Chapter XXIII

Norris Takes to the Hills

KANSAS backed out of the house and bowlegged his way to the stable. He took the same ropes he had used for the other horses and went to the corral. No expert, it took him several minutes to catch two ponies. His churning thoughts were full of hatred as he threw, missed, and gathered the rope again. He despised himself for taking this lying down. He ought to stand up to this killer, defy him, and fling bullets into the damned scoundrel's body. But Kansas knew himself for a weakling. The stark courage to tell Morg Norris he could not do such a thing was not in him. He had gone bad, but he had not gone bad in the thorough fashion necessary for an outlaw to hold his own on the frontier.

Hate of Norris seethed in him. He made up his mind, as soon as he was out of this jam, to cut loose from the Tail Holt bunch and go back to Texas. From now on Norris would ride him if he stayed here. The fellow was a bully and a mean one.

Kansas led the roped horses back to the stable and saddled. His gaze swept the road along which Chiswick's men must approach the ranch. If it came to a showdown he could jump a bronc and light out, leaving Norris to play his hand alone.

He heard a sound of something moving at the hitch rack on the other side of the stable. It might be a horse stirring—or it might not. Stealthily he moved through the stable to the door and looked out. His revolver was in the open, ready for action.

What he saw surprised him. The girl Nelly was pulling the slip knot that tied one of the animals to the rack. Kansas moved toward her.

"Where you going?" he demanded.

Nelly gave a little cry of fear, staring at him, her fingers flying to her open mouth.

"I—I—please let me go, mister," she wailed.

To Kansas came a thought. He was a stupid man, and his mind usually worked slowly. But his safety was at stake. He had to look after himself or this crazy fool Norris would lead him into trouble from which there was no escape.

His furtive glance swept to the house. No sign of Morg, who was probably busy inside with getting the food ready.

Kansas stepped closer. Instinctively he lowered his voice.

"Girl, I'll let you go," he said. "Fork that bronc and light out. Keep going till you reach Chiswick and his posse. Tell Lee, Kansas helped you get away. Tell him I'll be with his daughter and Norris watching over her all the time. Tell him I'm against this thing every way from the ace but Morg is hell bent on having his way. His idea now is to hole up in the old Walsh cabin back of Crowfoot. Don't forget the name, girl. It is Kansas. I'll be doing all I can every minute for Miss Chiswick. Don't forget that too."

"I won't forget," she promised.

"All right. Light a shuck and go like the heel flies were pesterin' you." He added: "I'll have to make a play at shooting at you."

NELLY pulled herself to the saddle and was off, gathering the horse to a gallop in a few jumps. Kansas fired in the air twice. He ran toward the house shouting at the man inside it.

Norris ran out to the porch, gun in hand.

"She's gone," Kansas screamed. "Jumped one of the horses while I was coming back

from the corral. I took a crack at her and missed."

The killer looked at the horse and rider diminishing in the distance. "Suits me fine," he said. "I didn't much want her along anyhow. But we'll have to get going *muy pronto*. Finish saddling and bring the horses to the house. We'll pack the grub on there."

He went back into the house and into the bedroom where he had left Ruth a few moments before. The man moved noiselessly. He was of the tiger cat breed. All his motions were smooth and rhythmic, as if he trod on padded feet.

Ruth was taking something from the drawer of a desk. She turned quickly, trying to hide it behind her back. The color had ebbed out of her cheeks.

The outlaw still had the .45 in his hand. He grinned, hatefully, as he crossed the room to her. His left arm he extended, palm open.

"I'll take that gun, sweetheart, before you hurt yoreself with it," he told her.

Ruth struggled with herself to stand out against yielding. If she brought her hand out swiftly, straight for the stomach, firing on the way, she might destroy him in time. But she could not do it. She could not drive her will to such a horrible thing.

Reluctantly she brought her hand out, slowly, the gun in it. Her fingers let go of it. The man dropped it in the drawer from which it had come.

He laughed, with malice. "I train my women better than that. This time I'll let it pass without the quirt."

"I only meant to defend myself with it," she said. She could not deny to herself that she was desperately afraid of him. No weapons she had at command could cope with such a man.

"I'll defend you from now on, sweet," he jeered. Then, curtly, he snapped at her, "You got what clothes you'll need?"

"Yes."

"Enough to keep you warn nights if we're on the dodge outside. That's all you can take."

AGAIN she pleaded with him. "I don't know what all you've done, but if you'll only let us go I'll see you get off. It would be madness for you to take me. Don't you see that?"

"No more of that," he said harshly. "We're on our way."

He took her back to the porch. Kansas was bringing up three saddle horses.

Ruth looked round. She had to fight her terror to keep from getting panicky.

"Where is Nelly?" she asked.

"She isn't going on our picnic," Norris said.

"But—you said——"

Ruth broke off, her eyes filled with fear. She swallowed, then tried again. "You haven't—you didn't——"

She was thinking of the two shots she had heard.

"The young lady lit out while we weren't looking," Kansas explained. He was busy packing the horses.

"While you weren't looking," Norris jeered. "Stand aside. I'll do that packing. You don't even know how to tie a rope. Where you belong is back in Kansas at the plow-handles you left."

Kansas said sulkily, "I didn't leave any plow handles."

After he had adjusted the loads Norris helped Ruth to the saddle. She did not offer any resistance. That would not do any good. In her heart a hope was stirring. Nelly would tell her father. Soon the pursuit would start. The L C outfit and its friends would comb the hills. With them would be riding Jeff Gray. In helping to save her he would vindicate himself.

Kansas led the way and Norris brought up the rear. He did not intend to let this girl escape too. Brutally he told her so.

"Don't make any mistake," he warned. "I'll plug you same as I would a man if you make a break. I'm that kind of a bird."

The riders circled the pasture and took the hill trail back of it. The outlaws pushed the horses, anxious to get out of sight before they were seen by any Chiswick riders. As they topped each rise, all three of them

turned in the saddle and swept the valley below with their eyes. Presently the folds of the hills enclosed them.

Norris rode up beside the girl. "Don't you worry, sweetheart," he mocked. "They won't catch us. If they do I'll make them wish they hadn't. You're eloping with a man this time, not a sawdust dummy like Lou Howard. Everything will be jake."

Ruth shivered.

Chapter XXIV

NO THREATS, NO PROMISES

AS JEFF GRAY rode from one land wave to another, heading north by east, he had a conviction that he was losing a lot of time. If Norris and his companion were making for the L C ranch house—and he had no doubt of this, since they had to find another horse—they would get there long before he did.

He swung due east, along a rock ledge that barred the way. His judgment was that he had been working too far north.

From the ledge a voice came, one with an Irish brogue, upon which was superimposed the drawl of the cattle country. "Stop right where you're at, me lad, and throw up your hands."

Startled, Gray pulled up. His heart turned a somersault, but he looked up with an expressionless face.

"First off, drop that gun," the voice ordered.

The man whose face peered over the ledge was Pat Sorley. A wave of relief swept over the rider. He was not going to be shot down.

"Lucky I met you, Pat," he said coolly. "I'm lost. Get yore horse and take me to the ranch."

"You've got a gall, young fellow," Pat told him. "I said to drop that rifle."

"I reckon to use it soon if I get a break," Gray said, ignoring the command. "Listen, Pat. War has broke loose. Chiswick has just had a fight with a Tail Holt crowd who came to drygulch some Mexican smugglers. Morg Norris and another fellow are heading for the ranch to get another horse. Nobody is at the house except Miss Ruth and Nelly. Don't talk. Get busy. We've got to ride there hell-for-leather."

"Are you lying to me, you scut?" demanded Sorley.

"No. I came from town to warn Chiswick and was with him during the fight. We caught them in Live Oak Canyon after they had ambushed the Mexicans."

Sorley had heard how Gray had saved young Chiswick. Swiftly he made up his mind.

"All right. I'll be with ye in a jiffy. Don't run off again while I'm getting my pony."

He joined the other a minute or two later. They rode knee to knee, travelling as fast

as they could without injuring their mounts.

"Any of our men hurt in the fight—if there was one?" the line rider asked.

"I don't think so. Didn't wait to find out. I caught a horse belonging to one of the Tail Holt bunch and followed them as they ran. A man called Sid Hunt was killed. We captured Lou Howard."

"So it was some of Sherm Howard's dirty work," Sorley growled.

"Yes. I came up a side gulch after Morg Norris and another of them. They had only one horse and would have to ride and tie till they got another. So I figured they would strike for the L C ranch house, knowing no men would be there."

"If that killer Norris hurts Miss Ruth, by God——"

Sorley stopped, for want of words to express his feeling.

"He might. That fellow is a bad hombre all the way through. A decent woman would get no consideration from him because of her sex. He's one devil."

"Probably he has too much sense to annoy her, wouldn't ye say?"

"Most men would have, but I don't know about him. He's not only bad and a bully. He's game as they come."

"Would a game man have shot at Lee from cover, begorry?" the line rider asked indignantly.

"Most game men would not, but this fellow is a wolf. For a Mexican dime he would have stood in the street and fought it out with Chiswick. Don't make any mistake about that. He has sand in his craw."

THEY dropped down from the broken hill country toward the valley. Below them they could see a huddle of buildings at the L C home ranch house.

The ranch houses disappeared, cut off by a hill top as the riders continued their descent.

"Likely those divils aren't heading this way at all," Sorley said, "and we're worryin' ourselves for nothing."

"I hope so," Gray replied. He did not share the line rider's optimism. He knew that if he were in Morg Norris' place his urgent impulse would be to strike for the nearest point where a horse could be got safely.

"And if they went to the ranch Miss Ruth might be out gallivantin' over the country the way she does," Pat went on, bolstering up his assurance. "Half her time that gir-rl spends in the saddle."

Gray pulled up abruptly. "Listen," he said.

To them drifted the sound of a galloping horse. Instantly Gray lifted his pony to a canter and rode out of the draw in which they were. The aproaching rider was a woman. He moved forward to meet her. She caught sight of Sorley and dragged her horse to a halt.

"They've got Ruth," she cried.

"Who?" asked Pat sharply.

"I don't know. Two men. I—I—got a horse and ran away."

Nelly broke down and began to sob.

"Two men with one horse?" Gray inquired.

"Yes. They found horses in the corral, and they made us pack food."

"What d'you mean they've got Ruth?" the crooknosed man asked grimly.

"They're taking her with them. I was to go too, but I got away like I said. One of the men let me go."

"Which one? Did you hear his name?"

The girl suspended her sobs. She looked at this hard-faced stranger whose eyes were like a day of judgment. His strength communicated itself to her.

"No. Yes, I did too. He said his name was Kansas, and that I was to tell Mr. Chiswick he would try to look after Ruth. He said he was against taking her and to remember that they would make first for the Walsh cabin back of Crowfoot. That is where they will hide."

"Did he call the other man Morg Norris?"

"He called him Morg."

"How did Kansas get a chance to let you go?"

"The other man had sent him out to rope and saddle horses and I slipped away to the stable. This Kansas caught me there. But he let me go. He pretended to shoot at me as I rode away."

GRAY fired the next question at Sorley. "Where is this Walsh cabin?"

" 'Way up in the hills. You follow Lance Creek—that's the one back of the house—pretty near to its headwaters. Then you cut across mighty rough country to Escondido Pass. The Walsh cabin is in a little park on the yon side of the pass. Unless you knew where it was you wouldn't find it in a hundred years.

"You'll have to go with me, I reckon, Sorley. I'd never find it alone. We'll stop at the ranch and pick up some grub." Gray turned to Nelly. "You're not afraid to ride alone to meet Chiswick, are you?"

She said no very dubiously.

"Nobody can harm you," Gray explained. "Outside of these two fellows only one of the Tail Holt crowd is loose. Chiswick has him cut off from this end of the canyon."

"I thought there were five of them," Nelly protested. She did not want to ride alone if she could help it.

"One has been rubbed out, another is a prisoner," Gray said. "Keep right on to Live Oak Canyon. You'll meet some of the L C boys. Tell them what you have told us. Tell them Sorley and I are heading for the Walsh cabin."

Nelly said bravely, "All right."

"Good girl," the stranger said quietly. "We wouldn't let you go alone if there was any danger."

"You—you won't let them hurt Ruth, will you?" she begged.

No muscle in the man's grim immobile face changed, but the eyes that looked into hers had a cold fierce deadliness appalling in its ruthlessness. He made no threat in words, no promises.

"Quien sabe?" He murmured.

A moment later he was galloping toward the ranch.

They found the place deserted. Gray flung himself from the saddle, grounded the reins, and strode into the house.

On the kitchen table he found a note written on the margin of a newspaper.

Dear Lee,

We had to borrow some grub for our honeymoon in the hills.

Your son-in-law,
Morg Norris

In imagination Gray could see the leering mockery on the killer's face as he scrawled the defiant challenge.

Hurriedly he and Sorley packed a supply of food. Each of them took a slicker and a blanket. The nights are cool in the Arizona mountains.

As soon as possible they were on their way.

Chapter XXV

TWO GO AND ONE STAYS

RUTH knew she must not show fear. No matter how urgently it knocked at her heart she dared not let it appear on her face. The man who had her in his power was a bully, and if she gave any sign of panic he would take a devilish delight in trading on it.

Hour after hour they wound deeper into the hills. Each added mile increased her worry. Not many people had penetrated the folds between these steep and rugged passes. Her friends would not know where to find her. They might as well look for the proverbial needle in the haystack.

In the saddle she sat clean-limbed and straight-backed, as impervious to fatigue as the outlaws, a slim figure beautifully poised. The sultry eye of Morg Norris gloated over her young loveliness. She was proud, and she loathed and hated him. So much the better. He would bring down that lifted chin and high heart before he had finished with her. He would drive panic fear into her throat. As some men enjoy breaking a spirited horse, so he wallowed in the sadistic pleasure of crushing a woman's self-respect.

He rode beside Ruth, insulting her with his jeers and even more with his admiration. She looked straight ahead, hot shame in her cheeks. It was in her mind that she deserved this. Punishment had come home to her for all the careless flirting she had done in the past.

Upon her hand, lying for the moment on the pommel of the saddle, he let his fingers close. Ruth did not snatch her arm away. She moved it definitely but without haste.

He grinned. "You don't like me, sweetheart."

Her scornful eyes rested upon him for an instant. "I come of decent people," she said.

"Wouldn't like me for a husband?"

"I'd rather be dead."

"Or a lover?"

She looked into his cruel gray eyes and

a sickness ran through her body. The man was inhuman. She knew of no weapon at the command of a woman that would be effective against such a villain. He was without scruple, without conscience.

Her horse swung to the right to pass a clump of Spanish bayonet. When he rode beside her again knee to knee he took up the talk where he had dropped it, the odious smile still on his face.

"One or the other, dearie," he purred. "Take yore choice."

A stone lay heavy on her heart. "I'd advise you to be careful," she said, trying to keep her voice even and contemptuous.

"Me, Morg Norris, careful!" His laugh mocked her. "You'll learn about me before we're through. I never was careful in my life. What I want I take. I make my own laws."

His vanity was colossal. It came to her that perhaps she could play upon it to save herself. He liked to talk about his prowess. By flattery she might deflect him from the purpose playing in the shallow surface of his mind, might at least lead him to move toward it with finesse. She made a change of front. It was useless to reproach him with outraging her rights, since he recognized no claims of others. Better to let him see himself as a lover irresistible, gradually wearing down her will to fight his fascination.

"What are those laws?" she asked.

"I make 'em as I need them."

"But—they're not all shifting sand, are they?"

"I do what I want to do. I don't trust anybody. When I get in a tight spot I play my own hand and fight my way out of it."

"That last is good," she said reflectively. "A man ought to be self-reliant. At any rate you are that."

"Y'betcha. Nice for you to meet a real man instead of lah-de-dahs like Lou Howard," he boasted. "I aim to show you how a real guy makes love."

"Don't you believe in any moral law at all?" she asked looking at him with critical interest.

"I quit Sunday school a right long time ago," he sneered. "Likely you'd say I was headed slap damn for hell."

SHE guessed he was proud of his reputation for evil.

"They say there is honor among thieves," she said. "You would stand by a friend, wouldn't you?"

"How do you know a friend?" he wanted to know, with a curl of the lip.

"I know mine," she answered.

"What about the sapheads you've flirted with off and on for the past two years? Would you call them friends, when you were making them think they were ace high with you and they only stacked up as deuces?"

She shook her head, smiling at him faintly. "Don't quote Ruth Chiswick to me.

I don't set her up as an example. But I do think I have more sense now than I had then."

"Lemme see. How long is it since you ran off with Lou Howard and then jilted him?"

"I'm a reformed character," she told him lightly.

"Don't you get too reformed and we'll get along fine. Understand one thing. Where I'm at I rule the roost. That's all you got to remember. I know yore kind. You have to be treated like a bronc with hell in his neck. Soon as he finds out who is boss there's no more trouble. Until then I keep my quirt hot."

"Don't you think kindness might work better sometimes?" Ruth inquired, rather casually.

His crooked smile chilled her. "All these lads tried kindness with you. How far did they get? I wouldn't know that. Some of 'em farther than others, I reckon." He waited to give her a chance to protest, but she did not do so. "Some need the whip. You can lash sense into them quicker than you can teach it any other way."

"That's a confession of failure," Ruth said. "I've noticed it often in horse breakers. The poorer ones, those not in the front rank, lose patience and get vicious with the colts; but top hands keep their heads and break the animals wisely. From what I've heard about you I'd think you were a top hand, one who would use his brains with horses—and women too."

Her words stung him. "I didn't say you had to keep quirting after they learn to answer their master's voice. I make 'em know who is in the saddle."

"Brute force is one way," Ruth agreed, a touch of contempt in her voice. "I suppose it's good enough for those who don't know a better one. How far are we going tonight?"

"We're going to the Walsh cabin," he said sulkily. "Maybe we'll keep going from there. Haven't made up my mind."

He resented her dismissal of him as a second rater. There was an urge in him to prove to her that he could win on her own terms. He had read in her manner some current of emotion not visible on the surface. Was it an invitation to prove how good a lover he was, a challenge which implied surrender if he could quicken desire in her? From the stories he had heard she must be a flirtatious little devil. With so much smoke there was probably fire. Unless he was greatly mistaken there was passion back of those stormy eyes. She was impulsive. If he could persuade her to marry him he could wipe the slate clean and escape the consequences of abducting her.

They moved along the brow of a hill, dipped into a canyon, and climbed its rocky bed to a ledge from which they looked down into a small park not more than an eighth of a mile across from one lip to the opposite one. A log cabin stood about a stone's throw below them. Back of it was a mountain corral. At present the place looked deserted.

The horses picked a way down along a slope of rubble. In front of the cabin Norris drew up.

He called to Kansas, "We'll throw off here a while."

"What you mean a while?" Kansas asked. "Aren't we camping here tonight?"

THE suggestion of opposition was enough for Norris. "No," he snapped.

"Why not?" the other man persisted. "We're sure holed up mighty good here."

"Because I say so. That reason enough for you?"

"We're in this together, ain't we?" Kansas grumbled. "You act like I'm some dirty Mexican sheepherder."

"You trying to pick on me, fellow?" Norris demanded, his mouth an ugly slit.

"Nothing like that, Morg. Seemed to me this was a good place to roost. Good feed for the horses. Filled with absentees, as you might say. I'll bet outside of some of our crowd there aren't half a dozen folks in the world know about this place. Nobody would find us in a thousand years. No, sir. What's the idea in moving on?"

"Kinda like this place, Kansas, don't you?" the other outlaw asked with silky suavity.

"Looks all right to me," Kansas said stubbornly. He added hastily, reading suspicion in the narrowed eyes of his companion, "But hell! I don't care where we camp."

"Maybe we could agree for you to stay here and for us to go on," suggested Norris significantly.

"What you mean, Morg? Course I'll go on if you do."

"You're so fond of me you'd hate to split up," Norris jeered. He turned to Ruth. "One of these friends you were talking about, the kind that stick closer than a brother."

"What's eatin' you, Morg?" asked Kansas unhappily. "I didn't aim to say a thing to annoy you." With the sleeve of his shirt he brushed away tiny beads of perspiration from his forehead. For the moment the heart of the man died under his ribs. The look in the eyes of the killer had been venomous. Could he have discovered in any possible way that Kansas had told Nelly where they would camp?

Norris watched the wretched man.

And Ruth watched first one and then the other. There was something here she did not understand, an accusation and a confession. A cold fierce glitter was shining in the eyes of Norris. He stood with feet apart and head thrust forward, weaving ever so slightly from side to side. If ever she had seen deadly menace it was there. She did not know he was reconstructing in his mind that scene when he had come out of the L C ranch house to see Nelly flying down the road; figuring out what there was about it that had seemed forced and unreal. She did not know he was coming to a decision that his companion had betrayed him. But to look at Kansas was enough to tell her the man was afraid to the marrow. His face had gone gray, his lips ashen. A muscle twitched in his neck. He was fighting to keep control of his jumpy nerves.

"No, you wouldn't annoy me, Kansas," said Norris, low and soft. "You'd be for me every way from the ace, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Kansas pleaded, his voice parched and dry. "I sure would, Morg."

"You wouldn't want me to stay here where nobody could find us in a thousand years, would you?" grinned the killer.

"Not if you didn't want to stay."

"Good old Kansas, faithful as Old Dog Tray," jeered the other.

"You—you got me wrong, Morg," burst out Kansas.

"Maybe so." Norris continued to smile, the mocking grin on his face something dreadful to see. "Well, I'm going to the spring to fix up this scratch on my arm while you unsaddle and picket."

RUTH offered timidly to dress and tie up the wound. She did not want to do it, for there was something just now horribly menacing about the man. When he refused her offer she was glad.

Norris sauntered to the spring, contriving not to turn his back upon the other man. He carried his rifle with him.

As soon as he was out of hearing Kansas spoke to the girl. "Don't look this way," he said hurriedly, uncinching the horse she had been riding. "Act like I ain't even talkin' to you. Keep a-lookin' at Morg. He aims to kill me, because he figures I sent word to yore paw we would camp here. I did too, by that girl I helped get away."

"You helped Nelly get away?" Ruth said breathlessly. "You sent word to father we would be here?"

"Yep. Lemme do the talkin'. I got my back to that devil and he can't see my lips move. Keep him here long as you can. I'm going back to hurry up yore friends."

Ruth wanted to beg him not to leave her alone with Norris. She would be safer if another man was with them. But his next words stopped her.

"Morg must be headin' for Wild Horse basin," the man went on. "I'll have Lee comb that country thorough. I got to light out now. Morg is fixin' to kill me." The man was pallid with fear. His eyes darted toward the spring. Now was the time. "I'll be sayin' adios, miss." Without touching the stirrup he flung himself into the saddle and lifted the horse to a gallop. Not an expert rider, one of his feet failed to find its stirrup. He clung to the horn to steady himself, his fingers dragging on one of the reins. The pony swerved sharply and the man lost his seat. A shoulder plowed into the ground when he struck. Almost instantly he was on his feet.

The eyes in his chalk face were glazed with fear. For a fraction of a second he hesitated, uncertain what to do. He started for the horse Norris had been riding.

Before he had taken two steps a rifle cracked. The body of the running man plunged forward as if it had been flung

from a catapult. He lay face down, motionless.

Ruth caught at the saddle horn of the horse beside her. She clung to it, trying to steady herself in a tiptilted world. For a moment everything went hazy She saw Norris moving forward, the rifle in his hands. He padded toward the prone figure, his supple body crouched and wary as that of a cat stalking its prey. The face of the man was demoniac. Upon it was stamped the horrid sadistic lust that comes to the habitual killer who has made his kill.

"You . . . you've killed him," Ruth cried, covering her eyes.

HE LAUGHED, triumphantly. "Surest thing you know. He was aiming to run out on me, to sell me for a peace offering to Chiswick. Thought he could hand one like that to Morg Norris, the dern fool. Why, birds like him come twenty to the dozen. Never did amount to a hill of beans. Couldn't rope, couldn't shoot, couldn't ride. Always a weak sister. Had to blow a stirrup at the one time when it counted most, not but what I would of got him anyhow. I figured he would try for a getaway, and I sure had his number right. The guy doesn't live who can fool me."

Callously he pushed the body over with his toe to make sure his victim was lifeless. "Dead as a stuck shote," he pronounced cheerfully. "When yore uncle Morg cuts loose they don't even squeal."

His satanic good humor appalled Ruth. He was immensely pleased with himself. The thing he had done no more distressed him than if he had shot a rattlesnake. The girl looked down at the huddled body which had been quick with life only a moment since, and a sick tremor ran through her. She felt panic rising to her throat—had to shut her mouth tight to keep from screaming.

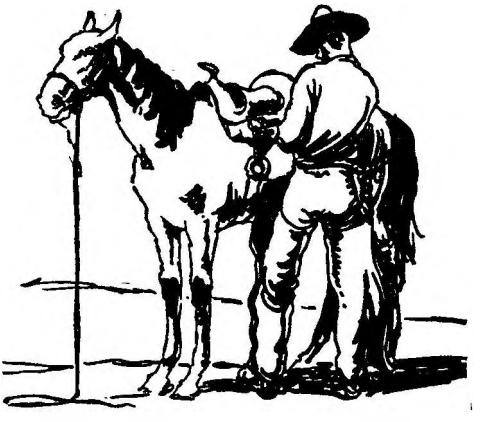
Norris was too busy congratulating himself before his public of one to notice that her face was drained of color to the lips.

"The lunkhead ought to of known better," he continued. "He'd ought to have turned in his string of horses and pulled his freight for Kansas long ago, seeing he couldn't keep his end up in a he-man country of lead-pumpers. He was certainly committing suicide when he set out to throw me down. Better men than he ever was have found they had bit off more than they could chew when they tackled Morg Norris. Where I come from they used to call me Sudden Death. There ain't any man alive can throw a gun quicker than me. My record is seven, counting him."

His boasting was horrible to hear. There was something inhuman about it. He had the smooth rippling muscles, the soft padded tread, of a wild jungle tiger. To Ruth the word seemed terribly fitting. One cannot appeal for mercy to a tiger.

The killer began to laugh. "I told him we might agree for him to stay here and for us to go on. It will be that way. I'll saddle yore bronc and we'll be off."

As Ruth watched him re-saddle, she pulled herself out of the hopeless conviction that she was lost. It would never do to give up. In what way could she help herself? There must be something she could



do. She held her quirt tight in both hands, twisting it, while her thoughts darted here and there. If she could leave a message——

The man's back was toward her as he cinched her mount. She slipped the quirt from her wrist and wrote on the ground with the heavy end of it, making sure he did not see. The leather dragged through the dust.

Wild Horse.

Abruptly she stopped, flicking the whip idly. He was bringing the horse to her.

"Hold this while I get Ginger." He gave her a mocking word of warning. "And see you don't try to make a getaway like he did."

The instant he turned to walk to his own straying horse Ruth's quirt was busy. She added the word *Basin* to the message and signed with the initial R. There was time for no more.

"All aboard the Honeymoon Express," he called, grinning at her.

She played for time. "Are we going to—to leave him like that?"

"Y'betcha!" He added, indifferently: "Fellows of his kind don't count with me. I like men with guts and women with jingle."

He moved toward Ruth, to help her mount. Hurriedly she pulled herself to the saddle.

Norris led the way to the rim of the park. He was in villainous good humor, and it expressed itself in a snatch of tuneless song.

"You bet I'll go to Frisco, a-kiting, a-kiting."

Ruth followed, as a squaw might have done a victorious brave. What else could she do?

CHAPTER XXVI

SHERM HOWARD GETS A SHOCK

ON THE door of Sherm Howard's house someone was knocking impatiently. The big man playing solitaire at the table put down the ten of diamonds and made sure his .44 was loose in the scabbard. He hoisted himself out of the armchair and waddled to the door.

"Who's there?" he asked.

"Me. Mile High. Lemme in, Sherm." The voice held a note of excitement.

Howard shoved back the bolt and threw open the door. The tall shambling puncher pushed his way into the house.

"Gimme a drink," he said hoarsely.

His host closed and bolted the door, walked to a closet, and brought out a bottle and a glass. Mile High poured half a tumbler full, drank it in two gulps, and sat down.

"Hell to pay," he said.

"What's wrong?" asked Howard, his opaque eyes fixed on the man.

"Lee Chiswick bushwhacked us."

"When? Where?"

"In Live Oak Canyon, right after we held up the smugglers."

"Spill it."

Mile High told all he knew, which was not much. They had trapped the Mexicans and taken the pack mule with the silver when an attack had burst upon them. He had recognized Lee Chiswick and one of his sons. He thought Brand was one of them, but he could not be sure. Taken by complete surprise, the Tail Holt men had not been able to put up a good fight. Sid Holt had been shot down. What had become of the others Mile High did not know. He had caught a horse and lit out down the canyon. As soon as he had got out of the farther end he had worked back through the hills to town.

"You don't know whether the other boys got away," Howard said. "Didn't see any of them down? Didn't notice Lou?"

"No, sir. I saw two fellows on one horse. They were coming lickitty split behind me. But I lost track of them later. They didn't show up at the other end of the canyon. Maybe Lee's men got them. I wouldn't know. It sure was every man for himself."

"It seems to have been Mile High for himself," Howard said bitterly.

The lank puncher helped himself to another drink. "Ride me if you've a mind to, Sherm," he said morosely. "I was there. You wasn't. I'm tellin' you that it was hotter 'n hell with the lid on. The others had as good a chance to get away as I had, outside of poor Sid. There are no road laws in a stampede, by gum."

Howard drummed with the tips of his

pudgy fingers on the table. "Someone else ought to be in soon with news," he said. "Some of the boys must have got away."

"I reckon, but I wouldn't bet none on it," Mile High replied. "It's sure one helluva mess."

"How did Lee find out what the boys meant to do?" Howard demanded, frowning at the cards in front of him. "Did you tell anyone, Mile High?"

"Not a soul. I don't believe any of the boys did. Kansas made a crack down at the corral about us going to Live Oak Canyon. I heard Sid blowing him up about it."

"Do you know who heard him?"

"No, I don't."

"Go down and ask Jim Reynolds to come see me. He might know."

Mile High uncoiled his long legs and rose. As he turned toward the door there came another knock.

"Who's there?" snapped Howard.

"Dan Brand," a voice answered.

"Anyone with you?"

"No."

Howard told Mile High to open the door.

WHEN Brand walked in he faced two men with drawn revolvers. The foreman said tranquilly, "Put 'em up, boys. I didn't come a-smokin'."

Howard pushed the weapon back into its holster. Mile High hesitated. He had been in a battle recently with Brand on the other side.

"Maybe so," the lank puncher said. "But I can listen just as well with my gun out."

Brand said, definitely: "I'll not talk to a man with his gun out; that is, not unless it's fightin' talk, with mine out too."

"Put up your hogleg, Mile High," Howard told his companion. "Don't you see that Dan is here on a peaceable mission?"

After the gun had disappeared Brand made a correction. "Peaceable or not, Sherm, depending on how you take it. I'll give it to you short and sweet. What I'm here to say is that Lee aims to hang yore son Lou to a live oak unless you get Miss Ruth back to the L C *muy pronto,* without a hair of her head injured."

The fat man stared blankly at the foreman. "Good God, man, what d'you mean? If you are talkin' about the Chiswick girl I haven't seen her since that day you-all were in town together."

"I didn't suppose they had brought her to town. The scoundrels who took her are holed up in the hills somewhere. We don't know where they are roostin'. Maybe you do. Anyhow you better find out immediate if you want to see Lou again alive."

"What has Lou got to do with it?" Howard asked.

"He's one of the gang that did this. We caught him. He's our prisoner now. A hostage, you might say. If anything happens to Miss Ruth it's all off with him."

"What d'you mean he's one of the gang that did this? Lou doesn't go around carrying girls up into the hills, if that's what happened, though so far I can't make head or tail of it." Howard looked reproachfully at the L C man. "You hadn't ought to talk that wild lawless way, Dan. About stringing up Lou, and crazy talk like that. Be reasonable. First off, tell us the story. Begin at the beginning. Let's hear what happened. . . . Will you have a drink?" He pushed the bottle toward Brand.

"I will not," Brand said curtly. "No need to begin at the first of it, Sherm. You know that better than I do. Through yore spies you found out some Mexican smugglers were going to run silver through Live Oak Canyon to Tough Nut. You sent five of yore gang out to waylay them."

"Wa-ait a minute, Dan." Howard raised a fat hand to stop him. "No such a thing. Some of the boys headed for Tough Nut to see the elephant. They may have gone by way of Live Oak Canyon. I wouldn't know about that."

"It isn't more than forty miles off the direct route to Tough Nut," Brand said contemptuously. "Don't try to load me, Sherm. I know what that outlaw bunch went to Live Oak for. We found two

Mexicans they had rubbed out and the pack mule with the silver. Yore crowd was still shootin' when we took a hand."

"The Mexicans must have attacked them," Howard protested. "That would be the way of it."

"Sure. When a brush rabbit gets nerve enough to spit in the eye of a rattlesnake. Like I said, Lou is our prisoner. That boy hasn't any sand in his craw. He wilted right off and blabbed all he knew. Don't waste my time trying to lie. Here's the nub of it. Two of yore men slipped away from us up a side canyon. They cut across to the L C ranch house and picked up Miss Ruth. After she had rustled grub for them they took her with them into the hills."

"What two men?"

"Morg Norris and Kansas."

"I'm not responsible for what that killer Morg Norris does," the fat man burst out. "You know that, Dan. He's a bad hombre. Long ago, soon as I saw what he was, I washed my hands of him."

"Lee holds you responsible. So do the rest of us. You can't get away with that, Sherm. Every decent man in this county will be against you in this thing. If that devil Norris hurts Miss Ruth you'll be in one hell of a jam. Don't think anything else for a minute."

THE big moon face of Howard was pallid. The reverse at Live Oak was bad enough. Not much chance to play innocent with Lou a prisoner. But this crazy adventure of Morgan Norris was ruinous. Sherm did not know which way to turn. Lee Chiswick hated him anyhow. The oldest son of the L C ranchman had been a private in the Texas rangers and had been killed while on duty. The father of the dead boy had always suspected Howard of betraying the youngster to his death, though he had never been able to prove it. If this girl was injured Lee would go hog wild. His revenge would never stop at Norris—not even at Lou Howard.

"How do you know the girl didn't just go for a ride with some of the boys, Dan?" suggested Howard, in a voice suave and placatory. "You know how she is—kinda wild."

The foreman's figure stiffened, his face set. "You'll drop that kind of talk, Sherm."

"I wasn't going to say a thing against her, Dan, except that she is young and likes the boys. No harm in that." Howard gestured with his soft plump hands, urging his point anxiously. He did not believe what he was saying. He knew Norris too well and how far the unruly scoundrel would go. But it was the best talking argument he could think of for the moment. "We want to be reasonable, Dan. I wouldn't have had this happen for all the money in the world—if it has happened. I can't believe it. Morg is a good looking fellow. Maybe he just persuaded her to ride along a ways. If it was Morg. We want to be sure of that."

"Morg left a note," Brand said quietly. "Besides, the girl who works at the ranch got away and told us. What's the sense in trying to fool yoreself? If it is yoreself and not me you're trying to load. I'm here to tell you to get busy. Send some of yore scalawags out to shoot down Norris. Get Miss Ruth back somehow safely. If you don't, you're out of luck, Sherm." The face of the foreman was harsh and grim.

Howard mopped his perspiring face with a bandanna. He made up his mind to sacrifice Norris. It was too bad Mile High was present, since it would be fatal for the idea to get out that he would not stand by any of his gang in trouble. But even Mile High must see they had to throw Morg to the lions after doing such a thing.

"All this wouldn't have happened if Lee hadn't jumped the boys in the canyon and shot them up," Howard said virtuously. "These smugglers are criminals, desperate men ready for any deviltry. Sid Holt was a deputy sheriff. Likely he figured it was his duty to arrest the Mexicans. But no use going into that now. If Morg has gone loco and taken Miss Chiswick into the hills——"

"No if about it," interrupted Brand brusquely. "I tell you he has."

"Then every man in our crowd will hunt him down as if he was a wolf." Howard turned to Mile High for support. "Am I right?"

Mile High nodded sulkily. "Soon as we know the facts," he demurred. "Me, I don't aim to be drove into any loose blanket stampede. I've slept under the same tarp as Morg and I'm not camping on his trail with a gun just on Mr. Dan Brand's say-so." He looked at the foreman in hardy defiance.

Brand met him eye to eye. "Don't get on the prod with me. You're up to the neck in that Live Oak Canyon hold-up and for all I know you're in the kidnapping too."

"Who says I'm in either one or the other?" blustered Mile High.

"Lou Howard says you were in one,"

Brand retorted. "And I daresay some of our boys recognized you."

"When I was masked?" Mile High jeered.

The outlaw saw his mistake, after Howard had shot at him one venomous look.

"Who mentioned the bandits were masked?" the foreman demanded.

"Didn't you say so?" Mile High covered up. "Anyhow, any fool would know they'd wear masks."

HOWARD brushed this talk aside. "We'd better talk turkey. First thing is to get Miss Chiswick back. I can promise to put thirty men to combing the hills inside of two hours, Dan. I'll go the limit on this thing."

"Good, if you send them to the right place," Brand made blunt answer.

"I don't know where he is any more than you do," Howard cut back sharply. "And I won't have you saying I do, Dan. There's one thing more I'll say. My boy Lou isn't in this. If you—or Lee—or any of his riders—do that boy any harm I'll never quit till I've cleaned up the whole Chiswick nest. You can put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"All I'm saying it that you'd better find Miss Ruth and get her home," Brand replied, frowning at him. "Damn quick too."

The foreman turned and strode out of the room.

Mile High said to Howard, angrily, "Is it yore idea to throw down on Morg?"

The lifeless eyes of Howard slid round to meet those of the other. "Don't always be a lunkhead, Mile High. What has this fellow done but throw down on you and me and all of us? You know this country won't stand for such stuff as he has just pulled off. He'd know it too if he wasn't crazy. We've got to play our hands to save ourselves. When Morg Norris took this girl with him against her will he signed his death warrant. Don't you go signing yours. We're going after Morg to get him. You had better get you a horse and trail along with one of the posses. You'll find it's doggoned good insurance against a few years in the pen at Yuma."

"I didn't expect you to weaken before Lee Chiswick," the younger man said. "I'm sure ready to ride to bring the young lady back, but we don't have to put the curse on Morg. Why not let him slip through our fingers across the line?"

"Because we have to bump him off to show good faith. He's gone too far. This country won't stand for kidnapping women. He'll be hunted down sure. To protect ourselves we have to be some of the hunters."

Mile High saw the logic of it. He had to hunt or be hunted.

CHAPTER XXVII

A MESSAGE IN THE SAND

JEFF GRAY had to fight down an impulse to hurry. It would be folly to wear out the horses getting to the Walsh cabin, only to find out that Kansas had sent them on a wild goose chase. Afer all the man was one of the gang. What more likely than that, under instruction of Norris, he had been trying to direct the pursuit in the wrong direction when he freed Nelly?

With a heavy heart Jeff admitted to himself that this was very likely a job that could not be done in a hurry. He might have to sleep on Norris' trail for a week. The fellow knew every pocket in these hills. If Kansas was false-carding they might not find the outlaws at all.

The worst of it was that time was driving Norris toward whatever desperate action might be in his diseased mind. He had burnt the bridges behind him. That the country would soon be alive with his hunters the man must know. Already he was marked for death, unless he could slip across the line into Mexico. Neither fear nor caution would restrain the young killer in his treatment of Ruth, since by his own folly he had already passed sentence upon himself. The presence of Kansas might hold him back, but Gray knew the lesser villain was not strong enough to have weight for long. Norris would brush him aside.

The two men traveled steadily, Sorley in the lead. The little Irishman was a good guide. He had an instinct for short cuts, and he held his horse to the fastest gait that would not sap its strength. They flung the miles behind them, moving always deeper and deeper into the hills.

"Much farther?" Gray asked once, his his mouth set to a grim straight slit.

"Not so far," Sorley answered. "That's Crowfoot over to the left. We're swinging round it now."

They circled back of the mountain, dropped into a gulch, and clambered up its stony bed. Near the top of the canyon Sorley stopped his horse.

"The cabin is in a little park just over the ridge," he said. "What do we do? Burst right down on them? Or wait till it's dark?"

"Better have a look first from the ridge," Gray suggested.

They left their horses just below the lip of the park, climbed up to the ledge, and looked down. No smoke rose from the house. There were no horses in the corral, but one saddle bronco was grazing near the spring.

"They sure have been here," Sorley said. "But they have done gone, and in some hurry, looks like. Didn't even take time to unsaddle. Why for did they leave one of the horses here?"

Gray was looking down at something sprawled out in front of the cabin. "They didn't need but two horses," he said, his voice harsh and cold. "One of them stayed here." He pointed at the still body.

A pulse of excitement hammered in the scrawny throat of the line rider. "Begorry, you're right. There has been a fight, and one of them got killed."

The younger man differed. "Not a fight, but a murder. For some reason Norris made up his mind to get rid of Kansas. He did so, and then lit out. I'm going down."

"Look out for a trap," the oldtimer advised.

"Don't think it's that. Two of the horses have gone."

But Gray did not take any unnecessary chances. His rifle was across the saddle as he rode down into the park. He made sure nobody was in the house before he took a close look at the dead man.

"Kansas, like you said." Sorley looked at his companion and then looked away. Both of them were thinking of what this meant to Ruth. "They can't be far ahead of us, if we knew which way they had gone."

It would be possible to find in what direction they had started, but both the men knew there was little chance of running

down Norris in hundreds of miles of rough mountain terrain.

SORLEY began to quarter over the park looking for signs.

"He shot Kansas in the back of the head, from off to one side," Gray mentioned.

"The horses headed up toward that patch of little pines near the ridge," Sorley called to him. "Two of them. Morg was in a sweat to get away."

"Yes." Gray's voice raised in sudden excitement. "Come here, Pat. Someone left a message for us."

Sorley ran to him. He pointed to some writing scratched in the sand. The old man read it aloud slowly.

Wild Horse Basin

"It's meant for us," Gray said. "Either the girl wrote it—or Norris did. It's signed with her initial, but that doesn't mean a thing. The scoundrel may have left it to fool us. The letters are done kinda shaky, as if she had made them in a hurry, on the sly." His eyes were back again on the writing.

"That's right," agreed the line rider. "If Norris had done it he would have fixed the letters deeper, so we wouldn't miss seeing them. I'd say Miss Ruth wrote it."

"Where is Wild Horse Basin?"

Sorley pointed to the north. "Up in the high hills, back thataway. Say, how would the girl know where he was heading for?"

"She might have heard him say—or Kansas may have told her before he was killed. Likely Kansas made some move to help her. Morg wouldn't have shot him if he hadn't figured the other fellow was turning against him. Let's get going."

"For Wild Horse Basin?"

"Yes. I have a hunch the girl did that writing. Morg never would have thought of it."

Sorley looked down at the dead man. I hate not to bury him before we go, even if he was a scalawag. But we've got to jump. It will be night soon."

They carried the body into the cabin and covered it with two gunny sacks.

The riders followed the trail left by Norris and his prisoner. Once out of the park, Sorley waited only to make sure of the direction taken by those in front of them. He struck into the hills, dipping across gulches and winding round the shoulders of elephant humps. The country grew wilder and more rugged. Sometimes they were in a region of stunted pines. More often the hills were dry and scarred with rock outcroppings. From the summits they could see a sawtoothed range lifting its crest into a sky of violet haze. Behind a crotch of the hills the sun was setting. Already dusk had softened the vivid tints of orange and scarlet to a faint pink glow. Night soon would sift down upon the high lands.

JEFF looked at the sky anxiously. In another hour it would be dark. A picture jumped to his mind and tortured him. He saw Ruth Chiswick sitting in the glow of a camp fire, her eyes fear-filled, panic rising to her throat. He saw Morg Norris watching her, never shifting his evil gaze, the tide of desire sweeping him toward the climax that had been in his thoughts all day.

Long since they had lost the trail of the two they were seeking. Sorley was making straight as he could for Wild Horse Basin. His hope was to pick up again the tracks of the horses somewhere in that stretch of broken country. But the hope was growing weak within him. He knew that night was already sweeping over the hills. In the long hours of darkness Ruth would be as safe with Norris as she would be with a gaunt hungry wolf.

The pursuers dropped down into the basin, came to a little stream tumbling down through the rocks. Sorley pulled up his horse.

"No use going any farther," he said. "Got to wait till we can see. All we'd do is get lost if we kept travelling."

Gray read the despondency in the old line rider's voice. He understood it because his own heart was sick. What Pat said

was true. They might as well throw off and make camp.

"There's one thing," he said. "If they came here Norris would camp on a creek. Maybe on this one, since it's the first he would come to in the Basin. You fix us up something to eat while I drift up along the bank for a ways."

"Sure," Pat answered hopelessly. "Won't do any harm."

The younger man swung from the saddle and turned his horse over to Sorley. "Reckon I'll make better time on foot," he decided.

The stars were pricking out of the sky. Black, shadowy outlines marked where the hill boundaries had been. In the vast emptiness Jeff had an acute sense of insignificance. He was an atom in an immense universe. His will to do held no more potency than that of one of the trout in this rippling stream.

He pushed through the brush for a half a mile or more. Abruptly he stopped. In front of him, two or three hundred yards distance, was a light which he knew must come from a campfire. A hot gladness poured through his blood.

SWIFTLY, with as little rustling as possible, he moved toward the camp. It was in an open place, close to the bank of the stream. On the edge of the clearing, as Jeff drew near, he made out the vague shadow of horses. Two figures were seated by the fire. He heard the murmur of a voice.

Gray crept forward with more care. There was no immediate hurry. Norris sat crosslegged at his ease. He had no faintest suspicion that there was any friend of Ruth Chiswick within a score of miles.

He was talking. The slur of his mocking speech came to Jeff before the words.

"I sure picked a fine spot for our honeymoon, sweetheart," he jeered. "A million candles in yore bedroom, honey. I'd say you were in luck I picked you up. Some break for you to get me instead of that pink-ear Lou Howard."

The girl's head was low. Jeff could see she was sobbing. Her courage had washed out. There could be no help in heaven or on earth for her now, she must be thinking.

Norris rose, stretched himself, and yawned, his arms above his head. The man's evil smile looked down on her. He

opened his mouth to speak, but words were frozen on his lips. From out of the brush came a chill crisp order.

"Keep yore arms right up where they are, Norris."

The figure of the outlaw grew rigid. A man was coming out of the scrub, revolver in hand.

"Don't make any mistake," Gray ordered. "Or it will be yore last." He moved toward the outlaw slowly.

Fragments of thoughts raced chaotically through the brain of the bad-man. He yielded to a desperate impulse and dived back of the fire, dragging at his gun.

Jeff fired—missed. A bullet zipped past his ear. He shot again, knocking the revolver from the hands of the bandit into the creek. Norris made a rush to recover the weapon, his arm fishing the water for it. As he pulled the Colt's out of the current, Gray was upon him. The barrel of Jeff's revolver crashed down on his head and knocked him over. He lay motionless, his .44 again in the brook.

The redheaded man made sure the outlaw did not have another gun on his person. To Ruth he gave crisp commands.

"Get the gun out of the creek, girl. And pick up that rifle over there. Then step behind me out of the way."

Ruth did as she was told. Her face was chalk-white, but she moved lightly on her feet.

Norris groaned and sat up, hands pressing against his bleeding head. "You aimin' to kill me?" he snarled defiantly.

"I'm going to drag you back with a rope round yore neck," Gray answered. "Lee Chiswick will hang you to a cottonwood."

The eyes in the swarthy face of the trapped man slid away from Gray, to take in the tethered horses and the brush that came close to the camp. What he was thinking could be easily guessed.

Ruth moved close to the man who had rescued her.

"Let him go," she begged in a low broken voice. "I—I can't stand any more."

Jeff did not look at her. "He's going back with us to yore father. Go bring me a rope from that saddle."

"I'm afraid of him," the girl pleaded. "He's horrible. You don't know."

"I can guess. Don't worry about him." Jeff added grimly. "He'll be rubbed out plenty soon."

The slitted eyes of Norris had come back to them. He watched the man and the woman warily.

"Without a gun and without a horse he couldn't do us any harm," Ruth urged.

"You don't turn rattlesnakes loose because you're afraid of them," Gray told her coldly. "You stomp them out."

"Yes, but——"

Norris dived for the brush, his lithe body moving fast as a streak of light. The gun in Gray's hand roared, and the bullet plowed into the ground. For Ruth had struck down his forearm and was clinging to it with both hands. He tried to free himself—flung the girl roughly away. The escaping man was in the willows. Jeff could see and hear the violent agitation of the young sprouts. He fired at the place twice, then plunged into the thicket after the bandit.

For a hundred yards he followed the fugitive. Abruptly he gave up the chase. He could no longer hear the rustling of foliage. Better get back to the camp. The fellow might hide, wait till he had passed, and slip back to the horses.

Chapter XXVIII

Ruth Is in the Dog House

ANGER grew in Jeff Gray as he swished back to the camp through the willows. By golden luck he had found this villain's camp and saved Ruth from disaster. For some fool woman's reason she had interfered to help him escape. With Sorley he had ridden fifty miles to save her, and for reward she made a fool of him out of sheer caprice.

Pat Sorley burst out of the brush just as Jeff reached the camp.

"I heard shots," the line rider cried, then caught sight of Ruth and stopped abruptly, staring at her. "Glory be, he found you."

"Yes," Ruth answered, and bit her lip to keep down a sob.

Gray strode up to her. "What do you mean by knocking down my arm and hanging on to me?" he demanded, a cold contained rage in his voice.

She swallowed a lump in her throat. "I—couldn't help it," she said meekly.

"Couldn't help it. Don't be a fool."

"I couldn't have you kill him, after—what I saw him do this afternoon." She shuddered, seeing for a moment the slack body of Kansas crumpling down to the ground.

"I don't get this," Sorley said, looking from one to the other. "You never in the worl-ld kept Gray from killin' this divil when he had a chance?"

"That's just what she did—grabbed my arm and hung on while he was making a break to get away," Jeff said bitterly. "It seems he had become her dear friend during the day. Probably we butted in where we weren't wanted, Pat."

"Don't say that," Ruth cried. "He's an awful man—inhuman. I never saw anyone like him. His face—when he killed the other man—was like that of a devil. If you hadn't come——"

Her big eyes met those of Gray and shrank away.

"You hated him so much you couldn't bear to have him rubbed out," Gray said with a curl of the lip.

"I didn't want you or father to kill him in cold blood while he was unarmed," she explained in a low voice. "I saw him do that today—shoot down a poor man trying to escape from him. Would I want my friends to be like him?"

"So you were thinking of us," Gray said, his drawl derisively insulting. "On our account you turned him loose to kill eight or ten more men. Nice the way you manage our business. I hope Lee Chiswick is as grateful to you as I am."

He turned his back on the girl and spoke to Sorley. "Reckon we'd better get back to our own camp, Pat, eat supper, and move down the creek a ways. He might meet some more wolves and come back to howl at us."

"Not likely, with him afoot and unarmed. Still, it's possible."

"I'll walk to camp," Gray told him. "Better saddle those broncs and ride down."

Without another word to Ruth he picked up the weapons of Norris and departed.

"Why in heck did you interfere?" Pat asked Ruth severely. "Don't you know this Morg Norris is a black scoundrel all the way through and needs killing?"

"Yes, I know that," Ruth assented. "But I didn't want to see him killed by my friends. First, Mr. Gray said he would drag him back for father to hang. You know how impulsive father is and yet how rockbound he is in his principles. He would have hanged this ruffian right off and been sorry for the rest of his life that he hadn't waited to give him a trial."

"All right. Then what would be the matter, gir-rl, with killed while trying to escape? Lee couldn't be blamed for that."

"No." She sighed wearily. "Oh, Pat! I can't explain. I saw a man murdered this afternoon. Isn't one enough in a day?"

THE Irishman patted her shoulder by way of comfort. "Your troubles are over, my dear. You can forget this black scut. He'll never worry you again. We'll stop his clock for him pronto."

Pat had stopped supper preparations when he heard the shots farther up the creek, but presently he had the coffee boiling and the ham fried.

Ruth sat near Pat, at a little distance from Gray, whose face still showed no friendliness. Her shoulders sagged. She felt very tired, was under a reaction from great fear and excitement that left her a rag. Moreover, she was not entirely happy, even though she had been released from imminent danger. This was a man's world, and the emotions of a woman had no place in it. Gray had saved her life at the risk of his own. Instead of being able to show the gratitude she felt, she was in the dog house, coldly condemned for not minding her own business.

While they ate their food and drank their coffee, the line rider did the talking for all three. He was garrulously happy at the termination of the adventure. Against all likelihood their luck had stood up. Eagerly he asked questions, and got monosyllabic answers. After a time he protested.

"Begorry, you'd think this was a wake and not the luckiest hour of the year," he snorted. "We ought to be thanking God you're safe again."

"I am," Ruth answered wearily.

"Ye don't look like it," he retorted.

"I'm—tired out," she said, in a lifeless voice.

Looking at her shadowed eyes and white haggard face, Sorley felt remorse at his sharpness. "You'll have a good sleep tonight and be rested tomorrow," he said gently.

Gray continued to eat and drink with a manner of hard indifference. He too was feeling a reaction. Ever since he had known Ruth was the prisoner of Norris he had been tortured by the fear of what the ruffian would do to her. All day black care had ridden on his shoulders. His concern had been in-

tensely personal. It had been due not to the fact that this villain had in his power a girl, but that the girl was Ruth Chiswick.

They packed, saddled, and rode down the creek for a few miles. Sorley chose for a camp ground a little mesa three or four hundred yards from the stream. No fire was lit, and the night was cold, as Arizona nights in the high hills are likely to be. Pat made a bed of pine boughs for Ruth and tucked her up snugly in two blankets.

"One of us will be on guard all night," he explained to her. "Don't worry about a thing, but let go of yoreself and slip off to sleep like a good gir-rl."

She promised that she would, adding with a smile, "You've been awf'ly good to me, Pat."

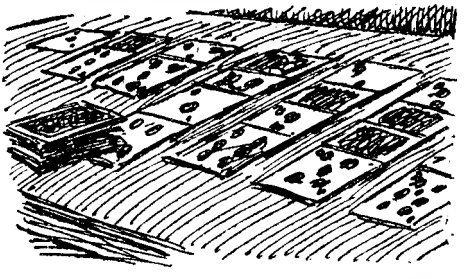
But Ruth did not find it easy to go to sleep. Her mind was still full of the excitements and the terrors of the day. Jeff Gray had the first watch. She could see him moving to and fro to keep warm. No other man had ever so impressed himself upon her as this one. From the dramatic moment when he had swept her behind the sacks in Sanger's store he had been dominant and forceful, a man out of ten thousand. Never would she forget him as he strode into their camp up the creek an hour or two ago. Her heart had jumped with joy, for she knew she was saved. It was not necessary for her to wait until the fight was over to know that. An intense masculinity was emitted from his person. It rippled through his smooth hard muscles. It rode in his bearing. It leaped from his cold gray eyes. There were times when the shock of it passed through Ruth's body in a wave that left her weak. No matter how long she lived or whom she met no other man would ever affect her so. Of that she was profoundly sure.

Chapter XXIX

A FRIENDLY CALL

SHERM HOWARD was alone in the house. He had spent the evening at the Golden Nugget and had come home to sleep, but he knew that was not going to be possible for many hours yet. He sat at a table, a small coal oil lamp at one corner of it, looking down savagely at the solitaire layout in front of him. There was no pleasure for him in the game. While he dealt and played automatically, the under current of his mind was absorbed by the difficulties confronting him.

A heavy gloom lay on his spirits. He was in a jam and knew it. Fifty times he had gone over the facts anxiously looking



for an out, and he had not been able to find one. Until the situation had resolved itself one way or another he could be sure of nothing.

Morg Norris was the chief uncertain quantity. What the man would do Sherm could only guess. He was the dynamite that might blow them all off the map. If the miscreant injured Ruth Chiswick the big man knew he was through as boss of the Tail Holt wild gang. In the cleanup that would follow he would be lucky to sneak out of the country and escape the penitentiary. But if the girl was rescued unhurt—especially if she was saved by one of the posses Sherm had sent out to hunt Norris down—his position would be much less dangerous. There was still the Live Oak fiasco to explain, but he could probably get by on the story he had told Dan Brand. Mexicans came cheap. Compared with Ruth Chiswick they were of slight importance in the minds of the settlers of this country.

Someone of course had carried to Lee Chiswick information of the impending holdup at Live Oak Canyon. Sherm was almost sure Jeff Gray was the man. From

Reynolds he knew that Gray had been present when Kansas blabbed the destination of the party, and the red-headed man had at once disappeared from town and been absent ever since. As soon as convenient the fellow must be rubbed out. Howard had another urgent reason for this. Information had come to him about Gray that greatly disturbed him.

Howard came to an impasse in the game, gathered up the cards, and shuffled them. He started to deal, but stopped with a card poised. The outside door of the house had opened a few inches. Through the crack a pair of eyes gleamed. Very little more of the face could be seen, for the hat was well pulled down and a bandanna handkerchief covered the nose and mouth.

Sherm Howard had time for a moment of fervent regret. How had he happened to forget to bolt the door, with his .44 lying in the cupboard a long five yards away?

The door opened farther and a lithe body slid through the widened crack into the room. The eyes of the self-invited guest did not lift from his host while a brown hand closed the door and pushed home the bolt.

Howard's stomach sagged as if from a weight of ice cold lead. His mouth went dry. The man standing with his back to the door was Morgan Norris.

Norris grinned evilly. "Didn't expect me, did you, Sherm? Figured some of yore boys had drygulched me up in the hills. But I'll bet you are real pleased to see yore old friend."

The fat man pulled himself together. "What you doing here, Morg?" he asked. "Don't you know this whole county is out lookin' for you?"

"Including all Sherm Howard's willing lads. Sure I know it." The desperado limped forward. "But I dropped in because I knew you'd hate for me to pass through without thanking you for sicking the boys on me."

The man was in bad physical condition. A bloodstained handkerchief was tied around his head. Another served as a bandage for his arm. He looked travel worn and haggard. Sweat stains streaked his face. All the jaunty insouciance that had distinguished him, all the neatness of flamboyant and expensive clothes, had long since vanished. His cheeks were sunken, his eyes hollow. He was a sick man, worn down to the edge of ragged nerves.

BUT he was an undaunted one. Never in his wicked ribald lifetime had he seemed more master of the situation. Howard expected that the fellow had come to kill him. Morg must have met one of the boys and learned that Howard had thrown in with his hunters.

"What's all this crazy talk about me sicking the boys on you?" Howard asked. "You ought to know better than that. Fact is, you've played the devil, Morg. I thought you had more sense than to pull the dumb thing you did. This country won't stand for doing harm to women."

"Don't preach at me," Norris snarled out of the corner of his mouth. "Get me food and water to wash my wounds. But first off, I want a drink."

The heart of the big man lifted. "Sure," he said. "Surest think you know."

He heaved himself out of the chair and waddled across to the cupboard. Beside the bottle lay the .44 he had unwarily separated himself from when he reached the house. This he pushed down between his trouser belt and shirt. The bottle and a glass he brought back to the man at the table.

Norris poured a large drink into a tumbler. He held it in his hand and slid a menacing look at his host.

"I saw you get that gun," he said, lifting his upper lip in a jeer. "Fixin' to gun me if you get a chance, you damned double-crosser. Well, you don't get it." Norris raised the glass. "Here's to a short life and a smoky end for traitors, Sherm."

He poured the liquor down at a gulp.

Coldly Howard defended himself. "Your information is not straight, Morg. Where did you hear I had turned against you?"

"I heard it from a ledge back of Coal

Creek," Norris told him harshly. "Yore boys were camped just below. I heard 'em talk. Didn't know who they were at first. I found out you'd sent them out to get me, by crikes."

"Why don't you use your bean to think with, Morg? Of course I sent them after you. After you had gone crazy I had to make a bluff, didn't I? I had to make out we were all hunting you to save our own bacon. Talk about me throwing down on you. What have you done but throw down on every last one of us?"

HOWARD spoke impatiently, irritably. He wanted to talk the young killer into a frame of mind less deadly, and the best way to do this was to put him in the wrong. The older man knew the sullen suspicious nature of Norris, how quickly he could flame to action. The one thing Sherm did not wish was a gun play—unless it was a safe one with him at the right end of the weapon.

"What you mean throw down on you?" the fugitive asked sulkily.

"You know what I mean, Morg. When you took that girl with you to the hills you set this whole district ablaze against us as well as you because we are your friends."

"Lou ran off with her first," Norris said.

"With her own consent. That's different. Where is the girl, Morg? What did you do with her?"

"I didn't do a thing," Norris growled. "Are you aiming to fix me up some food? Or ain't you?"

"Don't push on the reins, Morg. I asked you a question."

Norris gave information, very reluctantly, for what he had to tell hurt his inordinate vanity. "I turned her over to that double-crossing son-of-a-gun who calls himself Jeff Gray," he said.

The opaque eyes of the big man rested on him. "Tell it to me, Morg," he ordered.

"I'll tell it while you make me some supper," Norris told him. "Me, I could eat a government mail sack. Haven't seen grub for nearly two days."

The young desperado helped himself to a second drink, then sat down and pulled off his boots. He was careful not to turn his back to Howard. Sherm began to knock together some food, always with his eye on the other.

Norris told the story of what had occured, edited in such a way as to protect his self-conceit. He said that three men had attacked him at his camp in Wild Horse Basin and that he had fought them until the revolver was shot from his hand. He had made his getaway on foot.

"You didn't walk all the way from Wild Horse," Howard said, after he had broken a fourth egg into a frying pan.

"Most of the way." The outlaw looked down at his swollen feet. High-heeled cowboy boots are not made for walking, and he had been tortured cruelly during the long hours of tramping. "In the night I roped a bronc at Walker's and found a saddle in the stable. Most of the day I lay holed up in the rocks."

"What with yore wounds and all you must have had a hell of a time," Howard suggested.

The young man looked at him, fury in his eyes. "I'm saying so."

"If they shot yore gun from yore hand I reckon you're not armed," Sherm said, very casually.

The killer watched him through slitted lids. "Don't you bank on that, Sherm," he drawled, his words dripping warning.

Howard said, lightly, "I was thinking I'd have to fix you up with a gun if you had lost yore own." What he had been thinking was that if Norris was unarmed he could pump lead into him and take the credit for killing the man.

"I'm armed all right," the bandit sneered. "Don't make any mistake about that. But I may take you up on yore offer. Maybe I can use two guns."

NORRIS ate, ravenously. He drank cup after cup of coffee. More than once he went back to the bottle. At last he pushed his chair back.

"I reckon you know it was Lee Chiswick's crowd attacked us in Live Oak Canyon," he said. "I left in some hurry. Me and Kansas. Did they collect the rest of the boys?"

"Mile High got away, but Sid Holt was killed. Lou they captured."

"Too bad about that, Sherm," the other man jeered. "He'll blab of course and you'll be in this up to yore neck."

The big man looked at him bleakly, but made no answer in words. "Kansas got away with you, didn't he?" was his comment.

A film of wary blankness came over the eyes of the hunted man.

"Kansas made it out of the canyon with me," he said slowly. "A posse jumped us at the old Walsh place and got Kansas. I fought 'em off and lit out with the girl."

"Got Kansas. You mean killed him?"

"He'll never be any deader," Norris answered callously.

"Come clean, Morg. We've got to know just where we're at. Did you do this Chiswick girl any harm in any way?"

The sulky look spread over the face of the kidnapper. "Didn't hurt the li'l fool at all, outside of slapping her white face once when she got sassy."

"What are yore plans?" Howard inquired.

"First off, I aim to dress my wounds and bathe my feet in hot water."

"Sure, Morg," the fat man said with oily smoothness. "Help yoreself to anything I have here. You are welcome to whatever I've got."

Norris leered at him. "I'll bet you feel like I was your prodigal son. A fatted calf wouldn't be near good enough for me."

His host decided not to put the welcome on too thick. Morg Norris was not a fool when his passions were not involved.

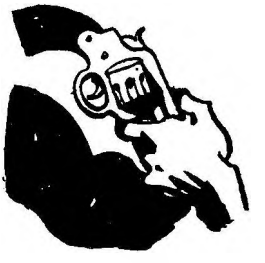
"You can have it straight, Morg, since you ask for it," he retorted brusquely. "You've played yore hand like a damn fool. I was hoping you wouldn't show up here but would slip across the line to Mexico. Well, you're here. There's nothing I can do but give you a lift on yore way. Right now all the passes will be watched. You wouldn't have a dead man's chance of getting through unless you had all the luck in the world. Question is, where do you aim to hole up? They will watch Tail Holt the way a cat does a mouse hole. Even now someone may know you're here."

"Only Sherm Howard, and of course he wouldn't give me away," Norris said derisively.

"Sure nobody saw you come in?"

"Sure. While I think of it, Sherm, I'll take that other gun you promised me." The slitted eyes stabbed into those of the older man.

FOR a barely perceptible instant Howard hesitated. He had a suspicion Morg was not armed. If so, he could be killed now with no risk. The man had become a menace. It would be well to get rid of him. He could use just now the credit that would come to him for rubbing out the desperado. But he could not do it. He found he had not the sheer nerve to draw and pump lead, not with the killer's gaze on him and his hand close to where the butt of a revolver might lie inside his vest. If he should be wrong—if Morg had a gun—it might be possible for him to get his man, but not before a slug or two plowed into his own stomach. It was too big a chance to take.



"Glad to give it to you," Howard said in his cheerful voice of false heartiness. "You'll find it in the tray of the trunk there. It's a good gun too. Throws just a mite high, but you'll make allowance for that."

"You get it for me, Sherm," the visitor urged. "You know just where it is."

Howard got the gun. He handed it to Norris, who broke it and made sure the chambers were loaded.

"Much obliged, Sherm," the outlaw said, mockery in his voice. "I can sure use this. Haven't had a gun in my hand since those skunks jumped me at Wild Horse."

The fat man made the best of it he could. He said, promptly: "I'm not dumb, Morg. Knew all the time you didn't have a cutter. Trouble with you is you're so damned suspicious. Why wouldn't I let you have a gun when you're up against it? You don't think straight."

"You'd bust a trace to help me, wouldn't you, Sherm?" the killer jeered.

"Personally, far as I'm concerned, you can go to hell yore own way, Morg," Howard told him bluntly. "But I stand by my crowd, and you're one of the gang, even if you do wear out our patience. You can't stay here of course. Everybody in town comes and goes to this house, as you know. Where do you aim to hole up till you can slip across the border?"

"I won't worry you about that," Norris said with a cynical grin. "If you are a good Samaritan to me while I'm here that will about let you out for right now."

"I don't care where you hide," the older man replied. "Nothing to me. Go to the L C ranch and stay with the Chiswicks if you've a mind to. Point is, when they crowd me, I'd like to make sure I'm giving them the wrong steer."

"Sure. You'd hate to see them collect me. But don't worry about it. They won't." The outlaw got a basin, poured hot water into it from the kettle, and reduced this to the proper temperature. All the time he watched his host out of the corner of his eyes. "But there's one thing you can do for me, Sherm, since you're so anxious to help. I'm about out of mazuma. I'll take a small loan of you can spare it."

HOWARD took his time to answer. Money was his god. To part with it unless he saw a chance of getting it back with interest was a positive pain to him. He could read Norris like a book. The fellow was sneering at him, but back of this lay a threat. His request was an order.

"Haven't got much here, Morg, but what I have is yours," the big man said. "Ten dollars—or even twenty——"

"Wouldn't be of any use to me," Norris said coolly. "I'll take five hundred."

"Five hundred." Howard stared at him. "You're loading me, Morg. You know I haven't got anything like that in the house."

"You'd better have it. Don't try to fool me, Sherm. I know you."

The narrowed eyes were glittering dangerously. Howard knew he had to make a choice. He must either pay or fight. For a moment he played with the idea of shooting it out. Reluctantly he gave this up. Morg was a dead shot. From a coffee pot in the cupboard he drew out a rol' of bills. He counted five hundred and pushed the money across the table. There was about fifty dollars left.

With his evil grin Norris mentioned that it was more blessed to give than to receive.

"Pay you when someone sends me a million," he added cheerfully.

He busied himself doctoring his wounds and taking care of his feet. Before he left he gave Howard instructions, a purring threat in his voice.

"You haven't seen me, Sherm. You don't know where I am. It wouldn't be healthy for you to get busy rustling a posse to take after me. Understand?"

Coldly Howard answered. "No use trying to help you, Morg. You don't know how to appreciate kind treatment."

"If I got any from you I'd sure keep my eyes skinned till I found out why," the man on the dodge cut back.

He backed to the door and stopped there for a last word of advice.

"I'll stick around a few minutes outside. Don't move from yore chair for half an hour. Just take it easy and see if you can beat the solitaire game."

The door closed behind him.

Howard sat in the chair as he had been advised. He was busy thinking, and his

thoughts all pointed to one conclusion. Norris was too dangerous a man to let live.

CHAPTER XXX

MORG MEETS CLINT DOKE

MORGAN NORRIS closed the door of the Howard house and ran through the garden to a back street. Before moving into the open road he glanced up and down it to make sure nobody was in sight. Swiftly he went up the road until he came to a path crossing the vacant space used by the town for a baseball grounds. This he followed. Behind the plate were two or three adobe houses belonging to Mexicans. He wound around these and came to the rear door of the Golden Nugget.

He did not enter the gambling house, but crept along one of the walls until he could look through a window and see what was going on inside. The sight of that room gave him an acute nostalgia. He had been one of the king pins there for many months. He had ruffled it with the best of them. Fifty times he had cantered into town with some boon companion and strolled in to drink, loaf, or play the wheel. Sick and weary as he was, nothing would have pleased him more than to drop in there.

But he dared not show his face. The Golden Nugget was closed to him forever. When he had run away with Ruth Chiswick he had put himself beyond the pale. If he were to open the door and walk in now a dozen cold hostile faces would stare at him, and at the right moment bullets would crash into his body as they had into that of Wild Jim Pender. Howard had been right. The thing he had done had hurt all the Tail Holt outlaws. If they got the chance they would square themselves by planting him in Boot Hill.

He crept along the wall toward Main Street. From this spot he had fired the shot that had wounded Lee Chiswick only a few weeks ago. Then he had been riding the top wave, a leader among the reckless lawless cowboys of the vicinity. Now he was a fugitive, every man's hand against his.

A poor broomtail stolen in the hills had brought him to town, but he intended to leave on a better mount. That was why he had ventured so close to the heart of the town. There were sure to be horses in front of the Golden Nugget.

A half a dozen of them stood at the hitch rack. His eyes went up and down the street. A few people were in view, two or three of them lounging in front of saloons, one or two others moving briskly toward some destination.

Norris stepped to the hitch rack to choose a mount. To him there came the sound of hoofs. Three men rode round a corner and drew up at the Golden Nugget. One of them was Curly Connor.

Back of a horse Norris crouched, revolver in hand. He guessed that these men had just come back from a fruitless search in the hills for him. They swung stiffly from their saddles as riders do who have not left them for many miles.

"Me, I could use a drink," one of them said wearily.

The speaker was Mile High. He tied the rein with a slip knot and turned toward the Golden Nugget. As he did so his glance stopped abruptly. He was looking into the glittering eyes of someone standing back of a horse.

"Goddlemighty, it's Morg," he broke out.

"Right, first guess," Norris said evenly, not raising his voice. "Don't monkey with yore hardware, any of you, unless you want to go out in smoke."

Mile Hight said bitterly: "You killed Kansas, you double-crossing devil."

"So I did," the bad man jeered. "And I'm still on the shoot, Mile High. Roll right along and get that drink, with yore arms down."

Stepping swiftly to the left for a better view of the man, Curly dragged out his revolver. Two guns blazed, one of them that of Connor.

WITH a ribald yell of triumph Norris vaulted to the saddle. Mile High's .45 came into action, but the horse was

plunging at the feel of the spur. Again Norris fired, his mount still in the air. An instant later he was dashing into the darkness, crouched low in the seat.

"Rout the boys out of the Golden Nugget, Jim," Curly said excitedly. "Get after him immediate. He got me."

"Bad, Curly?" asked Mile High.

"In the shoulder. I'll make the grade all right, but I don't reckon I can ride with you."

The lank puncher picked his hat out of the dust. There were two little holes in the crown. "The son-of-a-gun sure gave me a hair cut. Been one inch lower he would of collected me. Better get inside and have the boys look after you, Curly."

"Yes," agreed the black-headed man. "I'll be all right when I'm fixed up. Get fresh horses, Mile High. That rapscallion don't aim to pick no daisies on the way."

Curly was right. The fugitive had already left the road and turned up a gulch trail leading into the hills. If there had been any room for doubt as to how he stood at Tail Holt there was none left now. His roaring gun had cut down the most popular man in town. He had seen Curly stagger

from the impact of the bullet. As soon as possible he must get out of the country. Until that time he must lie hidden.

Old Man Haskins would take care of him—for a price. That was one of the reasons he had been forced to hold up Sherm Howard. Nobody did anything for nothing, the bandit reflected bitterly. Not when you were down on your luck, with the cards stacked against you. He would have to pay Pete well for protection.

Norris rode steadily till late at night. He was in a vile humor. His swollen feet tortured him. The clout on the head, a souvenir from Jeff Gray, still pained at times. From lack of sleep he was dead tired.

The cabin of the nester was dark when he rode up to it, but a hound dog filled the night with its barking. A man came to the door. He opened it only an inch or two.

"Who is it?" a piping voice demanded.

"Lemme in, Pete. It's Morg Norris."

The hillman hesitated. "I ain't exactly fixed for visitors, Morg. That's a fact sure enough." He lowered his squeaky tones to a whisper. "I ain't alone. I done got someone here."

The hunted man was taken aback. He had counted on Haskins being alone. Few came up to this neck of the woods.

"Who you got here?" Norris asked.

"Why, I don't rightly know his name," Haskins said. "A fellow from Texas."

Morg swung from the saddle and walked close to the other.

"I'm listenin', Pete," he said, and his voice dripped menace. "Is this some guy sent up to get me?"

HASKINS was a big ill-kempt, slovenly man. He was of middle age, large, with a deep barrel chest from which one would have expected the roar of a bull.

"Jumpin' Jehosophat, no!" The high falsetto registered excitement. "Don't start lookin' for trouble, Morg. This is a bird sent up by Sherm Howard. He's on the dodge."

"Oh! Sent up by Sherm Howard. He must be all right then." Norris showed his teeth in an evil grin. "A gent from Texas, but with no name." A sudden shock ran through the outlaw. "Not a guy about thirty, with a crooked nose and a scar on the back of his left hand, medium weight and height, calling himself Jeff Gray maybe."

"Nothing like that. A big rawboned fellow with a scar in his cheek made by a bullet."

"Not red-headed?" Norris demanded, still suspicious.

"Iron-gray."

"Who does he claim he is?"

"Maybe he didn't give me his real name. Seems he left sudden with his horse's belly draggin'. He had trouble."

Someone inside the cabin joined the talk. "Who is it, Pete?"

"A friend, Clint. Wants to stay with me a spell. He got into a kinda jam. Name is Norris."

"The fellow they're after?"

"Yes."

"What's all the powwow about? Why don't you bring him in?"

"Go in and light a lamp, Pete," ordered Norris in a low voice. "Put it close to yore friend. Then I'll come in."

Haskins lit a lamp and set it on a table. The light shone on a man sitting up in bed. His hair was tousled, his face unshaven. The chest of the man, seen through the opened shirt, was matted like a mane tangled with cockleburrs. He held his right hand beneath the blanket. The scarred cheek, in conjunction with the shifty rat-like eyes, gave him a sinister appearance.

Norris came into the room, moving with the padded pantherlike stride that marked him. His gaze locked with that of the stranger. That there was a weapon in the hand beneath the blanket he did not need to be told.

"Who are you?" he demanded in a snarl.

"He's visiting me, not you, Morg," mentioned Haskins mildly.

"Keep outa this, Pete," advised the Tail Holt bandit out of the corner of his mouth. "I'm asking a question, and I aim to get an answer."

"My turn to ask one now," the man in bed said, a hard rasp in his voice. "Who do you think you are to talk thataway to me?"

"I'm Morgan Norris." The owner of the name waved a hand in the direction of Haskins, without lifting his eyes from the other. "He told you who I am, but he didn't tell me who you are. Come clean, fellow. I'm in a tight and I don't aim to throw in with anyone I don't know. These hills are full of guys that are poison to me."

"Morg is all right, Clint," Haskins put in. "Might as well tell him who you are."

"My name is Doke—Clint Doke."

Norris stared at the man. "How many Clint Dokes are there?" he asked. "Another bird has been claimin' that name around here."

"So Howard tells me," the hairy man nodded. "He's a damn liar. Jeff Gray is his name. He's a United States marshal."

Chapter XXXI

No Bigger than You are Behind a Gun

MORG NORRIS stared at the man in bed. His mind was struggling to adjust itself to the implications of this information.

"He showed us a poster with his picture on it offering a reward for his arrest," Norris said. "Beneath the picture was the name Clint Doke. It was sure enough the spittin' image of this Jeff Gray."

"I wouldn't know about that," answered the man who claimed to be Doke. "I'll describe Gray to you. Red-headed—crooked nose—scar on the back of his hand—medium size."

"That's the fellow," Norris said with a bitter oath. "So he's a spy. I knew he was wrong all the time, but Sherm wouldn't listen to me. That big tub always knows more than anybody else."

"Gray is dangerous. Don't make any mistake about that."

The younger man admitted this. "But how come he to have that poster?" he asked, still suspicious. "What's the idea in his claiming to be you—if you are Doke?"

The hairy man scratched his tousled head to help him to think. "Search me. Onless he figured you-all would have heard of me account of the Texas & Southern holdup and he was using my name for a stand-in."

"That's the way I figure it," Haskins said. "Easy enough for him to get a poster

printed with his picture on it claiming to be Clint here. Clint is a Wyoming man. Leastways he has spent most of the past fifteen years here. Not likely he would be known up in this neck of the woods."

"Kinda funny at that," Norris insisted grudgingly. He did not doubt that Gray was a United States officer posing under another identity, but it was not in his nature to surrender a suspicion gracefully. "He comes up here, then you come. Whyfor? You aren't hunting U. S. marshals, are you? And Gray—what is he doing here?"

"I came because Texas was getting too hot for me," Doke explained. "Too many rangers on my tail. You got a rep here for making gents of that kind unwelcome. So I drifted this way and fixed it with Howard to let me hole up in these hills while I'm on the dodge."

"Is it yore idea that Gray came up here lookin' for you?"

Doke shook his head. "I'll be dad gummed if I know. But he's got me scared. That fellow is one hell-a-miler. He sleeps on the trail till he gets his man."

Norris drew a bottle from his hip pocket and passed it round. All three of them took a pull at it.

"My feet hurt like all get out, Pete," the most recently arrived fugitive said, embelishing his resentment of the fact with an oath. "I was afoot for twenty miles. How about lookin' after my bronc for me?"

Haskins departed to take care of the animal.

NORRIS sank into a chair and drew off his boots. He looked sourly at his aching feet.

"So you're scared of this son-of-a-gun, Gray," he jeered.

"Surest thing you know," admitted the train robber. "Scared he'll drag me back to Texas where old man trouble is sittin' waiting for me."

"He's no bigger than you are behind a gun, is he?"

"Not a mite. I'd as lief stand up and swap bullets with him if it came to a showdown. But there's something about him. Maybe it's just luck. Seems like he always drags in the guy he starts after."

"He went after me, but he didn't get me," Norris boasted.

"Story I've heard is that he set you afoot without a gun," Doke told him maliciously.

The younger man ripped out another angry oath. "Like you just said, he had luck. Come outa the bushes at me and whanged away before I had a chance. All I ask with him is an even break. I'm gonna get it too. Me, I'm tired of being hunted. I aim to turn hunter. This Gray is poison to you, the same as he is to me. What say we throw in together and collect him—hang his hide up to dry?"

Doke slanted a side look at him and grinned. "They ought to call you Sudden Morg. Five minutes ago you hadn't made up yore mind whether to cut lose at me with yore hogleg or not. Now you're talking up a partnership. May be good medicine, but I'd have to sleep on it first. We don't hardly know each other."

"Sudden Morgue is good," Norris said, and broke into jangled laughter. "I've sent plenty of guys who got in my way to morgues here and there. I'm in this part of the country for only a short visit longer, but before I leave I aim to meet Mr. Jeff Gray and stop his clock."

"We'll talk about this again," the man from Texas said. "Doesn't have to be settled tonight. With yore feet the way they are you're in no shape to travel for three-four days yet. If we can find out where this fellow is roosting and if he hasn't got too many friends around him I might take chips in yore game."

Haskins came into the cabin and they dropped the subject for the time. The newcomer bathed his feet in cold water and washed his wounds, after which he rolled up in a blanket on the floor and fell into troubled sleep.

(To be Concluded in the Next SHORT STORIES*)*

"Seems Like the Old War Eagle Mine Is 'Bout Due to Boom Again"

THE SUBSTITUTE PARTNERS

By REGINALD C. BARKER

Author of "Blizzard," "Chunky," etc.

WHILE redheaded Danny Raftery watched the venison steaks sizzling in a frying-pan, and kept an eye on the coffee-pot lest it boil over, he was acutely aware that Big Jake Nichols was watching every movement he made, much as a treacherous bull will watch a man afoot, hoping in unprovoked attack to catch him off his guard.

Danny, less than five feet-four in height, was of stocky build, but he appeared a pigmy beside his guest, who towered to a height of six feet five inches, boasted a forty-eight inch chest, and tipped the scales at two hundred and eighty pounds. Big Jake had been

waiting at Danny's cabin on Roaring River, in the Saw Tooth Mountains of Idaho, when Danny had returned from his day's work on his trap lines. Danny was not pleased, but he tried hard to forget his grudge against the giant, and offered him the hospitality accorded every visitor to a mountain cabin.

Big Jake, more crafty than clever, chose not to disclose the purpose of his call until the last steak had been consumed, the dishes washed, and the two men were smoking beside the glowing stove.

"Seems like you ain't got a mite of curiosity in you, Danny," he rumbled, "else you'd want to know why I came to see you."

"Your business ain't mine, Jake," said Danny. "But there's nothing to stop you spittin' out whatever's on your mind."

Big Jake's piggish little eyes flickered. He re-filled and lit his pipe, glowered at the smaller man through a veil of smoke.

"Don't know as I blame you for bein' sore at me," he said. "Got thinkin' about it later. Reck'n I made a mistake when I turned you down."

Danny ruffled his red hair with his fingers, gave Big Jake the benefit of a long, slow stare, seemed to be questioning the giant's sincerity.

"Oh, yeah!" said Danny. "Don't tell me you hiked twenty miles to tell me that."

"Not exactly, Danny." A placating note was in Big Jake's voice. "Fact is, I'm up against it. Got to have help to put that minin' contract through on time."

"Oh, that so?" said Danny. "What happened to your partner? Think I've forgotten that I helped you get that tunnel contract from Johnson & Carnes? Did you let me in on it, Jake? I'll say not! You called me a 'sawed-off little runt' that you didn't want around. And you gave Jed Gasper an interest in your contract. What did he do, run out on you?"

"Wors'n that," growled Big Jake. "If Jed had tried to run out on me, I'd have man-handled him into comin' back. No sirree, Jed used some of my money that I gave him to buy supplies to go on a toot with. Got into a quarrel down at War Eagle, and shot a man. Jed Gasper is spendin' six months in jail."

"So what?" inquired Danny.

"It leaves me alone with another hundred feet of tunnel to complete, within the next sixty days," explained Big Jake. "If the job ain't done on time I lose the price of the contract. And I had to put up a three hundred dollar bond that I'd finish the contract on time."

"Then it's just too bad for you," said Danny. He rose, thrust a stick of dry pine into the stove, spoke with his back turned.

"Maybe you forget that you ordered me away from the job, Jake, when I called to see how you was gettin' along. But if you've forgot it, I ain't."

"I tried to get another man," said Big Jake, "but none of the old timers would work with me. I ain't exactly popular in War Eagle. Help me out and I'll split even with you, Danny. That means a thousand bucks for sixty days work."

"How about payin' Jed Gasper for the work he has already done?" suggested Danny.

"To hell with him," snorted the giant. "Jed got throwed into jail, didn't he? That lets him out far as I'm concerned. I'll beat hell out of him first time I lay my hands on him."

"You would!" exclaimed Danny. "And you'd gyp me again if you got the chance."

BIG JAKE'S thick fingers curled like the talons of a bird of prey as he stared at Danny. He took his time about answering.

"By agreement with Johnson & Carnes," he said at last, "I'm to be paid in cash on the day the contract is finished. You'd get your money all right."

"If I tackle the job, you can bet your life I'll get my money," said Danny, "but lots of things could happen to keep us from finishing the job on time. The way it is, I'm pretty sure of makin' a few dollars at the trapping."

Big Jake looked at the red-haired little man with eyes that were beginning to

smoulder with anger. The hand resting on his knee slowly clenched into a massive fist.

"Meanin'," he said, "that you're turnin' me down."

Danny's eyes were like blue ice beneath his red-thatched brows, as he challenged the big man's lowering stare.

"Only a damn' fool," said Danny, "lets himself be gypped twice by the same man."

Big Jake heaved himself to his full height, and towered over the seated trapper.

"That your last word?" he asked.

"I'll think it over," temporized Danny. "I'll either show up at the mine day after to-morrow about sunset, or I won't."

Big Jake turned toward the door, spoke over his shoulder.

"Then I guess I'll be getting back to the mine."

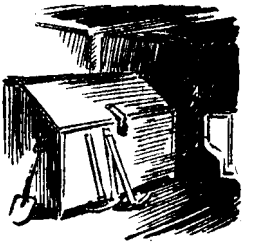
"Just as well stay to-night," Danny said with forced cordiality, "I got an extra bunk and some blankets."

"I don't stay where I ain't wanted," said Big Jake sullenly, adding as an afterthought, "Besides, you'll do your thinkin' better if I don't stick around."

Danny's thinking kept him sitting beside the stove until the last stick in the woodpile had been reduced to ashes, and the cabin grew chill in the winter night. Two months had proved to Danny that that section of Roaring River was about trapped out, just as the old timers of War Eagle had warned him. Only a few mink pelts hung from the rafters of the cabin, and the New Year was already a month old. In two more months the trapping season would be over, and Danny's hope of marrying in the spring would be as far away as ever.

Of course, dark-haired little Jeanne Conley would wait, just as she had waited for Danny ever since they two had graduated together from the little school in the old mining camp at the base of War Eagle mountain. Always Jeanne had believed that Danny would make his stake in the mountains they both loved. But somehow Danny's stake had failed to materialize, and the years had slipped away, as years have a way of doing, until Danny was nearly twenty-five and Jeanne was twenty-three.

Every single man in War Eagle had, at some time or the other, laid siege to the heart of the postmaster's pretty daughter. But she had eyes only for Danny, and one after another the other boys had drifted away from the old mining camp until only Jed Gasper, Big Jake Nichols and Danny were left. As a suitor, Jed Gasper was impossible, having developed into a rather shiftless sort



of fellow, with no particular aim in life. And Big Jake, the camp bully, was not the type to appeal to a girl like Jeanne. The old timers of War Eagle had a way of referring to her as "the darlin' of the camp."

AS HE sat by the cold stove, Danny's thoughts raced backward to the day when he had heard that Johnson & Carnes, who had recently taken over the property, were going to have some development work done in the abondoned War Eagle Mine. Thirty years previously the mine had shut down when a rich vein of gold-bearing ore had been cut off by a geological fault in the formation of the mountain. In the event that the prospecting should prove successful, it meant that the mine would re-open in the spring. There would be work, steady work for Danny—and there would be Jeanne.

But when Danny had applied for the contract, Silas Carnes, beefy of build, flaccid of face, and heavy jowled, had looked Danny over with disapproving eyes.

"Sorry, Raftery," the mining man had said, with the trace of a sneer in his heavy voice, "It'll take a man like Big Jake Nichols to handle our contract. You ain't big enough for the job."

Danny had told Jeanne all about it, and she had put her hands on his shoulders and smiled into his eyes.

"Don't you mind, Danny-boy," the girl had said. "It takes more than inches to make a man. Go tell Big Jake that he stands a chance of getting the contract. If he does get it, he will surely give you a job."

But Big Jake had turned Danny down, not from any particular dislike for him personally, but, though only Big Jake knew this, as a way of getting even with Jeanne, who had consistently refused to have anything at all to do with him.

And now Danny's pride battled with his common sense, which urged him to help Big Jake out. With a thousand dollars, Danny could marry Jeanne in the spring, and they could make a payment on the little mountain ranch at the mouth of Roaring River, which old Dad Wilkie had had up for sale so long.

That was why Danny Raftery showed up at the old War Eagle mine, where he found that Big Jake had taken up living quarters in the cook shack.

"Reckoned you'd change your mind after thinkin' my offer over," said Big Jake. "What did you do with them mink pelts? Give 'em to your girl?"

Danny flushed guiltily, as he tossed his roll of blankets into the upper one of two bunks, once occupied by a cook and his helper.

"I sprung all my traps before I left Roaring River," he said, "and hung the grub out of reach of pack rats. Then I went to War Eagle and left word with the storekeeper to send somebody after my outfit. Got anything to eat around here?"

"Help yourself." Big Jake, sprawled in the lower bunk with a blackened corn-cob pipe sticking out of his unshaven jowl, made no attempt to rise. "I've et myself, and I'm sorta tired."

Danny glanced around the shack, and Big Jake caught the look of disgust which flitted across the little man's freckled face. The sink was piled with dirty dishes enough for a dozen men; the floor was littered with potato peelings and empty bottles and tin cans. A half empty bottle of whiskey and a dirty tumbler stood on a chair within reach of Big Jake's hand.

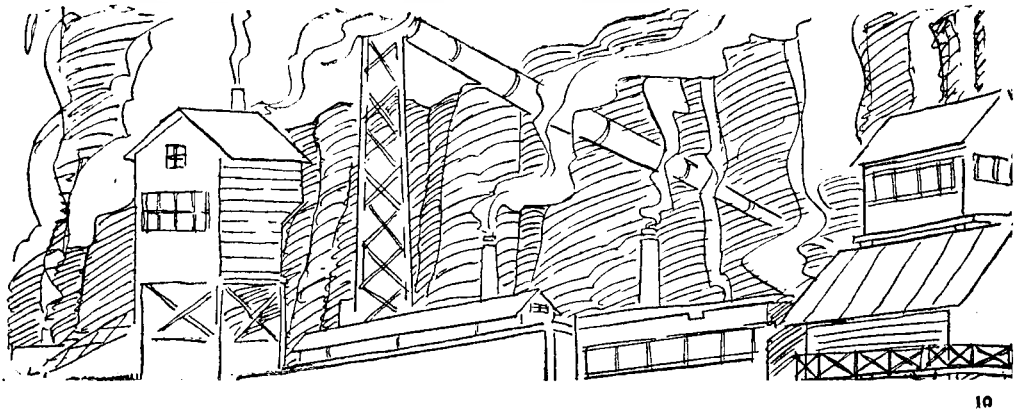
Danny made a supper off bacon, canned corn, cold biscuits and coffee. Then he rolled up his sleeves and began to clean up the shack. Big Jake watched Danny with a sardonic grin, poured himself half a tumbler of whiskey, drained it at a gulp.

"Ambitious little devil, ain't you?" he rumbled. "Pussonally, I leave that kind of work to the wimmin."

"Maybe that's why you ain't got a wife," said Danny. "No need for a man to live like a hog, just 'cause he lives alone."

Big Jake blinked with astonishment. That a man little more than half his size should compare him with a hog was not to be tolerated. With unbelievable agility for so huge a man, he was out of the bunk, and towering over Danny with massive fists balled.

"Why, you sawed-off little runt," rum-



bled Big Jake, "if I ever take a hold of you——"

"You'd be minus a partner," said Danny tersely. "I know I don't stand no chance against you, Jake, but skip it. Fighting ain't going to get us anywhere."

"I could scrag you like a chicken," said the giant. He stood glowering, then sullenly he turned away and took another drink. He was snoring when Danny finished cleaning up, and left the shack.

Danny could not remember a time when the War Eagle mine had been worked, but from boyhood he had heard about it. He had heard the story of the five hundred pound chunk of jewelry quartz which had been struck when the shaft was sunk, and raised top-side in one mass.

In the office of the *WEEKLY AVALANCHE*, old Charlie Hackney, the editor, had let Danny read in a thirty-year-old copy of the newspaper an account of how the great chunk of gold-streaked quartz had later been exhibited at a World Fair. Boy-like, for weeks afterward, Danny had explored the old dumps and buildings on War Eagle mountain, hoping that he might find just such another chunk of gold. All he had found had been a few small specimens of high-grade ore. Out of them, with pestle and mortar, Danny had retrieved a little gold. Month by month and year after year he had added to his little store. And one day, when Danny was twenty, he had exchanged his gold with an itinerant Syrian pedlar for a tiny diamond ring.

DANNY became suddenly aware of the beauty of the night. Covered with snow, the abandoned mine buildings glittered beneath a full moon. Towering above the water-filled shaft, the snow-covered gallows frame reflected the moonlight in a million iridescent gleams. The weird creaking of a rusty head block at the top of the gallows frame sounded uncanny in the silence, and Danny thought of the jinx which, so insisted the old timers, haunted the abandoned workings of the War Eagle mine.

Danny wandered into the ruin of the quartz mill which reared its snow-covered roof below the shaft house. The moonlight, drifting through the shattered windows, revealed tall steel stamps standing like ten frost-covered ghosts in a row, waiting, as they had waited for thirty years, for the War Eagle mine to boom again.

Leaving the mill by way of the rear, Danny looked down at the old camp of War Eagle, five miles away as the crow flies, at the base of War Eagle mountain. Less than a hundred souls inhabited the mining camp which once had sheltered ten thousand. The brick court house, rising above the low log cabins of the sleeping camp, was the largest building in town. At the rear of the court house were the sheriff's quarters, and the tiny concrete jail, where Jed Gasper lay snoring in his cell.

Danny's blue eyes sought out the Post Office, where Jeanne Conley dwelt with her crippled father. A light was shining through the window of Jeanne's room; the light which the girl had told Danny to watch for each evening after his work was done. It was a symbol of her love and faith, cheering Danny on toward success. The faint, far-off twinkle of that distant light was reflected in Danny's heart as slowly he returned to the shack where Big Jake Nichols lay muttering in his sleep.

Next morning, Big Jake and Danny resumed work on the contract. Danny's job consisted of running a steel ore-car loaded with muck and shattered timbers out of the dripping-wet tunnel onto the dump. Between times, he helped Big Jake set in place the new timbers made necessary by the dangerous state of the soggy ground.

Grouchy with a drunken hang-over, Big Jake made things as unpleasant as possible for Danny, sneering at him, and cursing him continually for a "sawed-off little runt."

THINGS arrived at a climax toward the end of the shift, when a spreading rail caused the loaded car to run off the track, and hurtle over the edge of the dump into the muck and snow twenty feet below.

What Big Jake called Danny won't bear printing, but Danny took it with a grin. He had made up his mind to stand the giant's bullying until the contract was finished.

"Aw, quit your beefin'," said Danny. "All we got to do is to rig a block and tackle. If I was half as big as you I'd pack the damn' car up onto the dump."

"One of these days I'll lay hands on that scrawny throat of yours," roared the angry giant. "I ought to have know'd you was nothing but a jinx!" Plunging down the face of the dump, Big Jake grabbed the six hundred pound steel car. With a single heave he lifted it onto its wheels. It was a magnificent exhibition of strength, but Danny's eyes were troubled as he thought of the giant's threat. Danny had no illusions as to what would happen to him if Jake ever undertook to manhandle him. He would be less than a rag doll in the giant's powerful hands.

That night Big Jake drank heavily, and next day he was in a worse frame of mind than ever; but he knew his business, and in spite of his continual drinking the work progressed fast. By the end of a month they had finished the re-timbering, and were working in hard rock, drilling it, and each evening before they left the tunnel, setting off a blast of dynamite. One evening, after the fuses had been lit in the hard rock face of the tunnel, Big Jake was so jubilant that he forgot to be disagreeable.

"Only fifty feet more to go, and twenty-five days to do it in," he bragged. "There ain't nothing can stop me now."

Quick to resent the "me" in Big Jake's speech, Danny shot back a swift retort.

"Better knock on wood when you say that. There's always the jinx of the War Eagle mine."

For Danny, bred and born in the mountains, still retained the mountaineer's belief in jinxes, windigos and such-like things.

Big Jake's angry reply was lost in the BOOM, BOOM, BOOM; BOOM, BOOM, BOOM! of the dynamite exploding in the face of the tunnel.

DANNY was the first to arrive at work next morning, and his shout of dismay brought Big Jake running up at a lumbering trot.

A stream of whitish mud more than two feet in depth, and as wide as the tunnel itself, was creeping sluggishly across the dump, like some pale escaping reptile of the underground!

Big Jake forgot to swear, as with dropped jaw he eyed the sluggishly flowing stream. When at last he found his voice, he spoke in an awed whisper.

"The jinx has got us; the jinx of the War Eagle mine! I ought to have guessed by the wetness of the ground what we were up against, and had better sense than to have tackled the job. The last blast freed the underground stream that years ago flooded the shaft and caused it to fill. We're licked to a frazzle. 'Tain't possible for any two men to finish the job on time."

"Licked!" echoed Danny, and lifted a booted foot with sucking sound out of the creeping mud. "What do you mean by licked, Jake? The job has got to go through."

"Go through hell!" snorted the giant. "I've worked at minin' long enough to know that we can't do it. May as well quit first as last."

Danny's freckles stood out like spots of rust against cheeks drained suddenly of blood. He thought of Jeanne, and of the light she kept burning for him every night; of her faith and loyalty through the years. And in his anger and despair, Danny forgot the disparity in size and strength between himself and Big Jake. He saw the giant only as two hundred and eighty pounds of bone and muscle that was rotten yellow at its core.

"You dirty yellow quitter!" Danny spoke through clenched teeth. "We've got to put the job through. I, for one, can't afford to quit."

"Then put it through," said Big Jake sullenly. "Trouble with you is that you don't know when you're licked."

Danny grabbed at the big man's sleeve as he was turning away.

"Listen, Jake," he said, "at least we ought to go take a look-see. Maybe things ain't as bad as they look."

"To hell with you!" Big Jake jerked his arm away, swung around with doubled fist. "You've been askin' for it a long time," he snarled, and smashed Danny on the jaw.

Lifted clean off his feet by the blow, Danny pitched backward. His head struck an old mining timber left lying on the dump. He rolled over and lay still.

PAIN, throbbing in his head like the beat of a drum, roused Danny to consciousness. He sat up, gingerly felt of his jaw, and discovered with the tip of an exploring tongue that two teeth were missing. Once on his feet, Danny found himself the axis of a swiftly revolving pinwheel, with buildings, snow and mountain spinning in a fantastic dance. Slowly Danny's brain cleared and the world became stationary.

Blue eyes gleaming with purpose, Danny returned to the mouth of the tunnel. The mud stream had diminished a little in volume as the underground reservoir emptied. It could only be a matter of hours before the flow ceased.

Danny lit his carbide lamp, splashed through the mud until he reached the scene of the blast; then, as he lifted his lamp high, he whistled in astonishment. Where, the evening before there had been an apparently solid wall of rock, now there was only a black void.

Danny glanced up at the roof, but it was lost in the darkness of what seemed to be a cavern in the mountain. Taking a chance of being hit on the head by falling rock, Danny plugged onward. The cavern proved to be about twenty feet across. At its farther side it narrowed to a natural fissure, evidently once the bed of an underground stream. This fissure narrowed fast, and soon ended against a wall of rock which stopped Danny's further progress.

For several moments he stood examining the formation with the aid of his lamp; then he flashed the beam over the ground at his feet. Stooping, Danny picked up several pieces of rock, looked at them closely, then dropped a piece in his pocket. The rest he threw away.

Slowly, head bent in thought, he made his way back to the shack, with the belief that if he told Big Jake the conditions, the

giant would return to help him finish the contract. Disappointed at finding Big Jake gone, Danny changed from his digging clothes into clean clothes, and started for War Eagle.

"'Tain't like Big Jake to lay down so easily," Danny told a group of old timers in Doc Moxley's general store. "Trouble with Jake is that he likes his liquor too well. His nervous system is all shot."

"You said a mouthful, Danny," agreed old Jeff Carmody, an ancient man with a toothless grin. "But for all o' that, Big Jake knows his business. If he said the job can't be finished on time, there ain't no use in any of the rest of us tacklin' it."

The storekeeper, leaning across the counter, nodded assent.

"Last I seen of Big Jake," he said, "he was loaded down with hooch and grub, and headed out of town by way of the Roarin' River trail. Cussed you out for a no 'count little runt before he left; said if you knowed what was good for you you'd stay away from him."

Danny felt gingerly of his aching jaw.

"I know when I'm well off," he said grimly. "I'm through with Big Jake."

He left the store, crossed the street to the Post Office, went to the rear door, and knocked.

Jeanne uttered a cry of dismay as she noticed his swollen jaw, but Danny dismissed her questions with a lop-sided grin.

"Accident," he said briefly. "Everything has gone haywire at the mine. Big Jake has quit me."

Jeanne led the way into the kitchen, forgot the doughnuts frying on the stove. Little, and dark of hair, she was wearing a blue apron; her arms were bare, and there was a dab of flour on her nose.

"Quit, Danny?" The girl's dark curls became streaked with white as she brushed them back with a floury hand. Consternation was in the brown eyes she turned on Danny. "Why, I thought—I had so hoped ——"

Danny threw an arm around her shoulders, pressed her to him possessively, forced himself to grin.

"Keep right on hopin', honey," he said. "We ain't licked yet."

"But, Danny——"

Danny helped himself to a hot doughnut, dropped into a chair, nodded toward the smoking stove.

"Better 'tend to your doughnuts before they burn up on you," he said. "I've got an idea that may work out. Now hold your horses and listen."

Jeanne's eyes grew wide as Danny outlined a plan by which he hoped to be able to finish the contract on time.

"But do you think the sheriff will do it?" the girl asked, with all the doubts of a frightened woman in her voice. "It might be against the law."

"Might be," agreed Danny, "but I reck'n the sheriff will help me out when I tell him what I just told you. Everybody in camp knows what it would mean if the War Eagle mine should boom again.

He rose, caught the girl to him in quick embrace, held her close a moment; then he was gone.

SHERIFF BILL CUSTER, big-bodied, gray-mustached and fifty, glanced up from his desk as Danny entered his office.

"Well," boomed the sheriff, "if it ain't little Danny Raftery himself. What happened to your face, Danny?"

"Had a run-in with Big Jake Nichols," replied Danny. "Got socked on the jaw."

"That so?" said the sheriff. "Must have happened in the cook shack, didn't it?"

"Huh?" Danny stared. "What's the idea, Sheriff?"

"All the evidence p'ints that way," said the sheriff with a bovine grin. "Else why is there flour on the end of your nose?"

Danny's face turned the color of his red hair. He cocked a leg over the corner of the desk. Thumbs stuck in the armholes of his vest, the sheriff listened until Danny got through talking.

"So you think you can finish the job on time if I parole Jed Gasper," said the sheriff thoughtfully. "Irreg'lar proceedin' anyway you look at it. Might get me in bad."

"Do you want the War Eagle mine to boom again or don't you?" asked Danny.

"Who don't?" said the sheriff, "but there's Jed Gasper to think about. He's scared stiff of Big Jake. Besides, 'tain't you that's got the contract with Johnson & Carnes."

"Square it with 'em over long distance telephone," begged Danny. "You don't need to tell 'em it's me who wants the job. Just say that Big Jake quit, and that you can get a couple of other men to finish the job."

Sheriff Bill Custer frowned, rose to his feet, strode worriedly back and forth across the office. Presently he paused at the window and stood looking down the snow-covered street.

Jeanne Conley was standing in front of the Post Office. Her apron was blowing around her, and she was shading her eyes from the sun glare with one hand, as she gazed toward the sheriff's office.

"Okay, Danny," said the sheriff at last. "Let's go talk to Jed Gasper."

There was no trouble with Johnson & Carnes, who after consigning Big Jake to a hotter region than War Eagle moun-

tain, intimated that they didn't care a tinker's damn who finished the job.

"One of us will be along with the money on the day it is due," promised Silas Carnes, "but we'll expect to find the job done."

Jed Gasper, already asleep in his cell in the jail, was not so easy to win over. A tall, powerful, lantern-jawed fellow in his early thirties, he saw no point in exchanging his warm winter quarters for a mucky wet tunnel. Besides, as he pointed out, he was in mortal fear of Big Jake.

"If that big devil heard I'd helped Danny put the job through, he'd sure raise hell," said Jed Gasper. "Might even kill us both. I wouldn't put it beyond him."

"In which case," said the sheriff grimly, "there'd shore be a hangin' in camp. You boys put that contract through. I'll let the word go around that Big Jake is to stay away from the mine."

"All right, Sheriff," said Jed Gasper at last, "I'll help finish the job; but get this straight, I ain't doin' it to oblige either you, nor the citizens of War Eagle. I'm thinkin' of Danny and Jeanne. And if you happen across Big Jake Nichols, you can tell him from me that I'm packin' a gun along."

Once at the mine, Jed Gasper became another man. With his system built up by weeks of plain food and no liquor, he worked cheerfully beside Danny as they cleared away the mud and debris which choked the tunnel. But watching Jed Gasper, Danny knew that his partner was always in fear that Big Jake Nichols would come back.

The underground reservoir had emptied itself, and the water had become a mere trickle. In two weeks the tunnel had been cleared up to the scene of the last blast. And so far there had been no sign of Big Jake.

After that, it was only a matter of bolstering up weak places in the roof, and placing a charge of dynamite here and there to heighten and widen the natural fissure in the mountain. The contract was completed three days before the date due. After that there was nothing to do but await the arrival of the money.

ONE evening after supper Danny left Jed Gasper at the shack and walked to War Eagle. There, through the sheriff, he telephoned Johnson & Carnes that the job was done. The mining men expressed surprise and satisfaction, promising that on the morrow's stage one of them would be at the mine with the money.

"It is all due to you, Sheriff," said Danny gratefully. "If you hadn't paroled Jed Gasper, I couldn't have put the job through."

"Big Jake was in town to-day," said the sheriff. "Some of the boys told him that you and Jed Gasper had finished the job. Sort of took him back, I guess; but he took the news quiet enough. Sold a few furs down at the store, then loaded up with hooch and started back to your cabin on Roaring River."

Danny was in exuberant spirits when he called on Jeanne a little later. Swinging the girl off her feet he danced around the room with her until he was out of breath. Then he took a seat beside her on the lounge.

"The job is done, honey, and we get our pay to-morrow," he told her, after which they talked of matters which concerned themselves alone.

It was after midnight when Danny reached the shack on War Eagle Mountain. As he pushed open the door, he thought he heard a sound. The next instant he was hurled aside, and he heard the sound of running feet.

Gasping for breath, Danny entered the shack, struck a match and lit the lamp. Then his heart missed a beat from sheer horror.

Jed Gasper lay on the floor with his head twisted to one side and his blackened tongue protruding from his lips. It did not need the black finger marks on Jed's throat to tell Danny that he had been strangled.

At first Danny thought him dead, but his heart was still feebly beating. It was an hour before he regained consciousness; it was two hours before he was able to speak in a husky whisper.

"Big Jake jumped me while I was asleep," he told Danny. "Never had a chance to reach for my gun."

Danny was for notifying the sheriff immediately, but with his nerve shattered by his ghastly experience, Jed Gasper refused either to accompany Danny, or to be left alone.

"Like as not that big devil is laying for us," said Jed, "I ain't going to stir outside to-night."

And all night long he sat wakeful, with his revolver resting on his knee.

Morning came at last, whereupon Danny tried to induce Jed to accompany him to War Eagle; but the fear of Big Jake was in the man's shaken soul. He refused to leave the mountain.

"I'm going to stay at the mine until I know Big Jake is safe in jail," Jed Gasper said. "If you hadn't arrived when you did, Danny, he would have killed me. I ain't going to give him another chance. What's more, if he shows up here while you're gone, I'll fill him full of lead."

WITH a trapper's instinct Danny looked for tracks before he left the mountain. Spring had come early that year, and though it was only the latter end of March and there was still a white carpet on the higher hills, the snow was gone from around the mine. In the soggy ground in front of the shack Danny found Big Jake's tracks. He recognized them at once, for the giant was the only man in the region who wore a number fourteen shoe.

Danny's blue eyes were grim as he followed the tracks of Big Jake down the mountain toward War Eagle, but a mile from the mine the tracks turned aside up the mountain. It looked as if Big Jake had decided to return to the cabin on Roaring River.

A glance at the sun told Danny that the auto stage had arrived at War Eagle an hour ago, and he suddenly remembered that it was the day upon which Johnson & Carnes had promised to arrive with the money in payment of the contract.

Danny had told Jeanne that he would come at once to her with his share of the money, so, figuring that a few hours more or less wouldn't matter in the apprehension of Big Jake, he decided to meet the mining man, return to the mine with him and get his money.

The fact that he would have to climb the mountain again worried Danny not a bit. But he was too worked up to stay in one place and await the mining man, and so he kept on until he reached a point in the trail where it curved around a mass of jumbled boulders. Then suddenly the silence was broken by the scream of a man in mortal terror.

Danny stopped as if shot, then broke into a run. As he rounded the curve he almost fell over Big Jake. The giant was kneeling on the chest of Silas Carnes who lay flat on his back across the trail. Big Jake's

powerful fingers were at the mining man's throat. He was fast being choked to death.

At Danny's shout, Big Jake released his victim, and rose to his feet. His eyes, drink-inflamed and vicious as those of an enraged bear rested on a heavy club Danny had snatched off the ground. Too well he knew that he would stand no chance unarmed in a battle with the maddened giant.

"Keep away," warned Danny quietly, "or I'll break your thick head."

"Arrgh!" A snarl broke from Big Jake's throat. "Drop that club before I take it away from you. I ain't got no quarrel with you, but you ain't goin' to gyp me out of my money."

Silas Carnes raised himself upon one elbow, began to gabble, pop-eyed from his choking and the fear that possessed his soul.

"He tried to rob me! Shoot him, before he murders us both."

"Shut up," said Danny shortly, "I'll handle him."

"Like hell you will," roared Big Jake, and lowering his head, he charged, huge arms curving away from his body, fingers curled for a wrestler's grip.

Danny waited until the enraged giant was almost on him, then quick as a cat on his feet, he side-stepped. The club in his right hand rose, then fell with a thud behind Big Jake's left ear. For a moment he stood swaying, then like a lightning-stricken pine, he slowly toppled to his fall.

"Gimme your belt," said Danny, to the amazed mining man. "We'll have to tie him up."

WHEN Big Jake's wrists had been tied behind his back, and his ankles bound, Danny pointed down the mountain.

"Go get the sheriff," he ordered. "I'll stick around until you get back."

"Lucky for me that you came along," said Silas Carnes. "I was on my way to the War Eagle mine to pay off a couple of fellows when this brute stepped from behind a rock and demanded my money. Claimed that it was his by rights."

"Some of it is," said Danny. "But the rest of it belongs to the men who finished the job, which was Jed Gasper and me."

"You!" exclaimed Silas Carnes.

"The sheriff was saving the news as a sort of surprise for you," said Danny. "But it's a fact, just the same."

"It don't seem possible that a little fellow like you could have made good on a job that Big Jake turned down," said the mining man. "Did you find the lost vein?"

Danny fumbled in a pocket, drew out the piece of rock he had picked up at the end of the natural fissure in the mountain, which he had explored on the day that Big Jake had quit. The mining promoter gasped as he examined the rock; it was nearly one half gold.

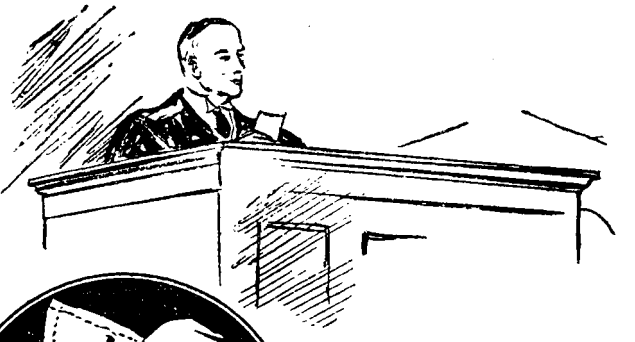
"We cross-cut a two-foot vein of this kind of stuff just before we finished the job," said Danny. "Seems like the old War Eagle mine is 'bout due to boom again."

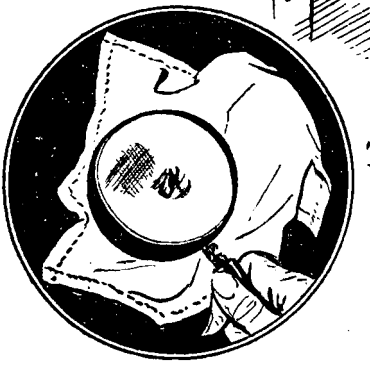
GOLD FROM GEORGIA

John H. Spicer

CALIFORNIA may be called the Golden State of the Union but Georgia in the South used to be an important producer of gold, a fact that may come as a surprise to many people. About twenty million dollars worth of this precious metal was produced from a group of mines at Dahlonega, about seventy-five miles northwest of Atlanta. Most of the gold was recovered by hydraulics and the use of small stamp mills. Very little underground work was ever done and the deposits were never followed to any depth. The operations were discontinued a good many years ago when it was thought that all the profitable ore had been exhausted. In recent years, however, a certain revival of interest has been reported and in 1928 at least several companies were exploring the old mines with the idea that modern methods of recovery might be able to show a profit from ore that was thought too poor by the former operators.

JUROR No. I





The State's Exhibit C

Question

CHAPTER I

SCARED OUT!

A HANGING CASE, beyond a shadow of doubt," Rance promised the jury when People vs Engel wheeled finally to trial; and Jim Bartlett himself thought the case was exactly that. Thought it was and, for more reasons than one, prayed it would turn out to be.

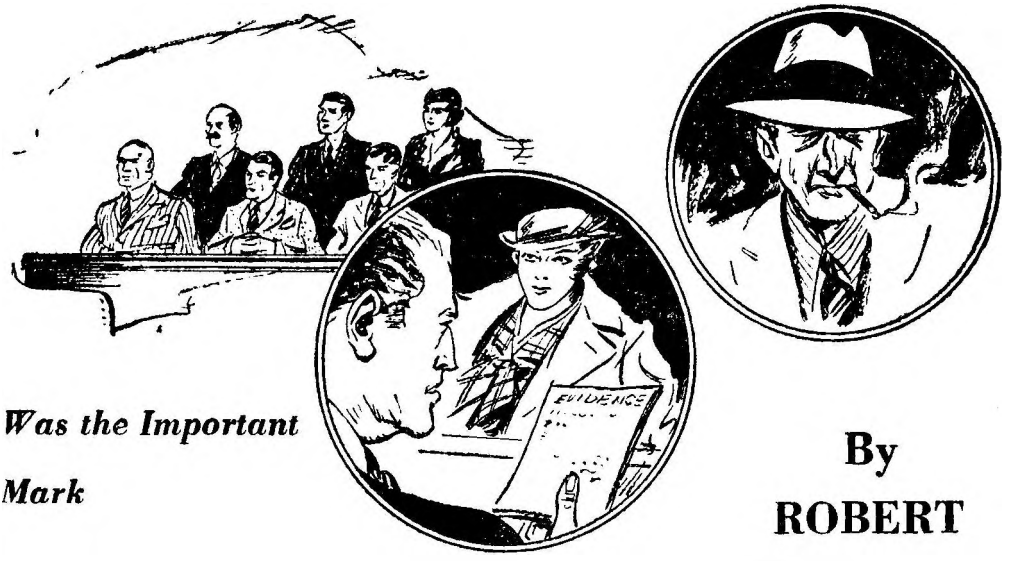
His own testimony and Hammer's, Jim firmly believed, would swing Engel. He was desperately anxious that it should, heartsick at thought of having to play one certain sleeved card of his that he had managed thus far to keep dark. In Rance's hand that card would rate as the high card that took everything. It was the ace that topped all aces—to Jim Bartlett, definitely and literally, an ace of hearts.

Engel, engaged in welding all city delivery services into one huge public-bleeding racket, was on trial for the murder of Tom Kane, an honest union head who stood in his way. That day, a September Monday, Rance bristled with confidence. But the case was young and so was Rance; and Logan Gerrick, defending Engel, was a crafty adept in criminal law who not only knew all the tricks but could command every resource of thugdom at the crook of a fat soft finger.

Through Monday and Tuesday, massing his evidence, Rance drew the State's noose tighter and tighter. Not for a moment had doubt of himself or his cause entered his mind; and on Wednesday, when the court clerk's dry voice crackled, "Next witness—William Hammer!" he turned a triumphant grim smile on Gerrick.

Hammer was the key witness of the prosecution, an elevator operator who would hamstring Logan Gerrick's alibi defense by testifying that on June fourteenth, the day of the murder, he had taken Engel up to the tenth floor of the Turret Building and had seen him enter Kane's small office directly across from the shaft.

A few days ago Hammer had been positive in his identification, willing to go the route. But he had changed since then, changed in a way that brought Rance up rigid at the moment he took the stand. Now Hammer's thin face was ashy, his hand visibly shaking when he raised it to



Was the Important Mark

By ROBERT H. ROHDE

Author of "And High Water!", "G-Date," etc.

be sworn. His voice came muffled and husky and his eyes held a glaze of panic as they blinked against Joe Engel's steely, steady stare. Bad—and then worse.

"I—I made a mistake," Jim Bartlett heard his star witness incredibly gulping. "If I've done anybody a wrong I want to right it. No, Mr. Rance. No, no sir! *This* isn't the man I saw go in Mr. Kane's room. I don't see how I ever could've thought it. W-why, right now I wouldn't say that there's even much resemblance."

So that was that and it was Logan Gerrick who wore the smile when court recessed in a startled hubbub with the State's case suddenly toppled and Joe Engel amazingly lifted to a spot where flowers of congratulation would be the underworld's buy for him instead of those somber wreaths of recent prospect.

In the corridor defense counsel grinned moistly and gloatingly at Detective Sergeant James Bartlett, who himself had "gone on" for Rance as the headquarters man who had dug up Hammer and arrested Engel.

"What," Gerrick jeered, "do you think of your case now?"

Bartlett said softly, "I'm not going to tell you what I think, Gerrick. You could sue me for it. Oh, you're good all right—but maybe it'll turn out yet that you're not quite good enough. This trial isn't over by a long shot, you know!"

But to Rance, waiting for Bartlett down the hall, the case was all overboard, sunk. He was wrapped in gloom.

"We're licked," he averred bitterly. "Somehow they must've got to Hammer—bought him over—and that finishes us."

BARTLETT shook his head. If anything he was younger than Rance, certainly short of thirty; but he was old in his knowledge of the racket world and the methods of criminal lawyers who more often than not were as crooked as their clients.

"Not bought," he said. "Scared. I was afraid of that. Hammer's got a wife and kids, and on pay like he gets he has to live from hand to mouth. He couldn't afford having anything happen that would put him in a hospital. The chances are somebody just pointed that out to him—somebody who looked as if he might be pretty handy at turning hundred-and-thirty pounders into mean accident cases."

"If it were just that, wouldn't he say so?"

"Like hell he would. He knows damn well that the city wouldn't be giving him a

police escort the rest of his life. Myself, I've been afraid of this. I didn't say anything to you—what would be the good? I just tried to prime Hammer against it. But it's happened, and there we are."

Rance nodded dejectedly, "Knocked flat," and stared at a drift of cigar smoke back by the courtroom door, where Logan Gerrick was now expounding on law and life to a cluster of newspaper reporters. "Flat," he repeated. "If we can't prove Joe Engel was in the Turret Building at or about the time of the murder, we can't convict. Gerrick has half a dozen yeggs ready to testify that Engel was dozing innocently in a hammock in the Catskills all that afternoon. I'll know it's perjury, and you'll know it's perjury, but we're not the jury—which means, with Hammer lost to the State, that it's a walkout for Mr. Engel."

Jim Bartlett rubbed a chin that was bigger and squarer-cut by far than pale William Hammer's. For a moment he held back speech, his blue eyes troubled.

"I'd hate," he said slowly, "to see Joe Engel beat this rap. He's a king pin; with him out of the way, this town and the decent people in it would be better off than I can begin to tell you. No, Rance, we can't let him slip out!"

The prosecutor's slim shoulders gave a twitch of impatience. "Don't talk like a fool," he snapped. "He *has* slipped. I don't say it's justice but, hang it, it's law. The last shot in the State's locker has been fired—and it's a dud. I tell you, we're licked. We might as well face the fact."

Bartlett had turned and was staring through a window that faced the shining lofty dome of the Turret Building, looming out over lesser spires of the business district a mile to the north. When he turned back to Rance his eyes were clear again, lighted by a decision, and his hard jaw was harder.

"No, we're not beaten," he said. "We've only begun the real part of this prosecution. I suppose you'll be good and sore, but now I'll come clean. I've been holding out on you, Rance. There's still one more State's witness in reserve who can and will knock Gerrick and Engel and their alibi into a cocked hat—whatever a cocked hat is. A witness you've never even heard of."

He glanced down the hall at a broad retreating back and a swinging brief case—Logan Gerrick, the taste of another crooked victory already on his tongue, moving jauntily toward one of those gargantuan luncheons it was his habit to stow away on trial days.

"Right!" he growled. "Not smart enough!"

Rance, thunderstruck beside him, was moving his lips but no sound was coming from them. His eyes were round with incredulity.

"It's the truth," Bartlett insisted. "Never you mind about Hammer. We'll hang Engel without him!"

RANCE found his voice at last then, but it was weak, a stammer. "You—you—you've had another witness up your sleeve all this time! For God's sake, why didn't you tell me?"

Jim Bartlett took a last draw at his half-smoked cigarette, dropped it and ground it under a heel.

"I'd never have told you," he said soberly, "if Hammer had stuck through and

clinched your case for you. It was a witness I made up my mind to protect to the last ditch. A witness I didn't want to lay open to the attentions of Joe Engel's merry men, you understand?" He swung up his wrist watch. "Quarter after twelve—and the last ditch is just what we're standing in at this minute, Rance. Okay, then. The holdout is ended. You can look for me

back here in your office—back with a rope for Joe Engel—at one o'clock sharp!"

Chapter II

BLONDE ACE

WITH the gavel's rap calling the courtroom to order at two o'clock that humid afternoon, Logan Gerrick was instantly on his feet. Hammer's fiasco and a seven-course luncheon had put him in high humor. His voice was a purr.

"Your Honor, I move the dismissal of my client on the ground of the State's utter failure to prove——"

He broke off at a sudden interruption; frowned.

"If Your Honor please!" Rance was up too, cutting swiftly and strongly in on that. "A motion to dismiss is not in order. The State has not completed its presentation. There is another witness to be heard. A newly discovered witness."

At the defense table Joe Engel stiffened and looked up at Gerrick with a startled question in his beady black eyes. But Gerrick missed that. He had swung around at a stir in the rear of the courtroom and his gaze was with a slight, rustling figure—Rance's surprise witness, moving with quick heel-taps up the aisle.

Gerrick's amazed eyes clicked on astonishing details. A girl! Not much more than twenty, for certain. Blonde and slim; a good-looking girl, even though her face didn't now have much color.

Gerrick stared at her, stared at Rance and abruptly sat down. Engel whispered urgently, "Who is she?" But by that time the girl was on the witness stand, sworn, and was answering for herself.

"Elizabeth Fenton." She was nervous up there with all eyes upon her, but her voice was clear. "Betty Fenton. Yes. *Miss!*"

Last seen by Gerrick, Rance had looked as if he would have no more smiles for many a day to come. But that had been two hours ago; just now he was smiling again, and the smile was the widest that defense counsel had seen on his face in all their several years of acquaintance. It beamed on Joe Engel, tense in his chair; beamed on Gerrick's flustered beefy face. And then its beam was full on the witness.

Rance's voice was furry.

"Miss Fenton, may I ask if you were in this city on the fourteenth of June, just passed?"

The girl nodded. "Yes, Mr. Rance. You know I was."

Bewildered, blustering, Logan Gerrick shot up.

"Objection!" he roared.

Rance said, quickly and smoothly: "Of course, I knew you were, Miss Fenton. Just answer questions, please. You recall clearly where you were on the afternoon of that day I mentioned, particularly between the hours of three and four P.M.?"

"At No. 253 Thompson Street."

"And that is in the near neighborhood of the Turret Building, is it not?"

"Just around the corner from the Turret Building."

Rance stepped to the defense table and dropped a hand on Joe Engel's shoulder.

"This man—the defendant in this case—did you ever see him before today, Miss Fenton?"

"Yes, sir; once before."

GERRICK saw Joe Engel's eyes widen, caught a flash in them that meant belated recognition. Inwardly he cursed. Then again, all faculties alert, he returned his attention to the witness. The prosecutor had rapped out another question and she was replying:

"Yes, I do remember the day when I saw Joseph Engel before. It was June fourteenth."

"Rot!" Gerrick exploded toward the jury box. "That was three months ago."

The gavel slapped down sharply but Rance himself refused the bait, bit back the rejoinder that would have halted the flow of this vital new testimony. Shrugging off Gerrick's outbreak, he went calmly on with the witness.

"Are you depending on memory alone for the date?"

"No, sir."

"Thank you, Miss Fenton. We'll return to that line later. Where did you see the defendant?"

"In the office where I work. It's at the Thompson Street address I gave you. A Western Union office. I'm the counter clerk there."

"When you say you saw Engel in the Western Union office, that means you saw him—met him—in connection with your duties?"

"That's right. He came in and sent a telegram."

"Was there anything about him that helped to fix him in your mind?"

"Yes—his eyes. There was a queer, set look in them. I can't just explain it. They gave me a creepy feeling, somehow. For a minute I thought he was a hold-up man—actually expected to see a gun come out when he put his hand under his coat. But it was a fountain pen that must have been clipped to his inside pocket."

"You read the telegram that he wrote?"

"I read it as I was counting the words. It was going to a village in the Catskill Mountains. A little place called Blackburg. It said that the sender was leaving for Blackburg on the seven o'clock train that evening and wanted a car to meet him at the station."

"Did you notice the signature?"

"Not at the time. No, sir. If I had, the name wouldn't have meant anything to me."

"In your own phrase, Miss Fenton, when did it first mean anything?"

"When a detective came into the office a couple of days later and talked with me. A nice-looking young man named Bartlett. He wanted me to look at a picture, said he was showing it to every one in that neighborhood. And the minute I saw the face I remembered it. I told Mr. Bartlett so."

"And then you got out a copy of that telegram to Blackburg for him?"

"Not a copy. I got out the original. The message that had been written and filed there in the office on June fourteenth."

"And you *did* notice the signature then?"

"Of course. The name signed on the message was Engel."

In a hush, Rance delved in his brief case and brought out a folded yellow sheet of paper. He opened it, handed it up to the witness.

"Is this the telegram sent by Engel, Miss Fenton?"

"Yes, sir. It is."

"There is a date on it, is there not?"

"Yes, sir. June fourteenth."

"And, by any chance, is there a notation of the time of day at which the message was presented to you for transmission?"

"Oh, certainly, Mr. Rance. There always is. It's a company regulation, and I noted the time on the blank the moment I received the message and the sending charges."

"Please read me the time."

"Three forty-five P.M."

AGAIN the big room went silent. Engel's rocky chin jerked up. Gerrick's heart was pounding hard, his stare frozen on the witness stand.

"You're sure there's no mistake about that?" Rance wanted to know.

"There couldn't be any mistake. I was looking at the clock. It's a Western Union clock and it couldn't possibly be even as much as a minute out of the way. Never could. It's Naval Observatory time, controlled some way by electricity."

Rance bowed to his pretty blonde witness and turned to the bench.

"Your Honor, I now offer this telegram in evidence as Exhibit C in the case of People vs Engel. I do so without commenting on the peculiar look noted by Miss Fenton in the sender's eyes and without attempting to offer an explanation of it. But I would submit to the court's attention that the murder of Thomas Kane occurred exactly at three-forty o'clock on the afternoon of June fourteenth, just five minutes before this telegram was handed over

a Western Union desk within one hundred feet of the Turret Building—and many, many miles from the Catskill Mountains!"

From the spectators' benches, with that, came sudden clamor. The gavel thumped and thumped again.

"Order! Order!"

Logan Gerrick's puffy face was purple then.

"You fool!" he whispered to Engel under cover of the commotion. "You let yourself in for it. They've got you in a jam now for fair."

There was ice in Engel's eyes, ice in his responding whisper. "Yes, a dirty jam. But you're going to get me out of it, Gerrick! You hear? You'll pull me out—*or else!*"

Chapter III

Nooses for Two

WITH two chilly little words Joe Engel had spoken volumes to Logan Gerrick. Spoken a shell full. He could pull his present defense counsel into that deep, black hole along with himself if he chose, drag him clear to the bottom.

That had been his threat and Engel never threatened idly. His "Or else!" summarily and terribly had turned the death trial for one into a death trial for two. Knowing Engel, Gerrick could not doubt that, and for an instant panic paralyzed his every muscle, deadened his razor-keen mind. With the fateful telegram in evidence Engel's goose was as good as cooked. And Gerrick's own goose, too. Only a legal miracle could beat the State's strengthened case—and where was a miracle? What could it be?"

Scully, Judge O'Mara's clerk, had hold of that little yellow death warrant now. He passed it down to the court stenographer, got it back and dropped it into a drawer of his desk.

Gerrick, with a mighty effort, pulled himself together. He shook his leonine head like a swimmer up from a deep dive. Then he was thinking straight again, seeing that bad as the situation was it could have been immeasurably worse.

Regardless of this staggering last-minute bomb exploded by the State, the trial of People vs Engel had not reached its end. Before the case went to the jury the defense must have its inning. So there was still

time to scheme an escape, and in the lexicon of criminal law time spelled hope. Always!

Rance was continuing with the witness, but the fireworks were over. The prosecutor, knowing in his heart that he wouldn't be permitted to get away with it, was trying to work into the record Miss Fenton's reason for not having come forward at an earlier hour.

She said: "Jim—that is, Sergeant Bartlett—wanted to keep me out of it. He was afraid I might find myself in trouble with gangsters if——"

She got no farther; at that point Logan Gerrick had snapped into action.

"Object! I protest against this barefaced effort to influence the jury against my client!"

"Strike it out," came mechanically from the bench, and Rance smiled one more smile, a polite one.

"Very well, Mr. Gerrick. Your witness. Proceed with the cross-examination."

Gerrick glowered at the prosecutor and appealed to the court.

"Your Honor, the defense had absolutely no intimation that Miss Fenton would be a witness for the State. We did not even know she existed and it is unfair to ask me to cross-examine without having had any opportunity to investigate.

"This is all past belief, for I assure you I stand ready to prove by not one but many defense witnesses that my client positively could not be the Engel who sent a telegram from the Thompson Street Western Union office on June fourteenth. I suggest that in a large city there must be many men with the name of Engel.

"It's possible that Miss Fenton has made an honest mistake. Another possibility occurring to me I hesitate to put into words. It is the possibility that her whole story is fraudulent, a fabrication to bolster up a case that has had its props knocked out from under it by a clear vindication of Joseph Engel from the lips of the State's own chief witness."

Rance shrugged. "The defense is at liberty to make whatever investigation it wishes. If you desire to postpone your cross-examination, Gerrick, I'll continue with the witness myself for another moment or two."

His remaining questions, though, were perfunctory and few, and within a minute Miss Fenton was stepping down from the stand.

DETECTIVE SERGEANT BARTLETT had come from somewhere in the rear and stood awaiting her at the gate in the railing that closed off counsel and press tables from the crowded rows of spectators' benches. Gerrick saw their eyes meet and read something in that swift exchange.

He had guessed it earlier, divined it in the softening of the girl's voice when she spoke of Bartlett in her testimony. Now he knew. No question, she had given more than Joe Engel's telegram to this "nice-looking" young man from Police Headquarters. She had given her heart as well. And as for Bartlett himself—the look of him was enough. He'd fallen as hard for that little blonde hangwoman as she had for him. It was written all over him.

Gerrick, filing an interesting bit of knowledge away for later figuring of its worth to the defense, veered his eyes to the jury box. In that sunlit corner of the courtroom lay his last chance to save his client and himself—and peering, all at once athrill, he realized with a sudden inner warming that this last chance could be a big chance. To bring it through he'd have to gamble, and gamble desperately. Gamble and whip his wits both. But everything was a gamble—everything in courts of law, everything in life—and under the spur of fear his crafty brain was already racing.

The fact was that with this particular jury he had an edge that could very well be translated into an out. At least, he could count on one man now blinking in that strong sunlight to go to any length for him—a man with a guilty secret that only Gerrick shared, one who himself walked in the shadow of the same retributive rope that dangled at this dark moment so low over Engel!

There were two or three more witnesses for the State; however, their testimony was routine, repetition of what had been heard before and Gerrick gave scant ear to it.

To one man, he knew, he could say "Or else!" with the same freezing voice that Joe Engel had used, but he needed another. His eyes searched the faces of the jurors and always they kept returning to one broad, stolid face at the right end of the lower row in the box.

The man's name was Diamond—Henry Diamond—and he was the janitor of an apartment house somewhere uptown. There were more intelligent men on the Engel jury than Diamond, among them several clear-thinking business men and a civil engineer; but by the chance that had made him the first chosen of the twelve, Henry Diamond was Juror No. 1 and consequently the jury's foreman.

Notes made on Monday during the selection of the jury were in Gerrick's brief case then; and later, after the early adjournment resulting from the playing of the State's sleeved ace, he had them on his office desk. In the notes were the names of all twelve jurors, together with their places of residence and such other information regard-

ing them as had been gleaned when State and defense counsel had examined them one after another prior to accepting them for service.

A scrawny young man with a wisp of brown mustache and eyes like marbles sat across from Gerrick—Nickie Hoy, Joe Engel's lieutenant in a dozen rich rackets; not much to look at, but recognized in the underworld and at Police Headquarters to be scarcely less formidable than Engel himself.

Gerrick flipped over a paper with a name and an address on it, and Hoy read the name aloud.

"Diamond, huh? He's the foreman of the jury, you say?"

"The foreman," nodded Gerirck. "And a damn lucky thing that he is, if you ask me. If Juror No. 1 happened to be somebody like Rufford or Jackson—a keen type—I'd still be scratching my head."

Nickie Hoy looked at him unwinkingly through a trail of smoke from a sagging cigarette. He knew precisely the spot that Gerrick was in, and a one-sided grin twitched a corner of his thin mouth.

"Yeah," he said softly. "Scratching your head with one hand and maybe feeling your neck with the other. I can see how it is. Joe has split a lot of big jack with you, Gerrick, and he's entitled to results. You couldn't blame him for raising hell if he didn't get them. Well, what's the idea about Diamond? Same as Hammer? You want a scare put on him? Think that'll work?"

Gerrick shook his head. There had never been much love lost between him and Nickie Hoy, but now Hoy was a vital ally and the time not one for acrimony.

Letting the sneer go by, Gerrick said, "Nothing rough, Nickie. This is entirely different than Hammer's case. I want Diamond handled with gloves. He's a widower, so probably you'll find him alone in his basement rooms up there at the Tremaine Arms Apartments. And if I'm any judge at all of people, he's a man who'll listen to reason.

"What I want you to do first is to get friendly with him, plant the idea that he can fill his pockets with easy money in return for a very small accommodation. Fill him up with that. No details, understand. Be vague about where the money's going to come from. But keep telling him there'll be more of it than he ever dreamed of having hold of all at one time. Get his cupidity thoroughly aroused. Get him itching in the palm. You know how, Nickie. You've taken plenty of crooked, dumb cops up on a mountain, haven't you?"

"And then?"

"Then get a couple of drinks into him—by his looks that won't be so hard. But just a couple; enough to make him feel good but not to muddle him. After that, lead him over to the Sparrow's. Bring him in a cab."

"Check," nodded Hoy. "The Sparrow's. *You'll* be there, Gerrick?"

"I'll be there. In back."

"What time do you want him?"

The great clock under the spire of the Turret Building was only a few hundred yards beyond Gerrick's window sill. He looked toward it and saw that it was a little after five.

"I'll allow you plenty of leeway, Nickie," Gerrick said. "I'll be at the Sparrow's myself at eight, but I won't expect you to be there on the minute. If it turns out that Diamond balks at coming——"

Nickie Hoy's white, small teeth clicked together.

"Listen, Gerrick," he said, "you worry about your end and let me look after mine. Nobody's going to balk when *I've* got him!"

Chapter IV

DIAMOND TRUMP

PROMPTLY at eight that evening a taxi pulled up in front of a musty little West Side waterfront saloon, and Nickie Hoy stepped out with his vaunted persuasive powers once more proved by company in tow. The company was Henry Diamond, the place was the Sparrow's and

Gerrick, a few minutes before, had seated himself with a highball in a dimly lighted rear room there. His glass was still half full when Hoy looked in at the door.

"Okay, Counselor. I'm here with the goods. Now what?"

Gerrick's bushy eyebrows lifted. "No trouble?"

"Not a bit. There was a For Rent sign hanging outside this What-you-call-it Arms place and I didn't even have to go looking for the boy friend. I just pressed the Janitor button and opened my arms for him to fall into. It was six o'clock when I looked at that empty flat of his—and we haven't been three feet apart since. We're pals, see?"

"What have you told him?"

"Nothing. But I've got him hopped up to thinking that there's really a Santa Claus and that I'm the guy that tells him which stockings to fill."

"Diamond cottons to the idea of easy money, does he?"

"Eats it up. He likes it as much as we do. I think he's even got a sneaking suspicion that his being on Joe's jury might have something to do with the piece of soft change I've been hinting at."

As a matter of fact such a thought had really dawned in Henry Diamond's not too bright mind a good hour ago, with his flat-hunting new friend continually and mysteriously alluding to riches which might swiftly accrue to him; and Gerrick was reading a reflection of the thought in his face a moment later.

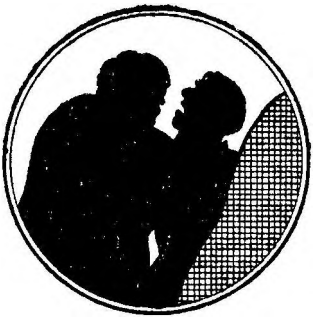
"You recognize me, don't you?" he asked when Hoy brought the janitor-juror back to him, and he noted both alacrity and expectancy in Diamond's nod.

"Sure I do. I never caught the name right, but you're one of the lawyers down in the court. Engel's lawyer."

Called back from the Sparrow's dingy bar, Juror No. 1 in State vs Engel had brought a brimming whiskey glass with him. He drained it and sat down.

"The judge," he pointed out, with a flutter of a pale eye that might have been meant as a wink, "told us jury people we shouldn't talk about the case. Not talk nothin' to nobody."

"A matter of form," Gerrick immediately assured him. "And, of course, you and I aren't going to tell anybody that we ever met outside the courtroom. If we happen to get together and do a little business—



why, that's strictly our own affair. Don't you feel the same way yourself?"

Juror No. 1 threw a quick side glance at Nickie Hoy; and his eyes, turning back to defense counsel, held a crafty gleam.

"Business? How do you mean? *We* ain't got no business that I know about."

Gerrick sipped at his highball, forgiving efficient Nickie Hoy for many things, and vastly pleased with himself. As a judge of character he stood one hundred per cent vindicated. There was larceny in Henry Diamond, plenty of it. He was going to be a push-over.

"Business," Gerrick repeated. "You can do something for me and I can do something for you. When we come to an agreement to do these things for each other, then it's business. What else could you call it?"

"I see," he grunted. "You want me to vote that Engel ain't guilty." His pale eyes flickered at Gerrick. "But one vote ain't goin' to set him free, Mr. Lawyer. I'm foreman, all right, but you mustn't expect that I could speak for the whole jury."

"I'm not expecting that, Diamond. I'm not even trying to influence your own decision." Gerrick's wallet was in his hand. He opened it, plucked out a bill and

smoothed it on the table—a one hundred dollar note. "Nice-looking slice of money," he said. "If you wanted to be accommodating, Diamond, you could have this hundred dollar bill now and twenty more just like it in a very short time. Two thousand dollars plus one hundred for good measure, and nobody to know anything about it but just us three sitting here.

"You hesitate? Well, I'll tell you plain that I've got another man who's ready to do this same little favor for me. Yes, he'd do it in a minute. But I think it might be better, everything considered, to have the foreman with me as well."

THE hundred dollar bill had been creeping toward the middle of the table. At one end Gerrick's fleshy fingers lifted from it; at the other edge, after a moment, the bony calloused fingers of Henry Diamond dropped down.

"What kind of favor?" Diamond asked huskily. "Now you listen here, Mister, while I speak a piece. If it's anything wrong, I'm not going for it. If it's anything that's going to get me in trouble ——"

"Not a chance, my friend," Gerrick cut in. "It's a thing that's done every day down at the court house. Pay strict attention to me for a moment, and I'll tell you exactly what I want you to do.

"Tomorrow evening some time this case of ours will go to the jury. Now, I've tried many other cases before Judge O'Mara, understand, and I know that on the last day he will hold a late session to get the trial finished. At my best guess, he will deliver his charge to the jury at some time between six and eight o'clock. Then you will retire to the jury room to deliberate while the Judge will wait in his chambers for your verdict.

"You, Diamond, will have some authority as foreman. I want you to use it to prevent a verdict from being returned—any verdict—before midnight. Then, on the dot of twelve, I ask you to rap on the jury room door for the bailiff and tell him that you wish to examine State's Exhibit C. Get that fixed in your mind right now, Diamond. State's Exhibit C—that will be the telegram that was brought into the case for the first time this afternoon. The one that blonde girl testified about. You remember?"

The hundred dollar bill had been traveling again, and was close to Henry Diamond's glass. Those colorless eyes, fixed on it in an enchanted stare, lifted and met Gerrick's and lowered again.

"Yeah. Sometimes maybe I wasn't listenin', but I heard all about the telegram. Pretty bad, ain't it?"

"It's a fake, Diamond. The lowdown on it is that the prosecutor has an axe sharpened for Engel on a certain personal matter that hasn't got anything to do with this case at all. The defense wants a chance to put Exhibit C to certain tests. That's what I'm driving at, and what I'm willing to pay all this good money to bring about."

Once more Diamond's mesmerized gaze lifted.

"Who makes the tests?" he wanted to know. "Where?"

Gerrick waved a hand. "Let that go, Mister Foreman. If you follow my instructions to the letter, you'll find that everything will be all right. But let me finish. At midnight, just before or just after, you're to call for Exhibit C. Under the law, you know, the jury has a right to inspect any piece of evidence introduced in a case which it is hearing, so there will be no question about the telegram being brought to you.

"You may hand Exhibit C around among the other jurors but be sure that it winds up in your own possession. Put it in your pocket—in your right hand coat pocket. Am I clear on that? I said, Diamond, the *right hand coat pocket!*"

Nickie Hoy's eyes, dancing, slitted between the two. Himself, he didn't know what it was all about but it was getting good.

Diamond said heavily, "What's the difference which pocket?"

"To simplify matters," Gerrick told him softly. "To make it easier. As I remember that jury room, the lights are controlled by a switch near the hallway leading to the court. You're to get to that switch, Diamond, at the moment when Judge O'Mara summons the jury. He'll wait for you to come to a decision until about one o'clock; that's his practice. Then he'll call you back to the box, and if you haven't reached a verdict he'll have you taken to a hotel for the night.

"When the Judge's call comes, I want you to turn off the lights and for just a second or two to stand there by the switch. Somebody—*you* don't need to know who—will take the telegram from your pocket; and at that instant you'll have two thousand dollars coming to you, payable whenever and wherever and however you wish. You don't need to worry about being cheated. I'll be only too glad to give you the money. It's fair exchange. Absolutely fair. Business, Diamond, business."

Juror No. 1 twirled his glass and thought it ponderously out. His brow clouded.

"But," he objected, "they'll want the telegram back, won't they?"

"They might forget it."

"Suppose they don't?"

Logan Gerrick smiled. "My dear fellow, why borrow trouble? There will be twelve men in that jury room and no one will ever be able to say which was the last man who had Exhibit C. If it were still in your possession and you refused to give it up—if that were the case, and they searched you and found the telegram—then, of course, there might be some unpleasantness. But among a dozen men, why, you'll be as safe down in the court house as you are up in your cellar at the Tremaine Arms Apartments."

Gerrick looked at Nickie Hoy then and Nickie, too, wore a grin.

A big, hairy hand had dropped over that racket-chiseled hundred dollars, and the hand had lifted and was closing. The bill was gone.

It was a deal.

Chapter V

JURY MAGIC

ENGEL'S "Blonde Hangwoman," Miss Elizabeth Fenton, was in a big movie theatre uptown when Gerrick struck his bargain downtown with Juror No. 1. Jim Bartlett, who had been seeing Miss Fenton very frequently since fate and duty combined to lead him into that Western Union branch in the Turret Building's shadow, was with her; and sitting a few rows behind, in an aisle seat, was a lantern-jawed youth who had stuck like a burr at her slender back from the moment she left Judge O'Mara's courtroom. Police records at Headquarters listed him as Solomon Ruck. Joe Engel and Nickie Hoy called him "Hawk."

From the theatre detective and witness went to a nearby restaurant, and behind them pussyfooted Hawk. He was an accomplished shadow but half way between theatre and restaurant Jim Bartlett had him spotted. However, Bartlett kept moving, and said nothing to Betty Fenton until they were seated and had given their orders for food. Then he spoke quietly.

"I'm going to tell you something, lady; and if it starts a few goose pimples, so much the better. The big parade has started already."

"Parade?" she inquired, crinkling her forehead. "How do you mean?"

Jim Bartlett was seated with his back to the street, but he knew then that another customer had entered behind them.

He asked, "Was that a man who just came in?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Right, Jim. All by himself. He's at a front table. Why?"

"A man with a long chin? Don't stare, Betty; just give him a brush and look at something else."

But at once she was staring—staring at Bartlett.

"Yes," she breathed. "A very long, sharp chin."

Bartlett nodded. "That's him. You're looking south at the racket parade coming north. That's the drum major!"

"He's following us?"

"Following *us* as long as we stick together. If we were to split up he'd be trailing on with just one of us—and you can bet the price of the town's best permanent that it wouldn't be me. A tough egg, that guy, and he don't mean any good to State's Witness Fenton.

"Well, at that," he said, "I might be figuring I owe the bird for a favor. Thinking twice, I'm sort of glad he's with us tonight. Glad to have you see the danger with your own eyes so that you know I haven't been telling you ghost stories.

"It's the hard, sure fact that when you came to the front against Joe Engel you enlisted in a real war, and from now until Engel swings you've got to keep one foot in a dugout. When I'm with you, of course, I'll be answerable for your safety. That goes without saying. But when I'm not—just like I said—you've got to think of yourself as a canary left alone with a cat. Every minute of the twenty-four hours you must. Anybody you don't know, haven't known a long time, might be the mouser coming to gobble you.

"So listen to the rules again, and remember them. Never get in a cab no matter what kind of weather it is. Use the trolley going to work and coming back, and when you get back stay in the house unless I come up and ask you out. Pass up the other boy friends after dark; I pack a cannon and they don't.

"Keep that heavy chain on the apartment door. Never take it off until you've had a good look at whoever rings the bell. If it's somebody you absolutely know to be one hundred per cent okay, let him in. If it's a man who wants to do something about the gas stove or the electric lights or the telephone, you tell him to call the Detective Bureau and they'll be glad to send a man who'll come right in with him and watch him do his stuff."

Betty Fenton threw another glance toward that small front table where the Hawk sat facing them.

"He's not very hungry, anyway," she whispered. "Coffee and pie—that's all he's taking."

"Hope it's huckleberry pie with plenty of flies in it and powdered glass on the top instead of sugar," Bartlett said cheerfully.

He smiled. "Don't look that way, lady! Great Scott, your face is as long as the drum major's! It's going to be all right. Perfectly all right. This won't last forever. A few weeks of it, and—finis. Just as soon as Joie Engel gets his neck stretched, the air will be clear. When the crape hangs out for Joie the worst mob we've got will scatter."

THE girl was solemn, still dubious, and Bartlett was pleased to see that. It meant he had at last succeeded in awakening her fully to her peril.

She whispered, "But—revenge?"

Bartlett laughed. "That's out. Revenge is just a word in the dictionary—a handy word that movie writers and fiction grinders plug a lot. It don't come into this case. Joe Engel has always been a tyrant with his own mob, and tyrants never make friends that stick beyond the grave. When they fall the wailing and gnashing of teeth don't last long. Look it up in history.

"No, lady, the gang will go through fire to save Joie but nobody would ever lift a finger to avenge him. One week after he goes up the rope *you* can go anywhere at any time—and you won't have to have me along unless you really want to. You could walk through the toughest joints in the city

and never be touched. Yes—even through the Sparrow's!"

It was ten o'clock then, and half an hour later Ruck reported to Logan Gerrick by telephone. Gerrick was still at the Sparrow's, but now he was alone. An hour earlier Nickie Hoy and Henry Diamond had taken leave together.

"The blonde dame," Hawk advised, "is parked for the night. She went first to the telegraph office in Thompson Street, and Bartlett picked her up there at five.

"He chop-sueyed her right to the tonsils in an upstairs dump around from the Western Union. Then he movied her, and they put on the feed bag again. Afterwards he took her over to Bidwell Avenue, where she lives, and they had a hell of a long good-night in the street doorway. They just broke away a couple of minutes ago. What do *I* do?"

"You," Gerrick said, "hit the hay. Don't hang around and get tangled up. I want you back there on Bidwell Avenue bright and fresh in the morning—early enough to catch that little yellow-haired load of poison when she comes out.

"Just keep her in sight without showing yourself. No doubt she'll come to court for cross-examination. But it might be that later they'll try to sneak her away, put her under cover and keep her there; if that happens we've got to know exactly where she is. If you lose her, Ruck—mark it down—you're going to find yourself highly unpopular with Joe and Nickie."

He hung up on that to see Nickie Hoy himself hopping out of the taxi in which he and the fixed juror had left the Sparrow's.

In the back room, with the door closed, Hoy jerked a grin. "What a burglar! All the way home that wolf Diamond was moaning because he didn't stick you up for fancier jack. I told him that being we had got so clubby together, I'd try to fix it for him to draw down three grand, flat. Kidding aside, that telegram would be worth a lotta times three grand in the ash can."

He munched at a pretzel he had scooped up on the way through the bar and wanted to know then, "Did you hear from Hawk?"

"Yes, just now. The girl had Bartlett pinned on her sleeve all night."

Nickie Hoy's one-sided grin twitched again. "Bartlett could be taken, too. He thinks he's better than he is. They don't come so big that they can't be cut down."

"Quite so." Gerrick took a long swallow of Scotch and soda, and his eyes glittered. "I'm just remembering that Bartlett made that sort of remark to me today. With the girl friend all ready to deal from the bottom of the deck, he cracked that *I* mightn't be so good. Well—that remains to be seen!"

NICKIE yielded reluctant admiration. "And it won't be long, either. How soon do we take his doll away from him?"

"Plenty of time for that."

"Yeah?"

"Weeks," nodded Gerrick. "Maybe months. When Exhibit C disappears in the jury room, O'Mara can't do anything but call a mistrial. That means a delay as long as I can make it stretch out. And then Rance will have to start all over from scratch. With a new jury and maybe a new judge."

"I know," Hoy said. "That part is plain. What I don't understand is how you think you're goin' to make the telegram vanish. You say you've got another guy squared—is he part goat? Is he gonna eat it?"

"He'd eat O'Mara's safe if I told him he had to. But no, he's not going to eat any telegram. Just because I don't want him to, he isn't! I want Exhibit C delivered to *me*. Then I'll be damn sure it will never pop up again."

"Swell!" But Nickie Hoy still was curious. He pointed out, "There'l be a lot of eyes on that jury, and a lot of eyes on you. So how the hell you ever expect to get away with it——"

Gerrick interrupted. His face was blank, his voice low.

"A few hours ago, Nickie," he recalled,

"you told me that I'd better mind my own business and let you take care of yours. Well—right back at you!"

Chapter VI

MOP-HANDLE RULE

NEXT morning, almost as bright and early as the Engel defense's vigilant Hawk, Jim Bartlett appeared in Bidwell Avenue. He called for Betty Fenton and, in Hawk's way of putting it, "trollied" her downtown.

In Judge Felix O'Mara's courtroom she took the stand once more in the case of People vs Engel, the day's first witness, and there underwent a badgering cross-examination that both set her own cheeks to flaming and angrily reddened Sergeant Bartlett's ears.

Solly the Hawk's report had for one thing provided Gerrick with sharp tools of satire and, when he failed to shake the girl's identification of Engel, he used them pitilessly. With the spectator's benches bursting out again and again in loud and prolonged guffaws, Gerrick played upon that "long good-night" of Bartlett's. He asked persistently, sardonically, for details of it.

"I supposed he—kissed you?"

Miss Fenton swerved pleading eyes to the bench but O'Mara smiled and said, "Answer!"

She nodded then, and the court stenographer had to turn and cup his ear, so low was her reply.

"Yes."

"More than once?"

"Y—yes."

"Had this police officer, this fellow-witness here, kissed you before? I mean, before last night?"

"Yes."

"James Bartlett was a stranger to you until June fourteenth, last?"

"A stranger."

"How soon after that day did he first kiss you?"

"It was just a week later, a Tuesday."

Gerrick turned a smirk to the jury box. With People vs Engel in the bag for a mistrial, he had in reality stopped worrying about that jury; none the less, it was still necessary for him to give a convincing impersonation of a lawyer trying a case.

"Ah!" he murmured creamily, going on with his act. "The following Tuesday. You perhaps wrote up the incident in your secret diary, Miss Fenton?"

"No—I don't keep a diary."

"Then how, may I ask, can you fix the date so accurately?"

In another instant, Gerrick was sorry he had got into that. The girl's small resolute chin went up and she looked at him straight. Quietly she answered:

"No woman, Mr. Gerrick, would ever forget a date like that. It was June twenty-first—eight o'clock in the evening, on the beach at the Lake. I could tell you about the moon, too. Oh, I'll always remember everything about it. Because, you see, Jim Bartlett had just asked me to marry him. The kiss meant yes."

Rance, close beside Gerrick, prepared to halt the defense's rough line with his witness, gave a throaty little chuckle. He whispered, "Take it, Gerrick. You asked for it!" and that cut the older lawyer like a knife. He coughed and purpled and barked toward the stand:

"That's all! Step down!"

AT THE end of the morning session Gerrick, his poise fully recovered, was producing his formal alibi with as much aplomb as if Exhibit C had never gone into the evidence against Joe Engel.

Engel had in actuality traveled up to Blackburg, far out of his home state, on the evening of June fourteenth; and the alibi witnesses, had it not been for Betty Fenton and the Blackburg wire, would have sworn he had been on his farm outside that village at the exact time of the murder. Now Blackburg wouldn't sound so good and a geographical switch had to be made in alibi location. But that was easy.

The Catskills, all told, covered a lot of

landscape, and Nickie Hoy owned a place so far from Engel's that no sane person going there would ever have taken a train to Blackburg. Thus it merely became necessary to hold that Engel, instead of being at his own farm, had been a guest at Nickie's when that close-range pistol fire ended Thomas Kane's long and bitter opposition to the swallowing of his chauffeurs' union by racketeers.

The alibi witnesses marshaled by Nickie had needed only a moment's re-priming in Gerrick's office before the court opened. Not one, in cold fact, had been in higher than local altitudes on June fourteenth; so with them it was just a matter of substituting the name of another village for that of Blackburg. They had the rest of the story pat, long ago.

Jim Bartlett, listening to the Engel mobsters through the rest of the morning and the early part of the afternoon session, knew he was hearing high-class perjury. Had any one of those glib defense witnesses been left alone to his own efficient fact-finding methods in, say, the basement at Headquarters, he was sure he could have brought the perjury to light; but Rance, bound by the rules of a profession that limited truth-seekers to mere words where hard knuckles would much better serve, had to let the alibi testimony go in.

Long before the day was over, Bartlett had lost his last regret that he had produced Betty Fenton for the State. Without her and without Engel's telegram the rap would, without question, have been beaten.

Even as things stood, half the jurors—the flat-headed half—were looking puzzled before Gerrick was through. But Exhibit C had completely won the engineer and the business men. Bartlett could see that from far behind the railing.

He couldn't make up his mind, though, about the foreman. That outstanding dimwit of them all had been nodding through the early part of the trial but now seemed to be taking very much more interest as it neared its end.

Betty Fenton had stayed to hear the case through, and Bartlett at length directed her eyes to Juror No. 1.

"It's a grand old system," he whispered. "If they'd picked that jury backwards instead of forwards, we'd see a quicker verdict. Take Rufford—the bald man with eyeglasses at the far end of the back row—*he's* got good sense. He ought to be the foreman instead of that janitor cluck in the front row at the end towards us.

"Rufford will convict on the first ballot, for any money. But he's No. 12 and the janitor's No. 1, so it will be mop-handle rule back there in the jury room. That probably means a slow verdict. Anyhow, No. 1 has looked all day as if he was eating out of Gerrick's hand. See him now! He's for Engel, *sure!*"

There had been furious oratory by Logan Gerrick in his best spread eagle style, and Rance at that moment was summing up for the State. His voice was low-pitched in contrast to defense counsel's; his summation terse, business-like, damning. He wound up by quietly insisting on the death penalty for Engel, and straightway Felix O'Mara rustled his robes and cleared his throat and began the reading of his charge to the jury.

He had finished it a little after seven. The jurors rose and filed out, with Janitor

Diamond in advance and Civil Engineer Rufford at the tail of the solemn and doomful little procession. Flanked by sheriff's deputies, with extra guards from Headquarters in front and behind, Joe Engel walked stolidly through one door of the courtroom while spectators poured chattering through another.

At their long table within the railing, as O'Mara's portly form vanished into chambers, the newspaper men seemed to have agreed that the victory was the State's. When they rose they passed up Logan Gerrick and grouped around Rance.

Jim Bartlett, moving out with Betty Fenton, passed Nickie Hoy in the aisle near the door. He said grimly, "Well, Hoy, it's all over."

Nickie looked at him with dead eyes.

"Yeah," he said. "All over."

But his lips were twitching before Bartlett was out the door.

Chapter VII

EXHIBIT C VANISHES

THAT night Miss Fenton had dinner out again—dinner and then a late supper, with another movie sandwiched in between. Jim Bartlett left her safe on Bidwell Avenue, chained in, and went back to the courtroom.

It was well after eleven and the jury hadn't yet been heard from. Lights burned dim in the big empty room. Felix O'Mara was dozing on his leather couch in chambers. Scully, the court clerk, was blinking sleepily at his desk. Two or three reporters, men on morning newspapers, were yawning at one of the counsel tables. Rance was probably getting a rest up in the prosecutor's office; Logan Gerrick, if he was following custom, was piling in highballs at Durfee's bar across the street. The spectators' benches were vacant.

Bartlett perched on the railing and lighted a cigarette, and a moment later one of the reporters had an idea.

He said, "What I need, some time inside the next sixty seconds, is a large hooker of bourbon with another for a chaser. Who's going over to Durfee's with me?"

His confreres of the press picked themselves up, but Bartlett shook his head.

"I couldn't," he smiled. "It wouldn't be right for me to. Out of respect to the practically late Joe Engel, I'll pass it up this time. Anyhow, I just got up from dinner.

Then he was alone with Scully.

Minutes dragged, then Scully's phone rang in his little cubby hole beyond O'Mara's chambers. He answered and came back grumbling. One of the reporters had called, wanted to know if there was any sign of a verdict yet. He and his friends had decided they liked the atmosphere better at Durfee's and Scully had Durfee's phone number on a scrap of paper.

"That makes me everything now," he crackled at Bartlett. "Clerk of the court, nurse to that damn fool jury, valet to Felix O'Mara, and newspaper death watch for a bunch of young apes bent on getting plastered. It's a great life."

He started to sit down again at his desk, got half way and came up again at the sound of a remote tapping.

"Hi!" he chirped. "There's the verdict!"

But his guess was wrong. The Engel jury had no verdict. Somebody in the jury room was demanding to see one of the State's exhibits.

"Exhibit C," the bailiff standing guard over the jurors told Scully. "Ain't that the telegram that was brought in yesterday?"

Scully disappeared and returned with the yellow message which months ago a very new blonde acquaintance of Sergeant Jim Bartlett had found for him in the Western Union files in Thompson Street. The bailiff took it and went back to the jury with it.

Bartlett strained his ears for sounds from the jury room that might tell him how the wind was blowing. It was hopeless. Two doors of heavy oak were closed between the courtroom and the jury room, doors at either end of a long dark corridor. Bartlett knew the corridor was dark; the jury bailiff's post was back in there while the twelve men beyond were deliberating; and light, even so faint as that now in the deserted courtroom, had made him blink when he came out.

When he went back and closed the first door, silence.

No sound of voices. No more rapping.

Nothing but the rattle of Scully's newspaper as he devoured his way through the sports pages. Scully had one eye on the clock while he read, and a little before one he put his paper aside and went in to call O'Mara.

STEPS rang in the corridor and Rance came in with one of his young assistants. Then more steps, heavier ones—and that was Logan Gerrick. Only half into his robe, Felix O'Mara emerged from chambers and ascended the bench. As ceremoniously as if the courtroom had been jammed, the gavel thwacked and the recently inert attendant back yonder popped up like a gray-coated jack-in-the-box.

O'Mara yawned at Scully, "No verdict? Summon the jury, Mister Clerk."

"Jury!" Scully roared.

Very faintly Bartlett could hear a tilted chair in that back hall going down on all fours, and then the tread of the bailiff's heavy soles and a knocking at the farther door. Within a minute of the court's call, the jurors entered single file and passed into their box beside the witness stand. Their bailiff was blinking again after long sitting in blackness.

Scully demanded, "Did you get that exhibit back, Cassatti?" and the bailiff shook his head.

"No, sir. I gave it to the foreman. I guess he's got it."

The jurors had ranged themselves facing the court and still were standing.

Scully turned to the box and said "Mister Foreman——"

That was as far as he got. His jaw dropped. There were only eleven men there instead of twelve. At this moment, the Engel jury was a jury without a foreman. No. 1 wasn't in the box.

Scully snapped off his glasses and snapped them on again. He shouted into the shadowy corridor, "Foreman! Foreman! Get out here."

But no reply came.

Felix O'Mara rubbed his eyes and puffed out his cheeks.

"What's this? No foreman? Where did he get to?"

The bailiff had started into the hall. Scully slipped past him, calling out again.

Bartlett, from where he stood, could see him at that inner door. It was unlocked now and when he threw it open, there was only darkness beyond. No stir.

In the jury room, Scully found a switch. Light blazed in the door frame and Scully shouted. Then he was coming back through the hall, running, his nose glasses unshipped and dangling wildly on their ribbon. His face was gray; his near-sighted eyes bulged.

"God Almighty!" he gulped. "Oh, my good God! The foreman's stretched out dead on the floor in there!"

O'Mara got up and leaned forward, staring.

"Dead?"

"Dead—with a knife in his back! Murder!"

BARTLETT'S voice, staccato, ripped a blanket of sudden profound quiet.

"Lock up, you! Don't let anybody out!" he blasted at O'Mara's lone dog-watch court attendant.

Then he dived for the corridor while others stood rooted and was already in the jury room on his knees beside the delinquent foreman when Rance and Scully raced in.

Scully had made no mistake. Diamond was dead. He lay face down with a black-handled knife buried between his shoulder blades.

Rance, disbelieving his eyes, blurted out, *"Murder?"*

Bartlett gave him a quick hard look.

"Unless it turns out he was a contortionist! Does it strike you as suicide?"

The room was filling. Felix O'Mara was there, puffing and blowing, his judicial silks all awry. The surviving jurors—all eleven of them—were there. Also Gerrick—everybody but that one court officer locking the doors outside.

And he too had joined the breathless,

staring throng within another few seconds. He came, but did not stay. With a clipped word Bartlett sent him scurrying out again to call Police Headquarters on Scully's phone.

Bartlett had got up and was dusting his knees. He was still wearing, in this warm early fall, a summer suit of cream colored linen and grime from floor boards unswept for days had ground into the light cloth as he knelt.

Behind him Rance was demanding, "Was there a quarrel? Who else was in it? Out with it, you jurors! Who stabbed this man?" Then when no response came, he rasped, "Damn it! You must know! You were all here."

A wavery thin voice—No. 6's—said:

"The lights went out. It was suddenly pitch dark. Nobody could see anything."

Confirmation came in a torrent from all sides.

"Couldn't see your hand before your face!"

"Just when the judge's call came!"

"Yes—right then! Somebody pressed the switch."

Rance shouted, "Silence! That's enough. One at a time now. Who pressed the switch?"

"The foreman did," the thin voice said.

"That's right. It was Diamond."

"I ask again," Rance chopped in, "who quarreled with him?"

Bartlett swung to the prosecutor, shook his head.

"No, Rance. It wasn't that kind of murder. Certainly not. This was planned—thought out well in advance. One thing, whoever did it had decided he wouldn't leave any fingerprints on his knife. That handkerchief there—he wrapped *that* around the haft."

The handkerchief he pointed at lay now on the floor beside Diamond. Bartlett, as he spoke, had whipped a pencil from his pocket. He stooped, drew the soft lead swiftly across the wide floor board on which the handkerchief had fallen. Then the handkerchief itself, its original position marked, was in his hand.

Felix O'Mara broke out with a roar of reproof. "What the devil! Don't you know better than to touch anything before the Homicide Squad gets here?"

"It's here," Bartlett said. "I'm part of it. I thought you knew."

Rance objected a little vaguely: "Just the same, the coroner's physician should see things exactly as we found them. Isn't that so?"

"In an ordinary case—yes," Bartlett agreed. "But not here."

HE HELD the handkerchief gingerly by a corner, lifted it under Rance's eyes. It was a cheap cotton square, rough-hemmed, and glossy with the starch of a first laundering at the mill from which it came. Starched and still creased, except where the murderer's grip had crumpled it around his knife, in the manner of handkerchiefs sold by millions in sealed, individual paper packets.

Rance said, "I don't get your point. I think you've done something you shouldn't have done."

"Maybe. If I have, the responsibility is nobody's but mine."

Bartlett tore a sheet of yellow legal cap from a pad on the long jury table, wrapped the handkerchief in it and stowed it in one of the big patch pockets of his loose linen coat.

"The fact is, Rance," he said, "that somebody now in this room outsmarted himself when he took this particular means of stumping the police. He kept his fingerprints off the knife—but still we've got him."

O'Mara cut in with a snort of impatience, "This is all absolutely offside. It's not getting anywhere."

Rufford, the bald-pated juror, spoke up crisply. "With Your Honor's permission, may we hear more from Sergeant Bartlett?" And calmly assuming assent, he looked at Bartlett. "Got the murderer, you say? With that handkerchief?"

The improvised yellow envelope rustled as Bartlett tapped the pocket which held it.

"With this handkerchief, needing nothing else. That's quite correct, Mr. Rufford. Just what I mean. Recently, the police laboratory has been able to do astonishing things in the way of bringing out latent prints. Today our experts have well developed methods of bringing them out even on cloth."

Bartlett paused, looked down at Diamond. All eyes were upon him as he went on: "Men of this jury, you men who are left, listen to me! A telegram came in only yesterday as a death warrant for Joe Engel in the murder of poor Tom Kane. And now a handkerchief will read under a microscope as the death warrant for the murderer of your foreman. A surer death warrant even than Engel's wire to Blackburg, for some might fail to accept Miss Fenton's identification of a man she saw only once.

"But, gentlemen, there's nothing uncertain about fingerprints. Every time—one hundred out of a hundred—*fingerprints get their man!*"

Rance started to speak, but Scully broke in swiftly, imperatively.

"Wait a second, Mr. Rance! There's something else screwy here. That tele-

gram—State's Exhibit C—the jury sent for it more than an hour ago. It never came back."

Again Juror No. 12, the self-possessed Rufford, raised his voice. "It was Diamond who insisted on seeing Exhibit C. The foreman himself."

Rance shot at him, "Where is it now?"

"Diamond had it last. I saw him put it in his pocket. A coat pocket—right side."

Bartlett took one step forward and one more liberty. He delved into the right hand pocket of that shabby brown coat with the knife's black handle sprouting from it.

"Are you sure?" he asked Rufford, looking up.

"Positive. I'd take an oath on it."

Bartlett straightened and faced Felix O'Mara.

"Your Honor," he said, "there's no telegram in that pocket. There's nothing in it at all."

Chapter VIII

Murderer's Handkerchief

"EXHIBIT C gone?" Rance's urbanity had gone, too. He was spluttering first, then rasping at the jurors. "The telegram can't have got out of this room. Impossible! Who has it? Speak up quick!"

No. 10—Jackson by name, a wholesale produce merchant—nodded toward No. 12.

"Rufford's right, Mr. Rance. Diamond had the exhibit when the bailiff knocked at the door and called us out. What he did with it, I didn't notice. But certainly he had the telegram. I had been looking at it myself. Had just handed it to him."

Felix O'Mara shook his robed shoulders.

"Circumstances alter cases. I think, Bartlett, we can disregard the letter of the law. Search the body!"

But there was still no telegram after every pocket in Diamond's clothing had been rummaged, and every drawer in the long table opened. The room was bare-walled, windowless, ventilated by fresh air forced through a duct near the ceiling. It afforded no place where even a slip of paper as small as a telegraph blank could be concealed. Amazingly, that appeared to be the fact.

Jim Bartlett saw it at a glance—saw many other things in the same instant. The case of People vs Engel, right now, was a mistrial. Rance would have to start all

over again with his prosecution, start from scratch. And unless the telegram were recovered, his hand on the new trial would be so weakened that he might not be able to make the rap stick.

That telegram was in Engel's handwriting. The only duplicate existing would be a typed carbon copy of the message as delivered—a copy now in the Western Union files in the Catskills—and would count for comparatively little. The longhand of the original June fourteenth message would hang Joe Engel; the carbon copy might not.

But even so, the vanishing of that yellow slip was of secondary importance in Bartlett's mind. In a flash he saw that the defense, if it already had plotted and executed one murder, would not stop at that. Next the gang finger would be on Betty Fenton. Between mistrial and retrial she would walk in the shadow of death. At any moment a bullet or knife might erase her as a factor in the case.

Everything depended on her. Surviving, she could still convict Engel. But with the original telegram gone, her death would practically floor the State. Even with half the police force to bodyguard her, she'd have small chance of coming through alive against Engel's coked-up rodmen. Vigilance must some time relax.

There was just one sure way to protect Betty, and that called for instant action. The missing wire must somehow be found. And swiftly.

Bartlett, seeing that coldly clear, wheeled to Rance.

"Maybe the quickest way to find the telegram would be to find the murderer," he said. "Looks sort of like it, doesn't it? One thing sure—he's in this group."

"A large group," Rance observed. "And if the lights were really out——"

"They were," Scully said. "They were out when I came in."

Bartlett said, "Check! I could see they were out, myself, and it's reasonable enough to accept that it was Diamond who put them out. He's lying right under the switch; that in itself fits with what the others have told us." His eyes went to Juror No. 12. "Rufford, will you please act as spokesman for your jury? Tell me, where were you all when the room went dark?"

"At the table, most of us, getting up from our chairs to answer Judge O'Mara's summons."

"Had you reached a verdict?"

"No. Diamond had held off a vote. He said there were a lot of things he wanted to think out—and I can't say that he ever impressed me as a fast thinker."

"Do you mean that there was no balloting at all?"

"None. The foreman seemed to resolve his doubts around Engel's telegram. He finally decided that he couldn't make up his mind one way or another until he had it in his hands. Several others of us decided we might as well see it, and we sent a call for it."

"You all handled it?"

"I fancy so. It was up and down the table for quite a while."

JACKSON, young and dark complexioned, reiterated: "I had it finally and Diamond asked me for it. It was very shortly after that when the lights went off. A matter of seconds."

"How did you find your way out?"

"The door into the hall was open. There was a streak of light under the other door below—light from the courtroom. That was what guided me, anyhow."

"Same here," Rufford said.

Bartlett walked over to the switch. He said, "Everybody stand tight. I want to see something."

He jabbed a finger and instantly the room was dark. He jabbed again and on came the lights.

"Okay, the streak is there. That settles that." His eyes swept the circle of jurors. "All of you," he directed, "take the positions you were in when Diamond pressed that switch. There's something I want to get at here. I'd like to reconstruct the situ-

ation of a few minutes ago. Any objections, Your Honor? None? All right then. We'll go ahead."

The eleven jurors were willing. Some, including Jackson and Rufford, seated themselves at the table. Others remained on their feet near the door.

Bartlett ordered, "Hold your positions, now, everybody. Hold them until I give you the word to start for the hall. You, Gerrick, you get out in the hall and stay there. You're not in this. And Judge O'Mara—would you mind stepping out, too?"

Rance wore a small frown. "I don't see much sense in this to tell you the truth, Bartlett," he said.

"It's standard stuff with the Homicide Squad," Bartlett assured him. "Reconstruction. Just plain everyday reconstruction. Sometimes it gets us somewhere, sometimes it doesn't. We try it whenever we can. With everybody locked in, murderer included, strikes me there could never be a better chance than this one."

Rance's frown passed. "I'll have to concede, at least," he said, "that you're one man at Headquarters who has always proved to know his business. So have your party, Bartlett. Do you want me to leave the room, too?"

"Not you. I want you here. For the next couple of minutes I'd like to have you take the place of a man who can't play his own part. Diamond's place. I want you—if you please—at the switch."

Rance stiffened. "Dead man's shoes, is it? You want the lights out?"

"That's the idea. But let them stay on until I say the word."

Bartlett moved among the now motionless eleven and then gave attention to the jury bailiff.

"Cassatti, where were you?"

"Here in the hall, Sergeant. I had just opened the door when the foreman—if it was him—doused the lights. I didn't see nothing. I didn't hear nothing. Everybody was coming for me all at once and the noise of trampling——"

"I thought of that," Bartlett said. "Twelve men walking on a bare floor—well, eleven—would make quite a racket. You just stay where you were, Cassatti, and we'll get it going. . . . Everybody ready?"

RUFFORD turned at the table. "Let's get this clear. What are we to do?"

"Hold everything until I clap my hands. Then all of you take, as near as you can remember, the same course you did when Cassatti opened the door and Diamond put out the lights. But—not a move until you hear the hand-clap!"

Bartlett nodded at Rance, now standing beside that ghastly sprawled brown figure on the floor.

"All right!" he said. "Hit the switch!"

Rance hit it. Darkness succeeded light. Utter darkness in which no man could see his neighbor. Seconds passed—slow tense seconds—but there was no hand-clap. Only one person was moving in the black room, and that was Bartlett. Rance presently thought he could see that light suit flitting here, flitting there.

Rufford called from the table, *"When?"* and his voice was keyed higher than it had been.

"Can you see me?" Bartlett asked him.

"Can't see a damn thing," Rufford said. Then he changed that. "Yes, I believe I can just make out where you are. The light clothes help."

Immediately, Bartlett brought his palms cracking together and the silence broke in a quick scraping of chairs and pounding of shoe leather.

Rance, by the switch, thought suddenly of the dead man at his feet, thought of that man's murderer groping sightless somewhere near him. A shudder swept over him. He wanted mightily to click that switch again, but Bartlett's voice rose to warn him against doing it.

"Don't touch it, Rance! No light; not yet!"

Then directly there was an abrupt outcry—a screamed oath. A spurt of orange colored flame speared at the same instant

through the darkness. A gun banged and something thudded into the wall just above Rance's head.

He fumbled desperately for the switch, and before his finger was on it there was a crash. With the light on, he saw the heavy jury table overturned—saw two struggling figures rolling away from it.

The bright light was dazzling after no light at all. Rance's eyes were slow to tell him who the grimly wrestling pair were.

ONE wore cream linen and was Jim Bartlett. The other wore gray. He had a pistol in a hand whose wrist was gripped and safely anchored above his head by the Headquarters man.

Rance's eyes popped. The gray suit was a court uniform, the man in it Cassatti, the jury bailiff.

The fight was over then. The gun dropped and Bartlett snatched for it and scrambled up. Cassatti lay limp, a great red welt showing where powerful fingers had gripped his sallow throat. Bartlett bent over him. A flat brass button, torn loose, went jingling across the floor as he ripped open the bailiff's coat. In another moment he was holding aloft a yellow folded paper.

"Your lost exhibit, Rance," he panted. "And a knife killer!" He stopped to get breath, spoke again. "I sort of thought somebody might be interested enough in that handkerchief to try to get it from me. There's the man who tried—the man who had Exhibit C. Would you say we had the makings of a murder case on him?"

Cassatti was sitting up. His eyes fixed on Logan Gerrick, staring in at him from the hall. Gerrick's full cheeks were bloodless, suddenly shrunken in.

"It was *him!*" he cried. "Gerrick—he made me do it! He bribed the foreman to get that telegram. And told me I had to kill him to shut his mouth. Gerrick had me on the spot. He knew I killed another guy once. I'm going to tell everything. I'll tell about the other killing, too. Everything I know!"

Outside sounded a thumping at the double doors leading from the corridor into the courtroom. Gerrick, running down the jury hall a moment later, was met and swept back by an avalanche of Homicide Squad men racing in. There were a dozen of them, a grizzled veteran at their head. Rance recognized him—Foran, the Captain in night command at the Detective Bureau.

Foran's practiced eyes traveled rapidly. They took in many things, last of them a handkerchief in Sergeant Bartlett's hand. Bartlett was waving that handkerchief as if it meant something.

"The big clue!" He insisted on being heard. "It caught a murderer!"

Foran was not easily excited. His glance at Diamond had been brief. Dead men with knives in them were familiar stock in his trade. The handkerchief was more interesting.

He echoed, "Caught a murderer? Yeah? How?"

"In the first place, fingerprints."

Foran was not impressed.

"Fingerprints on cloth? Is that the best you got? You dumb cluck, the laboratory couldn't raise a latent out of a piece of goods like that one time out of fifty!"

Jim Bartlett looked at Rance. He looked at Judge Felix O'Mara. He looked a little longer at Logan Gerrick, longer yet at Bailiff Cassatti. And looking at all of them, Bartlett looked not unpleased with himself.

"Once in fifty, Captain?" he murmured. Then he grinned. "They must be getting good in the lab. Last thing I heard, the average for catching fingerprints on cloth was once in a hundred. What I *mean*, Skipper, this handkerchief worked into one ace come-on for a guy with a guilty conscience!"

An Absent-minded Man Finds That the Spots of a Leopard Are Not Easily Changed

SPOTS OF THE LEOPARD

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "Wolf Devil," "The Silent Hour," etc.

THE majority of the people in the Little Smoky Mountain section were unaware of the fact that an absent-minded man is often a man with rare ability to concentrate, a thinker. They were still laughing at Bob Telford for throwing his gloves into the fire and spitting on the mantel, when he walked into Ahab Ruttle's cross-roads hamlet store, pointed to a jack-knife in the notions showcase and walked out with a pair of screaming-red suspenders. No wastrel with words was Bob. Neither was old Ahab.

On the platform in front of the store, Telford came to himself and found a package in his hand and no jack-knife in his pocket. He opened the package, frowned. A voice drawled from a point nearby:

"Them shore air purty. Only plum' red 'uns Ahab had. I been a-wishin' I war able to buy 'em, i-gonnies, fer a month."

It was a scraggly-bearded, jeans-clad, rusty-booted lout whom some logging foreman had nicknamed "Minus." The fellow did lack intelligence, but he had his share of cunning. Then to the stalwart Telford's ears there came another voice, one that was feminine and musical.

"Hello, Bob."

He jerked his head around. "Hel-hello, Kate."

She was a handsome and wholesome-looking young woman, neat in a freshly-laundered percale dress. With her was her brother, the deputy that the Johnsboro sheriff kept on Little Smoky. Bob Telford did not speak to Dave Ensley, nor Dave to Bob. It was a bitterness that dated back fifty years and to a fight between a Telford dog and an Ensley dog in a log church.

Mountain mission schools had taught Kate Ensley the truth about hate. Also, they had taught her something concerning taste in wearing apparel. Her topaz eyes ran over Bob's clay-colored corduroys, drab Stetson hat, much scuffed logging-boots. She observed, quietly:

"The suspenders are pretty red, Bob, don't you think?"

Telford wasn't going to admit that he'd been wool-gathering again. Not in the presence of Dave Ensley! He heard himself saying:

"They'll go right well with my new blue suit."

He had flushed deeply under his bronze. Dave Ensley was of an age with Telford, twenty-four, not old enough to be very wise. He laughed at Bob's discomfiture. It was a big laugh of mingled amusement and derision, and it cut.

"Stop that, Dave!" his sister cried resentfully.

Telford went white. There was bleak rage in his speech. "Take off your badge and gun, and I'll——"

No, he wouldn't. Kate had stepped in between them. Kate, the only Ensley worth shooting. He turned away. Minus Higdon's silly grin evaporated. What a fight that would have been! The girl led her brother into the store. Suddenly Telford realized that he was about to walk into Unc' Johnny Green, billygoat-bearded and bespectacled Little Smoky magistrate, institution more than man. Unc' Johnny had seen and heard.

"Wait, Bob," he muttered. "I hate to see the tail o' the old Telford-Ensley feud thrashin' around thataway. It's cost enough in bloodshed, already. You're the only Telford left. And you're a big Telford, biggest of 'em all, even if you do choose to be a sort o' lone wolf, hardly ever botherin' to even talk to anybody. Wolf? No, not wolf, but leopard, because leopards has got spots. Meanin' shortcomin's. It says in the Book: 'Can the leopard change its spots?' The answer is, it can!"

THE younger man was still white. He said nothing. Unc' Johnny went on. "Bob, anybody that's got brains enough to do what you've done—take a pair o' mules and clear a hundred dollars a month doin' sub-contract loggin' for the big companies, and at the same time nearly educate himself through 'sociatin' with lumbermen —ought to have brains enough to keep his head any time and any place."

"Thanks for the sermon," Telford said bitterly. "You missed your callin', Unc' Johnny. You ought to been a preacher."

He strode off homeward. Old Magistrate Green shook his head slowly, and muttered, "Spots. Spots o' the leopard."

But Telford was mollified somewhat. Unc' Johnny's talk of logging had done it. Bob had been seriously considering the purchase of four more pairs of mules and equipment to fit, hiring four helpers, and taking on more important logging contracts. The matter filled his mind now. When he reached the old two-story, hewn-log house that he had been born in, that he had lived in alone for six years, Dave Ensley was forgotten.

Darkness was coming on. He lighted an oil lamp on the livingroom table, and fished more than a hundred dollars in banknotes from a trousers pocket. It represented his logging profits for the month just past. A little quick figuring in his head, and he smiled. This made fourteen hundred and forty dollars that he had in cold cash—not in any bank that might break, but right there in the house—enough to buy the mules and equipment.

Under his breath he hummed an old hill song as he went about preparing a supper for himself.

About mid-afternoon of the next day, Bob Telford was snaking a poplar log out of a hidden cove and toward a bank of little Mad Jane's River when two men stepped out of the laurels and confronted him with ready revolvers. They were grizzled Nathan Wyman, the Johnsboro sheriff, and Dave Ensley, his deputy.

Telford stopped his mules. He growled, "Who you lookin' for?"

"You," Wyman said. "Dave felt that you'd think there was personal feeling back of it if he arrested you, and so he got me to come up. Don't give us any trouble, Bob. It'll only count against you."

"I'll be damned!" burst out Telford. "You, Dave, you're not man enough to take me, and had to send for Sheriff Wyman! Sheriff, what am I supposed to have done? Murder? Highway robbery? Arson? Or was it just because I invited Dave to take off his badge and gun so's I could thrash him?"

"If you don't know," the senior officer said, "Magistrate Green will tell you. Give me your word that you won't try to escape, and I won't handcuff you, Bob. Eh?"

"I won't give you my word for anything," was the fiery response. "I've broke no law, and you're not goin' to put me in your jail without a scrap your grandchildren will talk about. Not that I object to

bein' tried before Green. Unc' Johnny gives everybody a straight deal. Here—put the irons on, if you just got to; and when I'm ready to have 'em knocked off, I'll have 'em knocked off."

He did not say that in a boastful manner. He said it in the manner of one who is merely stating a fact. They manacled his wrists, took out his mules and led them to their shed and corral on the nearer river bank, went on with him to the Little Smoky hamlet.

GRAPEVINE telegraph had spread the news, and the single short street was lined with silent, curious hillfolk. Bob Telford, as straight as any pine, looking neither to left nor to right, walked so fast that sheriff and deputy were hard put to keep pace with him. One wag whispered that Bob was taking Wyman and Ensley to the magistrate, not vice versa.

Billygoat-bearded old Unc' Johnny Green was ready behind the scarred desk in his log-walled office next door to Ahab Ruttle's store. Open before him were the two books that he used to guide him in his adminis-

tration of justice—an ancient Bible and a battered copy of Shannon's Code of Tennessee Law. He lifted his gaze above the rims of his spectacles at the clatter of boot-heels on the threshold, was not one whit surprised to see that Kate Ensley was stealing in behind her officer brother.

The place filled rapidly then. In spite of himself, the taciturn lone-wolf prisoner had held the limelight for long on Little Smoky. The fact that he was the last of the fighting Telfords would have ensured this, had he not been the man apart that he was.

He took his place before the desk and looked down upon Green with a very slight, half amused, half angry smile. Green proceeded with the preliminary trial in his own particular way.

"Robert Telford, I regret to say that you are charged with breakin' into and robbin' Ahab Ruttle's store last night. Guilty, or not guilty?"

"What're you askin' me a fool question like that for, Unc' Johnny?" bit out the accused.

Green blinked upward. He believed firmly that the prisoner was innocent, but he dared not establish any precedent that might mean difficulty for him in the future.

"Guilty, or not guilty, Bob?"

"Not guilty!" Telford answered in the tones he used when swearing at his eternally intractible mules.

Unc' Johnny had no word of reproof. He reached into a desk drawer, took out a pair of screaming-red suspenders that were ripped a little at the cross, and held them up. Now it was the accused that blinked. There was a good deal of whispering in the crowd behind him. Green said:

"You bought these yesterday, Bob, from Ahab Ruttle. Only plum' red ones he had. Ahab heard a noise in the store last night, and he slipped in, and grabbled with the robber, and they fell. Ahab's head hit somethin', and it dizzied him. When he come to he was grippin' these suspenders in one hand, had tore 'em off o' the robber. Was countin' money when you happened in yeste'day, he said, and it—er, it's thought by some that you seen him countin', and that you—er, bein' such a fool over money ——"

"Another spot o' the leopard, huh?" interrupted Telford. "Unc' Johnny, Minus Higdon is the one that was in the store last night. He was crazy about them red suspenders, and he's robbed my house while

I slept—I work, and at night I sleep—and later he's broke into the store. Have Minus brought up here, and I'll make him own up that he did!"

"Bring Minus, Dave," Green said to Deputy Ensley.

But Higdon was nowhere to be found!

It lent strength to Telford's argument, but not strength enough. The law required that he put up a cash bond that would make sure of his reporting to court at the county seat for trial at its next term. A hundred dollars would be about right, the old magistrate decided. His eyes twinkled. The smart young Johnsboro prosecuting attorney wouldn't make much off Bob Telford. It would be a rare show, that trial.

Sheriff Wyman and Deputy Ensley escorted Telford, still in irons, to his home that he might get the bond money. In the center of the old log-walled living room, Bob halted and faced about. He disliked having anybody at all know where he kept his savings. The hiding place was perfect, and fireproof. There being no help for it, Bob turned suddenly and walked to the worn old stone hearth. The officers followed.

THEY saw him take up a blackened iron poker, and with it lever out of place one of the large, flat stones. Below there was a hole in the dry clay. Suddenly Bob Telford rose gasping. His hoard of fourteen hundred and forty dollars was gone!

"I see," he muttered. "We've always thought Minus Higdon was some cracked. Well, he ain't. He follered me from the store yesterday, thinkin' to steal the suspenders, and peeped through a window there, and saw me put last month's clear hundred dollars in with the rest o' my money. He waited until I was asleep, and then stole the money and the suspenders too!"

"The hole is empty, all right," Ensley told his superior officer.

Nathan Wyman had seen that for himself. He was at once suspicious. The average mountain man would never have taken a thing like this as quietly as Telford had taken it. He didn't know Bob Telford, that sheriff. Dave Ensley did, but Dave was an Ensley.

"Then you'll have to stay in jail until time for your trial, Bob," Wyman said in tones that were more or less steely. "Get hold of his arm there, Dave, and don't——"

It was like trying to handle a box—not a mere stick, but a box—of exploding dynamite, the Johnsboro sheriff remarked afterward. Neither he nor his deputy had a gun unleathered. The prisoner made a bashing iron-headed club of his manacled wrists, knocked both officers sprawling, and was gone before they realized what had happened!

From behind an oak a little way up the mountainside, Telford watched Nathan Wyman and Dave Ensley make their way back to the cross-roads hamlet, saw Wyman mount his horse and ride away toward the low country. Then Telford set out for the rocky road that the sheriff was traveling. He followed it for half a mile.

He was just ready to turn into a dim side trail in thick laurels when Kate Ensley appeared as though out of nowhere at all. She was smiling half fearsomely. He frowned at her.

"You little devil," he said, "you're the cause o' all this!"

Amazed, she stammered: "But—but I'm not. How could I be?" He didn't answer, and she went on, the half fearsome smile returning: "I saw all anybody could 'a' seen from up there on the mountainside, Bob. What're you followin' the sheriff for?"

"To make sure he don't turn back and play fox," sharply said Bob, "and because one o' my few friends lived down this road—and out that little trail there a piece. Gran Slagle the old 'seng-digger, I mean. I kept her from starvin' in that main cold spell last winter, and I reckoned she might do me a favor or so. Helpin' me take these handcuffs off, for one thing. And tellin' me where to find Minus Higdon, for an-

other. You don't happen to know where that weasel lives, Kate, do you?"

"Funny, but I don't. He's an odd one. Now you see him, and now you don't. You think he did steal them red suspenders, Bob?"

"I wouldn't have said so, if I didn't. And while he was about it, he carried off a hatful o' banknotes I'd saved up to go into big loggin' with, damn him. 'Scuse me, Kate. Good-bye."

He disappeared in the laurel-choked dim trail. Soon a dilapidated log cabin loomed ahead of him. On the doorstep a wizened crone with a cold clay pipe in her mouth sat dreaming. Telford halted and spoke.

"La, la, la!" creaked the old ginseng-digger, climbing to her rheumatic feet. "Ef hit ain't Bob Telford! Whut brang you'un hyar, Bob?"

HE INDICATED his ironed wrists and jerked his chin toward an ax and a chopping-block in the guttered dooryard. Muttering unintelligible fragments of imprecations, Granny Slagle limped from her doorstep. Again Deputy Dave Ensley's sister bobbed up as though out of nowhere, and her strong young hands beat the crone's withered claws to the ax.

Silently, but with a strange gleam in his eye, the last lone Telford stretched the small manacles chain on the block, Kate lifted the heavy blade, measured the blow, and brought it down hard, severing the chain. Telford straightened and pushed the separated cuffs up his sleeves and out of sight.

"Much obliged," he told the girl bluntly. To the old woman: "Gran, you 'most always know things. Where'll I be likely to find Minus Higdon?"

Here was proof of the fact that all luck can't be bad. "Minus," drawled Granny Slagle, "air asleep thar in my house. Brang some grub hyar, and I cooked hit fer we-'uns—cooked a dishrag in the beans by mistake, but he'un never noticed—and 'en Minus got sleepy. Had some money. Don't know whar he got hit. I reckon Minus war up late last night, Bob, mebbe."

"Your reckonin's correct," Telford said, after an exchange of glances with Kate Ensley.

He strode into the cabin and came back dragging the scraggly-bearded lout by one leg. Higdon was blinking, grunting, flailing his arms. When he had seen that he was in Bob Telford's hands, he became quiet. There was fear in his beady eyes. Then he blurted:

"Say, what—what——?"

"Am I goin' to do with you?" Telford growled. "Make you talk, that's what. You, Gran. Fetch me some lampoil, and a match, and some rope. Mind if I tie Minus to one o' them runty peachtrees there?"

"No!" shrieked Higdon. "No! I'll tell, Bob—I'll tell!"

"All right." Telford winked slyly at the Ensley girl. Then he jerked Minus Higdon to his feet, caught his belt behind, and marched him toward the Little Smoky cross-roads hamlet.

Kate followed for a few rods, then vanished in the laurels. Telford was puzzled for a moment over that.

Unc' Johnny Green and Deputy Dave Ensley were in the magistrate's office, talking and smoking cigars that the sheriff had left, when Bob arrived with the now sullen lout. For once Telford had beaten the grapevine telegraph of the Smokies, and old Green opened the preliminary trial without a crowd of gaping onlookers. Pinned down hard, Minus Higdon admitted that he had taken the red suspenders from the logger's home, and, afterward, broken into Ahab Ruttle's store.

"There!" exclaimed Telford. "Told you, Unc' Johnny, didn't I? Dave, unlock these triple-derned cuffs and take 'em off!"

"Who cut 'em?" growled Dave.

"I'll never tell, long as I live. Take 'em off, will you?"

ENSLEY looked toward Green for advice. Green nodded, and the deputy removed the separated manacles. Telford

was enjoying this triumph so much that he was in no great haste to bring up the matter of his missing hoard. He reached to Unc' Johnny's desk for one of Nathan Wyman's cigars and a match, lighted the cigar, then absent-mindedly tossed it into the sawdust-box cuspidor and thrust the still hot, blackened match into his mouth. Green laughed. So did Ensley, in spite of himself.

"Another one o' my leopard spots, Unc' Johnny, I reckon," Bob drawled complacently. "All right, Minus. Talkin' to you now. That big wad o' cash you took out o' the hole under a hearth rock in my house—where'd you hide it?"

Ensley's search of Higdon's clothing had turned up less than a dollar. Higdon whined, "That thar money Dave found on me, I earned hit a-shootin' craps at the log-camp last night, a-startin' on a nickel which I'd found in the store on the counter. I never got nothin' else in thar, nuther!"

"Tell that to the hoot-owls!" Telford bit out.

Kate Ensley called from the street door, interrupting: "Let that go, Bob, and come here. Stay where you are, Dave. And you, Unc' Johnny."

There was in her voice that which compelled obedience. Wondering, Telford strode to her. She caught his sleeve and drew him out, and around a corner of the log building. There she spoke again, in very low tones:

"I got your money, Bob."

"You!"

"Yes, me. I'll give it to you after you've answered a question, and not before." Her topaz-brown eyes were quite steady. "What made you say that I was the cause o' all this?"

He reddened a little. Straightforwardly he said, "Want to know, do you? All right. Hadn't been for you, Kate, dog-gone you, I'd 'a' left Little Smoky and went West six years ago. I'd had a notion it—uh, it'd be a whoppin' good end to that crazy old feud if you and me was to marry. Only Dave would object much, and you're his pet sister, and he'd be shakin' hands with me in a week. I even decided to use my savin's for buyin' new furniture for the old house, and clothes for you, fine clothes, and a automobile for you. Now, Kate, dog-gone you, you know, and what're you aimin' to do about it?"

"No, sir!" stoutly said that wholesome girl. "No, sir, Bob! You won't buy furniture, nor any clothes for me, nor any automobiles; you'll go into big loggin', just like you meant. And forget what Unc' Johnny said about leopard spots. He's got some o' his own. I've got 'em. Dave's got 'em. Everybody has got 'em. Anyway, a pe'-fectly white leopard wouldn't be a leopard!

"You wonderin'," she went on, "how I come by this money? Listen."

She took from inside her bodice a very thick sheaf of banknotes, pressed it into his hands, hastened on:

"Down there at Gran Slagle's I remembered about you throwin' your gloves into the fire and spittin' on the mantel, and all at once I thought I had the answer I wanted. I ran a streak for your house, and searched through it. You didn't hide your money under the hearth, Bob, like you thought. You put the suspenders under the hearth—and saved your money from Minus Higdon by your absent-mindedness! Them awful red suspenders; they'd 'go well with your new blue suit,' would they?"

She finished that, laughing merrily. His grin was a trifle awkward. "But," he said, "you didn't tell me where you found this cash, did you, Kate?"

Again the girl laughed. "Bob," eyes twinkling now with mischief, "I've got somethin' to hold over your head the rest o' your life. I found all that money in your kitchen garbage-can."

GARVEY GETS A HUNCH

By HOWARD NOSTRAND

Author of "The Spirit of Bobville," "Winged Steers," etc.

NOBODY who had been christened Percival Israel Garvey should ever have gone out West to seek his fortune. It did not help at all that he came from good New England stock, and that his double-barrelled cognomen was a combination, an honoring of two well-to-do uncles who had the effrontery to die poor, leaving him nothing but their ill-assorted monickers for remembrance.

The two-handled appellation was a tender thing that required constant careful guarding, and many an eye-blacking reprisal; for some sagebrush humorist was forever calling him "Percy, deah" or "Izzy, mine friendt" with appropriate accent and devastating result.

At nineteen, he was a cowhand with the Tumbling B outfit, and as good a man as any—only he had to prove it more often. But the culminating indignity lurked in oblivion for ten years, and then he himself brought it to light.

He had become foreman of the ranch, and one day it was necessary for him to sign for a delivery of stock from a neighbor. Carelessly he scrawled his initials: "P. I. G." and immediately became "Pig" Garvey. He never lived it down—"Pork" Garvey, "Sausage" Garvey, "Sow-belly" Garvey—world without end. Amen.

There were compensations, however; it kept him in practice, aided him to be a success in the vocation that turned out to be his life's work—he was elected Sheriff of Clayton County, and held the office, despite politics, changing ways of living, and hell and high water, for over forty years.

When the Court House was built, P. I. Garvey was given an office in it. Duckboards gave way before cement sidewalks; he still looked out upon busy Main Street from his sanctum on the second floor. The Clayton City Municipal Traction Corporation laid tracks, erected poles, and imported four shiny tan trolley-cars; he gazed at the bustling thoroughfare from the same place. Gasoline driven buses eventually replaced the now ancient vehicles; and the old man watched the change through the wide window of the room that had aged with him.

Tall he was, and thin; and his seventy-one years must have passed swiftly and lightly, for his step was springy, and his eyes were clear.

It was ten o'clock of a Friday morning early in June, and he was sitting at his desk, staring at the traffic signal recently installed at the corner of Pike and Main Streets. The coat of his "blue business man's suit, best quality serge, double-stitched seams, full, roomy pockets—send ten cents in stamps for our complete catalogue" hung behind him on the back of the swivel chair; while the trousers of the same were undergoing a slight repair at the hands of Deputy Peter Jameson, who had learned to sew in the Navy.

The sheriff's long drawers were coyly hidden by furniture, but his eyes strayed nervously to the doorknob under which a chair had been wedged.

"For Gawd's sake, Pete!" he exclaimed. "Git a move on, will yuh? I'm gittin' as

fidgety as an old maid in her petticoat. Yuh had time tuh put in a whole new seat."

"Well," said his assistant, resting for a moment—he was one of those tailors who try to complete a job without rethreading, and his right arm was tired from the continuous raising of the needle high above his head—"I never kin figure out why yuh buy yer clothes from a catalogue. It ain't as if yuh was a sourdough gettin' ready fer a vacation in Frisco. We got plenty stores right here in town that's just as cheap, and they'll fit yuh."

"I been buyin' m'clothes from Philadelphy," came the answer, "sence before you was a-wearin' somethin' held on with a safety-pin, and I'm not a-goin' tuh change at this late date. Every year I gits me a mail-order book, an' I looks over the pictures. Then I says, 'I want that one,' and I gits it. No slick feller starts a-sayin', 'Now, Sheriff, you will surely be int'rested in this model direckly from Broadway,' an' all that kind of fumadiddle.

"When I makes up muh mind, I jes' writes an' says I want Model 24KN 422, size forty-two, with thutty-two inches from crotch tuh bottom of trousers—an' that's all they is to it."

"Yeah," said Pete, "only that don't take into account the width of yer seat; and that's where the trouble is."

"'Tain't so," answered the old man indignantly, "an' you know it. The half of m'handcuffs was a-hangin' outa muh back pocket so's they caught on the handle of the door whilst I was a-gittin' outa m'car this mornin'. Don't be so all-fired ornery."

ONCE more he turned to watch the black box with its alternating red and green light. Each time it changed, a bell rang, and the old fellow winced.

"Doggone!" he exclaimed at last. "'Nuff tuh wake the dead—an' no sense to it."

"What?" asked Pete.

"That confounded alarm clock it's got in its insides," he answered. "They got no call tuh be disturbin' the peace an' quiet with that God-awful racket."

"Peace and quiet?" grinned his deputy. "In this part o' town?"

The sheriff cleared his throat. "There is a ordinance in this here municipality," he said, "about creatin' unnecessary disturbances—an' that there is it. I'm a-goin' tuh stop it. Mebbe I ain't got no more authority inside the city limits, but I'm still a resident an' taxpayer; an' I spanked Bart Williams oncet fer tootin' a bugle at two o'clock in the mornin' on that same identical corner. Now he's Chief o' Police, but he's still doin' the same thing, an' I aims tuh spank him agin."

He reached for the telephone.

"What you goin' tuh do?" queried Pete.

"Young feller," came the answer, "I been patient with yuh long enough—you git them pants done."

Taking the receiver off the hook, he hunched over the instrument and shouted, "Gimme Police Headquarters!"

The girl down at the switchboard flinched, snatched off her headpiece, and remarked to Joe, the porter, as she plugged the call, "I bet Old Man Garvey'll never learn that electricity takes the place of lungs.

If he poked his head out of the window anybody in town could hear him, and he only wants the Municipal Building next door."

"That you, Bart?" the sheriff bellowed. "Yep—Garvey. Listen, in this here State yuh cain't drive no autymobile if'n yer color-blind, kin yuh?"

He chewed on a fringe of drooping mustache as nasal sounds came out of the ear-piece. From time to time he nodded his head.

"Yeah," he cut in, "I know. The reason I'm askin' is I wanta know what in the seven brass-plated little hinges o' hell is the use of that all-fired bell a-ding-dongin' all day long in the traffic light. If'n a man's drivin', he's a-watchin' fer it t' change; and if'n he's dozin' at the wheel, the feller behind him'll wake him up in a hurry. If'n yuh want it fer blind men, they ain't supposed t'drive nohow; and if'n they're a-walkin', they waits tuh be led acrost—and anyways, so fur as I know, they ain't a blind pusson, man, woman, child, or Chinaman, in the whole o' Clayton County."

Again the receiver squawked. The old man's jaw dropped a little. Finally he nodded and hung up.

"What'd he say?" asked Pete.

"They don't want it neither," answered the sheriff. "They ain't nobody wants it—it jes' come with the outfit. Only they don't crave tuh touch it, on account it ain't been approved yet."

He began to chuckle. "Durn buzzard! Tole me tuh stuff cotton in muh ears."

His deputy snapped the thread with a quick jerk. "Here y'are," he said, tossing over the completed garment. "Now be careful so yuh don't pop through 'em again."

The old fellow sighed as he clothed his long legs and stood up. Wriggling his green galluses into their accustomed place on his shoulders, he smiled and said, "Yuh kin now open that door."

In a conversational tone he continued, "It's funny how a pair o' britches kin put confidence into a man. I mind me o' the time Jim Judson come to a New Year's party with Sairey Kent, an' somehow he busted his seat out a-liftin' her down from the buckboard. All evenin' he sat in a corner with a blanket roun' himself, and the prespiration a-drippin' off'n his chin, a-claimin' tuh be havin' chills.

"Sairey was real put out about it, because anybody could tell he didn't have no

fever. Finally he told one o' the boys, and in no time a-tall everybody knew what 'twas."

He fell silent, walked to the window, and gazed off at the pine trees dotting the side of Clark Mountain.

"How'd he take it?" asked Pete. "I bet he was sore."

"Waal, son," said the other musingly, "I don't guess he was real sore, though he claimed tuh be. He perked right up after I fetched him a pair of overalls, and 'twas only a couple o' days later they was tellin' the folks how they was a-goin' tuh git hitched. Prob'ly them extry britches give him the confidence he needed."

WHILE he was speaking, his attention had been drawn to a black coupé that had pulled up in front of the Eagle Market across the street. A man of about twenty-six, in khaki jodhpurs and gray flannel shirt, hopped out and hurried into the store. He was hatless, but his black, curly hair was as neatly slicked into place as if he had just had it brushed—or as if he had glued it down.

"There!" snorted Garvey. "There's somethin' else bothers me considerable."

Pete came to the window, squinted in the direction of his chief's glare, and grinned. "Speakin' of pants," he said, "that's a contradiction for yuh. He's the most confident critter I ever did see, and it ain't because of his clothes, neither. I bet he'd be confident in red flannel underwear—or in a grass skirt."

"Waal," stated the sheriff slowly, "if'n he was a woman, he might be called a brazen huzzy; but seein' he's a man, they's only one thing I kin think of—and I wouldn't smile when I said it."

He lifted his coat from the chair and fought his way into it. "I've known him sence he was knee-high to a grasshopper, and I was proud as anybody when he come back t' take charge o' the Tumbling B. I went all the way out there special jes' tuh say 'Howdy'—an' mebbe advise him a bit. An' what does he do practic'ly tell me t' go tuh hell.

" 'Good mornin', Hank,' I says to him—we was a-standin' right in the office from where I bossed that outfit fer nigh onta six years while Old Man Laydon was off chasin' rainbows with his sassiety wife.

"He looks at me fer a long time, like I was somethin' gone wrong with a cow's hind laig, and then he says, 'Oh yes, Mister P. I. Garvey—I didn't reckanize yuh right away, Mister Garvey. It's been so long sence I seen yuh.'

" 'Oh indeed,' says I. 'Waal it'll be a hell of a lot longer nex' time.' And that was that."

"Why now, that seems right polite to me," said Pete. "You got to remember he's been to college and all."

"If'n yer foolin'," said the sheriff, "I ain't in no mood fer it; and if'n yer serious, I'm sorry fer yer stupidity."

He headed for the door.

"Where you goin'?" asked the other.

The old man spun around and stared grimly. "I'm a-goin' over acrost tuh the Eagle Market, and I'm a-goin' tuh ask Mister Henry Barton what the idee is of his sellin' off every last confounded head of stock they was on the Tumbling B. He's plumb ruint the place."

Pete shrugged as the sheriff whirled and plunged out of the room. He saw him trudge purposefully across the street, and he watched while the interview was in progress, although the men were visible from the waist down only, and legs and feet don't tell much.

SUDDENLY, however, the meat clerk at his place near the plate-glass window snapped from somnolent contemplation of nothing at all, scurried around the chopping block, and rushed toward the spot where the deputy had been viewing blue trousers and khaki jodhpurs.

They were no longer in evidence. Instead, there was a jumble of white aprons, any number of lower limbs, and as many slithering feet.

"The old son-of-a-gun!" exclaimed Pete, and hurried out to see if his conjecture was correct.

It was.

Four of the clerks were holding the sheriff's arms, hanging on for dear life while he struggled to get at Henry Barton who, lips parted in a tooth-revealing grin, was standing calmly behind a protecting wall of more white-coated attendants.

The deputy shoved Abe Stern, the proprietor—wringing his hands like a nervous woman watching a dog fight—to one side, and dove through the swaying mass of starched clothing.

"Hey, Sheriff!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Yuh gone and ripped yer pants again!"

As if he had been stirred to frenzy by an electric current and it had suddenly gone dead, the old man ceased his efforts.

"My Gawd!" he said. "Lemme outa here!"

They let him go; he dashed blindly away and over into the protecting dimness of the Court House corridor.

Operator Number Ten of the Clayton City Municipal Traction Corporation shook

his head and shifted back into low, moving the bus from the black marks on the macadam where he'd brought the monster to a screeching stop as the old fellow had darted unseeingly into its path. Not until he had reached Mission Boulevard two blocks away did his face lose the concentrated look that had been on it. Then he grinned and glanced into the rearview mirror at the five passengers, who were likewise recovering.

"That was Sheriff Garvey," he announced, as if he were the lecturer on a rubberneck car showing off one of the city's landmarks. "Prob'ly he's got a crime wave on his hands."

Back in the Court House thunderous speech rumbled down the hall, and the forked lightning of vituperation played around the blonde thatch of the deputy, who had just entered the office and was leaning against the wall, waiting for the storm to subside. At last a ray of sunlight broke through as the old fellow stopped glaring and finished plaintively, "Doggone, Pete, why'd yuh go an' lie tuh me? Muh pants is all right."

"Well," said the offender, "I didn't like to see yuh makin' a fool of yerself, and there ain't no use tryin' to annihilate a feller when yer hands is bein' hung onto. From the way we'd just been talkin' I figgered you're a whole lot more partic'lar about yer seat than about the rest of yer anatomy, so it popped inta my head, and I hollered it."

"Sure did take the fire outa me," admitted the sheriff, smiling. "Yuh got no idee the picture I had o' muhself."

"Yuh blushed some," Pete informed him. "I never would of believed it."

"Waal, son," the other went on, "bygones is bygones—let's fergit it. Only I got tuh thank yuh fer bringin' me t' muh senses. I shouldn't of flown off the handle."

"Yeah—why did yuh?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the old man, flaring up again. "That there polecat! He was busy orderin' stuff, and I waited nice and calm until he got through talkin' tuh young Curtis. Then I says, 'Mornin', Mister Barton.'

"An' he says, 'Good mornin'—sow-belly!'"

"Hm," mused Pete, "seems to be out after trouble. That don't look any too much like a friendly way o' talkin'—everything bein' considered."

"O' course," said the sheriff mildly enough, "from his point o' view I'm prob'ly jes' a meddlin' ole fool. With all his education he should ought tuh know what he's about. But I got kind of a pussonal int'rest in that there ranch, and I'm plumb flabbergasted."

"You ain't but hinted things," said the deputy. "I cain't read yer mind. What's all the shootin' for anyhow?"

"THREE things," stated the other, "Mebbe four. Old Man Laydon dies leavin' everything to his daughter in school som'eres back East, and there ain't a better piece o' propitty in these parts—blue ribbon bulls and all.

"Then this here slick-haired Barton turns up with authorization from the executors of the will t' take charge o' things. He's king pin—power of attorney an' I dunno what not. Everything goes on smooth as silk—Tumbling B had a fine bunch o' hands—until this spring, when suddenly he starts lettin' the help go, hirin' strangers, an' sellin' out. Some o' them bulls, wuth close to a thousand dollars apiece, he practic'ly give away fer a couple o' hundred—I know folks that bought 'em.

"But he collects a sizeable sum—nigh onto a hundred thousand, I calc'late—and nobody ain't seen it. I been doin' some mighty careful askin' around, but there ain't no trace. Now that there looks a powerful lot like somethin' funny is on foot, an' I aims tuh be in on it."

"A man," remarked the deputy, "who is uneasy in his mind, ain't inclined to meddle with the law the way he done just now."

"Son," said the sheriff, "you ain't reached maturity yet. A kid that breaks a winder runs from a p'liceman—but this ain't no

broken winder, this is large doin's. Me—I reckon he aims tuh rile me so's I loses m' judgment, so's I cain't see the maverick fer the ticks. An' I'm lettin' him think so. You seen me blow up before—waal, that there was fifty per cent I was good an' mad, and fifty per cent I was play-actin'. So long as he thinks I'm a crazy ole coot, he ain't afeared o' me."

"And you wasn't real mad," grinned Pete.

"Sure I was mad. But not so mad I didn't notice he was a-buyin' all canned stuff and smoked meats. Now if'n he's still got his Chink out there, that's plumb crazy—less'n he's a-plannin' a long journey and a hide-out.

"Waal," he continued, getting to his feet, "I guess I'll go hunt up some grub fer immediate use—the excitement's made me plumb ravenous. I'll be in when I git back."

WHAT with one thing and another, he didn't return until four o'clock. First there was the matter of a shave that claimed his attention for the better part of two hours—he usually fell asleep in the chair, and Old Kramer, his barber for thirty years, never ventured to interrupt his snooze.

Then, when he did at last arrive in the neighborhood of the Court House, he spied a truck parked in the middle of the street, and a fellow in blue overalls working over the offending traffic signal. Joining the crowd that watched from the sidewalk, he surveyed proceedings until the clanging bell was not only silenced, but removed. And then he clumped up the worn wooden stairs to his office.

"Sheriff," called Pete, poking his head out, "come a-runnin'; I got news."

"Runnin'," said the old man, appearing in the doorway, "is a wasteful way of gettin' around."

He dropped into his squeaking swivel chair and let its complaining springs ease him into a semi-reclining attitude of solid comfort, his Number Twelves making a V at the ends of his sprawling legs.

"And news," he went on, "ain't fresh when we git it. We go rushin' here an' there, all tied up in knots over somethin' happened yestiddy or mebbe day before. There's as much enjoyment in a las' week's paper as one on which the ink's still damp—it's all in the trainin'."

The deputy shrugged and remarked, "Well, this here's about the Tumbling B; I thought you might be int'rested."

Garvey brought his knees up with a jerk. "Whyn't yuh say so," he fumed. "Takin' half an hour tuh tell a body!

"Go ahead! Go ahead!" he ordered, as Pete stuck his tongue in his cheek and gave him a side glance. "What yuh waitin' fer?"

"I was talkin'," the other began, "tuh Jack Pelley, who works in the telegraph office. We was both in the lunch wagon jus' now, and somehow or other we got talkin' about the Tumbling B."

"Spittin' yer gut!" exclaimed the old man. "I mighta knowed."

"Now wait a minute, Sheriff," admonished his assistant. "Don't you go off on yer high horse again—it wasn't me started it. His brother worked out there and was laid off last week.

"Anyhow, he got a night telegram from Chicago this mornin' for Barton out at the ranch. There's four people due here tonight from New York: Ethel Laydon, another woman, and two men—feller called Gardiner, who sent the message, and a chauffeur."

"Gardiner's the executor," put in the sheriff. "That all?"

"Almost—they're goin' to stop at the Hotel fer supper and then drive straight out to the Tumbling B. It said they'd like things ready fer 'em, and fer Barton to meet 'em here in town."

"Waal," said Garvey, "I'm right glad of the information, sence it kinda lines up with my suspicions about the stuff that there polecat was a-buyin'; but if'n that telegrafter's yer friend, yuh better tell 'im not tuh go around disclosin' messages—'tain't

legal. And if'n he does it too free, he's a-goin' tuh make th' unemployment situation in his fambly just so much th' worse."

"Now listen here, Sheriff," Pete began, "if I thought for a minute——"

The old man waved him to silence. "I know—I know—he's a friend o' yourn an'

all o' that, and I ain't makin' no fuss; I'm jes' givin' a little advice. I told yuh I was happy tuh git the news, didn't I?"

"Yeah."

"An' so I am. I'm a-goin' tuh have m' supper in the Hotel t'night. I'm a-goin' tuh set there until I see what comes next. 'Specially in case the foreman o' the Tumbling B don't get tuh show up. If'n he does, waal, I guess Nature kin take her course."

So it came to pass that the Clayton City House had the honor of serving its full course dinner to a county official.

He was a good eater; but the canapes, the soup, the five slices of bread during the long pause before the entrée, and the extra-large helping of roast beef and mashed potatoes—his due as a prominent arm of the law—slowed him up considerably. He was engaged in a sad-eyed contemplation of a dish of suspicious looking bombe-glacée, while with lethargic hand he stirred his coffee, when the sound of voices just outside the dining room made him lose his small remaining interest in food.

THREE people followed the head waiter to a table. First, there was a young woman not much past twenty, a brunette with regular features and confident carriage —rather attractive, but too much like Old Man Laydon in looks to be considered beautiful. Next came a lady of middle age, a sharp-featured person who appeared to be—as she was—a professional companion; and finally, a short, stout man with a very bald head fringed with gray hair, and with an unsurprising double chin.

He alone of the three showed signs of the long journey that lay behind them; for his feet dragged, and he dropped wearily into his chair like a rider of the Pony Express at the end of his run.

The sheriff dallied over his coffee until they had read the menu and had given their order; then, treating his mustache to a left and right swob with his napkin, he arose and strode over to the travelers, who sat silently awaiting the appearance of food.

"Good evenin'," he said. "My name's Garvey, and I'm sheriff o' this here county. I hope you-all will pardon my breakin' in on yuh thisaway, but I reckon yer here about th' Tumbling B."

The girl smiled up at him. "Why, Mr. Garvey!" she exclaimed. "I'm certainly glad to meet you. Dad used to talk about you so much. Won't you join us?"

"Waal," said the sheriff, "I should feel right proud—only I got t'be goin'. If'n yer Pop mentioned me, then yuh know I oncet managed the ranch fer him, and I jes' wanted tuh say that if'n I kin be of assistance, all yuh has t'do is gimme a ring on the telephone."

He shifted his gaze to the stout man and squinted grimly. "There's a heap o' things about ranchin' I might be able tuh explain—jes' in case yuh git puzzled."

Bowing from the waist with only slightly less flourish than a courtier taking leave of royalty, he said "Good evenin'" once more, and walked out into the lobby.

He paid his bill and was lighting a cigar at the counter when the foreman of the Tumbling B pushed through the revolving door and hastened toward the desk.

To the sheriff's way of thinking, Henry Barton should have been making his getaway—dressed in khaki jodhpurs—speed-

ing along a highway, his pockets crammed with stolen wealth, and the rumble seat of his coupé bulging with smoked meats and canned goods.

Since the non-appearance of the suspect would have warranted official intervention, he had intended to take charge of the situation, send out police alarms, and, as he had remarked to Pete, "soon or late" things would come out all right.

But here was the fellow all tricked out in a new gray suit and shiny black shoes, keeping his appointment like any respectable citizen. It was too much!

UNWILLING to believe the evidence of his eyes, he made his way across the street and entered the shop of Enrique Sanchez, dealer in tailor-made cigarettes, and cigars of his own manufacture. There he engaged the proprietor in a discussion of the relative merits of twist and mixtures for stoking a pipe, while he kept watch over Barton's car and another, a long blue sedan with New York plates, into which a negro in a dark uniform eventually climbed and sat industriously picking his teeth.

Señor Sanchez launched on a subject that could have occupied him for ages. There were so many angles to the questions, intriguing ramifications needing careful expatiation, that he did not realize he might as well have saved his breath.

His busy fingers never paused in their accustomed manipulations of leaves and filler, and his stock steadily increased as he talked.

"—and you take thees tweest," he was remarking, "eet have not the—how you say?—*sedosidád?—delicadeza?—suavidád?* —eet need sometheeng.

"You build a house—you do not leave raw wood. Even for clothing a leetle cotton she's poot in weeth the wool—no?"

"Uh-huh," agreed Garvey gravely, "most always."

"So," went on the other, "eet ees more better a meexture. But here also can be trouble. Too much of thees—too much of that—" he shrugged. "Now how I make my cigarros? First I theenk——"

"Well, I'll be doggoned!" exclaimed the sheriff with such violence that Enrique spoiled the masterpiece he was working on and looked up round-eyed and open-mouthed.

The old man yanked at the door; a cowbell hanging above it clanked as it opened and closed; and he rushed out to the curb to stare after the tail light of the big sedan which was streaking out Mission Boulevard behind Barton's coupé.

Nodding his head, he remarked to himself, "Guess I'm jes' a plain dumb fool." Then he shoved his hands into his pockets and trudged off.

Señor Sanchez twisted his neck to peer after him. When the blue-clad figure turned the corner into Juniper Street, the cigar-maker shrugged, said, "Borracho!" and went on with his work.

CLAYTON CITY originally came into existence because it was the most logical place for a station on the railroad, and that organization never had any reason to regret its location. It is in the center of a prosperous cattle country, and highways radiate in all directions to pocketed valleys where well cared for steers browse contentedly.

The Tumbling B Ranch is in one of these valleys—the San Jarábe—and there are two ways of reaching it.

The first and more prosaic, the one over which livestock are driven, skirts Clark Mountain, follows the San Jarábe River for a space, slips through Chinchero Pass, and emerges at last on an undulating stretch of open country after a total of fifty-two miles covered.

The second sneers at such timorous ambulating, casts discretion to the winds, and fights its way up the bare chest of Red Rock Range, desperately clinging to perpendicular surfaces on dynamite-bitten gashes, switchbacking up to the dizzy height of Cat's Hump Pass, and arriving, in the end, at the self-same spot in thirteen miles

—most of them straight up and down.

This was the route Henry Barton took; and four o'clock next morning Jack Melcher, cowhand on the BZR, bunkhouse bound after an evening well—if not wisely—spent, jammed on the brakes of his rattletrap roadster and attempted to focus his bloodshot eyes on the road ahead.

He was approaching the third hairpin turn, had just topped the little rise that told him to expect the familiar white painted posts and cables which were supposed to prevent motorists from plunging three hundred feet into Encina Canyon—and they weren't there!

His yellow headlights shot out over the black pit unimpeded, and the car's length of crushed stone road between him and the edge seemed somehow a very small margin of safety. He shivered nervously, shut off his motor, shoved the shift lever into reverse, and let his fuddled wits work on the problem of what it all meant.

Then he noticed frayed cable ends, and he knew.

"Gawd!" he exclaimed. "Musta been goin' like hell!"

Getting out, he walked shakily to the brink, peered down, muttered, "Dark as the inside o' m'hat," and edged away.

He climbed back into his car and sat wrapped in thought.

"Gotta go fer help," he mused. "No sense settin' here. . . . Go fer help. . . . Where'm gonna turn aroun'? . . . Hell with backin'. . . . Red light don't show nothin'—prob'ly go off m'self."

But he managed to get headed the other way at a turnout not far off, and he was telling his tale at Police Headquarters in Clayton City as the first faint suggestion of the new day turned the black velvet of the eastern horizon to gray.

SHERIFF GARVEY had shaved and breakfasted, and he was sitting in the parlor of his eight room house on Juniper Street making insulting remarks at his radio, tuned to a program of setting-up exercises.

"Bend an' stretch!" he exclaimed. "G'wan—break yer fool backs. Whole country gone loco standin' in fronta open winders in their shirt tails breathin' deep!"

"Greet the morning with a smile—" sang a cheery voice.

"Huh!" snorted the old man. "I'm plumb howlin'!"

Out in the hall the telephone rang. He rose, said, "Shet up!" as he snapped the switch on the offending set, and hurried to answer the call.

Hearing his wife's approach from the kitchen, he shouted, "Stay where y'are, Marthy—I'm a-gittin' it," and unhooked the earpiece.

He nodded as he answered the question that came over the wire:

"Yep—this is him.

"Where?

"Yeah, I'll c'lect m'depitty an' git goin'—who was it?"

A frown creased his forehead.

"Yuh don't know?"

More sounds issued from the earpiece.

"Yeah," he agreed, "riggin' ropes is the best yuh kin do."

Once again he listened. Suddenly his head came up with a jerk.

"New York plates? My Gawd!"

He slammed the instrument back on its stand and rushed out to the garage, flinging to his wife as he passed, "Git Pete on the phone, an' tell 'im tuh high-tail it out tuh the Hump. I'm on muh way—been a bad smash."

A police car was stationed at the city line, and its driver was leaning negligently against it. As the sheriff's touring car approached, he stepped into the middle of the highway and held up his hand.

The old man pressed the button on the steering wheel; his siren wailed; and the blue-uniformed figure hastily jumped out of the way as the swaying machine roared by. It bounced from city macadam to state concrete, and after a couple of miles, to crushed stone.

At length Garvey pulled up behind a line of parked vehicles: two ambulances, a

wrecker, another county car—the coroner's—and three more municipal patrols. Hopping out, he hurried to the crest of the rise, stumbling a bit on the uneven and loose-surfaced road.

He stopped a moment to watch while three men strained at a yellow rope stretching almost horizontally from their hands to a pulley hooked to a short length of chain on the crane of a red tow-car. From there it disappeared in a vertical line into the canyon.

A blanket-wrapped bundle came into view, slowly turning at the rope's end. Charlie Grahl, owner of the Sunset Trail Garage, hung perilously by one hand from the steel framework of the truck, reached out, and swung it in. The men ceased hauling, slacked off; and the body of the first victim to reach the height from which it had been rocketed some time during the night dropped to the road a foot from an irregular hole that told of a torn out post.

The sheriff walked to the verge and peered at the foreshortened figures of men appearing and disappearing among the pine trees like small boys playing some uncertain and aimless game. They seemed to be doing a great amount of shouting and staring at three others who were perched

insecurely on a rockstrewn height over a tangled mass of twisted metal that had once been an automobile.

Lying at least two hundred feet from the base of the cliff, it looked as if it had been tossed there by some malevolent force, and had smashed down on the spot where it now rested; for the few bits of wreckage on the ground were quite close to the shattered car. The fact that it was a short way up the opposite slope in a small pocket was added evidence that it had not rolled at all, although it may have hit slightly higher up and dropped back—like a book flung at a wall.

Only at first glance did the activities seem aimless. A line had been attached to a projecting portion of chassis, and many hands tugged while two of the figures on the ledge above pried with a long plank until they succeeded in moving the wreck so that it canted precariously against a large boulder that kept it from rolling to the bottom.

Then one of the two dropped warily and wedged another plank against it, but the crew still strained on the rope while the third man, inappropriately dressed in a black suit and straw hat, cautiously made his way down and disappeared from sight behind the hulk.

Grahl sighed and said, "Prob'ly be a job gettin' them out. Oughta have a torch on it."

"How'd yuh get this one?" asked the sheriff. "Thrown clear?"

"Naw," answered the garage man, "he was in the other car."

"Other?" frowned the old fellow. "What other?"

"The coop," he was informed. "Yuh gotta stick yer head over the edge an' look straight down. It fetched up against a tree, I reckon."

He did as directed, stared for a long time, and then his eyes darted to the lifeless bundle that had been placed on a stretcher across the road.

"Coroner seen it yet?" he asked.

"Sure—nothin' was touched until he give the word." The man laughed. "You shoulda seen him ridin' down on the rope!"

Garvey had already started toward the stretcher. As he bent to lift the blanket, a white uniformed youth said, "It's not very pleasant, sir."

Remarking, "Son, I got over bein' squeamish a long time back—yuh never kin tell what yuh kin tell," the old man removed the covering to gaze at a familiar

form. Although the face was horribly battered, the hair was black and curly, and the body was clothed in a gray suit—now splotched with dried blood—and new black shoes.

He handed the blanket to the interne, said, "You better fix this back on," and went again to the wrecker, where he addressed Grahl once more:

"Charlie, I wanta go below—how about it?"

"Sure," came the answer, "but yuh gotta be careful or yuh'll scrape yer hide goin' down."

"If'n Doc Petty kin make it, I'd sure be ashamed not tuh try," he retorted, and waited while they struggled to rig a makeshift bosun's chair.

AT FIRST he did not realize what they were about, for he was watching the progress of a limp form being passed down a human chain to the bottom. Finally he turned impatiently and exclaimed, "In the name of all git-out, what yuh tryin' t'do—gimme a see-saw or somethin'? Lemme have that there rope!"

Tying a bowline with a bight, he shoved his foot into it, remarking disgustedly, "Think I was a-goin' t'paint th' side of a house."

He was over the edge, dropping slowly, and twisting disconcertingly so that cliff, tree tops, and sky circled crazily around him, when Pete's face appeared among the grinning ones above, every eye watching the descent.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Haul up! I gotta talk tuh m'deppity!"

When he was once more at the top, he took his assistant's arm and walked toward the cars. Facetious comments from the bystanders about cold feet and sinking spells, he seemed not to hear.

"Pete," he said in a low voice, "I want yuh should do some careful lookin' aroun' fer me. I ain't satisfied with the way things is."

"What'll I be tryin' to find?" asked the other.

"Anything that don't seem usual—like where they was a autymobile parked."

The deputy's eyes dropped to the loose stones; then he grinned and glanced quizzically at his chief.

"You ain't got no call," he remarked, "to send me after buckets full o' steam, or pigeon's milk. If yuh really wanta get rid o' me, I kin go on back home—I come away without doin' justice to my breakfast anyways."

"Pete," said the old man sadly, "sometimes I 'druther have you a-helpin' me than 'most any half-wit I kin think of. But they's been folks kilt here, an' you should ought t'know me better'n t'git the idee I'm a-foolin'. They's a place by the nex' bend where they stored stuff whilst they was a-fixin' this here road—a cleared space, fairly level, that goes back a piece. That there's a good spot fer hidin' a car fer a spell—was anybody wantin' t'do so."

"Ambush?" asked Pete.

"Hell no!" exclaimed the sheriff; and then he paused, meditatively scrutinizing the face of his deputy for a moment before he went on, "Leastways I don't figger it thataway. Yuh know who's dead, don't yuh?"

"Yeah," came the answer. "The boys only know it's Barton, but the other car havin' four people an' bein' from New York, I drawed my own conclusions."

"They lef' from the Hotel las' night," said Garvey, "an' went a-streakin' out Mission Boulevard. The foreman was a-leadin' the way—naturally. Now wotta we find? There's the sedan all busted up way out there as if it shot off goin' like the hammers o' hell, and here's the coop direckly straight down like it dribbled off. What d'ye make outa that?"

"Why," said Pete, "Barton, knowin' the road, but miscalculatin' on the turn, went over; and the big car followin' behind and seein' his tail light disappear, kept right on goin'."

"Waal," remarked the sheriff, "not countin' a man bein' asleep at the wheel, I don't see how he could miss all o' the

signs there's been a accident a couple o' seconds previous."

"The sedan would of had its headlights dimmed," went on Pete thoughtfully. "They prob'ly couldn't see much."

"All right," said the other, "mebbe so—but I feel uneasy in muh mind. Barton's used this here road fer 'most a year, an' it's pretty late in the day fer him t'go an' do a fool thing like you say. Anyways, we kin do a little prospectin' aroun'. I'm a-goin' down below, take a look at things, an' talk tuh Doc Petty."

As they started back, he waggled a warning finger. "Don't yuh so much as open yer face, neither. This is betwixt me an' you. I ain't cravin' t'be made a jackass of."

ONCE more the sheriff started down on the rope, and went all the way without mishap. Climbing over rocks and detouring around bushes, he reached the coupé and gave it a careful inspection. So little did it show signs of the long dive, that if he had come on it without previous knowledge, he would have been puzzled for a moment to explain how it got there.

However there was an explanation: by one of those curious chances, those freakish bits of gruesome prankishness so often occurring in road accidents, its fall had been checked by a stump about six feet tall, on which it had been spitted as neatly as a chicken in a rotisserie, or a butterfly in a specimen case.

The trunk—at least a foot in diameter—had rammed up through to the top, and a few inches of it stuck out above at an angle to add a playful note, like the little round cap on the head of a circus elephant.

The door on the left-hand side was hanging open as if from a heavy blow—undoubtedly the result of the body of the driver being flung against it as the seat was slammed aside by the upward thrust of the tree—and there was bloody evidence on the ground that the man had lain there.

Only one pane of glass had been damaged, the one in this same door; but although innumerable cracks radiated in all directions from a point at the center where the victim's head had no doubt struck, it was, nevertheless, in one piece.

The old man peered inside, frowned at the combined ignition switch and steering lock, gave an experimental twist to the wheel—which refused to budge—wiggled the shift lever, and said, "Hmm."

Then he seemed to lose interest in the wreck, for he began working his way over the uneven ground toward the place where the other car still held the attention of the rescue party. Scrambling over a small ridge of bare rock, he came face to face with the coroner, who was evidently making for the base of the cliff.

"All finished?" asked Sheriff Garvey.

"Yes," wheezed the man—he was middle-aged, and of a girth unsuitable for mountain climbing. His clothing was wrinkled and dusty; his pudgy hands were scratched; and there was a three-cornered tear in the right leg of his trousers.

"You goin' tuh pufform an autopsy?" pursued the officer of the law.

DOCTOR PETTY sighed and answered, "Well, in cases of this kind the examination is naturally perfunctory—more or less."

"Yeah," agreed the old man, "they ain't no cause tuh mess aroun' when yuh kin tell by lookin'."

"Sure, Sheriff," the other smiled, "but of course we make a thorough inspection—you understand."

"Uh-huh," came the answer, "only I want yuh should do me a favor; I want yuh t'make a real good job o' Henry Barton—total an' complete. I wanta be sure what he died of."

The coroner glanced up at the rim of the canyon where the tow-car, dwarfed to plaything size, stood black against the sun. "I'm pretty sure," he remarked, "I can give you that information right now.

"The spinal column is fractured in two places with a probable severing of the cord. Even if fragments of the frontal bone should prove not to have touched a vital

portion of the brain, death would have been instantaneous."

"Anyhow," said the sheriff, "I'd be right thankful tuh have it the way I said. Now, what about the others?"

The doctor shook his head slowly. "A very horrible thing—mangled beyond belief—two men and two women. One of the men—the chauffeur, I judge—was a negro; his death must have been a torture."

"How?" asked the old man.

"His body," came the answer, "was still warm when I examined him just now, although one of the spokes of the steering wheel had pierced his chest cavity."

Garvey looked thoughtfully at his shoes for a moment; then he started carefully to slide down over rocks he had recently fought to climb.

"Say!" exclaimed the coroner. "Don't you intend to look at them?"

"No," grunted the other, maneuvering over a particularly bad spot, "yuh told me all I needed tuh know. They ain't no sense o' my getting in the way o' the boys bringin' 'em out."

Reaching a horizontal foothold, he looked up at the stout man, who was hesitating at the uninviting path he too must follow, and grinned, "An' I don't aim t'be a-standin' underneath tuh ketch yuh—should somethin' bust. I'm finicky thataway. So long, Doc."

PETE was waiting for him at the top. Motioning with his head, the young man moved quietly away from the crowd; and the sheriff hurried after him.

"I found a couple o' things," whispered the deputy. "But first I want yuh to take a look at this curve here, and then we'll go on up to where you told me."

Pete pointed guardedly. Starting at a point in line with the first post beyond the broken place, which also bore signs of the accident in the fact that it leaned outward, the surface of the road was grooved by parallel tracks dug through loose stones to solid ground beneath.

These had been partly obliterated—perhaps by the feet of the rescuers—but further on they curved into what must have been a terrifying skid that had piled up two mounds, one of them dangerously close to the edge, where a pair of wheels had swung sideways.

"Somebody," remarked the sheriff, "sure came around here hell-fer-leather."

"Yeah," agreed his assistant, "now let's go get the cars."

"I 'druther walk," said the old man. "I want t'think, and operatin' a gas buggy ain't condoosive."

He began trudging up the grade, and Pete moved along with him, saying, "It's a long way—we'll be tired out."

"Huh!" snorted Garvey. "Tired! Yuh make me tired talkin' like that. I swear I dunno what people's got laigs fer. Ridin' in elevators up a single flight o' stairs, drivin' a half a block tuh th' stores—even the kids has t'go t'school on wheels!"

"Sure," answered Pete, "an' before Henry invented the Lizzie, every long-heel from the Panhandle to the Pipestone Pass

got bow-legged forkin' broncs—I bet you was pretty near growed fast to a saddle yerself, Sheriff."

The old man cocked an eyebrow and smiled. "I am sorry t'have t'give in, son," he admitted, "but as I remember it, that's the way 'twas—an' I still got the saddle."

Pete seemed to have lost interest in the argument. His hands were in his pockets, and he was absentmindedly kicking his way along, his eyes intent on the stones that rattled across the road with every swing of his brogans.

"It's got me down," he said at last. "I can't fit things together, and maybe the answer is they don't fit."

"What're yuh drivin' at?" asked his chief.

"Well," he went on, "somebody was parked up there in a new flivver all right; an' somebody stopped in a hurry; an' two cars was wrecked; an' you got suspicions, because yuh don't like one o' the men that's dead. But it mighta been anybody stopped like that, and it mighta been a pettin' party up ahead."

The sheriff grabbed his arm and brought him to a halt. "Jes' a minute, son," he said quietly. "In all o' them facts o' yourn, they's one thing calls fer some explainin': what's all this about a new flivver?"

"Why," the deputy informed him, "the tracks is in silt—plain as day—and they've been made by new tires because there's a line in the center of the tread-mark from that little bit o' rubber that sticks out all the way around on a new shoe. It wears out after a few miles—'specially on roads like this here."

"Now that's right smart o' yuh, son," said the old man, "but they's no law agin puttin' new tires on 'most any car."

"No," replied Pete, "there ain't. Only, if it was an old one, the grass an' such between the tracks'd be greasy from rubbin' on the bottom of the oil pan, or the transmission, or the differential housing; and it's clean as a whistle—there's broken stalks, but practic'ly nothin' else."

SHERIFF GARVEY gnawed at his mustache for a moment and squinted off at distant Clayton City baking in the morning sun. "How d'ye know it's a flivver?" he asked. "Was a hub-cap knocked off fer yer convenience, or somethin'?"

"Nope," came the answer, "but it was almost as easy as that—the make o' tire that comes on a new flivver ain't used as factory equipment on no other car."

"Waal!" ejaculated the old man. "I'll be eternally damned!"

He patted the other on the shoulder, saying, "Son, I seen some mighty tricky trackin' in my time, but this here takes the cake—yuh must have Injun blood in yer veins. Now, let's git goin'."

He turned his back on the heights and started downhill.

"Hey!" said Pete. "Where yuh bound for?"

The sheriff was swinging along at a great rate, and the young man had to run to catch up with him.

"Ain't yuh goin' tuh go up an' look?"

Garvey shook his head. "We best git us back t'town. We gotta send out police alarms fer that flivver."

It was his turn to have his arm grabbed.

"Now listen, Sheriff," said Pete, "I don't know the half o' what you do, an' yuh may have a good idear what's been happenin'; but you're always talkin' about not bein' a jackass, an' you're sure headed for it."

"How come?" asked the other, slowing up.

"Well, if you'll think for a minute, there's prob'ly quite a few o' them flivvers around; and we don't even know the color."

Sheriff Garvey grinned broadly and nodded as he admitted, "Yep, I guess that's what yuh call goin' off half-cocked—kinda like lookin' fer a needle in a haystack, ain't it?"

Then he stared at his deputy and went on, "So long as yuh seem t'be so smart, Geronimo, how'll we find it?"

The young man shrugged. "It's kinda hopeless."

"Hopeless nothin'!" Garvey exploded. "C'm'on. If'n it's only been druv a few miles like yuh say, then they's only two places it coulda been bought at: Parton's down on Post Avenue, or the agency over to Boydstown."

TWENTY minutes later he was at the telephone in his office, and Pete was slumped in a chair on the other side of the desk, with his arms folded, and his chin on his chest.

"Yeah!" shouted the old man. "A new one—Where?—He didn't?—What's the number?"

He grabbed a pencil and scribbled hurriedly on the back of an envelope.

"Thutty," he called, "yeah, I got that—thutty, four-twenty-two. What's he look like?"

As he listened, his face broke into a smile much too grim to be pleasant—it was more of a triumphant leer.

"Yep," he said finally, "I will let yuh know immediate—much obliged."

The receiver clicked back into place on the hook; Sheriff Garvey shoved the instrument away from him and looked at Pete.

"Waal, son," he remarked, "that kinda clears it. Don't it?"

He picked up the notation he'd made and held it out to the other man. "Take this here and give it tuh Jim so's he kin get busy with the radio—it's the license number. Tell him tuh say the sheriff o' Clayton County wants held fer investigatin' a man twenty-six years old, five feet, ten inches tall, an' weighin' about one hundred seventy-five pounds, with black curly hair an' brown eyes, drivin' a new, black, two-door flivver with dealer's plates—number thutty, four-twenty-two."

The deputy got out of his chair and reached for the paper. "Not for me it don't clear nothin' up," he said. "That's Barton's description."

"Uh-huh," agreed the old fellow.

"Well, I don't see——" began the other, but he was interrupted.

"Git a move on! Yuh ain't supposed tuh. I'll tell yuh when yuh done what I tole yuh."

The returning deputy found Garvey standing in the dark-wainscotted corridor, muttering to himself while he worked over a large, framed map of the United States hanging on the wall. The light was poor, and his nose was so close to the glass that it seemed as if he were attempting to mark out with it the route he was measuring with a foot-rule.

"Goin' places, Sheriff?" asked Pete.

"Autymobiles!" exclaimed the old man, turning around. "Confounded whiz-bangs!"

He scratched his gray head satisfyingly with the end of the brass-edged ruler and squinted at the other. "S'posin' a feller started off at say nine o'clock las' night from up there, an' druv all night, where'd he be by now?"

"Well," remarked Pete, "if it was me, and I was in a hurry and had a bran' new car that I wasn't carin' if I ruined it or not, it'd be a good long ways."

"That's what I figger," agreed the sheriff. "Say he averaged fifty miles an hour fer fifteen hours—that's seven hundred an' fifty miles."

"He'd be damn tired," stated Pete, "but it could be."

"Waal," went on Garvey, "gasoline sure complicates the pursuit o' criminals. Le's go inside."

"What's on yer mind, Sheriff?" asked the other as he followed him. "The way you toss me crumbs now an' then is liable to ruin my digestion."

"Set down, son," said the old man, "an' we'll go over this thing. A mite o' back-trackin' on a trail don't hurt none; 'specially when they ain't nothin' we kin do otherwise but wait.

"In the firs' place, yuh should know I suspicioned it wasn't Barton—jes'—— Oh, I dunno—it jes' didn't *feel* like him somehow."

"Yuh ain't made no secret of it," said Pete. "I seen that much up on the hill."

"Waal, I only suspicioned it then; so I didn't say nothin'—it bein' mos'ly hunch thataway, an' takin' into account they was a body dressed in his clothes an' all. But when a man's face is mashed in so yuh cain't reckanize him, yuh gotta show me a mighty good reason fer it; an' they wasn't none.

"An' down below they was less'n that—no broken glass, no busted steerin' wheel—nothin'. Fu'thermore, that coop is the same make as mine; and when I turn off

muh motor, it locks the wheel at the same time. That's the way that thing is now—wheel locked, an' it's even outa speed. I cain't figger a man doin' all o' that when he's a-flyin' through the air."

Pete whistled and stared at his chief. "Pushed off," he said.

"Yep, son, I reckon so."

"Wait a minute, though," said the deputy, resting his elbows on the desk and cupping his chin in his hands. "Why would the steering wheel be locked?"

"Because," came the answer, "it'd be doggone tough t'push a car in that loose stone less'n it was helped by bein' up the hill a ways; then all it'd need would be a start, if'n it was aimed proper."

"But how come you're so all-fired sure it's not Barton?" asked Pete. "It coulda been a hold-up."

"Uh-huh—only it wasn't. I thought of it; an' Petty's a-goin' t'make a thorough autopsy on my say-so; but I don't need it.

"A new flivver lef' Boydstown at three o'clock yestiddy afternoon t'be delivered at the Tumbling B; an' the feller who took it out was t'bring back the coop—jes' a ordinary transaction—only he ain't showed back yet. An' "—the old man banged his fist on the desk—"his hair is black an' curly, an' he's average height!"

"Hm," mused the young man, "it ain't sane, but it sorta ties things in."

"Sorta!" Garvey exploded. "Listen; Barton's been high-gradin'—milked the place dry. He gits that telegram sayin' the owner's a-comin' out, an' he knows it's time fer him tuh high-tail it. He comes down t'town an' loads up with grub enough tuh last a long while, goes back tuh the ranch an' sets aroun', a-waitin' fer his new car; or mebbe it jes' happens t'come along whilst he's still there—don't make no diff'rence.

"Then he sees this feller from Boydstown could pass fer him, if'n his face was altered, an' he gits a better idee, somethin' that'd slow up the search, or mebbe wipe it out altogether.

"Nope," the sheriff stopped speaking and shook his head, "that ain't right. It wouldn't altogether stop it, but it'd raise almighty hell with his spoor. Anyhow, here's the rest of it:

"He has the flivver foller him up there—murderin' the feller then or later—comes down t'town, an' has them folks foller him back. The crash prob'ly happened jes' like you said—'ceptin' he didn't go over the edge a-tall, but skidded aroun' the turn—them marks yuh showed me—an' snappin' off his lights beforehand so's it looked like he was a-droppin' beyond another rise in the road.

"The sedan shoots right into the canyon; an' he goes up, gits the other feller's body, dresses it up in his own clothes, brings it back, an' shoves the coop over. That makes sense, don't it?"

"I kin shoot it full o' holes," said Pete.

"Which is?"

"Well," the young man went on, "it's one God-awful bloodthirsty business from start to finish; Barton never looked like no killer."

"Hell!" exclaimed Garvey. "Sence when has looks been a proof of anything? If'n yuh went by that, half the folks in this here town'd be in the calaboose."

"Wouldn't surprise me none," grinned the deputy.

"All right, all right," the old man said testily. "I been tuh plenty minstrel shows myself—git on with yer shootin'."

"It's all as if it'd been planned weeks ago—it fits so nice—and it couldn't o' been."

"That ain't so," answered the sheriff, "not a-tall. If'n it was figgered ahead o' time, he'd of had his supplies ready, his new car a-waitin' in one o' the sheds; an' he cert'nly wouldn't o' done a fool thing like killin' a man that's bound t'be missed pretty quick. He'd o' had a feller on the ranch from Denver, or Salt Lake City, or somewheres—somebody that could disappear 'thout anybody bein' any the wiser. Yuh got 'nything else?"

"Sure—how'd he kill the hombre?"

"That," said Sheriff Garvey, "is insultin'

tuh yer own intelligence. When we ain't got nothin' else t'do, we kin go up there an' find the rock he done it with—in fifty or sixty years, mebbe, if'n it don't rain."

"Well," remarked Pete, "there's just one thing more: why in hell did he go and buy

a lot of food? Years ago it might been necessary, but now there's hamburger joints even in the Bad Lands, and yuh kin buy an egg san'wich in the middle of the Mojave Desert."

"There!" shouted his chief. "That's the answer!"

The deputy stared. "What's the answer to what?"

SHERIFF GARVEY stood up and walked to his arms closet in the corner. "The murderin' pole-cat's never left fer nowheres," he growled. "He's layin' low, a-waitin' fer the fuss t'die down. An' I'm willin' t'bet muh bottom dollar I know where he's at.

"C'mon!" he ordered. "What yuh settin' there fer? Git onto yer hind laigs an' grab yerself some shootin' irons. We're a-goin' t'do a bit o' judicious man-huntin'."

As they climbed into the touring car, Pete remarked, "Sheriff, if it ain't bein' too previous, don't yuh think we'd ought to get a couple of the boys to come along?"

Without answering, the old man maneuvered out of the parking space back of the Court House and into the stream of noon-hour traffic. Not until they were rolling along Mission Boulevard did he speak.

"The odds," he stated, "is two tuh one a'ready; we don't need no army."

His deputy shrugged, and they rode in silence to Sycamore Street, where two parallel steel rails, shining bravely, kept alive the memory of the trolley line.

"It's past all understandin'," said the sheriff, "how a man kin go off the handle. O' course they's some that's jes' plain ornery from the Fust Grade on up—like a rattlesnake—only we don't take notice until they do somethin' sizable. But most o' them is like anybody yuh meet, 'ceptin' they been a-nibblin' some kind o' jimson weed, an' it's druv 'em loco.

"I don't rightly figger this Barton feller—mebbe he's a combination. Still an' all, he was a youngster growed up in these parts, an' it gits me down that I'm a-goin' after him."

"Wasn't it you said we should bring along rifles?" asked Pete.

The other nodded. "Yeah, son, I did. An' we will mos' prob'ly have tuh use 'em. But the older I git, the more I am bothered by the need fer 'em."

"Well," said the young man, "if you're goin' to take it so hard, supposin' we find him, an' let me do the shootin'—if it's called for. I ain't forgot the mess up ahead."

"No," came the answer, "nor neither have I; an' I aims t'do muh share. Only I don't git no pleasure outa it like I used tuh."

THEY had started the ascent, and had rounded the first turn when the ambulance came into view. Obligingly it swung into a turnout. Two more cars appeared. Garvey backed into the space vacated by the conveyance from the hospital and waited.

He shouted at the first automobile, "How many more in the parade?"

"Only us, Sheriff," was the reply. "The rest've already gone."

They drove on, and Pete ventured to say, "I'd be right thankful if you'd tell me what you got in mind. Are we headin' for the Tumbling B?"

"We're goin' a-past it," answered Garvey.

"You figger he's hidin' out somewheres in the San Jarábe country?"

"No, son, he's mos' prob'ly in only one spot—on Monte Venadéro."

"But that's in Boyd County," objected Pete.

"I'm a-gittin' a mite deaf," remarked the old man, shaking his head sadly. "It's a terrible affliction—deaf *and* absent-minded. Prob'ly I kinda fergit the map o' Clayton County in the office, seein' as how we're a-nearin' the scenes o' muh youth; but near's I kin recall, an' fer the business in hand, the dividin' line betwixt Clayton an' Boyd makes a loop so's it kin take in pretty near the whole o' that there mountain."

"Oh!" said Pete. "Kinda stretchin' out like a rubber band."

"Uh-huh," agreed the sheriff, "exackly. Jes' keep yer tongue betwixt yer teeth, an' we kin keep this here interview in Clayton County where it b'longs.

"Yuh see," he went on, "Jim Barker was a depitty o' mine oncet, 'bout fifteen years back, afore he went inta politics and got himself elected sheriff over there. If'n he's as lunk-headed now as he was then, I aims tuh steer clear o' tryin' t' tell him somethin'. He ain't no real sheriff—he's a back-slapper."

They were passing a cluster of brown buildings upon which Garvey had kept his eyes from the time they'd topped Laydon's Hill, that slopes down in a three mile coast to a level stretch a hundred yards north of the corral. At the place where the Tumbling B road joins the highway, he lifted his foot from the accelerator, and the automobile obediently slowed.

"You want I should mosey around?" asked Pete.

The old man stepped down on the pedal, and they shot ahead.

"I don't guess so, son," he answered. "Anybody that's there don't count nohow. It was sort o' habit—like an ole hoss a-passin' a barn he's lived in fer a long time. We ain't stoppin' till we gits tuh Minden's Cave."

"That's a new one on me," confessed the deputy. "I never heard of that place."

"It's unlikely yuh would," said Garvey. "It's a private cave—sort of. 'Bout thutty years ago a prospector named Ike Minden wandered inta the bunkhouse o' the Tumbling B a-claimin' he'd discovered gold on Monte Venadéro. The boys saw right away he was a mite gone in the upper story, an' fer a joke they took him in tuh see the boss.

"Waal, it turned out Old Man Laydon had knew him years before in Californy; so he clamps down on them an' makes out t'go inta partners with the poor ole coot. An doggone if'n they wasn't gold up there! 'Twarn't what yuh'd call a bonanza, an' the most of it he got a-pannin' a trickle o' water so small nobody'd even bothered t' name it. But it kep' him happy, an' the boss was satisfied.

"This Minden has the idee o' startin' operations on a big scale. He uses up what dust he don't spend fer food on blastin' powder. Reg'lar slave he was. Finds this here cave an' enlarges it so's he kin live there; clears a tol'able road tuh the place; an' then he ups an' dies."

"Then there's still gold there?" asked Pete.

"Sure—like in the San Jarábe, little specks. Only a sane man don't break his back fourteen-fifteen hours a day fer mebbe a dollar.

"Now here's my idee; I cain't figger a likelier place fer a hideout; if'n I recollect rightly, yuh might even git a autymobile up into it—mebbe crackin' a spring, though it's doubtful. Even s'posin' it's a bad guess, we ain't wasted nothin' but a couple o' gallons o' gas."

FIFTEEN minutes later the touring car was grinding along in second gear, crawling up the slope of Venadéro. The road suddenly flattened out; the sheriff steered off to the shoulder and stopped under an overhanging bank.

"Git the rifles," he said. "We're leavin' the car here. The way to the place starts 'bout five hundred feet ahead. Soon's we git aroun' the bend, the road's in clear view from the cave—doggone place is like a lookout tower—an' we has t'do some inconspicuous movin'."

"Hell!" exclaimed Pete. "We cain't crawl on our bellies up no mountain!"

"Nobody ast yuh to!" snapped the sheriff. "It's only the car I'm afeared o' him spottin'. If'n we keeps close tuh the right hand side, we're hidden by the bank; and oncet we gits inta Minden's trail, we're pretty well sheltered by trees an' sech until we're mos' there."

"D'ye think, Sheriff, we kin maybe sneak right up on him?"

"I'd sure like tuh. If'n he's up here, he's got t'do some tall explainin'—though I don't figger he'll try talkin' his way out, less'n we gits the drop on him. In any case, I ain't aimin' t'shoot a man on no more'n suspicions at this late date—I ain't no border town marshal.

"He's been crazy as a cornered rat ever sence he got that there telegram—if'n what I tole yuh means anything a-tall—an' yuh cain't reason with no trapped animal. He'll mos' likely start fadin' fer his irons immediate—should he spot us."

"What if he does?" said the deputy. "That's all the evidence we need. He'll prob'ly let loose too soon anyhow. And our guns are good as his."

"Don't be an idjit! Yuh sound like a movin' pitcher hero. Shootin' downhill is always better'n any other way, an' even a spent bullet's nothin' tuh have in yer gizzard."

They entered an almost unnoticeable break in the bank of earth and rock which walled in the road, and crept cautiously forward, every step more disappointing than the previous one in the fact that there was no sign the path had been traveled in many months. Even in those places where soil was exposed, no tell-tail tire marks showed. Pine needles and pine cones lay thickly along the way.

GARVEY was slightly in the lead, and his progress was getting slower and slower. Glancing over his shoulder, he whispered. "We best sneak through the trees now—over thisaway. He will mos' prob'ly see us if'n we don't."

"Where is it?" asked Pete.

"Jes' beyond them pines ahead," answered the old man, pointing with his rifle. "The trail bears tuh the right, as yuh kin see, an' they's a rock slide o' sorts the road has t' skirt, so's it kin climb tuh the mouth o' the cave from the far side. I figger t'drift through the shrubbery an' git where we kin look straight inta the openin'. When we see how the land lays, you stay there whilst I go on up aroun', completin' the circle."

"It don't look like nothin's been this way," suggested the deputy.

"Waal," remarked the sheriff, "I dunno what you think, but they's a God-awful lot o' loose vegetation aroun'—nuff pine-droppin's fer a whole forest—mostly where they's patches o' dirt. An' he'd be plumb foolish tuh leave more tracks fer you t'go a-drawin' conclusions from. I don't guess we better start doin' no shoutin' yet a while.

"Fu'thermore, it'd be a good idee tuh spread out a mite. Gimme a minute or two, an' then come on."

Pete was enjoying the show. He was fully convinced that his chief was barking up the wrong tree, and the look on the man's grizzled visage was worth an admission fee.

Clayton County had once had the reputation of being a tough spot, and it was then that Garvey had won his spurs; but nothing more dangerous than uncovering a still had disturbed the placid flow of his life for a long time. The mere hint of impending battle had stiffened the old codger into a semblance of the two-fisted hellion he must have been in the old days, and the deputy set his face muscles to keep in check the grin that fought to crease his lean cheeks.

"Cowboys an' Indians!" he chuckled as

the blue-clad figure was swallowed up by shrubbery.

When he judged the minute to be up, he started forward, however, following the other's course. Suddenly the smile on his face was wiped from it as a sharp report slapped into the silence of all around and rattled viciously among the crags.

And then Peter Jameson, Deputy Sheriff of Clayton County, did a foolish thing. Forgetful of self, he broke into a run, tripping over deadfalls, and plunging through tangles of branches that scratched his face and tore at his clothing.

Something that sounded like a bull-whip cracked sharply overhead three times; shots rang out in staccato succession. The tip of the whip caught him as a repeater determinedly spoke once more, high up and to the right; and there was left only one old man crouched behind a huge pine tree to deal with a killer who held all the aces.

THE sheriff watched for some sign of life in the prone figure of his assistant, but it was quite still, sprawled out in the open in full view of the man who had fired, a man who needed only a hint of movement to begin pouring lead into the unprotected body.

It was an uncomfortable and skin-prickling situation. When Garvey's cautious creeping had been noticed and the first bullet had pinged off a jutting rock three feet away, he had flopped down on his stomach behind the biggest thing in sight —the tree trunk was a good thirty inches in diameter—and there he was!

The other man was sniping from between two rocks that lay conveniently at the mouth of the cave, a distance of at least two hundred yards; and hitting him would have been marksmanship worthy of a champion. In the first few seconds of excitement, the sheriff, pausing only to reload, had blazed away, holding his Winchester out beyond the protection of the pine, and exposing nothing more than his right arm.

But when his brain cooled down a bit, he saw the impossibility of doing any damage except by the longest of chances.

Saying, "Might jes' as well shoot inta the air," he quit and took stock of the affair.

Screaming lead smacked into the tree or zipped through shrubbery, spattering on rocks and humming off into the air.

"If'n I tries backin' away," he mused, "they's nothin' t' prevent him from slidin' tuh the end o' one o' them boulders an lettin' daylight inta muh carcass. Now he cain't do nothin', an' neither kin I. We jes' stays here an' starves like a couple o' wapiti with locked horns—until it gits dark, an' then we goes in fer blind men's buff. I wish tuh Gawd Pete hadda been a mite more keerful! Two targets is more disconcertin'."

During his soliloquy, he had let his elbow slide out a bit, and a bullet slapped into the ground so close that he felt the thud.

"Zowie!" he exclaimed; then as if to reassure a nervous self, "Luck!"

NOW it is a well-known fact that even the most stodgy of mortals can, in moments of danger, conceive a split-second plan that might out-general a Napoleon. Not always are these lightning strokes of genius feasible; but the successful ones are never forgotten, and the failures are buried with their originators.

No one could truthfully have called the sheriff stodgy, and two things had tied themselves together in his mind by the fact that the one had forcibly followed the other. First he'd thought of two targets, and then a scant six inches had saved him from being nicked.

"Doggone!" he ejaculated. "Mebbe it'll work!"

Like some monstrous measuring worm, he brought his middle clear of the ground, inching forward on his knees until he was close to the tree. Standing up, he wriggled quickly out of his coat and let it fall behind him, freed himself of his holster, slipped the green suspenders off his shoulders; and

for the second time in as many days, his drawers came into view.

But he wasn't done yet—he got out of his shirt.

In the meanwhile, the firing had stopped; and the silence was full of the menace of a possible stalking. With his toe, he cautiously moved a fold of blue cloth out into the line of vision of his quarry, and a fusillade immediately set the hills to ringing.

One bullet churned into a pile of pebbles and sent fragments in all directions. The old man stiffened, dropped his hand to a tender area, and said, "Stung b'God! Gwan, damn yuh!"

He began to roll his shirt into a ball. Looking at the result, he muttered, "Too small," and dropped it on top of the other pieces.

Thoughtfully he unbuttoned his Balbriggans.

A couple of minutes later, Henry Barton stared unbelievingly down, as a black slouch hat surmounting a pair of blue-clad shoulders slid cautiously from behind its bulwark until almost the whole bulk of the torso was exposed—a perfect target. The distant rifle spat flame, and the bullet splatted against the cliff.

If the fugitive had looked more carefully, he might have been puzzled at the weird shooting posture; for the man below seemed to be lying on his gun. However, when what seems like a golden opportunity presents itself, most men are inclined to act first and think later.

Another bullet ricocheted into space from the face of his fortress. The murderer squinted along his barrel, and squeezed the trigger. The body jerked with the impact of the lead, twitched, and lay still.

Twice more he fired for good measure, and, with his repeater in position for quick action—although it didn't seem necessary—he got to his feet and began to walk downhill, never for a moment letting his eyes waver from his prey.

He was no more than twenty feet away when a gaunt old man with not a stitch of clothing on his goosefleshed skin popped from behind the tree on the opposite side. A six-shooter barked once, and the killer crumpled with a bullet through his heart.

With the smoking revolver forgotten in his hand, Garvey hurried over to his deputy. Strangely enough, the young man was now on his back, and his eyes were open; but his face was white and drawn—the face of a corpse.

Bloodless lips astonishingly parted in a grin, and a weak voice said, "Holy smokes, Sheriff, you're a sight. I could arrest yuh—a man of your age!"

"Waal, I'll be doggoned!" exclaimed Garvey. "I sure thought you was done fer."

"Got me in the leg," came the answer. "Seein' where I was, I figgered I better lie damn still."

THE sheriff backed away, saying, "Yuh been bleedin' some, son. I best git muh shirt or somethin' fer a torneyko."

Then, from the direction of the big pine, came spluttering sounds of outraged feelings as Sheriff Garvey pawed over his clothing—peppered with bullet holes.

"A fine lookin' mess I'll be a-rollin' inta town in this rig!" he called. "Prob'ly be mistook fer a Swiss cheese."

He came back grinning to his deputy. Around his middle his coat was tied in the fashion of an apron, the sleeves serving as strings to hold it on.

"Waal, son," he said, "I guess I'll have tuh do like yuh want I should, an' go patronize one o' th' local stores. My other suit ain't no great shakes, an' this'n is sure beyond fixin'."

As he began ripping the leg of Pete's trousers, the young man said, "Tryin' tuh do the same fer me, ain't yuh?"

"Uh-huh," answered Garvey, "mis'ry loves comp'ny."

Hastily he tore his shirt into strips.

"How bad is it?" questioned the wounded man.

"You'll live," stated the other. "Don't seem to of broken nothin' much—jes' went

in one side an' out th' other. At your age I prob'ly wouldn't even of noticed it."

Pete let it go at that and asked, "Gimme an idear what happened, will yuh, Sheriff? With my face poked into the ground the way it was, I couldn't see nothin'; and the sounds was excitin' but unhelpful."

"Waal," said the old man, carefully binding the injured leg, "it was a mighty ticklish business, an' it called fer strategy. I figgered he'd be fooled if'n I could git him tuh shoot at somethin' looked like me; so I stuffed all o' m' clothes inta m' coat, makin' a head outa this here shirt an' part o' muh underwear.

"The bigges' job was fastenin' the hat so's it'd stay on, but I did it with m' badge an' muh lodge pin."

"Was it Barton, Sheriff?"

Garvey stared witheringly. "Naw," he remarked, "'Twas one o' th' Daltons—o' course it was Barton!"

"An' yuh killed him," Pete went on.

The sheriff nodded his head. "Yeah, son, I did. In the excitement, I kinda fergot m'self—an' you was on muh mind some. But it's jes' as well. Him bein' up here thisaway an' shootin' 'thout no warnin' the way he done is proof he was guilty—any man with his brains where they b'longs kin tell that. Only they ain't nothin' much fer a law court t' git its teeth inta."

"I ain't so hurt but what I'd like to know some more myself," said the young man. "Why don't yuh go up to the cave an' see what yuh kin find. I'm curious as hell to know what he did with that flivver."

Garvey looked doubtful. "I best git yuh back tuh town. It wouldn't take but a minute, though, would it?"

"Gwan, Sheriff," said Pete, grinning. "You could already be there—an' for Gawd's sake get some pants on! You'll catch yer death."

The old man got dressed. Scurrying up the hill in his perforated raiment, his coat collar turned up to shield his shirtless chest, he might have passed for a victim of gangster bullets, miraculously risen from the pavement.

In a short time he was back, a changed man. His riddled suit was effectively covered by a cloth raincoat, although the sleeves were so short that the ensemble suggested a sixteen-year-old grown out of a perfectly good last year's garment.

In his hand was a black valise that he plumped down with a flourish at Pete's elbow.

"There!" he said. "There's the stuff caused all the trouble—more greenbacks than I seen sence the Black Rock Gang was rounded up twenty-some-odd years ago. The poor fool musta thought nobody knew about this place, b'cause he lef' this here satchel right in plain sight. Yuh kin amuse yerself by speculatin' how much is there whilst I goes down fer th' car."

"How about the flivver?" asked Pete.

"It's up there, right enough," answered Garvey.

"Why not use it to take me down," suggested the young man, "'stead o' takin' a chance bringin' yours up."

"Waal, son, though yuh might not think so, I still got some respect fer law an' order; an' that's part o' the evidence."

The old fellow grinned wickedly. "We're leavin' everything here jes' as 'tis fer our friend, the Sheriff o' Boyd County—which gent we 'phones from our own bailiwick. The money I'm a-takin' along fer safe keepin'; an' this here coat is needful tuh uphold the dignity o' the law."

"Seems to me," said Pete, "like a smart bit of maneuverin' any way yuh look at it."

"Oh, I dunno," replied Sheriff Garvey modestly. "'Twarn't no great shakes. Prob'ly if'n I hadn't went off half-cocked I mighta figgered out somethin' woulda done the trick 'thout wastin' a puffickly good suit o' clothes."

SHIP'S DOCTOR

By BERTON E. COOK

Author of "A New High for Love," "Crusade of Hate," etc.

THEY called him the ship's doctor, the medico of the sea. He was the S.S. *Excalibur's* official physician. They depended upon him to administer to the seasick, to maintain the aged tourist's pulse, to save lives in their holiday bouts with lust. Dr. Melvin Bachelder of the *Excalibur.*

And to-night he had let a man die.

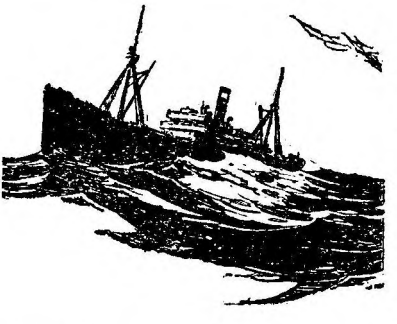
Dr. Bachelder stood aft at the maindeck rail with the eerie sensation of death still brooding over him. He had come away in the dark of the graveyard watch to think. He could not sleep.

He reviewed the case, the roué whom he had moved from stateroom 217 to his own room 219. By moving him there, the doctor had saved his family the shame of another woman's part in their web of life—and by moving him first, before administering the stimulant, he had let the roué die.

But the doctor's thoughts were not wholly on the case. He went back over the years and heard again the dismal plaint of a woman bereft of her mate: "Why will men fight the elements out there beyond help when life is so abundant on the land?" That woman had been his mother, that dismal plaint her beginning of a program that was to divorce her only son from his sea heritage. Throughout the succeeding years of childhood and youth, Melvin Bachelder had been filled with the grim awfulness of life on the wastes of the world. He had been warned away from it, he had been led to look upon a drowned person, he had been stood on rocky cliffs to behold and fear the wild onslaught of crashing seas in scores of storms. No son of Captain Bachelder's widow was going to sea, not if she could prevent it.

She did more. Along with his negative training, she had exerted a positive guidance; she had made of her son a doctor. To-night, Dr. Bachelder recalled her lofty dreams for him. He would become a Carroll conquering yellow jack or a discoverer of chaulmoogra or insulin. Above

The Sea in His Blood, and Iron in His Soul



all else, he was to soar into fame. So the woman had dreamed.

And in spite of it all, here stood Dr. Bachelder in the night at a cruise liner's rail. Not a seaman, but at sea. He had compromised heredity and environment—call it that. For the brine in his blood still persisted and his medical status relieved him of the awful prospect of his father's experience. Never would he have to risk his life on little schooners, much less in that curse of curses, an open boat in a storm. Not he.

Great black seas came out of the night and rushed at him, he shrank instinctively back from them until they went frothing astern. And yet he returned to the rail for more.

"Fancy an open boat out there in the dark to-night!" he murmured. Then his mind reverted to the case in 219 and he added, "I feel like a debtor for that lost life; some day I shall pay the debt, I shall pull a worthwhile case through."

It was a vow.

Dr. Melvin Bachelder went up to his room, totally unaware of a fate that even then was preparing to challenge the vow.

GONE were the tropics. Their warmth and manaña indolence were a memory three days astern. Passengers had forsaken cavorting decks, the last meal was unsteady.

The *Excalibur* had become a hollow hotel, a floating hostelry in which organized entertainment had paled.

Captain Forsythe stood in flying snow in the weather wing of her swaying bridge. His mind was on her schedule. Close by the binnacle amidship stood the second officer with one hand on the siren's lanyard. While it bawled its cowlike warning, he knew there was nothing to blare at. "In these days o' radio weather warnin's," he muttered, "only the *Excaliburs*, only these clocked liners, punch through on their blasted, ruthless schedules!"

Down there on the hurricane deck stood the radio shack. In it, Chuck Harte, the junior op., was trying to keep awake while his chief snored out another graveyard watch on a settee, while nothing came out of the earphones save those monotonous beep-beeps that were radio beacons on their automatic service to ships seeking cross-bearings.

Chuck sighed sleepily; all the time he had done in cargo tramps he had lived in vain for the shrill whine of a distress call.

He got it to-night. The earphones screamed in his ears. He grabbed up a pencil and wrote: ". . . *Sasso* . . . 37N 68-20W. Mate wants directions how treat *capitano's* leg . . . broke three days. Bad break but *capitano* forced keep going account of ice. Listing under tons of ice. *Capitano* getting weak. Pain . . . burning up. We depend on his skill to reach port. He knows ice. Have your medico advise treatment leg. Motta, mate."

Chuck leaped to the settee. He roused his chief. Before the chief had the phones on his head, Chuck had shot out on deck and bucked the storm to mount the bridge. Up there he glimpsed a low light in the chart room. He went to it, to the Second standing with parallels in hand over the chart. Chuck rattled out his story without even taking the message meant for the doctor out of his pocket. He was supremely excited.

And the Second growled, "Hell, man, you breeze in here like an SOS. This ain't nothin', tell it to the skipper. He's out in the starb'd wing—as usual."

Chuck breezed on. He reached the binnacle just as a sea rolled the ship over to starboard. He went down in the snow and slid feet first into the wing. He fetched up at the skipper's heels. Undismayed, he got up and talked rapidly about an Italian tramp *Sasso* with a disabled captain and a mate Motta asking for medical advice.

"Then she's not disabled? Good. We're not going to be held up."

"No, sir," Chuck came back promptly, "but her mate's in a hole about that ice and the cap'n, he's in a bad way, sir. We gotta—I mean——"

"Take the message to the doctor right

away. Dr. Bachelder 'll tell them how to set bones," Captain Forsythe cut in curtly.

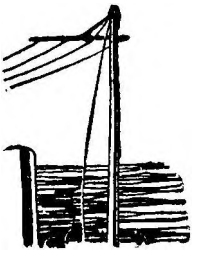
Chuck Harte ran and slid to a companion head. Dr. Bachelder, he'd tell 'em!

EIGHT bells in the wheelhouse and a new watch taking over. Eight booming clangs fill the engine room vault and a fresh engineer comes into the whine of reduction gears ahead of his junior to read the blackboard.

Eight musical "cling-clings" on the doctor's shipclock above his desk. It is four a.m. and Dr. Melvin Bachelder peers once again at three radiograms from Motta, the *Sasso's* mate. Every word of them rings in his soul like eight fatal bells, the end of—of what? Too, every word revives the woman's years-old cry, "Why will men fight the elements out there beyond help——?"

"But this man is not beyond, I have been summoned. God, I wish I were a fatalist! This cursed dread of rough water. I wonder if that Italian master is so badly off?"

He read again Motta's thinly veiled confession: "We depend on his skill to reach port. He knows ice." To this appeal, the



Excalibur's doctor had replied with three specific orders. They were: put the patient to bed regardless of all else, set the bone using plenty of long splints, and lower his temperature with ice packs. As soon as the *Sasso's* mate could report these directions carried out, he was to do so, please.

The report came too quickly. "Impossible set bone. Too much pain and fever. Has begun fainting spells. Raves about the ice. Motta, mate."

One long glance at that missive was sufficient for the *Excalibur's* doctor. Only one. His fist closed over it. While the crumpling paper yet rattled he cried out, "It's *got* to be set. Fainting. Raving. This might be serious. Confound doctoring by radio!"

Impulsively he snatched a sheet of paper off a pad, swiftly he scrawled: "Keep patient abed. Report condition of leg and fracture in detail. Signed: M.B.,M.D." This he pushed toward the waiting Chuck Harte and set him going post haste.

Outside the wind waxed strident, the seas higher. It was the ugliest night in months —and out of it came Motta's reply like an angry retort: "One end of bone out a hole eight inches above knee. Leg turning dark around wound. Yellow fluid seeps out. Fever worst yet. Motta, mate."

This time Chuck Harte got no hurried reply. He watched the doctor read and reread the radio; he wondered why the doc paled, why his fingers shook so. He could scarcely wait for the voice to break through those blanching lips. This affair might be almost as lively as an SOS after all!

"Yellow fluid, eh?" came the words at length. "There's infection. Possible necrocis. In that case, might have to scrape the bone."

Thus the doctor mused aloud while white skin drew taut over drawn features and perspiration appeared. Chuck watched it all intimately, watched until he saw a startled look flare in the brown eyes. They had focused on two black leather kits near the desk, now they came away filled with dread of the kits or whatever they signified. Good night, was the *Sasso's* skipper gonna die?

To Chuck's astonishment the eyes had turned green. "I say, wha's the matter, doctor?" he cried in alarm.

The fine head jerked out of its spell. Dr. Bachelder glared once at Harte, he chafed his thin hands, he began to pace the room. Abruptly he seemed to realize there was Chuck still waiting. He waved an arm toward the door. "No more. No reply. Run along."

Chuck welcomed escape. He breasted the storm to the radio shack and plumped himself down onto the spare chair. For once in his voluble life he was tongue-tied.

MEANWHILE Melvin Bachelder fought his battle alone. He opened the door to peer into the snow that flew at him. He tried to gage the size of seas that filled the night with noises of racing foam. He shut it out by closing the door, but he could not shut out his horror of it all.

"An open boat in that!" he ejaculated. And, like an echo, came his old haunt: "Why will men fight—beyond help?"

Beyond help? Not in these latter days—and wild nights—since radio had arrived. Captain Bachelder had perished before radio, but Capitano Fiore of the *Sasso*—there already was a doctor on his case. That doctor was Captain Bachelder's son. Fate had played a strange trick this time.

"Unless I personally attend to the wound, Captain Fiore is going to——" his blue lips refused to frame the word "die".

And for good reason. The very word itself introduced a new factor, it reminded the doctor of the life he had lost in 219 and the vow he had made afterward. Here was a decidedly worthwhile life to pull through; the captain had broken his leg in arduous duty, had stomped around on an ice-burdened ship until he had ground the bone ends apart and started infection. "He knows ice."

Once more the miserable eyes turned to the kits. One held his surgical instruments, the other his medicines. Ugh! He turned his back on them to pace and mutter, "It means crossing those seas in an open boat. I can't do that!"

But the dead man in 219 haunted his conscience; for that lost life he had vowed he'd save another one, a better one. He had pledged himself. The door opened—Chuck Harte with another message. He flung it open under the doctor's very nose, he panted while snow melted on his blond hair.

Dr. Bachelder read it. The same protruding bone, the same fluid—but the patient was short of breath!

"Tell Motta I'll come. I'll have to set the bone myself!" It burst from the doctor's lips despite himself, despite his deep horror of seas and open boats. It got away from him.

In the cold calm that followed Chuck's departure, came realization; he had committed himself to the dread of years. He had offered to cross in this storm in an open lifeboat—he rushed to the door. The message must not go!

Too late. Instead of Chuck, he glimpsed a burst of heaving water. It smashed against the *Excalibur's* great hull, it spread away. She heeled down as it swept aft and snow pelted the doctor's eyes shut. Then the roaring wind in the rigging, in the funnel guys, filled his ears. Into all this he must go.

CAPTAIN FORSYTHE'S yardstick of command was his ship's schedule. Even now he had the dividers on a chart. One point indicated the ship's probable position, the other pricked at the paper where she should be by the next high twelve, below the Delaware Capes.

Came an interruption. The captain straightened to behold a face that was drawn and ghostly. "Well, Doctor, so you've made a professional call by radio."

The white face nodded solemnly.

"Good. That's settled. Glad we could assist without losing time. Lucky it wasn't an SOS."

"It is, sir."

Captain Forsythe dropped the dividers. "Is, you say. I don't quite fathom you, Doctor."

"They depend upon Captain Fiore to get the *Sasso* to port under a heavy burden of ice. Captain Fiore, sir, requires immediate medical treatment."

Captain Forsythe's lips parted. They closed with finality. He turned his back and resumed work over the chart; the interview was closed. The *Sasso* incident also was concluded.

Here was the doctor's legitimate excuse to escape the ordeal he had impulsively wished onto himself. Here was his opportunity, but something unfathomable within the man refused to back down on his promise, on his vow, on his long, earnest training as a physician. His tomb-like voice spoke to the captain's back. "Captain Forsythe, I am going aboard the *Sasso* to set the captain's leg."

Forsythe wheeled. "You're WHAT!"

"Pardon, sir. With your approval, I am obliged to keep a promise by making a professional call. I have radioed to that effect. I am expected."

"Can't anybody over there set a bone?"

"There is infection. It is serious. Their skipper's life," said the doctor jerkily, and every word belied the dread in his eyes.

Captain Forsythe caught the look in those eyes, he discovered the struggle raging within the young man. It presented his ship's doctor to him in a brand new light and he looked away into the darkness. "I see," he admitted slowly. "I didn't realize." Then brusquely, "Very well, Doctor."

And Second Officer Grune in the shadows at one side, an unnoticed eavesdropper; he too had caught the struggle writ large on the doctor's face. Now he gave vent to a low, penetrating, scornful laugh. For Second Officer Grune never had needed the services of a medico in all his burly, young life. After seeing that sensitive, ghostly face, he counted himself lucky that he never had. Fancy calling this fellow in a pinch. Fancy!

THE *Excalibur* merited her stout name. Like the great sword of Arthur, she cut and slashed her way on a new course to the *Sasso*. She split seas, she laid the waste in acres of foam. East of northeast she bored on her sixty-mile drive into the black of night and the white of flying snow.

Her turbines vibrated throughout her splendid hull and snow turned to hail. The wind swung into the southeast and hail stones tattooed her hurricane deck, glazed her lifeboats and doubled the glass that enclosed her promenade.

Again the wind changed. It moved down into the south and the hail softened to rain. Downpours came hissing up the *Excalibur's* boiling wake. They swept in sheets up the length of her, engulfed her, passed on over her port bow to drum on into the black void to leeward. Her chief engineer with his own hands crowded on more steam; she slammed and split and blasted the seas at a furious speed to the Italian tramp whose skipper knew ice.

A southerly cross sea greeted the dawn with millions of white crests licking high. Two-way seas sent boomings and battle groans through the black steel hull in ceaseless counterstrains. It was a race that made the doctor's sheathed room snap and crackle in countless twists and strains.

And the doctor? Those sounds filled his ears while he watched the somber approach of what he knew was destined to be a terrible day. Was fate going to wipe him out as it had his father? He shuddered. Then, quite suddenly, he cursed his own weakness. But he could picture himself dumped out of a lifeboat beyond recovery on the wastes of the world. It dawned upon him then that Grune, being the second officer, would be the commander of the boat.

Ugh!" He turned away from the doorway.

For diversion, he inspected his medicine kit, the pill box he had already used. That done, he opened his highly cherished surgical kit. Here was his special retractor instrument with its tiny bulbs to illumine the inside of incisions; here the scissors with interchangeable blades. The scalpels were in order. He became engrossed in these priceless things, they were indeed serving to keep his mind off the sea outside; or were they?

Grune came in like a warden. He broke the spell. He stood at the coaming and barked out startlingly, "Ready in five minutes!"

But he did not go directly. His cruel eyes watched the pale features tighten in

strain, then he stabbed again, "Ye're in fer a dam' rough excursion, Doc, prepare to get wetter 'n hell."

The last sound from him was that taunting laugh outside and it cut the doctor to the quick. All his built-up diversion and its calming effect were melted down by that taunt. He looked down to the instrument kit and to his utter dismay discovered that his hands were shaking. His hands that must operate!

He clasped them behind him and addressed his splendid instruments: "It's up to you, now; what the hands lack, you shall have to compensate, you and—" he got out his waterproofed reefer and stuffed the anaesthetic in one side pocket, the iodine in the other—"You and these. We've *got* to see it through— if we survive the lifeboat ordeal to reach the patient at all!"

DR. MELVIN BACHELDER loved not the limelight ever. He hated it to-day. Throughout two decades he had concealed a fear, a dread that made him wary of undue attention lest he reveal it in a lax moment. So he emerged from his room this grim morning with his head hunched deep in his high reefer collar. In either hand, a kit; in his soul an awful misgiving that he had prepared his own funeral and this was its beginning.

Two waiting sailors impatiently whisked away the kits and stowed them under a rubber sheet in the boat. Gaping passengers defied wind and rain to crowd against lines drawn at either side of the lifeboat's station. They watched the doctor solemnly as the curious always do. But the doctor scarcely saw them, he was looking out beyond the boat upon tumbling seas under driving rain. They were fighting seas from the east and challenging seas from the south, and away off there beyond it all a reeling white apparition was the *Sasso* festooned in ice. The scene hypnotized Dr. Bachelder, he marvelled that he had been so rash as to offer his services on such a mission. He shuddered, he walked to the lifeboat in a daze of dread—until he caught the brazen eyes of that truculent Grune boring into his secret soul, until he heard again that low chuckle. The doctor hunched deeper into his collar and climbed up over the gunwale.

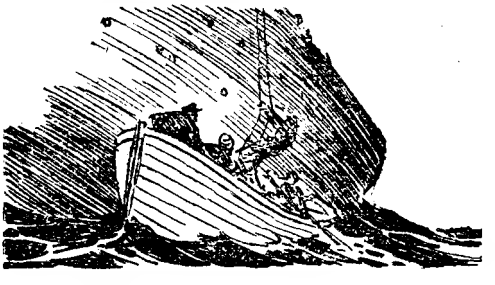
"Sit aft here, Doctor," Grune shouted, "where I can grab onto you. Them's your tool kits in the rubber sheet, they're your worry."

Immediately came action. Worm gears crawled at patent davits. The lofty arms canted out over greedy seas and the lifeboat went with them. Now a long sea laid the ship down to slide into a hollow, yet the boat swung and travelled on and Dr. Bachelder cursed himself for risking a glance overside.

Then the descent. Boatfalls clupped in blocks, the boat eased down, down—until the glassed-in promenade came up and went on overhead. The *Excalibur* became a huge wall of black steel that leaned and swayed until up came a railing. It was lined with passengers in rainclothing and one fool couple cheered. Cheered!

"Hoo-ray yerself," Grune muttered sarcastically.

The doctor's temples throbbed when he looked down the second time. He looked away quickly at rows of deadlights rising,



always rising. And far off there over the tumult on the other side the iced *Sasso* hove high on a monstrous sea, squirmed on top of it and squirted brine out over her white-clad rails.

Grune's all-inclusive eyes caught the doctor staring at her. "Wait 'll you attempt to climb aboard her over that ice!" he chuckled.

Swish—oo! The lifeboat took the water

and instantly became a wild, headstrong, living thing. Grune had his steering sweep in place and working fiercely, two gaffs fended bow and stern away from almost certain destruction against that lofty, black wall.

"Heave—heave. Pull t'beat hell! Head 'er off there for'd. Pull, damn 'er!"

Oars crabbed. Oars dipped deep, almost stalled. Water flew aboard. The boat bobbled and turned away with the powerful thrusts of Grune on his steering oar, with the steadying heave of his picked, volunteer crew on their oars. The *Excalibur's* hull receded. The boat shot headlong down a long slope. She started up the other side of the valley, stalled momentarily, went on up. The Second's big boots braced in front of the doctor, he swayed to his battle with the stern oar. He yelled to his crew and the world re-appeared around them.

Only to be blotted out in a downpour while the doctor's teeth chattered and his hands slipped off the edge of his thwart. He jerked them back for another grip, well aware that he must not allow himself to get tangled with those massive rubber boots that braced Grune to his task. He hugged the rubber-covered kits against his side, and for all his efforts they moved about like crabs. Between kits and slippery thwart he fought to stay put while the other men braced to oars.

Thus it went until a stern monotony set in. Silence gripped the laboring men. Rain pelted squinted eyes and the rhythmic grind at the oars vied with the wild noises of wind and seas outside. Keep afloat, keep going, keep headway; the doctor began to surge with the men and he read their relentless struggle in the set of Grune's features above him.

Read, too, the fight in Grune's stare when he discovered a veritable mountain coming. In a flash it was close. Up went the bows, the men forward rose above the doctor when he turned around and gaped with bated breath—the boat did not climb that one, it was the mountain that passed under her. In a twinkle she was on the far side. She plunged headlong while the doctor took a better hold on instruments and seat, while Grune's boots stomped for a better brace.

The boat climbed the next one between rain squalls. Up top she dipped and there lolled the *Sasso*. She looked large and old and weary, she sank out of sight until only her weaving mastheads showed—and the doctor heard Grune grunt, "Holy Neptune's liver-pin, what a bruiser coming!"

It was. It filled the entire world. It laid the dusk of nightfall in the vale rushing before it and the lifeboat became a mere chip heading into that gloom.

Grune barked a strident command and hove his steering oar to port. The long, perilous climb began. The bows went up so sharply that the doctor lost his seat. He slammed against Grune's big boots and the boots budged not one iota. The doctor rebounded from them, thumped his head against the thwart, caught up the kits he had scrambled under foot and fought his way back from Grune. While the Second cursed him, he regained the thwart and sat down like a bag of cement.

Hugging the kits tighter than ever, he looked and kept looking uphill at that awful sea. It loomed to heaven; on the other side it reached all the way down to—but the boat wasn't climbing it! She had stalled on the side. Momentarily she'd start the death slide stern-first! Dr. Melvin Bachelder forgot his determination to keep silent whatever should befall, he said, "This is the end!" He cramped and clamped his arms and legs to the seat and panic lent strength to his limbs in that terrible moment.

"Heave! Pu-ull! Holy Neptune, row!" Grune's savage howl sent an electric shock up the boat. It roused the battling crew to supreme effort, it drove them. Every man of them rowed as he never had rowed in all his years at sea, and they were veterans all.

"Tracy, you damned loafer, I'll kill you

if you catch another crab like that!" Grune threatened number four brutally.

Foam broke overhead to starboard. It spread. The fierce struggle of the rowers pulled the stubborn boat up to it. Then she was moving into it. Up she rose to new heights—she sat on top! The doctor thanked God fervently.

Scarcely had she mounted the top of all creation when a snarling scourge came hurtling up the south end of the mass. It was a big cross sea and it came tearing. Its comb flew in battle pennants, it struck the lifeboat under the starboard quarter. It killed her headway completely. It started her slewing and Grune bent to his stern oar. But it carried her along the top of the mountain to port willy-nilly, it played with her, rocked her, punished her unmercifully. The world had gone stark mad for Dr. Bachelder.

The Second's next yell was a grunt, it was a brand new cry to his half-spent men, yet they gave their utmost and the port oars quickened in a spurt of desperation.

At long length the bow did come back. It started down the longest descent yet and the doctor took one look into the abyss. It drew the breath clean out of him. Here he sat, a passenger in a life-and-death struggle, forbidden to do one solitary thing to help in the fight; he was infinitely worse off than any other man in the boat. But when he saw that abyss, he had to fight to stay conscious. Down she dipped, down she slithered, there seemed to be no bottom to the slide.

HE EMERGED from that ordeal in cold sweat, he forgot he was Dr. Bachelder. Both his legs were cramped tight to the underside of the thwart. He did not realize how fiercely he had hugged his kits. All he knew was that he was living on borrowed time, his life now was but an extension.

He relaxed from weakness and went limp all over. More hills came, more deep ravines, but he was too weak and spent to dread any more; he had lost something in that awful plunge. It refused to leave his memory, he kept seeing the huge graybeard loom above the battling cross sea's charge, the swoop down backward—for him—into the abyss.

Until the Second hove his steering oar away over in a momentary lull and the boat's wake curved. That change snapped the passenger out of his spell. He glanced away to port and there rose a great lump of ice with a rusty funnel swaying awkwardly on top. The *Sasso* stood close abeam. Her iced rail was lined with gesticulating men and their faces were haggard.

The sight of those faces was what brought the doctor back to full realization of his errand. There was appeal in their eyes, and he was a doctor again, reading the strain of life in faces. His lips framed solemn words, "I'm here as their last hope, I'm a surgeon on a serious case!"

"Stand by for their ladder there, Doc. Grab the first chance at it, there won't be many."

The boat eased close in, oars came aboard, blades dripped aft. Contact! The doctor got to his feet and gripped the gunwale, set himself.

"Grab that ladder!"

A sailor up forward got it. He passed it along aft. Then the doctor's thin hands got hold. Abruptly he turned back for his precious kits, for the instruments that must see him through this unforgettable experience. To his startled gaze it seemed impossible; the kits were not on the thwart at all!

Grune laughed in his face. "Get yerself aboard, go on up," he snapped, "I got yer tools. At this rate you'll do well to get yerself aboard."

Somehow the doctor managed to slide himself inboard instead of overboard, but not before he settled on the ladder into the sea to his knees. He landed on the *Sasso's* glassy deck and squnched in soaked shoes. He squnched toward the bridge structure where the captain's room would be. Suddenly he remembered those instruments.

He turned back—just in time to see Grune fumble them, grab at them over the ladder-head, and squirt them into the air. They parted over his head and went sailing out of reach into the sea. And Grune, in his wrath, hove the rubber sheet after them.

"Oh God, that ends it!" the doctor groaned in abject defeat.

ILL fortunes never seem to come singly. Dr. Melvin Bachelder stood shivering in his wet footgear, the victim of one misfortune after another. That man in 219 had died, and his death had been the beginning. The doctor had lost sleep over the case; when at last sleep had come, he had been jolted out of it by a radio call. Other radios had followed. They revealed the startling fact that the master of the *Sasso* required personal attention with surgical instruments and iodine and anaesthetic. That situation had forced the doctor over treacherous seas and the trip had drained the gimp clean out of him. His one hope of serving the sick man lay in his instruments because his hands were weakened and unsteady. At best it promised to become an ordeal far removed from the usual service and equipment of an operating room—and the captain was the hope of ship and crew in a tight spot.

And now? The instruments were gone. It seemed to Dr. Bachelder, brooding there on the icy deck, that fate had become a living being, a vicious spirit that lashed him and shamed him before his world. Already it had exposed his besetting fear to Grune, and Grune had tossed the choice morsel to his boat crew. The story would run riot aboard the *Excalibur,* as stories do at sea.

Motta, the mate, came. He stood close to the doctor and waited until his very presence broke the physician's train of reflection. Then he spoke. In English that sang sadly in the ears. He pleaded for his captain, his words ran on and on while men stood around and listened.

Grune watched the two, watched the doctor's mouth for the reply that did not come. Grune was angry at himself that he had fumbled those kits, even he realized their importance on this mission. He endured the doctor's glum silence until it got on his nerves. He refused to stand here longer!

In a devastating stride he swarmed up to the doctor and leered at him. "Too damn bad about the kits," he snorted, "but hell, we can't stand here doin' nothin' forever. No good o' cryin' over spilt milk. The op'ration's all off. So go on up to their skipper and—well, give the Wop the once-over and git back here. We've lost a lotta time fer nothin', we gotta make up fer all this hooray stuff. Hurry, mister."

That speech in itself was bad enough at the moment, but Grune's overbearing manner about it—and his raw truculence! It stung the son of Captain Bachelder to the core. He take this from the bungler who had robbed him of that priceless retractor? Those beautiful scalpels? Grune, of all the men present, should be the first to sympathize with Captain Fiore's predicament, and here he stood——

A strange, cold anger surged through Dr. Bachelder. He turned to survey this brute from his cockeyed sou'wester to the soles of his rubber boots. He met the brazen stare and in that brief interchange he became the master of the situation. He was the surgeon on a case again.

"Grune," said he frigidly, "did you ever have occasion to depend upon a doctor?"

"Huh. Now wadda you think? Look at me!"

"I don't have to, you're a rank bounder. Now you trail me to this captain's cabin, you and I are going to operate. It will do you good. Come along."

THERE's something about a soldier, but there's vastly more about a physician—especially when misery stalks in stoic silence within the dim light inside a lonely cabin on the wastes of earth.

Dr. Bachelder entered. His trained eyes discerned the suffering, the flush of racing hot blood in the weathered face. He

marked the twitching fingers half curled on the quilt they'd been clutching. The Roman nose of a conqueror of three days of trouble, but the dilating nostrils and heavy lids and heaving chest that registered the price the captain's body had paid for his stoicism. Three relentless, driving days and beleaguered nights; eighteen eight-hour watches of walking and standing on the grating, grinding ends of fractured bone until it had. . . . The doctor uncovered the leg. He saw one end of the bone out. Pus was coming.

"He would not bear us to touch him," Motta whispered while Grune's features twisted as he stared at the thing. Grune was already perspiring, but he blamed it on the close air in here as he turned away and his eyes fell upon a crucifix on the wall.

Now the patient made incoherent words about the ice. He winced, became acutely conscious, discovered a stranger.

"The doctor, *Capitano,*" said Motta to stall off another of those furious bursts. "The doctor has come to——"

"Mother of God," groaned Fiore, "give me medicine, I must keep going till we get

in. I must—keep going—keep . . ." His voice trailed out.

"First you sleep," the doctor said softly while he prepared the anaesthetic. He instructed Motta carefully in its use.

Silence. Anaesthetic fumes. Deep breathing on the bed.

The doctor made a steward hold the dingy light bulb. "Right there. Don't move it an inch," he warned.

The doctor produced a dainty pocket knife and tried the edge while he watched the effects of the anaesthetic solemnly. He caught the bosun's eye and sent him out to have Chips prepare long splints. He motioned Grune closer to wait on him. All the while, the old *Sasso* rolled and wallowed and corkscrewed over one sea after another, and Grune's expert ear caught a peculiar sound that came from the engine room. It made him wet his lips. He glanced toward Motta; no wonder they wanted a doctor, no wonder this captain seemed so desperate to make port under his own guidance. The *Sasso* was leaking!

But Grune dared not mention it. "One thing at a time," he said to himself.

"Grune, strop this knife. Razor strop at the sink. Lively! I have called to you three times and you're at my elbow, what's the matter? Man alive, we haven't started yet!"

Grune yawned despite his new uneasiness about the *Sasso.* So Cap'n Fiore was avoiding a tow, eh? Grune yawned again. Damn that sickening, dopey anaesthetic! He stropped the knife and the motion stirred up his stomach, never had he smelled such stuff.

"Time means life, Grune," the doctor called impatiently. "You have prated about lost time; good, that's sharp as we can expect. Here, come around on my left side and hold—I said my left! Now forget what you have to look at and hold this so. No, pull it toward you. That's better. Steady, steady."

Grune held something, he neither knew nor wanted to see what it might be. He averted his eyes and muttered thickly, he cast longing glances toward the door. The fumes were worse than ever, only the extreme importance of the captain, in their plight, kept Motta to his assignment grimly.

And the doctor? He was lost in his work. He seemed to have drained from Grune a portion of his burliness into himself. He was deep into the worst professional crisis he had ever encountered. Nothing in the radiograms had begun to disclose what he had found.

The *Sasso* refused to be ignored, she took a long, schooning dive down between seas. The doctor braced against the bank of drawers that piled up from the floor to the side of the bed. It was an awkward stance for him, but the only one possible; this was the antithesis of a hospital operating room in every way. Yet, in spite of everything, he got to the source of the infection. One careful survey of that spot and he knew it was going to take more time than he had suspected. He called out, "Just enough to keep him under, Mr. Motta. Watch his pulse." Then to Grune he snapped, "Reach me that iodine. Hurry up."

Grune reached twice before he got hold of it. The doctor took it quickly and opened it himself, not trusting Grune, while the anaesthetic seemed to pack full the air, while the steward's arm grew heavy from holding a mere light bulb and Grune paled under his tan.

"Take it away, Grune—but keep it handy till I ask for it."

Grune took the iodine. Before he knew what to do with the new odor, he heard the dull scrape of that knife. He coughed and tried to check it to conserve his strength. He began to doubt his stomach. More than ever, he craved to see the horizon, to get his bearings once more.

But he looked in vain. He turned to see Motta's Italian swarthiness now drawn and green. He saw the doctor's shoulders bent over the patient; working, working, working as though nothing else mattered. He hated him for his apparent immunity to the fumes, to the sight of an open wound and raw bones and blood. Ugh!

Little did he suspect the real situation with the doctor still braced against the chest of drawers. Dr. Bachelder's legs were cramped, his fingers ached, his eyes burned in the iodine vapor and strain of seeing by meager light. His head reeled at moments.

Yet he worked on.

Presently he called hoarsely for more iodine. Grune passed it and saw the thin fingers close on it; he was glad to be rid of its nasty stench. Now Grune took it away again. When he did, he distinctly heard the bones crunch into place. The door opened and the *Sasso's* carpenter came in with long splints. Grune jerked his head toward the fresh air, toward the one chance for a look at the horizon that might steady him. He dropped the iodine!

It spilled and a dark stream of the stuff coursed over the linoleum. Fumes rose from it immediately, an overwhelming wave that the current of cold fresh air coming in over the floor lifted up. It rose all the way to Grune's nostrils, quite suddenly he saw the cabin spin around him. He staggered away from the doctor and fell.

The doctor heard the fall, but he could not leave the wound at that critical stage. He gave a crisp command. Motta managed to get to the stream on the floor. He recovered—there were two scant ounces left.

The doctor glanced at it. "Thank God for that much!" He shoved it at the man holding the light and worked on.

MINUTES later, Grune revived and pulled himself awkwardly, shamefacedly to his feet. He was infinitely relieved to see that he was not the center of attention; the carpenter had replaced him at the doctor's side, Motta was hanging to his job still and the steward had the light lower down to the operation. All were intent upon that silent battle on the bed.

Dr. Bachelder had spread his knees wider apart, now, to get closer, to maintain his balance against the ship's roll and slat. His hands moved back and forth, steady and swift; a drain for the discharge, a rude splint from the carpenter's hands, yards and more yards of an old sheet that had been torn into strips for bandages.

At length the operation was completed. Dr. Bachelder straightened up, failed to go all the way and squared his stiff shoulders. Sweat stood on his brow. For the first time he became aware of Grune revived.

"You may as well go back to the ship, Mr. Grune," he said wearily. "No need of

holding her here longer." He turned to the *Sasso's* mate and said, "Ease Captain Fiore down into his bed more comfortably, he's going to need it when he comes to. That will be soon. I'll be back directly."

Slowly the young doctor washed and rewashed his hands and arms at the tiny sink. When he turned aside to dry them, there stood Grune staring at nothing at all. "What on earth are you still here for? Better get going, the *Excalibur* has lost considerable time as it is."

Grune gave him a puzzled stare. "I am waiting for you, Doctor," he declared.

"I'm not going, Grune. I can't leave."

"Not going!" The mate's jaw sagged ridiculously in blank astonishment. "You're not going back aboard?"

"I can't. My patient is a very sick man, I can't leave him."

"But you can't stay here, what 'll Cap'n Forsythe say? And this *Sasso"*—he led the doctor to the door—"This tramp is leaking. She's a crate, she ain't safe."

The doctor stood unmoved.

"See here, Doc, you've done all you can, and a damned good job to boot, but I tell you as sure's I stand here, if you stay here the chances are more'n even you'll never reach port. Now you're a doctor, but my business is ships and I tell you——"

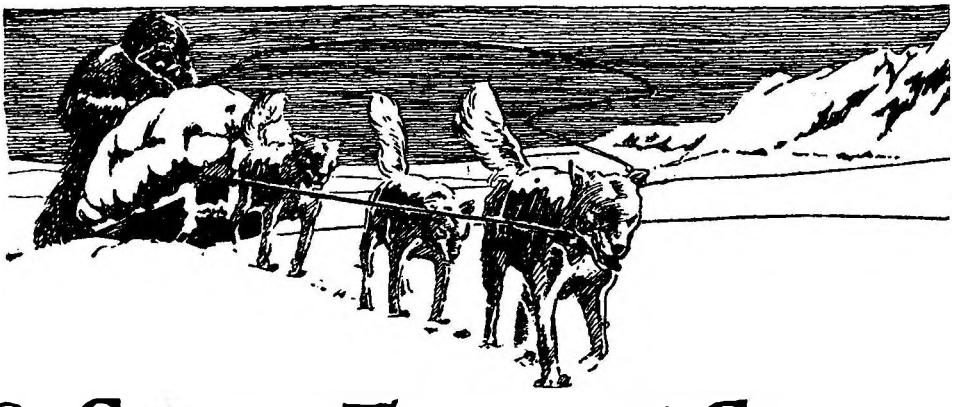
"So long, Grune."

Grune left with a solemn shake of his head. All the way from the *Sasso* to the *Excalibur,* now lying around to leeward, he kept muttering, "And that bird was scared stiff of seas! Can you beat that?"

One afternoon later in the week, the *Sasso* came crawling into the harbor and docked within two piers of the *Excalibur.* The reporters were disappointed when the young doctor brushed them aside brusquely; his entire concern seemed to be that lump of humanity on the stretcher.

But one of them got to talking with a grizzled old veteran looking on and:

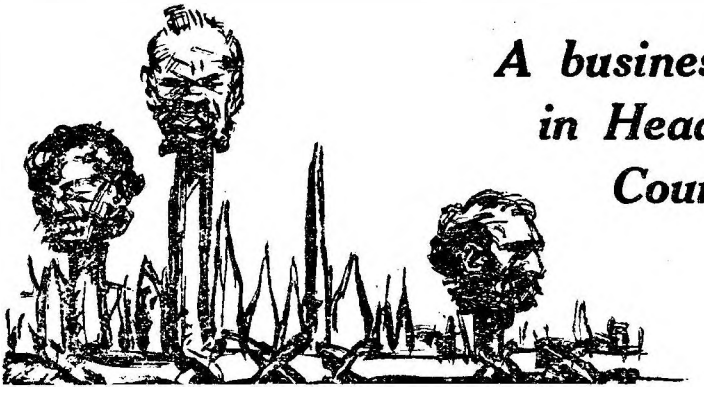
"Know Mel Bachelder? Well, I oughta. Knowed 'im since he was a little shaver, knowed his father before 'im; his grandad, too. No better masters ever handled a sextant. And the boy—well, that's a funny case. I allus thought he favored 'is mother's side, but I'll be hanged if he ain't all Bachelder t'day. Bachelder through and through."



The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

An Ancient Mystery of the North

BLACK JOHN SMITH of Jim Hendryx's Halfaday Creek stories is a great hand at clearing up mysteries—especially when there is any profit to be gained thereby—but an actual and ancient mystery of the far North that has never been solved is what became of the five men Frobisher



A business venture in Head-hunter Country!

TRADE HEADS

A novelette by

Captain Frederick Moore

RUFUS KING — *One of the best known mystery writers of the day develops the "Eye Witness"*

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And the best in yarns by

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W. M. RAINE — W. E. BARRETT, *etc.*

All in the next issue——

SHORT STORIES *for September 25th*

left in the Arctic to guard his gold mine. Frobisher made several trips to Baffin Island in the Sixteenth Century and in 1576 he found a mineral deposit on Kadlunarn Island that he thought was gold. The house he built and the other evidences of his visit are still visible there. He left five men on the island to guard his mine from the natives and returned to England with a cargo of the ore.

The men were never heard of again and it was long suppposed that they had been killed by the Eskimos. The natives say this is not so. Their traditions which describe events of centuries ago with surprising accuracy and detail say that the white men built themselves a boat and sailed away, perhaps in a forlorn hope of returning to England.

A clue to their disappearance was found a number of years ago by the explorer Donald B. McMillan. On an island in Countess Warwick Sound he found an ancient stone house which from the moss and other evidence appeared to be over three hundred years old. Native tradition said it had been built by white men. Frobisher's men seem the most likely builders as they were perhaps the only white men in the region at that time. As the island was only about fifty miles from Kadlunarn it would appear that they had been wrecked before they were any more than started in their desperate attempt to reach home.

The saddest thing about the whole affair was that the mine which the men had been left to guard and the cargo Frobisher had taken back to England was not gold at all but only the worthless mineral called fool's gold that has fooled many other inexperienced men before and since.

Salt Water Blood

BERTON E. COOK writes us that one of the strangest of strange incidents in sea lore is the case of the aged ex-master of sail in Kansas. A popular radio program once revealed that he fled the sea, only to locate by chance near salt water in mid-continent.

"Quite likely he has about him mementos of sea life," says Mr. Cook. "If so, some future connoisseur probably will discover them there and marvel at finding such exotic material in the middle of a continent. This, of course, long after the ex-sailing master is forgotten.

"All of which explains the fact that many homes bear the deep-water stamp without claiming one solitary member of the family on the oceans of earth. Conch shells, coral fans, shell-bedecked boxes are there. In other landlocked homes it might be only an odd flare somewhere within the family for pictures of ships or those twine company calendars. The plausible explanation for it lies in the family tree; maybe some forgotten generation did go 'down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life.'

"A doctor quit a very large city's very modern hospital, some years ago, to fill a vacated island practice. He could not say why he chose a lonely island. He got started there only to hanker for an even closer contact with the sea. He sat in his study and painted fair word-pictures of himself aboard a liner as ship's doctor. Ten to one, he descended from some ancient sea rover and the ancient urge was rising in him to the forefront again after dormant generations. For salt water does get into the blood.

"But the dormance had left its mark, too; the young doctor's conversation disclosed an abiding dread of small craft, especially open boats, when he learned that his new field of endeavor included trips to isolated, other islands in open boats.

"Unbeknown to that doctor, he founded the story in this issue entitled, *Ship's Doctor.*

"Berton E. Cook"

Making a Day of It

THE length of a day or night a man prefers is merely a matter of choice and the ability to get to the proper place,

If any one is not satisfied with what he gets at home, there is an assortment of daytime which ranges from three hours' duration to three months and a half, from which he may take his pick. On the other hand, he can play the nighthawk for from two hours and a half up.

At Wanderbus, in Norway, the day lasts from May 21st to July 22nd without interruption; and at Spitzbergen, the longest three and a half months.

At Tornea, in Finland, the longest day has twenty-one hours and a half, and the shortest five hours.

At St. Petersburg and Tobolsk in Russia, the longest has nineteen and the shortest five hours.

At Stockholm and Upsala, in Sweden, the longest day has eighteen and a half hours.

At Hamburg, Danzig, and Stettin, in Germany, the longest days have seventeen hours, and the shortest seven.

At Berlin and London, the longest day has sixteen and a half hours, and the shortest about eight.

Sacred Crocodiles Again

IN THE Story Tellers' Circle of a recent issue of SHORT STORIES, I read that—'To find a place where the crocodile is not only protected but worshipped we have to go to the other side of the globe where this is true in at least two countries of the Old World,'" writes a reader, Ralph F. Donaldson, whose headquarters are in New York City and whose letter head reads, "Explorations and Expeditionary Photography."

"One does not have to travel that far," continues Mr. Donaldson. "In the interior of Dutch Guiana, South America, the Djukas, direct descendents of West African slaves and now one of the most independent of jungle people, worship and protect the crocodile. Some of their more civilized clansmen living near the gold workings and mission stations will accompany a white man croc-shooting but even then reluctantly.

"The Bush negroes feel that to harm a crocodile any way will incur the wrath of the *Jumbii*, an evil jungle hobgoblin. This is particularly true among the natives on the upper Suriname River.

"Late one afternoon as my expedition slowly paddled along, weary after long hours of forcing our four *corials* through frothing *schulers*, we watched the shore line for a suitable camp site. The natives were happy to have ascended the Moosama-pratii Falls without an accident; only ten days more and we would arrive at Graman Kondre, our destination.

"Duffy, a town negro acting as my personal boy, pointed to a large sand bar some fifty yards to the right. A huge crocodile lay dozing in the hot afternoon sun. I raised my rifle, took aim, and just as I squeezed the trigger, Koolentii a husky paddler seated behind me struck the rifle with his paddle. The bullet sped wide of its mark.

"'It is not good white man,' he cried. 'The bad *Jumbii* will put a curse on this *corial* and all of us will be drowned in the *schulers, ah na boon, ah na boon.*'

"Just as in far-off Africa today, the mysteries of black magic entwining the natives with the tentacles of superstitions and taboos prevail in the Suriname bush. The crocodile, and his companion—the snake, are living symbols of black magic and voodooism.

"Very truly yours,

"Ralph F. Donaldson"

OUTLANDS AND AIRWAYS

Strange facts about far places and perilous air trails. Send in yours.

Catapult Launchings

IN FURTHER support of those who believe that catapult launchings will play an important rôle in air transport of the near future come the successful tests of the new Dornier DO-18, which Lufthansa will use for experimental mail flights in the North Atlantic this summer, and the catapult ship Ostmark. The flying boat was launched from the ship and made a flight of 2,856 miles at an average speed of 139 miles an hour. The catapult ship functioned so well with the heavily loaded plane that it is now believed one such vessel only, at the Azores, will be required for the Atlantic service.

Africa's Vanishing Game

ON HER return from a recent African expedition Dr. Mary Akeley, widow of the famous African explorer, Carl Akeley, declared that the real problem of the student of primitive Africa is not to defend himself against wild animals but to see them. His real difficulty was not to make peace with dangerous tribes but to find them living according to their ancient customs. Dr. Akeley went on to say that on her recent expedition she found in Africa among all thinking citizens, both official and private, a strong sentiment for conservation; they realized that the wild life of the continent was probably its greatest attraction, and that vanished species could never be recalled.

The true sportsman realizes that it is the duty of his own generation to pass unimpaired to the next the natural assets of a country, that his son and grandson are as much entitled to a glimpse of old Africa as he, and that the scientists of tomorrow must not be deprived of the opportunity to study the strange African species in their attempts to supply missing chapters of the earth's history.

The ends of conservation may be served further by disproving the fallacious notion that all large mammals are aggressive. Only once during thirteen months of hunting in the remote regions of equatorial Africa was a shot fired in self-defense by a member of the Akeley party.

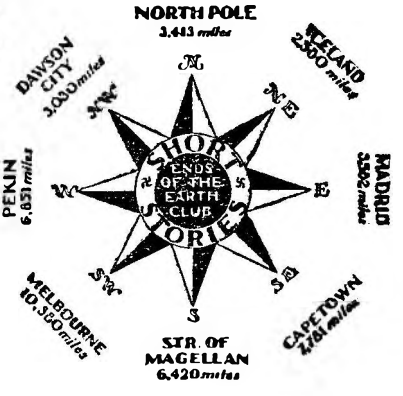
Air Express

AIR EXPRESS is growing faster in Europe, where it had an earlier start than in this country. The Royal Dutch Air Lines have taken over two-thirds of the vast Netherlands tulip bulb export trade. It has been found that the bulbs travel better by air than by ground transport. Cairo is getting its chrysanthemum plants from England by Imperial Airways. Lonely officials in far-flung Indian stations no longer have to wait for weeks for their radio tubes, but get them in a few days by air from London. Florists are importing orchids from the Continent and the Near East, and London shops display fresh mangoes flown from Egypt, while at the Croyden restaurant French patisseries are served less than two hours from their Paris ovens.

A wooden hotel has flown fifty miles in New Guinea. From Port Moresby, Papua, Reuters reports that the hotel was built for Lae, a small town on the coast. The price of Australian sawed timber is high and the cost of sea transport heavy. So the contractor, Tom Flower, found it cheaper to get his timber supplies at Wau, a mining town in the mountains.

He bought the wood, cut everything to shape, made the doors and windows in his own workshop—and then had the whole hotel carried by airplane down to the coast, a fifty-mile journey over very rough country. The hotel has now been pieced together successfully and has been opened for visitors.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, % Short Stories, Garden City, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

Our members in Scotland are few and far between, but certainly there must be plenty of fifteen-year-olds who would be glad to have a friend in Australia.

Dear Secretary:

For some time now I have been reading SHORT STORIES and I am very much interested in your Ends of the Earth Club.

I wonder if some boy of fifteen would care to correspond with me. As I have relations in Canada, I would prefer some other country, Scotland if possible.

Yours truly,
George Burton

18 Joslin Street,
Wayville,
Adelaide,
South Australia

Newspapers, magazines and correspondence to exchange.

Dear Secretary:

I have been a constant reader of SHORT STORIES since I bought my first copy some time ago, and I hold it to be the best adventure magazine published, bar none.

Since I would like foreign correspondents, especially South America, British Isles, Germany, France, Spain, Latvia and Japan, I should like to join your wonderful club. I shall be pleased to exchange newspapers and magazines from any of the countries mentioned.

Yours hopefully,
Albert Bauman

Netook,
Alberta,
Canada

Come on, all you stamp collectors, rally to the aid of an invalid member.

Dear Secretary:

I am sick in bed, having been an invalid for a long time. My friends bring all kinds of magazines to me and recently I found a copy of SHORT STORIES among them. This is the best magazine I have ever read.

I would like some pen pals. I am a collector of stamps. I have traded some in my time and hope to again if I get strong enough.

Here's hoping for lots of letters.

Yours very sincerely,
Ernest L. Butler

Duffee,
Mississippi

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Write your name and address carefully on the coupon below. I'll send you absolutely free a copy of my new book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."* It reveals the secrets that changed me from a 97-pound flat-chested weakling into a husky fellow who won the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" against all comers! And it shows how I can build you into an "Atlas Champion" the same way.

Are you underweight? I'll add pounds where they are needed! Are you fat in spots? I'll show you how to pare down to fighting trim.

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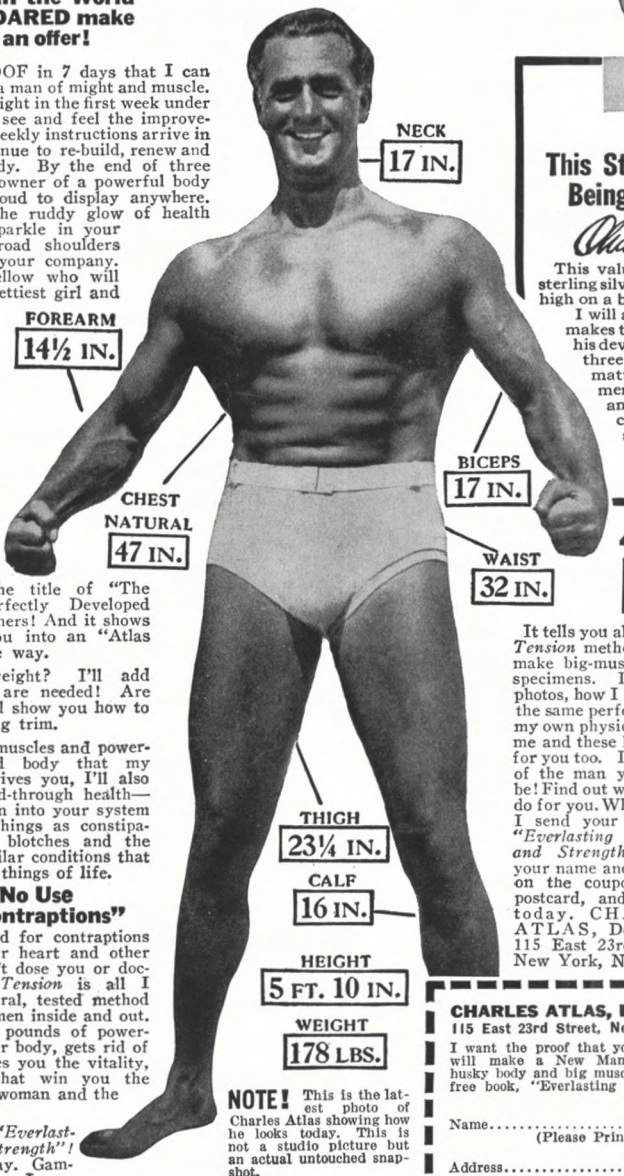

NOTE! This is the latest photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

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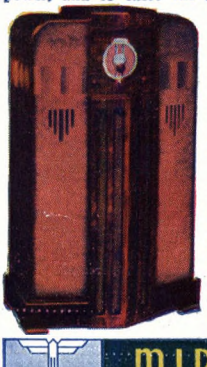

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