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Short Stories

Twice A Month

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story of

**Hashknife
Hartley**

by

**W. C.
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April 25th, 1939 SHORT STORIES 176 Pages



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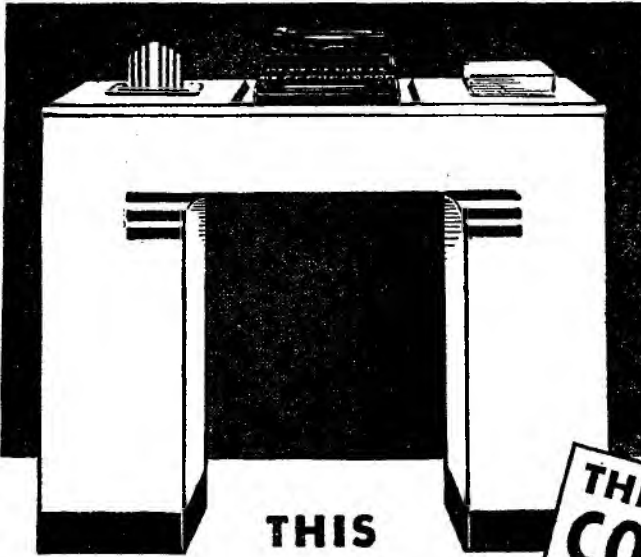
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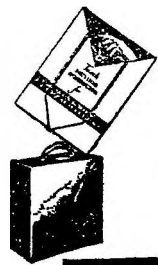
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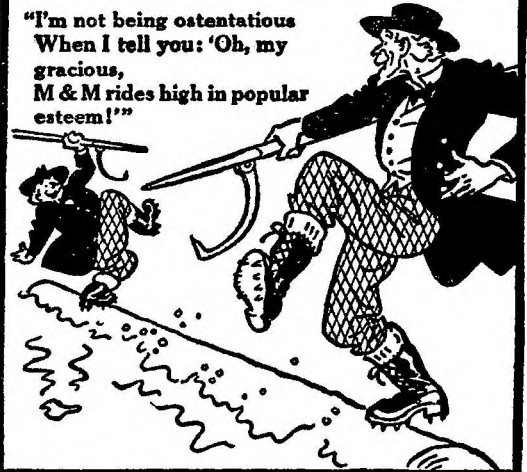
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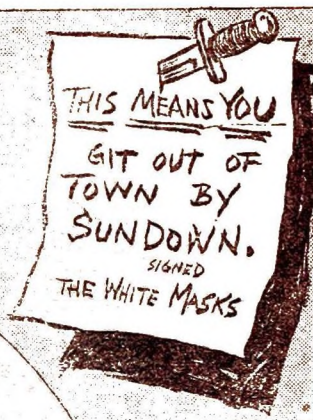
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by

W. C.
TUTTLE



*Funny How These Bad Men
Seem to Cut Their Own Trails*

Hashknife and Sleepy Are—

PASSENGERS FOR PAINTED ROCK

By W. C. TUTTLE



I

IT WAS hot and dusty in that old smoking car. Darkness had cut off the dreary view of miles and miles of seemingly endless sagebrush, mesquite, gray and harsh in the blistering sunlight. The occupants of the car were few, drowsing wearily.

Sitting together, facing each other, were Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens. Someone in years past had called them soldiers of fortune. But Sleepy denied that cognomen, substituting, "Cowpunchers of Disaster." Hashknife was several inches over six feet tall, slender, but powerful. He had a long, narrow face, generous nose, high-cheek bones and a wide, thin-lipped mouth. His eyes were gray; a peculiar tint of greenish-gray, which seemed to look through things. Few people ever forgot those eyes.

Sleepy Stevens was shorter, wide of shoulder, long of arm, and his legs were slightly bowed. Sleepy had a good-natured

face, with no predominating features, unless eyes may be classed as features. They were large, very blue, and seemed to look at the world in amazement. But those eyes were plenty capable of looking unwaveringly through the sights of a hot rifle or six shooter, when the going got tough.

In garb they were very much alike, and also very typical of the country through which they were traveling. Overalls, tucked into high-heel boots, faded shirts, neckerchiefs, stringy vests, and sombrero hats. Piled on the luggage-rack above their heads were their war-bags, canvas sacks, with a draw-string at the top—the baggage of a wandering cowpuncher.

A weary looking brakeman came through the car, swinging a lantern.

"About how far to Painted Rock, pardner?" asked Hashknife.

The brakeman tried to look out at the passing scenery, glanced at his watch and scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"Ought to be there in fifteen minutes," he replied, and went on.

Hashknife sighed and looked at Sleepy. "Painted Rock sounds like a reg'lar place," he said.

"Don't mind me, cowboy," replied Sleepy. "Like I've done told yuh, seven, eight times already, it looks crazy to me. If yuh look at it right, I mean."

Hashknife's grin seemed to reach from ear to ear.

"Prob'ly very simple, when yuh hear the answer," he remarked.

"Did Bob Marsh ever get us into anythin' that was simple?" demanded Sleepy. "The situation is prob'ly tougher than a basket of rattlers. I know Bob jist as well as you do. He's a liar. There ain't no beef to be bought."

"Well," drawled Hashknife, soothingly, "I wouldn't call Bob a liar, until I knew he lied to us. Yeah, I know, he's secretary of the cattle association, and I agree that he's liable to—"

"That's what I've been tryin' to get through yore head. Bob sends you a wire, which says, 'Go to Santa Lucia in San Pablo Valley and talk beef prices with Johnston Burke.' Well, that's all right. But now we gets a wire from Burke, sayin', 'Will meet you at Painted Rock. Will be better to get off there.' Now the map shows that it's twenty miles from Painted Rock to Santa Lucia. Painted Rock ain't even in San Pablo Valley. Dang it, Hashknife, it looks like—well, somethin'. I dunno what."

Hashknife stood up, lifted down two wrinkled coats, draped them over the back of the seat, and then lifted down the two war-bags.

Slipping on the coats, they unfastened the tops of the war-bags, drew out their Colt .45's and shoved them inside the waistband of their overalls.

"I've got to git somethin' to eat pretty soon," declared Sleepy. "That old gun's rubbing plumb through me against my backbone."

THEY were closing their war-bags when the brakeman came through the car again, calling:



"Painted Rock! Next stop Painted Rock!"

"Big town?" queried Sleepy.

"Big town for a spot like this. Three houses and a water-tank."

"What's the good of a town out here?"

"My friend," replied the brakeman wearily, "I hope I find the answer to that question some day; I'll be able to answer it plenty times."

There was a tiny light in the little depot, but no one in sight. What would be about a city block away was a lighted building, evidently a saloon, with an upstairs with two front windows, one faintly lighted. There were no horses at the hitch-rack.

Hashknife and Sleepy, with their war-bags tucked under one arm, went over to the lighted saloon. It was a typical cattle country saloon, rough and ready, smelling strongly of stale liquor and strong tobacco. Four men were hunched around a poker table under an oil lamp, busily engaged in the intricacies of draw-poker.

They all looked up quickly, as Hashknife and Sleepy came in. One was bareheaded

and in his shirt-sleeves, apparently the saloon-keeper. He said, "Howdy, gents; are yuh wishful of somethin'?"

"Is there any place where we can get a little supper?" asked Sleepy.

The man shook his head slowly. "No, there ain't. My old woman could rustle up something, but she's laid up with rheumatism. I been doin' my own cookin' for two weeks—and I ain't et much either."

"Where do the rest of yuh eat?" queried Sleepy, looking at the others.

"Oh, they're runnin' cows—'way out yonder, twenty, thirty miles."

"As the crow flies," added one of the men dryly. "And I ain't no crow."

"Too bad," sighed Sleepy, "I'm so hungry I could eat me a crow."

"I can give yuh plenty to drink," offered the proprietor.

"No, I'm afraid that wouldn't nourish us very much," said Hashknife. "Yuh see, we was expectin' to meet a man here and—"

Hashknife swung his war-bag around, intending to place it on the bar, but at that moment a bullet tore through it and smashed into the counter. From outside came the whanging report of a shot. As Hashknife whirled around, another bullet tugged at his neckerchief.

The four men went out of their chairs like a covey of quail going out of a mesquite, and Sleepy was sliding across the floor toward the wall, gun in hand. Hashknife went flat on the floor as the third bullet whacked into the wall behind him, and fired at the flash through the doorway.

"Watch that window, Sleepy!" snapped Hashknife. "I'll take care of the door."

The saloonkeeper was flat on his back against the wall, yelling:

"What the hell's gone wrong? Stop shootin', will yuh?"

"Yuh better go out and talk to *him*," suggested Sleepy dryly. "We're willin', if he is."

But the shooting had ceased. Three shots had been fired, all of them at Hashknife,

but the tall cowboy was unscathed. Sleepy crawled rapidly to the doorway, where he listened closely. Then he got slowly to his feet and looked out.

"A horse just left town," he said. "I reckon the man went with him."

The proprietor got up, dusted off his clothes, and said to Sleepy:

"Close the door, will yuh? If he shoots agin he'll have to shoot through them glass winders—and they're plenty thick."

"You don't happen to know who done the shootin', do yuh?" asked Hashknife curiously.

"Well, it must be an outsider, stranger. There's only me and my old woman, the storekeeper and the depot agent in the town. It wasn't neither me nor my wife, the storekeeper took a train to Santa Lucia early this afternoon, and the depot agent ain't got ambition enough to pull the trigger on a gun. Mebbe it was the man you figured on meetin'."

"Yeah, I forgot about him," nodded the tall cowboy. "What sort of a town is Santa Lucia?"

"Narrer as hell," said one of the poker players quickly. "Last time I was over there I shot three holes in a saloon porch roof, and the danged city marshal chased me three miles. Who dealt that last mess?"

WHEN the deal argument was settled, Hashknife said:

"Any of you fellers know a man named Johnston Burke?"

Two of the men shook their heads, but one said:

"Yeah, I know *of him*. He owns the JHB spread in San Pablo Valley. They tell me that he's a rich rooster, who lives in Frisco. That's about all I know. I wouldn't know the gent from a side of bacon. Gimme three cards off the top, mostly aces."

"Mebbe he's one of the White Masks," chuckled one of the men.

"Some new lodge?" queried Hashknife.

"Yeah. Only three members, as far as

anybody knows about. They wear long white masks. I understand that they've got San Pablo Valley kinda shaky in their boots. Who tilted that pot. You, Jim? Didn't yuh hear me askin' for aces? Had a couple in m' hand, and *mebbe* I helped. I'll jist tilt that pot four-bits, before I look. *Mebbe* I helped.

"I'm just wonderin' how we're goin' to get to Santa Lucia," remarked Hashknife. "Any chance to hire a couple saddle horses?"

The saloon proprietor shook his head. "Not here. Yore best bet is to catch a freight train goin' that way. They mostly stop here for water, and they'll haul yuh over there for four-bits. Ort to be one along inside an hour. Yuh can hear 'em whistle for Painted Rock, and that'll give yuh plenty time to catch 'em. Sa-a-ay! I jist happened to remember that I've got a couple cans of salmon and some sody crackers behind the bar. Might be a snack for yuh, if yo're real hongry."

"You never made a greater speech in yore life!" exclaimed Sleepy.

"Would yuh mind doin' yore eatin' over on that other side of the room?" asked one of the players. "If that galoot should happen to come back, I don't want to be between you and the window. With all the practice he's had, he can't miss much longer."

"I don't believe he'll come back," grinned Hashknife. "When yuh miss a man three times, hand-runnin', at forty feet, it's time to quit."

"Well, yo're mighty cool about it, pardner."

"It wasn't serious."

"Wasn't serious? My Gawd! It scared the tripe out of me—and he wasn't even shootin' at me."

"You was raised delicate-like, Jim," chuckled one of the men. "Us old Arizonians—"

"Yeah, I know. You was flat on the floor, holding a chair-seat in front of yore head."

"I went into a de-cline, myself," remarked the proprietor. "Them kinda things age me, don'tcha know it? Who dealt that last bunch of misfits?"

Hashknife and Sleepy finished off the two cans of salmon and a box of crackers, which they paid for, and were ready to leave the saloon, when they heard the long-drawn station whistle of an approaching freight.

"Jist hop the caboose and hand the conductor four-bits apiece," advised the proprietor. "Good luck, gents."

"Same to you," grinned Hashknife. "Mebbe we'll see yuh again."

"That's fine, boys. Painted Rock is a great place to visit. Give my regards to Edgar Carlton and Busted Hope. You'll meet 'em both."

"And Speedy Singleton," added the man who said he had been chased out of Santa Lucia by the marshal. "Tell him I'm comin' back and disturb his danged peace again one of these days."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy hurried up to the depot and climbed aboard the caboose, where the sleepy conductor accepted their money without any comment. Finally he said:

"What'll they do with the buildin's now?"

"What buildin's?" asked Sleepy.

"The ones in Painted Rock—since everybody's left there."

"We're the only ones that left."

"Huh? You amaze me. I didn't know



that two people could leave the town and still have anybody left. My mistake. Santa Lucia? Twenty miles. Barrin' a hot-box, loose rail, loose cattle or a broken couplin', we ought to get there in a couple hours. If you're asleep, I'll wake yuh up."

"Suppose all three of us are asleep?" queried Sleepy.

"Somebody'd have to wake us up. I've got to get orders in Santa Lucia."

After he had crawled up into the cupola of the caboose, Hashknife sprawled on the seat, smoking thoughtfully, while Sleepy stared moodily at his boots. Finally Hashknife said quietly:

"Well, go ahead and say it, Sleepy. You told me so."

"Whatsa use?" sighed Sleepy. "You danged near got killed."

"Inches away from it, pardner."

"Uh-huh. Mr. Burke wasn't such a good shot."

"No, I don't think it was Mr. Burke. I don't know Mr. Burke. Bob Marsh wouldn't make a mistake like that."

"Mr. Burke wired us to meet him in Painted Rock, Hashknife."

"Yeah, that's true. Mebbe this feller came in place of Burke. Sleepy, I'm 'beginnin' to look forward to Santa Lucia. I'm goin' to enjoy meetin' Mr. Burke. I only wish I knew how much to offer him for his cows, and who I'm buyin' 'em for."

"Cows!" scoffed Sleepy. "Bob Marsh is a liar, I tell you. He'd send us into a lion's den, armed with a broken buggy-whip. I told him we'd never take another job for the association, not even at any price. Now the danged liar gets us down here to buy cows. We're jist a couple brainless catspaws, draggin' his red hot peanuts out of the fire."

"Chestnuts, Sleepy," corrected Hashknife soberly.

"What do I care what kind of nuts they are?"

Hashknife stretched out on the seat and put his head on his war-bag. "We'll go kinda careful in Santa Lucia," he told

Sleepy. "I've just got a hunch that somebody knows us—and don't want us messin' around in San Pablo Valley. And didja hear 'em mention the White Masks?"

"Yeah, I heard plenty. White Masks! I took a look at yore face and yuh looked like a kid that had just been told that Santa Claus was bringin' him a hound pup for Christmas. White Masks! So that's what that liar of a Bob Marsh had in mind, eh?"

"I'll tell yuh what let's do," suggested Hashknife. "We'll stay right on this freight. If Bob Marsh puts up a howl, we'll say we never did get his telegram. That's one way to keep out of trouble. Yuh might as well stretch out and sleep through Santa Lucia. Their troubles are none of our business, anyway. How do you feel about it, Sleepy?"

"Just like you do, you danged liar," replied Sleepy soberly. "If we live through this deal, I'm goin' to pop Bob right on the nose. He takes too much for granted."

II

SANTA LUCIA awoke by degrees. It was too hot, even at that time in the morning, for sleep; so Hashknife and Sleepy sat at one of their windows, overlooking the main street, and watched Santa Lucia come to life.

Two sleepy swampers crossed the street from the Eureka Saloon and Gambling Palace, bearing buckets, which they proceeded to pump full of water from a pump that creaked and squealed like a lost soul. Somewhere in the front of the building a window creaked up, a metallic crash mingled with the squeak of the pump, and a man's voice wailed:

"Some son-of-a-buck hit me with a clock!"

The other man said, "I—I wonder if it's still goin'."

"It shore as hell was goin' when it hit me! Hey, you clock-thrower! Stick yore head out of that winder again, and I'll knock yore ears off with a rock."

"Sh-h-h-h-h!" came the sibilant whisper. "That winder right up there! I seen him peekin' out."

Crash! Window glass rained down on the wooden sidewalk, and a woman's voice screamed, "Who done that? I'll have the law on you!"

"The rock was for yore husband, ma'am," explained the swamper.

The other swamper went into paroxysms of mirth.

"That's the old maid milliner! She ain't got any husband. Fill that bucket and let's git out of here, before she comes down!"

The creaking pump increased in crescendo, until the bucket was filled. The swampers hurried across the street to the saloon, where they began cleaning up the place. The hotel proprietor came out red-faced, and took a look at the broken window. The milliner had spoken to him, and in no uncertain terms. Stable keepers were leading horses out for their morning drink, an ore-wagon, drawn by eight horses, rumbled down the main street.

A horse and buggy drew up in front of the little drug store beneath their window and a gray-haired man got out. He was greeted by another man, who was sauntering up the street.

"Good mornin', Doc. Goin' some place, or jist gittin' back?"

"Good morning, Speedy," replied the gray-haired man. "Well, I just got back from a case, and going out on another. It seems that a couple of the JHB cowboys are staying out at a line shack at the far end of the valley, and one of them accidentally shot himself last night."

"Killed himself, Doc?"

"No, just a bullet through his arm, I guess. Pat Horan came in after me, but I was out on a case. I hope that road is all right."

"Who got shot, Doc?"

"Steve McLeod. At least that's the information Pat Horan left at my place. I've got to get some extra bandages."

"See yuh later, Doc. Yuh might advise McLeod to pack a club, instead of a gun—they don't go off accidentally."

Laughing at his own joke, Speedy Singleton, the marshal of Santa Lucia, sauntered on up the street. Hashknife turned his head and looked at Sleepy.

"Did we ever know Steve McLeod?" he asked. Sleepy shook his head.

"Not by that name," he replied. "But what's—oh, I see. You think mebbe yore one bullet might have caused the *accident*, eh?"

"I shot square at the flash, Sleepy. 'If his arm happened to be in the way—"

"Yeah, that's right. And he works for Burke. Let's go and gather in some ham and eggs, before it gets too darn hot to eat."

Santa Lucia was a typical cattle and mining town, boasting six saloons, all on the main street. They were the Eureka, New York Bar, War Bonnet, New Paris, Southern, and Broadway. The Eureka was the largest in the town, and naturally drew the most trade.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy were eating breakfast in a little restaurant, when Speedy Singleton came in. The marshal of Santa Lucia was of medium height, black of hair, sallow of skin, and with the most tired-looking pair of eyes that the two cowboys had ever seen.

He looked them over wearily, nodded with a great effort and sank down in a chair near them.

"Are the eggs all right?" he asked in a dreary monotone.

"Mine are," replied Hashknife.

"Then mine won't be. Ain't never been over two good ones in a case. All right," he nodded to the waiter, "bring me ham and eggs. Better turn the eggs over. I hate to have 'em lookin' at me, like some monster with yaller jaundice. Had an uncle that died from it."

"Fried eggs?" queried Sleepy.

"No—jaundice." The marshal had no

inflexion in his voice. He seemed to groan every word; an expert pessimist.

"Nice little town you've got here," said Sleepy brightly.

"I ain't got it. Don't want it. Bad enough to be marshal of it."

"Can't yuh quit the job?" queried Sleepy, amused.

"Got to eat. Better at this than anythin' else. Failed in school, failed in business, failed in health. Only fit to pack a sawed-off shotgun."

"By the way," smiled Hashknife, "we met a friend of yours over in Painted Rock last night. Said to tell you hello, and that some day he was comin' over again and break your peace. Said he shot three holes in a saloon porch and you chased him three miles."

"Yeah," droned the marshal. "But he didn't tell it all—I was on top of that porch, without my gun. He didn't break the peace—he shot a heel off my left boot."

"He said somethin' about the White Masks."

"Did he? Been funny if he didn't. Everybody else is talkin' about 'em. Waiter! What about my ham and eggs?"

"Comin' right up, Mr. Singleton."

"God forbid! Is that coffee? It is? Why, that would dissolve a gunwad. But that's life, I suppose. If some wild-eyed cowpuncher don't kill me with a bullet, some waiter will kill me with their alleged nourishment. Speedy Singleton, a target, born and bred."

"But you are still alive," smiled Hashknife.

"I wonder. Here are the eggs—at last. I wish I had seen the hen that laid them—but that was before my time."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy, chuckling to themselves, left the restaurant and the mournful marshal. Just beyond was the sheriff's office, indicated by a faded sign. A tall, lean individual, at least two inches taller than Hashknife, greeted them.

"The name's Hope," he said patiently.

"Christened Elmer, but knowed as Busted Hope. I'm the deputy sheriff."

Hashknife introduced himself and Sleepy, and they all shook hands.

"We were talkin' to the marshal over in the restaurant," said Sleepy.

"That gob of gloom!" snorted Busted.

"He's funny," grinned Sleepy.

"If yuh like yore fun wrapped up in crepe. Are you fellers from the north range?"

"No, we came in on a train last night," replied Hashknife.

"Yeah? You don't happen to be the two cattle buyers that Burke was expectin' last night on Number 15, are yuh?"

"Unless he was expectin' more than two—yes," nodded Hashknife. "We missed that train and came in on a freight. Was Burke here last night?"

"Shore. I talked with him at the depot last night."

"Sorry we missed him last night."

"Oh, he'll be in this mornin'. He figured that somethin' happened to keep yuh from arrivin'. Burke's a nice feller."

"We never met him yet," said Sleepy.

"Oh, ain't yuh? I thought from the way he spoke that he'd done quite a lot of business with yuh."

"By telegram," said Hashknife, busy with a cigarette. "Yuh get to know folks thataway."

"Yeah, that's true. Burke's got a lot of money. He don't spend much time out here in the valley, bein' as he's a city man. Owns the JHB spread, biggest in the Valley. He's got a son out here that's a cock-eyed nuisance, and the old man has to come out ever so often to knock his ears down and point him on the straight and narrer way. Sonny stays at the JHB, 'cause nobody else will tolerate him."

"I heard that he got throwed out of every school he ever went to; so they had to hire a private teacher. He's full of iniquity all the time, and bad whiskey part of the time. Only about twenty-two. His sister's out here, too. She's less'n twenty,

I'd say. Pretty as a pitcher, too. Somebody said she might marry Riley Waters, the JHB foreman—but I don't believe it. He's a pretty cowboy."

"This don't look like any place for a pretty cowboy," said Hashknife.

"Oh, he's salty as the sea and as forked as a mesquite. Don't ever let that handsome critter fool yuh."

A BIG man limped in and the deputy said, "Mornin', Sheriff. Meet Hartley and Stevens, them cow buyers that Burke was expectin'. Boys, this is Edgar Carlton, the sheriff."

"Mornin', gents," grunted the big sheriff, looking keenly at the two cowboys, as he sat down at his desk. The sheriff of Santa Lucia carried a bit too much weight around the waist-line and under his chin, but looked capable.

"I just seen Johnston Burke and Riley Waters drive in," he told them. "Their rig is tied in front of the hotel. Burke asked me if I'd seen yuh."

"Thank yuh, Sheriff," said Hashknife. "We'll look him up right away."

"You'll know him," said the deputy, "'cause he wears store clothes."

They found Johnston H. Burke in front of the hotel, sitting in the shade. There was no mistaking him, a big man, well dressed, well groomed.

"Hartley and Stevens, eh?" he grunted, after Hashknife had told them who they were. "Expected you last night."

"Couldn't make it," replied Hashknife. "Had an appointment to get shot—but the man missed me three times."

Burke looked curiously at Hashknife. Evidently he had no idea what Hashknife was talking about.

He said:

"Bob Marsh recommended you boys to me—er—very highly."

"Bob Marsh," declared Sleepy, "is one of the biggest liars unhung."

"Oh!" exclaimed Burke quietly. "Well, he spoke well of you."

"He'd better. But he's still a liar, Mr. Burke."

"Yuh see," explained Hashknife, "we both knew that we were not going to buy any cattle from you. We are not cattle buyers—we're—"

"Plain damn fools," interrupted Sleepy. "Yeah, that's right," agreed Hashknife soberly.

Burke chuckled. "I'm glad we all understand our positions," he said. "Suppose we go up to your room and talk things over. You have a room, haven't you?"

"The bridal suite," grinned Sleepy. "Anyway, it's a special room of some kind, 'cause the pitcher ain't cracked."

They went upstairs, gave Johnston Burke the one chair in the room, and made themselves comfortable on the bed.

"As an introduction of myself," said Burke, "I may say that I am Johnston Burke of Burke and Company of San Francisco. Twenty years ago I was a Superior Court Judge of Wyoming. I left there to practice law in San Francisco, where I entered the stock brokerage business. Five years ago I purchased the Circle C cattle outfit here, which I changed to the JHB brand. Would you mind reading this note?"

HE HANDED a folded piece of paper to Hashknife and lighted a cigar.

The note was written in pencil on cheap paper and was undated. It read:

Twenty-two years ago you sentenced me to twenty years in the penitentiary. You knew I was innocent, but you railroaded me so you could marry Adele. Well, I paid the price demanded by you and your damn law. Now it's your turn to pay—my price.

And the price for twenty years of a man's life comes high. I am asking ten thousand dollars a year—a total of two hundred thousand dollars, and not a cent less. Be ready to pay when I ask. **I do not need to sign my name.**

Hashknife read the note aloud, examined the writing closely and gave the note back to Johnston Burke.

"Writes a nice hand," said Hashknife, as he began rolling a cigarette.

"Doesn't he," said Burke coldly. "This note was mailed in Painted Rock about ten days ago. I haven't heard further."

"Do yuh remember the man?" asked Sleepy.

"Yes—very well. His name was Barney O'Keefe. Before I became a judge, I defended him in a horse-stealing case. He was guilty—but the jury didn't think so. Later I defended him in a shooting scrape—and I guess I saved his worthless neck. The next time we met—I was the judge. That time he was found guilty, and I sent him up for twenty years."

"Uh-huh," nodded Hashknife. "Knowin' his past, he figured that you railroaded him."

"Perhaps he felt that way about it."

"He mentioned a woman," remarked Hashknife curiously.

"I married her," said Burke quietly. "She's gone now. I still have the girl and boy. Possibly O'Keefe was in love with her, but not she with him."

Hashknife smoked for several minutes, thinking it over. Finally he said, "You're scared of him, Burke."

"Not of what he asks, Hartley—but of what he may do. You must remember that I have a son and daughter."

"I heard about yore son," said Hashknife. Burke's face reddened. That son was evidently a sore subject with him.

"Would you know this Barney O'Keefe?" asked Sleepy.

"After twenty-two years—who knows, Stevens? His features are not clear in my memory. The Lord knows what he might look like, after twenty years in a penitentiary."

"This kinda cattle buyin' is out of our line," said Hashknife.

"You mean—you won't help me, Hartley?"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Burke. Did Bob Marsh tell you that I'm a detective?"

"Well, he said that if you couldn't help me—no one could."

"If there's any punishment for liars in the hereafter—" said Sleepy.

"Barney O'Keefe is in this valley," said Johnston Burke. "Crazy, or not, he says he is going to make me pay. I want you to find that man. Your fee doesn't interest me. Find him for me, and I'll sign a check. Will you be willing to work for a hundred a week and expenses—win or lose?"

"Let me ask you a question, Mr. Burke," said Hashknife. "Did you send me a telegram to meet you in Painted Rock last night?"

"Certainly not!"

"Yore name was on the wire. It said to meet you there. For yore own information, we stopped there, and somebody fired three shots at me in the saloon."

BURKE'S ruddy cheeks paled a trifle. "I—I don't understand, Hartley."

"Somebody knew we were comin' to Santa Lucia; so they got us to stop at Painted Rock, with the intention of killin' me. They signed yore name to the wire."

"Mebbe it was Barney O'Keefe," suggested Sleepy. Burke's lips tightened.

"Someone who knew you were coming here," he said. "Some of the boys at the ranch? No, I never talked it over with them. But it is possible that my correspondence with Bob Marsh might have been seen in some way, but I do not believe—"

"Did yore son know about it, Mr. Burke?" queried Hashknife.

"Corey? Why—damn it, yes, he knew. But he wouldn't say a word."

"I've heard that he drinks."

"Yes—that's true, Hartley."

"It don't matter now, Mr. Burke. The man was a bad shot. But even a bad shot is dangerous, as long as his intentions are good. In a way, we're kinda in the same

boat; we both have an enemy in the valley. They might both be the same man. It might be interestin' to find out."

"Then you'll take the case?" asked Burke eagerly.

"Sa-a-ay!" drawled Sleepy. "If you know that bat-eared high-pockets like I do, you'd know he'd been on the case for twenty-four hours already."

"My goodness!" exclaimed Johnston Burke, getting to his feet. "Why, that is wonderful! I shall arrange with the local bank to honor your personal request for any money you may need. And remember, I am not expecting any miracles, Mr. Hartley."

"You won't get any," replied Hartley soberly. "We're all out of 'em."

"Another thing," said Sleepy quickly. "If you've got a couple good horses and saddles at the ranch, yuh might bring 'em in and shove 'em into the livery-stable for us. We ain't never learned to walk much yet."

"I'll bring you the best on the ranch," promised Burke.

A little later Hashknife went up to the depot, leaned through the ticket window and said good morning to the garrulous agent, who seemed stooped from the weight of his corn-cob pipe.

"Do you remember sendin' a telegram to H. Hartley, Tucson, day before yesterday, signed Burke?" asked Hashknife. The man rubbed his chin.

"Yeah," he nodded, pointing his pipe-stem at Hashknife. "I remember it. I remember Burke sendin' yuh one the day before, too? What about it?"

"Did Burke hand you the one day before yesterday—in person?"

"No, he gave me the first one. A little Mexican kid brought the last one. I re-

member it plain, 'cause I put the charge in an envelope, so he wouldn't lose it."

"Would you remember that Mexican kid?"

"Hell—no! They're as much alike as two quail. This one could barely get his eyes up even with that winder ledge. I never did see more'n his two eyes."

"Very, very smart," muttered Hashknife, as he walked back down the street. "Plenty of brains, but poor marksmanship."

III

THERE was no question about Riley Waters being a handsome cowboy and from his small, well polished high-heel boots to the top of his expensive Stetson he was the glass of cowboy elegance. Even his six-shooter had the finest mother-of-pearl handles, and was inlaid with silver.

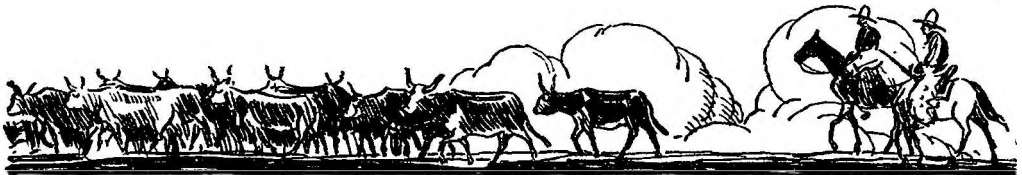
Just now he stood in the center of the JHB ranchhouse, hat in hand, looking at Johnston Burke, who stood at the foot of the stairs.

"I don't want to hurt your feelings, Riley," said Burke soberly, "but you cannot have my permission to marry Kay. She is only a girl—impressionable as the devil. Judging from what I can hear, this will only be one of your *past* conquests."

"I didn't quite get that last part of it," said Riley.

"No? Well, I've heard that you fall in love—or think you do—with every pretty girl or woman you meet, Riley. That is your reputation. When a man has that sort of a reputation—marriage rarely stops him from further conquests. I'm sorry, but you haven't my permission to ask Kay to be your wife. That is all, Riley."

"Yes, sir—I reckon I understand.



Riley Waters turned and walked out of the house, a grim expression on his handsome face. So he fell in love with every pretty woman, did he? Well, why not? Kay was the first one he had ever met, who would some day have plenty of money.

He had never made love to Kay, but felt that she liked him. At least, he told himself, he had played square with Burke—in asking permission. If Kay fell in love with him, he didn't see how Johnston Burke could change that. But foreman jobs were scarce, and Burke paid him more than the average foreman's salary — and Riley Waters knew he was not capable of making that much money at any other job. And there were other women in San Pablo Valley—still left from other conquests.

Then "Root" Fisher came to the JHB. A queer character was Root, a mixture of ignorance, religion and laziness. He was a squatty person, past fifty, partly bald, and with a huge beard. His eyes were small and bloodshot, his thin nose sharply hooked.

Several years before a prospector had struck a rich gold vein on Fisher's property, but Fisher drove him off with a Winchester, located the claim himself, and refused to work it, saying that gold was the root of all evil. It got him the cognomen of "Root." He had refused all offers for the property, and threatened to shoot anyone who trespassed.

Root Fisher had been a squaw-man. That is, his wife was a half-breed, and from this union had come two children, a girl and a boy. Gale, the girl, was eighteen, while Jimmy was twenty-two. Gale was pretty, showing little of the aboriginal blood, but Jimmy was evidently a throwback to his mother's people. His mother was dead.

Johnston Burke met Root Fisher on the wide porch of the ranchhouse, and they looked keenly at each other.

"I'm Root Fisher—yo're Burke?"

"Yes, I am Burke, Mr. Fisher. What can I do for you?"

Fisher's little, red eyes bored into Burke's, as he said:

"You can keep yore kid away from my girl, Burke. We're ignorant—us Fishers—but I ain't ignorant enough to think that yore son means any good to my girl. She ain't his kind. I've done told him to keep away. Now, I'm tellin' you."

"I've told him to keep away from your place, Fisher," said Burke. "That is one of the reasons I came down here—to try and keep him out of trouble. But you must remember that my son is of age, Fisher."

"I know. You got a girl, Burke; you know how I feel."

"Exactly."

"My boy is damn fool," stated Fisher. "He meet your boy in town and they get drunk few days ago. My boy get bad drunk. His blood is not good to mix with whiskey. He want to do war-dance. Your son war-dance, too, and they have a fight. He knock hell out of my son."

"Was your son badly hurt, Fisher?"

"One eye closed, nose broke. He ain't hurt much. I don't care. Boy can take care of himself; girl can't. I don't want your son at my ranch no more."

ROOT FISHER turned and bow-legged his way out to his horse. Johnston Burke stood on the porch and watched him ride away. He heard a sound behind him and turned to see his son, Corey Burke, standing in the doorway, his boots in his hand, hair tousled, a yawn on his face.

Corey Burke was twenty-two years of age, but looked older. He was not unhandsome, but incorrigible. Nothing seemed to matter with him. He liked whiskey, cards and some women. Education had been forced on him.

"Just getting up?" asked his father. Corey yawned widely, nodded and spat dryly.

"What was Root Fisher doing over here?" he asked curiously.

"He told you to keep away from his daughter, didn't he, Corey?"

"Oh, I don't know—maybe he did. Funny old coot, isn't he? Did he come to talk about me?"

"He came to warn me to keep you away from his ranch, Corey."

"Why, the fussy old devil," laughed Corey. "Dad, have you ever seen Gale Fisher? She's worth looking at."

"You don't seem to think much of his warning," said Burke.

"What do *you* think?" countered Corey, stifling a yawn.

"I think I feel just as he does, Corey. His daughter is young, likely illiterate, possibly pretty. She is part Indian. Keep away from her. To you she is something to play around with; that is dangerous. You don't want to marry her, of course. Root Fisher is no fool. He has warned you to stay away. Next time he will use force."

"Force?" Corey laughed. "Dad, he must have impressed you."

"Root Fisher is too ignorant to count the cost, Corey; he'll shoot."

"Serious, eh? Oh, by the way, that reminds me."

Corey searched his pockets, finally bringing to light a folded envelope, which he smoothed out and removed a single piece of paper, on which was printed in pencil:

KEEP AWAY FROM THE FISHER RANCH.

Just the one-line warning, with no signature.

"I got it in the mail yesterday," explained Corey. "Somebody mailed it in Painted Rock. Maybe Root Fisher is writing me letters."

"Root Fisher never sent that," said Burke. "I hope this convinces you that the Fisher ranch is a dangerous place to go, Corey."

"I'll talk with Gale," replied Corey. "If she don't want me to come there again, I'll stay away."

Johnston Burke shook his head wearily. "Will you *ever* have any sense, son?"

"*Quien sabe?* People with a lot of sense never have any fun, Dad."

KAY BURKE came hurrying around the house and ran up the steps. She was a tiny thing, clad in overalls, high-heel boots, a colorless shirt, and a gaudy handkerchief was looped around her throat. In one hand she swung a sombrero. In spite of the dust, Kay Burke was pretty.

"Where have you been?" queried Corey, looking her over.

"Well, stranger," drawled the girl, "me and Buster Allen and Chicory Smith have been out range brandin' calves—and I did—done all the ropin'. Buster says I shore toss a mean hunk of twine. How long have you been up, my weary-lookin' brother?"

"Don't let that ache yuh, ol' Alkali Face," retorted Corey.

"Maybe I am a little grimy and gritty, but I had a lot of fun," declared Kay. "Chicory didn't want to go along. He said that branding was no job for a high-class chef, but I told him I had to have a chaperone; so he went along. When we got back he asked me what in hell was a chaperone."

"You seem to be learning the cowboy dialect, Kay," said her father, smiling broadly. "I hope you don't adopt their profanity."

"I can swear like a mule-skinner, Dad," declared Kay soberly.

"At least, try and be a lady," said Corey, apparently bored.

"Oh, is that so? By the way, we came past the Fisher ranch, and I saw Gale Fisher. She was out at the gate, leading a horse. She *is* pretty."

"You never heard me say she wasn't, did you?" asked Corey. "And she *must* be pretty, if you'd say so."

"I was surprised. I've seen her brother, and he looks like an Indian."

"That's just what he is," declared Corey. "You better clean up, kid."

"You might try washing your face, too," replied Kay. "A shave wouldn't hurt you

any either. Why not sober up for a few days and enjoy Arizona?"

Kay stepped past him and hurried up the stairs. Johnston Burke smiled grimly. "She's right, Corey," he said kindly. "Try it and see."

"I have fun," growled Corey. He started for his room, but paused.

"Did those *cattle buyers* show up?" he asked.

Johnston Burke looked keenly at his son. "Who told you about them?" he asked. Corey squinted thoughtfully.

"Why, I don't know who it was now. It wasn't a secret, was it, Dad?"

"It doesn't seem to have been," replied Burke drily.

IV

MOSES the Hermit intrigued Hashknife Hartley. Like a character out of the old Bible times he came to Santa Lucia, riding on a sway-backed mule, his waist-length, white beard, flying in the breeze. He wore only a thin, threadbare shirt, overalls and *alpargatas*, the Mexican sandals, roughly made of hemp. He was bearded to his deeply-sunken eyes, his thin nose hooked like a hawk's beak.

"He don't talk much," explained Busted Hope. "Lives all alone back there near the rim. Got himself a little vein of gold, I reckon. Manages to hammer out enough to keep him in beans. Nobody knows what his name is. Moses the Hermit is all we call him. Plays a little poker, drinks a little whiskey, but he never gets drunk."

"How long has he been in the valley?" asked Hashknife.

"Oh, mebbe a little over a year."

"He shore ran strong to hair," grinned Sleepy. "That beard comes all the way to his belt."

"Yeah, he's hairy," agreed Busted. "Are you buyin' any cows from the JHB?"

"We haven't—yet," replied Hashknife. "Tell me somethin' about these *White Masks*, Busted."

"Them sons-of-guns!" snorted Busted. "There's three—mebbe four in the gang. The first job they pulled off was to rob the Santa Lucia-Buena Vista stage. They got the payroll of the Golden Arrow mine that time. Then, on a pay-night, they stuck up the Eureka, just before they closed after a big night, and cleaned out the place. Then they held up the Golden Arrow mine, just ahead of a big shipment of bullion, and got plenty. That was their last job."

Busted reached out and struck his knuckles against the desk.

"Anyway, we hope it's their last," he added.

"Four men, eh?" remarked Hashknife.

"Three—sure," corrected Busted. "At the Golden Arrow robbery we found a woman's track in the dirt, where they kept their horses. I figure that a woman held their horses."

"Might have been made before or after the robbery," said Sleepy.

"Nope. Ain't been a woman at that mine in months. The tracks showed that she got off her horse, stood around for a minute, and then got on again. Wasn't no tracks leading there nor comin' away."

"Find the woman," suggested Sleepy.

"Find the woman who could be associated with three men," said Hashknife.

"Yeah, we've worked on that. There's only one that fits the bill."

"Oh, you've got one located, eh?"

"One woman who could fill the bill," said Busted. "She's got a father and a brother. It wouldn't be hard for them to get a third man."

"The Fisher family," said Sleepy.

Hashknife grinned widely. "Been gatherin' information, eh?" he remarked.

"Oh, I heard about 'em," replied Sleepy. "They tell me that young Burke is kinda crazy about the girl."

"I reckon that's partly the reason that his father came here," said the deputy. "The girl's all right. Her old man is kinda queer, and the boy is as wild as a hawk. Their mother had a lot of Injun blood."

"Don't blame the Injun blood," said Hashknife quietly.

"I'm not blamin' their blood," said Busted quickly.

"What's been done toward runnin' down these White Masks, except to try and figure out who they might be?" asked Hashknife.

"Not a thing, Hartley. What could we do? They strike when we don't expect 'em to strike, and make a clean getaway."

"Any descriptions?"

"Nope. Just three, four men, all wearing white masks that reach from the top of their heads to their waists. Kinda like white shirts, with hoods fastened onto the collars, and with just two eyeholes."

TWO men came past the office and called a greeting to Busted, who told Hashknife and Sleepy that the two men were Rance Pelley and Mack Dalton, who owned a small mine adjoining the property of the Golden Arrow.

"Them two boys work mighty hard, tryin' to build their little mine into a winner," said Busted. "They manage to hammer out enough free gold to buy their beans, but it's shore hard work. Pelley likes to take a whack at draw poker, but he was tellin' me the other day that him and Mack hadn't made enough in the last two months to buy a stack of ships. But they keep on smilin'."

"Are they friendly with the Fishers?" asked Hashknife.

"I'm not sure that they even know the Fishers, Hartley. You ain't tryin' to figure that Mack and Rance—"

"No," grinned Hashknife, "I was merely lookin' at the possibilities of that third man. They've got to have a third, yuh know."

"What about the girl wearin' men's clothes, even shoes?" asked Sleepy.

"Yeah, that's worth thinkin' about," agreed Busted.

Doctor Chambers, the gray-haired doctor of Santa Lucia, dropped into the office.

It was merely a casual call. Busted introduced him and Hashknife asked about the cowboy who had accidentally shot himself.

"Oh, that was Steve McLeod," smiled the doctor. "Well, he's all right. That bullet cut quite a gouge in his right forearm and cost him quite a loss of blood. Luckily it missed his elbow. It sure is a terrible road out there. I broke a front spring in my buggy."

"Where was he when it happened, Doc?" asked Busted.

"Oh, away out there on the north range, he and Pat Horan, living in a line camp shack."

"About how far is that shack from Painted Rock?" asked Hashknife.

"From Painted Rock? Why, I don't know. Let's see—well, on a straight line, it must be about halfway from here to Painted Rock."

"Was you thinkin' about goin' to Painted Rock?" asked Busted.

"No," smiled Hashknife, "I wasn't. But the JHB brought us in a couple good-lookin' ridin' horses this mornin', and we might make a little trip. We kinda like to know somethin' about distances and all that."

"Let's go over and take a look at the saddles," suggested Sleepy. "We'll prob'ly have to change the stirrups."

Crossing the street to the livery-stable, Sleepy said:

"Thinkin' about Steve McLeod, Hashknife?"

"Yeah. How'd he shoot himself along the right arm and barely miss his elbow—even if he's left-handed? He must be a contortionist."

"Do yuh think we better go see the gent?" queried Sleepy.

"No hurry; we'll catch up with him, sooner or later; he'll keep."

COREY BURKE and Riley Waters came to town later that day. Busted Hope introduced Hashknife to them. Corey was drunk enough to wax sarcastic,

"You don't look like a cattle buyer to me, Hartley," he said.

"No?" queried Hashknife quietly. "Just what do I look like to you?"

Corey Burke chuckled, looked Hashknife square in the eyes, and his chuckle subsided quickly. Finally he looked away, scowling a little.

"Why not answer the gent?" queried Waters.

"Well—" faltered Corey, not looking at Hashknife. "Well, if he is a cattle buyer—what's the difference? I—I need a drink, Riley."

"Yeah, you act like yuh do," smiled the foreman of the JHB. "I'm pleased to have met yuh, Hartley. C'mon, Corey."

"What the hell struck that smart-alec?" asked Busted. "He acted like he'd swallowed a fish-bone and it stuck in his neck."

"I don't know," smiled Hashknife. "Maybe he was thirsty."

Over at the Eureka bar, Riley Waters asked the same question of Corey Burke, who had just swallowed a full glass of high-proof whiskey. He shook his head, cleared his throat and leaned against the bar.

"I don't know, Riley," he said. "Did—did you notice his eyes?"

"Well, I suppose he's got eyes, like anybody else."

"Has he?"

Riley Waters laughed. "I dunno what happened, but he sure took all the sap out of you awful quick."

Corey Burke drew a deep breath and shook his head.

"I—I guess he scared it out of me, Riley. I don't know what it was. I can't explain—except that his eyes—well, I shut up, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you shore shut up," agreed Riley Waters. "Funny, wasn't it?"

"Aw, let's have another drink and forget it."

"Yo're drinkin' too much, Corey. Some day yore Old Man is goin' to throw you out on yore head. He's gettin' sore about

it. And if I get drunk with you, he'll fire me, too. Let's go back to the ranch."

"To hell with the ranch! Bartender—some glasses. My Old Man sowed a fine crop of wild oats when he was my age. He's all right now."

"Well, I'll have one more with yuh, Corey—and then I'm goin' back. If you don't want to go with me—that's up to you. But I'm not goin' to lose my job over yore thirst, I'll tell yuh that much."

"Don't mind about me," said Corey. "I'll take care of myself. Maybe I'll get drunk enough to go out and tell Old Man Fisher what I think about him. Didja know he came over and told dad to keep me away from his ranch? It's a fact. And me at my age. Fill'm up again, bartender."

"You better keep away from that Fisher place," remarked Waters.

"You, too, eh? To hell with you. Maybe you're stuck on Gale."

"Shut up, you fool," gritted Riley Waters. "You talk too loud."

"Fool, eh?" laughed Corey. "And you tryin' to make a play for my sister. That's funny. Well, are yuh going to have a drink with me?"

"I am not," replied the foreman firmly. "You haven't the sense that God gave geese in Ireland. I'm goin' back to the ranch."

"See if I care," sneered Corey. "Go ahead. Tell'm I ran you out of town."

SPEEDY SINGLETON, the pessimistic marshal of Santa Lucia, dropped into the sheriff's office, where Hashknife and Sleepy were talking with Busted Hope.

"Corey Burke is gettin' his infantile nose wet again," droned the marshal. "He's over at the Eureka, soaking up enough whiskey to cure all the snakebites in Arizony. I'm goin' to have to slap him into durance vile, if he gets loud again, regardless of who he is."

"Seems like a bad boy," remarked Hashknife.

"Both in mind and stummick," said the marshal.

"His father seems like a nice man."

"Fine. None better. There ain't anythin' in heredity. I can prove it by myself. My father always looked at the bright side of things."

"Yeah, I heard about that," said Busted soberly. "He was a brass polisher in a Pittsburgh factory."

"An honorable profession, Mr. Hope I wish I had his virtues."

"You sound like a man who had suffered a lot," remarked Sleepy.

"I used to sing tenor," said the marshal sadly. "A horse threw me across a hitch-rack one day, and I must have dented my sound-box. Can't even call a cat any more. Well, I've got to keep an eye on the erring infant. See yuh later."

"So long, Speedy," grinned Busted. "Don't pick any fights."

V

IT WAS nearly dark, when Corey Burke rode out of town, listing badly to port as he galloped away. Hashknife and Sleepy, eating their supper in a little restaurant, saw him ride past, going toward the JHB. Hashknife sighed and turned back to his meal.

"A problem for papa," he said.

"Yuh cain't make me spoil my meal by worryin' about that young buckwheat," declared Sleepy. "He'll prob'ly turn out all right—if somebody don't shoot him."

They were leaving the restaurant when Johnston Burke and his daughter drove into town. They drove to the depot, and back to the general store, where they tied their team. Burke recognized them by the light of the store windows, and drew Hashknife aside. He had a telegram from the warden of the penitentiary, where Barney O'Keefe had served his time. It read:

BARNEY O'KEEFE RELEASED HERE OVER TWO YEARS AGO. NO INFORMATION AS TO HIS WHEREABOUTS AS HE SERVED FULL TERM. HAIR WHITE, SIX FEET TALL, WEIGHT A HUNDRED AND

SIXTY-FIVE. WAS IN FAIR HEALTH WHEN RELEASED.

"I wanted all the information I could get," explained Burke. "But this doesn't help us much."

"No, it don't help much," agreed Hashknife. Burke sighed and looked across the street toward the Eureka Saloon.

"Have you seen my son this evening?" he asked quietly.

"Why, he started toward yore ranch nearly an hour ago, Mr. Burke."

"But—well, that is queer! we didn't meet him on the road. Was he—?"

"Yeah, he was," admitted Hashknife.

Johnston Burke sighed wearily. Kay called to him, saying that she had the mail. He called her over and introduced her to Hashknife and Sleepy. She gave him the mail and he looked through it quickly, selecting a letter, which he opened and read by the light through the window. Without a word he gave the letter to Hashknife. Kay went into the store, and Hashknife read the penciled letter:

YOU WILL SECURE \$10,000 IN CURRENCY AND HAVE IT READY FOR DELIVERY AT SUCH A TIME AND PLACE AS A FUTURE NOTE WILL DESIGNATE.

The note had been mailed at Santa Lucia. Hashknife studied the note carefully before giving it back to Johnston Burke.

"The first year's pay," he said quietly.

Burke nodded, his face grim. "I wonder if they think it is that easy?" he said.

"How well did you know Barney O'Keefe?" asked Hashknife.

"Why, I—well, I knew little about him, Hartley. You know how it is."

"Did he seem to be an educated man?"

"Not that I remember. He was a cowboy. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I kinda like to know if we've got to buck brains."

"He may be smart."

"There's a difference," said Hashknife. "A smart man would realize that he can't

blackmail you. He can only collect that money through your fear of somethin' happenin' to you or yore family. He must know that you do not fear exposure. A man might have brains, and still not be smart."

Johnston Burke nodded thoughtfully. "True, he can strike at me three different ways—my son, my daughter and myself."

"I wonder if he will," mused Hashknife. "Mebbe he's a bluffer. But how can that be proved? Anyway, you don't have to pay the money, until yuh get another note from him."

"I guess we can only wait," said Burke. "The moment I hear anything, I'll let you know, Hartley."

COREY BURKE was pretty drunk when he left Santa Lucia, but not too drunk to know what he was doing. About two miles from town the road forked. After a moment of indecision Corey Burke laughed drunkenly and turned to the left-hand fork, which led to the Fisher ranch.

"This is a good chance to tell Old Man Fisher a few things," he told himself. "Telling me to keep away from his ranch! I wonder if he knows who *I* am."

There was a dim light in the main room of the small ranchhouse, and Corey rode through the tumble-down gate and straight up to the ramshackle porch. The more he had thought about Root Fisher going to see his father, the madder he got. It was a terrible insult, according to his drunken senses, and should be wiped out in blood.

He nearly fell down from his saddle, but managed to keep his feet. He did not knock on the door, but flung it wide and stumbled into the room. Gale Fisher was sitting beside a table, sewing on some bright-colored cloth, but sprang suddenly to her

feet, and he stood there, swaying on his high-heels.

"Hello, sweetheart," he chuckled. "S'prised, eh? Tha's good. Where's your father and the Injun kid?"

"Father and Jimmy are out," she managed to say. "Why—why, do you come here?"

"Well, 'f that ain't a smart ques'n. What 'm I doing here? Why, I came to see you. I never noticed before how beau'ful you are, Gale. You've got 'm all beat? C'mere to me, you beau'ful, little devil."

"Go away, Corey," she pleaded. "You're drunk. Father will come home and find you here."

"Who cares? I came to find him. I'll show him. He thinks he can keep me away from you. Well, 'f that ain't rich. C'mere, Gale, I wanna kiss."

"Go home, you fool," she told him. "It only means trouble—you coming here. I don't want you here."

"*You* don't? Don't lie to me, Gale."

"Keep away from here, Corey; keep away from me."

"Who says so?" he demanded huskily. "Can't nobody keep me away from you—not even you. Give me that kiss, before I make you give it to me."

"Stay back, Corey," she begged, backing against the wall. "You can't—"

"Who says I can't?" Corey laughed harshly and was within reaching distance from her, when he suddenly spun on one heel, his arms flung wide.

Glass splattered around the room from a broken window, and from outside the house came the report of a shot. Corey Burke was down on his face, unmoving, his fingers clutched in a Navaho rug. Gale sank back against the wall, all the color



drained from her pretty face. The cheap calico drape, caught in the breeze from the broken window, was the only moving object in the room. Not another sound came from outside.

Slowly the girl seemed to recover her senses. She stepped over the body and halted beside the table. She had no idea what to do now. She nervously brushed away an imaginary lock of hair from her forehead. Suddenly she lifted her head. From outside came the thud of hoofs.

She ran to the door, thinking it was her father and brother, but jerked the door open right in the face of Sheriff Edgar Carlton, just as he had lifted his hand to knock. Her left hand went to her lips, as she recoiled, and his eyes went past her to the quiet figure on the rug.

Slowly he came in, looking closely at her. Then he said:

"I heard that shot, Gale. I thought I'd stop and see—"

"It's Corey Burke," she whispered.

"Uh-huh—I see," he muttered, as he dropped on one knee and turned the young man over, but kept watching Gale closely.

"Yore father warned him to not come here, didn't he?" he asked.

"I—I don't know, Mr. Carlton."

"Well, I do. He ain't dead—yet. But he'll be needin' a doctor awful quick. His horse is outside. You better slip on yore overalls."

"Why?"

"Why?" he parroted. "My dear lady, yo're goin' to jail—if only as a witness to this shootin'; so into the overalls—quick."

"I—I don't know who shot him," she breathed.

"Well, as far as that goes, I ain't asked yuh, Gale. I'm givin' yuh plenty time to make up yore mind whether to lie to me or tell the truth. If yuh don't know it, the truth is always the best."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy were in the office, talking with Busted Hope, when the sheriff and his pretty prisoner ar-

rived. It was the first time that Hashknife and Sleepy had ever seen Gale Fisher. Busted gave her plenty of clean blankets and a lamp in her cell, before saddling their horses.

The sheriff notified Doctor Chambers, who was on his way in a few minutes, along with the sheriff. Hashknife and Sleepy rode with Busted, and the whole party arrived at the same time. Swiftly they entered the house. The lamp was still burning bravely, but there was no trace of the body. Only a wide-spread blood-stain on the old Navaho indicated where the body had fallen.

Hashknife saw the smashed window, and investigated it closely. The sheriff was interested, too, and admitted that he did not see it before. Nor did Gale tell him that the shot had been from outside.

"How far away from here was you when yuh heard the shot?" asked Hashknife.

"Oh, about a half mile, Hartley."

"Uh-huh. If the shot had been fired inside the house, I don't believe you could have heard it."

They searched the tumble-down stable and outbuildings, but there was no sign of the body.

"Mebbe," suggested Sleepy, "he wasn't hurt as bad as you thought, Sheriff. He might have got up and headed for home."

The sheriff nodded and led the way back to the house, where the doctor examined the stained rug.

"No, he didn't bleed enough to kill him," said the doctor. "It is all very puzzling."

"Wait a minute," said the sheriff thoughtfully, pointing toward the doorway of the bedroom, where Gale had changed clothes. "It was right in front of that doorway."

"What?" asked Busted Hope.

"Another Navaho rug. It had dancing figures on it. Funny how yuh remember. While she was puttin' on her overalls, I remember lookin' at that rug and wonderin' if I could buy it from Fisher. I like them dancin' rugs."

"But what has the rug to do with the missin' body?" asked Busted.

"Nothin', I don't reckon — only it's gone."

They rode slowly back to Santa Lucia, wondering what had become of the body. They unsaddled their horses and were talking in the office, when a rider went up the street, galloping his horse at full speed.

"Somebody goin' in a hurry," observed the sheriff. "Turned at the end of the street. Say, I wonder if somebody is after the doctor; he lives down there."

IN a few minutes the man came galloping back and drew up at the office. It was Buster Allen, from the JHB ranch, and almost out of breath.

"I came to get the doctor," he told them. "A little while ago we found Corey Burke out by our front porch. He's been shot pretty bad, but he ain't dead. There goes the doctor now. He told me to notify you boys."

"Yuh say he—he was near yore front porch, Buster?" asked the sheriff.

"That's right. Somebody shot him, or he shot himself—yuh can't tell. His gun is gone. He shore smells like a distillery."

"Well, I'll be damned!" breathed the sheriff. "It's only a couple miles between them two ranchhouses, but I thought the kid was hurt too bad to ever go that far. Well, I reckon it calls for another visit. Want to go along, you two fellers?"

"Might as well," replied Hashknife. "It gives us somethin' to do."

They found an anxious crowd in the main room of the JHB ranchhouse, while the doctor worked over the wounded man. Johnston Burke, grim-faced, had little to say about it. Finally he came over to Hashknife and the sheriff, who were talking together, and said:

"I can't imagine who did it, Sheriff."

"Yuh mean—who brought him home, Burke?"

"No, I—brought him home."

"Yeah. He was shot in the Fisher ranch-

house. I've got Fisher's girl in jail now. I saw yore son on the floor over there, and then I took the girl to jail, when I went to get a doctor. The wounded boy wasn't there, when we got back to the house."

"Shot in the Fisher ranchhouse!" exclaimed Burke. "Root Fisher shot him! Why, Sheriff, he warned me to keep Corey away from there."

"Did Corey know about the warnin'?"

"Certainly—I told him myself. Why, someone even sent him a warning by mail."

"The boy was drunk, when he left Santa Lucia," said Hashknife. "That bullet came through a window."

Johnston Burke shook his head wearily, as the doctor came to them.

"He's got a chance, Mr. Burke," said the doctor. "The bullet went high in his left shoulder. But I can assure you that he did not walk from the Fisher home—someone brought him here."

"But why would they do that?" asked Burke.

"It kinda strikes me that the person who done the shootin' didn't know it was the sheriff who came in a few minutes. Because the girl went away with him—it's just possible that this shooter thought it was one of the Fishers. So they moved the boy over here, figurin' that it might take the curse off the Fisher folks."

"Whoever packed him here must have packed him on a saddle," said the sheriff. "There'd be bloodstains on that saddle."

"Not if he was wrapped up in that Navaho rug, Sheriff," said Hashknife. "You'll prob'ly find the rug tomorrow, unless the shooter was smart enough to hide it. Honestly, I don't believe he was shot by one of the Fishers."

"You don't?" grunted Burke. "If they didn't—who did?"

Hashknife shrugged his shoulders. "Anyway, that girl didn't shoot him. She told the sheriff that she was tryin' to keep away from him, when the shot was fired through the window. He was tryin' to kiss her."

"I dunno," sighed the sheriff. "Mebbe I was a little hasty in puttin' her in jail, but I didn't know just what to do."

"I—I don't believe I would hold her, Sheriff," said Burke. "She isn't going to run away. We better just wait and see what develops further."

"Well, I'll turn her loose, Burke. But I sure want to have a talk with her father and brother. It looks mighty funny to me—especially since he came to warn yuh against Corey goin' over there. I'll take her home tonight. She's prob'ly scared stiff by this time."

OLD Chicory Smith, the cook, who had been kept busy by the doctor, managed to find time to come to the sheriff.

"I was the one what found Corey," he told the sheriff quietly. "I kept somethin' to show yuh. It was pinned on his sleeve."

From inside his shirt the old cook produced a piece of soiled paper, on which had been penciled—THE WHITE MASKS.

"It was pinned right on his sleeve," said Chicory. "I took it off; so I could give it to you, Sheriff."

"The White Masks, eh?" muttered the sheriff, fingering the paper. Burke looked dumfounded. Hashknife drew him aside and whispered:

"Have you got the written warnin' yore son got through the mail?"

"Yes—right here in my pocket. Corey didn't ask for it, so—yes, here it is."

Hashknife examined the two pieces of paper together, studied the writing on both, and handed them to Burke.

"Both written by the same man, Burke—and on the same kind of paper."

"But, Hartley, why on earth would the White Masks warn Corey not to go to Fisher's ranch?"

Hashknife shrugged his shoulders. "There's the warnin', Mr. Burke—and they made good."

Burke nodded glumly, as Riley Waters joined them. He had been assisting the doctor.

"I shouldn't have left him in town," said Riley. "I should have made him come back with me, Mr. Burke. But he was drinkin' and talkin' mean—and I had work to do. I'm shore sorry."

"Don't blame yourself, Riley. I know how Corey acts after he has had a few drinks. If the Lord will spare him this time, it may teach him a lesson."

"Any clues, Sheriff?" asked Riley.

"No—nothin', except that he was shot in Fisher's ranchhouse."

"No! In Fisher's ranchhouse? Corey told me he had been warned to stay away from there. Why, I can't believe they'd shoot Corey."

"Why would the White Masks send him a written warnin'?" asked the sheriff.

"Are you jokin'?" asked Riley Waters.

"No, I'm not jokin'. Corey got a written warnin', unsigned. Old Chicory found a piece of paper pinned on Corey's sleeve, and on it written The White Masks. Hartley says it's the same paper, and that the same person wrote both notes."

Riley turned to Hashknife. "Is that true, Hartley?" he asked. Hashknife nodded. "Yeah, it's true, Waters. But we haven't been able to figure out just why the White Masks should be guardin' Gale Fisher."

"That's ridiculous!" exclaimed Riley.

"On the surface," remarked Hashknife. "If we knew who the White Masks were, mebbe it wouldn't be ridiculous. Until we do know—well, we can only make rough guesses."

"That's right. But have yuh seen any of the Fisher family, Sheriff?"

"I've got Gale Fisher in jail, Riley."

"Gale? Why, you don't think — she wouldn't shoot anybody."

"No, I don't reckon she would. I'll take her back tonight. But before I do, I'm shore goin' to ask her some questions. I've just got a hunch she knows who fired that shot. Mebbe I'm wrong, I dummo. It might have been her father or her brother, of course."

"Not likely," said Hashknife. "They

wouldn't be that dumb. Instead of shootin' him, they'd prob'ly beat the devil out of him and sent him home. After all the warnin' they've done, I don't believe they'd take a chance on killin' him in their own home."

"They're not very smart," said Riley.

"Too smart to put a loop of rope around their necks," said Hashknife.

"Well, we might as well be headin' home," said the sheriff. "We can't help with anythin' around here. Doc will likely stay all night. See yuh tomorrow, Burke. Night, folks."

They rode back to Santa Lucia about midnight and the sheriff told Busted to not unsaddle his horse.

"Are you goin' to question that girl?" asked Hashknife.

"I've been thinkin' that over, Hartley," he replied. "She's likely scared now, and if we try to question her, she won't answer. I'll take her home, and mebbe she'll talk to me alone. She's kinda shy, and it's a dead, immortal cinch that she won't talk to the bunch of us."

"Well, good luck to yuh," laughed Hashknife. "See yuh *mañana*."

"*Hasta luego*," called the sheriff.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy lay awake for at least an hour, trying to puzzle out this latest development in San Pablo Valley.

"Are yuh sure that the same person wrote on both pieces of paper?" asked Sleepy. "Yuh might be mistaken, yuh know."

"They're just alike. But the funny thing about it is the fact that I don't believe the same man wrote the notes to Johnston Burke. I had an idea that he was part of the White Masks. All this note business makes is sound like one organization. Still, a different man might have written the demands on Johnston Burke, and still be a White Mask."

"Yeah, there's at least three of them, Hashknife."

"And," added Hashknife, "I don't believe a White Mask shot Corey Burke."

"Yuh don't? What makes yuh believe that, pardner?"

"Just a hunch. They've only been mixed up in robbery; so why should they attempt murder, without chance of profit? And to merely protect a girl from a drunken fool. More than that, what were they doin' there?"

"Then yuh don't think it was Root Fisher and his son, eh?"

"Not if they've got a lick of sense. And more than that, Sleepy, the man who fired the shot sure didn't want the deadwood laid on Fisher."

"Sure, he didn't; that's why he took the body away. Hashknife, do you suppose Gale Fisher has a sweetheart?"

"Yo're beginnin' to get smart, Sleepy. We might as well try and get a little shut-eye."

But Hashknife and Sleepy were destined to get little slumber. Someone was hammering on their hotel door, and yelling at them to get up. It was Busted Hope, almost too excited to talk.

"That Gale Fisher's back!" he yelled at them. "Somebody killed the sheriff and she came back for help. She's downstairs now, scared white. Get into yore clothes and go out to her ranch with her, while I head for the JHB and get the doctor."

"Didn't yuh say he was dead?" queried the half-awake Sleepy.

"Mebbe she was wrong. Anyway, we can't take a chance. You git down as quick as yuh can; I'm headin' for the doctor."

Gale was waiting at the doorway of the hotel, when they came down.

"More trouble, eh?" remarked Hashknife.

"Bad trouble," she nodded wearily, and waited for them to saddle their horses at the livery-stable.

Gale led the way, and there was no conversation on the way to the Fisher ranch. They dismounted at the tumble-down porch and went into the house. The sher-

iff was sprawled on the floor, and Hashknife's quick examination convinced him that Carlton was long past medical help.

"I liked him," said the girl simply. Hashknife looked keenly at her.

"Another shot through a window?" he asked. She pointed toward the door, which was sagging half-open.

"It was like that," she said. "The bullet came past the door."

Hashknife sat down on a chair and looked around the roughly furnished room. Then he carefully rolled and shaped a cigarette, while the wide-eyed girl watched him. Finally he said:

"You was talkin' with him when the shot was fired?"

"Yes. We didn't talk, coming out here. I was so glad to be free again."

"Uh-huh. What were you talkin' about, Miss Fisher?"

SHE looked away for a moment, but her eyes came back to him.

"He thought I knew who shot Corey Burke. He said that someone was with me before Corey Burke came, and that man stayed outside. He told me I must tell him who that man was, or my father and brother would both be hung, if Corey Burke died. He said I would have to tell him, or he would wait and arrest my father and brother.

"I started to tell him that I—that he was wrong—but just then the shot was fired. Then I ran to one of the horses and come right to Santa Lucia."

Hashknife smiled over his cigarette.

"You would have told him, rather than to have had yore father and brother hung, wouldn't you, Miss Fisher?"

Gale drew a deep breath and shook her head. "I couldn't tell him anything," she replied.

"Uh-huh. But the man outside that doorway prob'ly thought you *might* so that's why he closed the sheriff's ears."

"I don't know who was out there," she said.

"Speakin' about that door," remarked Sleepy, and quickly shut it. "We've had two men shot down in here tonight."

Hashknife lifted his head and half-turned toward the door.

"Busted and the doctor must have made good time," he said. "I heard 'em ride in."

Then the door was flung open by Root Fisher, who came striding in, followed by his son. They stopped short, staring at the two strangers. Then the old man's eyes shifted to the sheriff's body on the floor.

"What is all this?" he demanded.

"This is my father and my brother," said the girl. Hashknife and Sleepy nodded, and Hashknife said:

"Where have you two been, Mr. Fisher?"

"Buena Vista," he said shortly, and came closer to look at the body.

"The sheriff?" he asked.

"Yeah—the sheriff," replied Hashknife. "He was shot here a while ago."

"Dead?"

GALE said, "Two men were shot here tonight. The first one was Corey Burke."

Root Fisher stared at Gale, a dazed expression in his face.

"Two men killed?" he asked dumbly. "Two men killed here?"

"Corey ain't dead," said Hashknife. "He's over at the JHB."

Root Fisher rubbed his beard with a shaking hand, as he turned to Gale.

"You tell it," he ordered.

Swiftly the girl told him what had happened to Corey Burke, her arrest, the release, and the death of the sheriff. She seemed to have recovered her poise, and her story was told without any emotion. Jimmy Fisher, more Indian than white, listened stoically, only his eyes indicating that he was interested. When she had finished Root Fisher turned to Hashknife.

"How much do you know about this?" he asked.

"I reckon yore daughter has told it all

—as far as she can,” replied Hashknife. “When Corey Burke was found at the JHB ranchhouse, there was a paper pinned to his sleeve. It had the words ‘White Masks’ written on it.”

“Damn bad!” exclaimed Root Fisher. “I told Corey Burke to keep away from here—but I never shot him.”

“I hope you can prove where you’ve been for the past few hours,” said Hashknife. “It looks kinda bad for you.”

“We been to Buena Vista—me and Jimmy. My sister sick up there. We leave late. Damn long ride, six, seven hours on horses.”

“You must be very hungry,” said Gale. “I’ll fix—”

“Not now. Wait! Somebody come—outside.”

“That must be Busted and the doctor,” said Sleepy.

It was. And along with them came Riley Waters and Buster Allen. The doctor’s examination was brief.

He shook his head and closed his black hand-bag.

“Too late, eh, Doc?” queried Busted.

“Too late—even had I been here when he was shot, Busted.”

The deputy blinked painfully, but turned to Root Fisher.

“When’d you show up?” he asked, “and where have yuh been?”

The old man told his story in a few words. Busted sighed and looked at Hashknife.

“I reckon we’ll have to take his word for it, Hartley,” he said. “Easy enough to find out when he left Buena Vista. I reckon that clears him.”

“It looks like it,” agreed Hashknife.

Busted turned to the doctor. “Yo’re the

coroner, Doc; is it all right to move the body now?”

“Oh, yes. You’ll have to keep the body at your office for the night, as I’m needed at the Burke place. I’ll be in early in the morning.”

“I have an old buckboard and team,” offered Root Fisher. “You are very welcome to it. Jimmy can go along and bring it back.”

“That’s nice of yuh,” nodded Busted. He turned to Hashknife.

“Dog-gone it, I can’t believe that Ed Carlton’s dead. It’s just one of them kinda things that yuh can’t believe.”

“I know how yuh feel, Busted; it’s shore tough. But they’ll have to make you sheriff now—and what you’ve inherited!”

They went out to their horses. The doctor went across the hills with Riley Waters and Buster Allen, while Hashknife and Sleepy rode together back to Santa Lucia.

“Well,” said Sleepy, as they neared the town, “this last job can’t be blamed on the White Masks, Hashknife.”

“Yuh think not?” queried Hashknife.

“What do yuh mean?”

“Only this,” replied Hashknife. “When I examined the sheriff’s body I found a White Mask marker shoved in a fold of his coat.”

“Holy miraculous” snorted Sleepy. “Why, I can feel the bristles rise right up on the back of my neck.”

“Yeah, I noticed that,” remarked Hashknife dryly. “You better get a haircut to-morrow.”

VI

SANTA LUCIA seethed with excitement over the death of the sheriff and the shooting of Corey Burke. This being



Saturday, the town was full of range people and those from the mines. Edgar Carlton had been a very popular sheriff, well liked by everyone. Because of the fact that the White Masks took credit for shooting Corey Burke, the public took it for granted that the White Masks had murdered the sheriff.

Hashknife and Sleepy heard enough to know that many people believed the Fishers to blame for the shooting, because it happened at their ranch; and that some of them believed that Root Fisher and his son were two of the White Masks. Hashknife told this to Busted Hope, and warned him to expect trouble, when the Fishers came to town.

"I've sent for 'em," said Busted. "We're holdin' the inquest at noon, and Gale Fisher is the main witness. She saw both shootin's, Hashknife. We're shippin' Ed's body to Denver tomorrow. That's his old home town, and his people want to bury him there."

"Uh-huh. Well, if I was you, I'd swear in about six good men for this inquest, and have 'em at the front, ready to help keep the peace, in case some of these well-meanin' folks kinda start trouble."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

Speedy Singleton, the marshal, admitted to Hashknife that he was worried over the inquest.

"They're gettin' drunk before noon," he complained. "It ain't natural."

Johnston Burke and Riley Waters came in from the JHB, bringing the report that Corey was conscious, but had no idea who shot him. In fact, he said he did not remember much about going to the Fisher ranch.

But in spite of the fears of the officers, the crowd at the inquest was orderly. Perhaps it was because Busted Hope had several armed men seated near the witness chair. Root Fisher, Jimmy and Gale came just before the inquest opened. Doctor Chambers explained how the sheriff had been killed, and the deputy testified to the

fact that Gale Fisher came to tell him that someone had shot the sheriff.

Gale Fisher was visibly frightened, as she sat down to face that overflow crowd in the courtroom. In order to connect up the events of the night she was obliged to tell about the arrival of Corey Burke at her home, the shot through the window and the arrival of the sheriff.

She managed to pick up the thread of the story again, when the sheriff released her from jail and took her home, where the sheriff was killed, while questioning her, by a shot fired through the partly opened door.

"Ask her where her Old Man and that Injun brother of hers was all that time," called a voice from the crowd. Busted Hope sprang to his feet and faced the crowd.

"Her father and her brother was comin' home from Buena Vista," he told them, and the crowd subsided, until another voice piped:

"What about them White Masks?"

Busted Hope got to his feet again. "That's enough out of you," he stated. "Any questions that are needin' to be asked and answered will be handled right up here. If yuh don't like it that way, we'll clear the room."

THE case was given to the six-man jury, which did not leave their seats. After a whispered conversation, Rance Pelley, selected as their foreman, got to his feet.

"Have you arrived at a decision, Mr. Pelley?" asked the doctor.

"Well, yeah, we have, Doc. The evidence don't point exactly toward anybody, as far as we can see; so we just say that he was killed by a party or parties unknown, and let it go at that."

"What do yuh have to have—a full confession?" yelled someone in the crowd. It brought a laugh of approval from the audience. Doctor Chambers faced them quickly, holding up a hand for silence.

"Folks, the inquest is over," he an-

nounced. The crowd filed out, many of them voicing their disapproval of the verdict.

"I'll tell yuh right now," declared a half-drunk cowboy, "I'd hate to wake up and find m'self in Root Fisher's house."

"You ain't never woke up anywhere, as far as I've heard," jeered a voice. "All yuh do is talk in yore sleep."

Most of the crowd adjourned to the several saloons to talk things over. Hashknife and Sleepy waited until the Fisher family were on their way out of town, before going to the hotel, where they sat down to enjoy a cigarette.

"How do things look to yuh?" asked Sleepy.

"Queer," replied Hashknife. "Sleepy, this looks like a three-way deal. There's the White Masks, Barney O'Keefe, who is tryin' to bluff Burke into payin' him a fortune, and the man who killed the sheriff."

"Could they be all the same gang, Hashknife?"

"Yeah, it is possible. Barney O'Keefe may be one of the White Masks, and meb-be one of the White Masks shot the sheriff. If that's true, it kinda looks like Gale Fisher knew somethin' that they were afraid she might tell; so instead of shootin' her—they shot the sheriff. That would indicate that she is one of the gang."

"If yuh remember," remarked Sleepy, "they found a woman's track at the spot where the White Masks left their horses at the Golden Arrow."

"Yeah that's true. There's other women in the valley, of course, but after this shootin' at the Fisher ranch, it puts the deadwood pretty heavy on that outfit. But we ain't gettin' any place, pardner. I reckon our best bet is to start at the beginnin'."

"What do yuh mean, Hashknife?"

"Doc Chambers told me how to strike the old road that will lead us to the line camp, where Steve McLeod is stayin'."

"Yo're still thinkin' about them three shots that missed yuh at Painted Rock?"

"That's the beginnin', Sleepy. I'm kinda hankerin' to meet Steve. Ain't any proof that he fired the shots, of course—but a ride will do us both good. I believe there's an old sayin' among fox hunters—some-thing about if yuh lose the scent, try back. That's what we're goin' to do."

"Only these," said Sleepy grimly, "ain't foxes—they're lobos."

VII

THE line-camp shack of the JHB was a small, pole cabin on the bank of a dry-wash, closely surrounded by mesquite. Near it a creaky windmill reared its head above the mesquite, the place enclosed with a pole fence. A few cattle bawled around the outside of the fence. From the leaning stovepipe came a trickle of wood smoke.

Hashknife and Sleepy rode out on the mesa rim above the shack, where they drew up and looked over the place, wondering if it was the one they were looking for. A man came to the doorway of the cabin, picked up some wood from the pile beside the door and went back into the house. If he saw the two cowboys on the rim, he didn't seem interested.

"It looks like the way Doc described it," said Hashknife. "Anyway, we'll soon know. C'mon."

They rode off the mesa, down to the gate, which they opened, and then rode up to the house. The man came to the doorway, looking curiously at them. He was a lean, lanky cowboy, with several days' growth of stubble on his jaws, which were working slowly, as he masticated his tobacco. He spat carefully, before he said:

"Hyah, strangers. Lookin' for somebody?"

"Not exactly," replied Hashknife, as they dismounted without any invitation. "You don't happen to be Steve McLeod, do yuh?"

"Nope; I'm Pat Horan. You lookin' for Steve?"

"We're headin' for Painted Rock," said

Hashknife casually. "Doc Chambers asked us to drop in and see how McLeod's gettin' along with his bad arm."

"Oh, yeah," Pat Horan spat carefully at a lizard. "Well, Steve ain't here now. Prob'ly won't be back for a few hours. We're workin' this end of the range, throwin' the cows down toward the home ranch. Water's gettin' scarce up here. Been movin' 'em in small bunches. Got 'm pretty well cleaned out."

"Somethin' smells awful good," smiled Sleepy.

"Oh, yeah—I was cookin' a mulligan. That is, I was warmin' it up."

"It's always better warmed up," declared Sleepy. "Yuh don't happen to have—well, more'n enough, do yuh?"

Pat Horan laughed shortly. "Why, shore, I can feed yuh. C'mon in."

They entered the shack. It was about twenty feet long, by fifteen feet wide, with one window and one door. There were two bunks, a table, thrée home-made chairs and a rusty cook-stove, on which bubbled a pot of savory mulligan.

"Man, I'm shore hungry," declared Sleepy, "and a mulligan hits me right square between the eyes. And a couple cups of Java and—"

Sleepy saw the expression on Hashknife's face. Horan was over by the stove, lifting off the pot of mulligan. In a far corner of the room was a rough, built-in closet, the door closed—and Hashknife was looking at this spot.

PAT HORAN turned from the stove, a big spoon in his right hand. He looked sharply at Hashknife, and the spoon fell from his hand, clattering to the stove. And almost at the same moment Hashknife crashed into Sleepy, knocking him flat. The closet door had banged open, and the crashing report of a rifle fairly rattled the frail shack.

Hashknife was down on his left side, firing from that position. Sleepy, slightly confused, was clawing at his gun, when

Pat Horan leaped high over him and darted through the doorway. A man was stumbling out of the closet, a rifle falling from his hands, as he pitched forward to the floor.

Sleepy sprang to his feet, ran outside and tried to locate Horan, who was riding swiftly through the mesquite, heading toward Painted Rock. It was evident that both men had their horses tied at the rear of the shack, because one was still there. Sleepy went back.

Hashknife was examining the other man—the one who had come out of the closet—and his face was grim, as he looked at Sleepy.

"Horan got away, did he?"

Sleepy nodded. "Yeah. They had two horses tied behind the shack."

"This one is all through goin'," said Hashknife quietly. "Man, he almost had us."

"How did yuh know he was in there?" asked Sleepy.

"That table was all set for two, Sleepy—and he said McLeod wouldn't be back for hours. They must have seen us at the rim of that mesa, but couldn't be sure who we were; so McLeod was goin' to bush us from that closet. Mebbe Horan was goin' to help—but it turned out wrong. Golly, I sure felt that bullet brush my head!"

Sleepy went over and looked closely at McLeod's features.

"Ever seen him before?" asked Hashknife. Sleepy shook his head.

"Can't place him," he replied. A coat hung on a nail beside the closet, and Hashknife searched the pockets. From an inside pocket he took a stamped letter, addressed to H. Hartley, Santa Lucia Hotel, Santa Lucia, Arizona.

Inside was a single sheet of cheap paper, on which was written:

GET OUT OF SAN PABLO VALLEY AND
STAY OUT. WE ONLY WARN ONCE.
THE WHITE MASKS.

Hashknife chuckled quietly. "We saved

McLeod a trip to Painted Rock, Sleepy. They were prob'ly goin' there after their supper."

"I'll betcha," agreed Sleepy. "Well, how about a plate of mulligan?"

"Yeah, it might be a good idea. I dunno just what to do about this deceased party. Mebbe we better leave him here, until the sheriff and coroner can look him over. Yeah, I guess that's the best thing to do. We'll unsaddle that bronc, so it can eat and drink. Whooe-e-e! Didn't Horan high-tail it out of here! He figured that McLeod would down one of us, and between 'em they'd finish the other."

Sleepy dished up the hot mulligan, poured some strong coffee, and they started a meal. Evidently the events of the afternoon had little effect on their appetites.

"I still don't quite figure this McLeod," said Hashknife thoughtfully. "A feller don't go gunnin' for yuh, unless—wait a minute!"

Hashknife got up from the table and went to examine the man again. Then he laughed shortly and got to his feet.

"Three years ago, Sleepy," he said. "Remember that Rockin' Chair outfit in Wyomin'?"

"I hope to tell yuh, I remember them. The McKeller bunch!"

"That's right—a fine bunch of killers. But if yuh remember right, one got away that night—Steve McKeller. This is Steve McKeller."

"No! Well, can yuh imagine that! I remember his father and one brother lived to go to the penitentiary, and the other died. Hashknife, didn't somebody say that his twin brother got away?"

"That's the fair child, Sleepy. Well, this one wanted revenge."

"And they're part of the White Masks, eh?"

"Well, I dunno about that—but it looks as though they was actin' as mailin' agents for the White Masks. Some connection, I reckon. Anyway, we can't find out a darn thing from this stiff-faced gent; and his

pardner is prob'ly still foggin' space between us. I reckon the only thing to do is mosey back to Santa Lucia."

IT WAS late in the evening, when they arrived at Santa Lucia, but they found Johnston Burke and Buster Allen at the sheriff's office, talking with Busted Hope.

"We've been wonderin' where you fellers were," said Busted. "You went out so early that nobody knew where yuh went."

"Oh, we had a little ride to make, Busted," smiled Hashknife. Then he turned to Johnston Burke. "Have you got two punchers named McLeod and Horan workin' for you, Mr. Burke?"

"Yes, I have, Hartley."

"They're at the upper line camp," said Buster Allen.

"Were," corrected Hashknife. "McLeod is dead—and Horan, if he's still goin' as fast as he was the last we heard, he's in Canada by now."

"My God!" blurted Burke. "What happened? Did Horan kill McLeod?"

"No-o-o," drawled Hashknife "I killed McLeod myself. Horan got so scared that he pulled out of the country."

"Lovely dove!" wailed Busted. "Another corpse! What happened?"

"McLeod tried to dry-gulch us," said Hashknife. "He hid in the closet and tried to gun us down, but I beat him to it. In the excitement, Mr. Horan took a fast horse out of the valley."

"But why—why?" groaned Busted. "Why'd he try to bush yuh, Hashknife?"

"Revenge, I reckon. He happens to be Steve McKeller from the Rockin' Chair outfit in Wyomin'. Three years ago we busted up the gang, killed Steve's twin brother, and sent his father and one brother to the penitentiary. Either Steve wanted revenge, or he was afraid I'd discover him. We'll never know which."

"That's funny," said Buster Allen. "I never knew he had a rep. Seemed like a quiet sort of a feller. Yuh say Pat pulled out? Which way did he go?"

"Toward Painted Rock," grinned Sleepy. "But he must have gone a long ways past Painted Rock."

"Why?" asked Allen.

"Hell, that's only about ten miles. At the speed he was goin', he couldn't stop in that distance."

"Dog-gone the luck," wailed Busted. "Now, I've got to go plumb over to that old line shack to bring back a dead man. I'm more of an undertaker than a sheriff. I'll betcha Doc will yelp to the skies, too. But he's got to go, 'cause he's the coroner."

"I wouldn't drive over that road at night," said Hashknife.

"Hell, I'm not goin' to, Hashknife. Start early in the mornin'. What a life, anyway!"

"How's yore boy gettin' along, Mr. Burke?" asked Hashknife.

"Just fine, thank you. The doctor says he must have the constitution of a mule."

"And the brain of a jackass," added Busted.

"I am afraid I must agree with you, Busted," said Burke quietly.

"Mebbe this will be a lesson to him," said Sleepy.

"I hope so. At least, he will have to behave himself for a while. Well, we must be going back to the ranch."

"Have a pleasant trip, Busted," said Buster Allen. "The scenery is real pretty out that way."

"You've got a hell of an idea of pretty things!" snorted Busted.

"Well, Riley prob'ly meet yuh there, Busted," said Allen. "He'll have to see that the place is closed up properly. Them danged pack-rats will walk off with everythin', unless they're packed away. See yuh *mañana*."

"ANYTHIN' new?" queried Hashknife, after Burke and Allen rode away.

"Not a danged thing, Hashknife. We shipped Ed's body late this evenin'. Doc came in with Burke and Waters. He said the kid would get well. Ain't seen any-

thin' of the Fisher outfit since yesterday. I hope t' hell they keep out of town. Ain't many folks come in on Sunday, anyway."

"I forgot about it bein' Sunday," said Hashknife. "That's why Horan and McLeod wasn't workin'. If we had been a little later, they'd have likely been on their way to Painted Rock."

"Oh, was they goin' to Painted Rock?" asked Busted.

"I think they was," smiled Hashknife. "It's a cinch they wasn't comin' here—not with me in town."

"No, I don't reckon they was. Funny about you runnin' in the jasper that got away from yuh three years ago. It's a wonder he didn't get yuh."

"How long have you known McLeod and Horan, Busted?"

"Oh, mebbe a little over a year. They bunked together. Say! Yuh don't suppose they're part of the White Masks, do yuh?"

"Who could be the third one, Busted?"

"Oh, Lordy, I dunno. I can't connect three fellers. But that don't mean anythin', 'cause I have a hard time keepin' track of myself. All this shootin' and killin' is ruinin' my nerves. If somebody scratches a match behind me, I git a cold chill.

"I don't know of any Hope that ever broke any records, except for eatin', but I do hope that somebody has a stop-watch handy if anybody starts shootin' around me. I'm jist as certain as hell that I can bust all records for all distances. I shore hope I have flat ground and no obstructions."

"You don't look like a feller that would scare easy," remarked Sleepy soberly.

"My looks has fooled a lot of people, Sleepy. From my neck up, I'm brave as a lion, but from there down—you'd be terribly surprised. Some folks think that the brain controls the body. Like hell, it does! When my legs say, 'Let's git out of here, Busted,' my brains jist up and take a ride."

"There's a lot of us like that," laughed

Hashknife. "I reckon we'll go out there with yuh in the mornin'. We might run into Horan—and I'd like to ask him a few questions."

"I'd shore be pleased to have yuh along," replied Busted. "Mebbe I'll have to drive out in a spring-wagon, along with Doc Chambers—but we'd shore admire to have yuh along in the party."

VIII

THEY did not start very early, and because of road conditions it was not possible to make good time with the wagon. Hashknife and Sleepy rode behind the wagon most of the way, while Busted Hope and Doctor Chambers clung to the jolting wagon-seat and tried to keep upright.

They drew up at the rim of the little mesa and looked down at the shack. Far down the swale came a lone rider, which Busted said was Riley Waters, foreman of the JHB. He saw them and waved his hat. Hashknife said:

"We closed and fastened that door, Sleepy."

"That's right," agreed Sleepy, "but she's wide open now. Horan must have come back."

Busted kicked on the brake and drove carefully down the steep pitch, swinging the team in a half-circle to the gate. Sleepy opened the gate, as Riley Waters joined them.

"I didn't think you'd get here very early with that wagon," he said. "How was the road?"

"What road?" queried Busted. "That's nothin' but a pack-trail."

They drove over to the shack, tied their horses and went inside. No one said anything, as they stood there in that dim in-

terior, staring at the latest tragedy of San Pablo Valley.

The body of Steve McLeod was laid out on one of the bunks, while seated at the rough table, his head resting on his arms, was Pat Horan, as dead as he ever would be, the top and back of his head blown away.

"My God!" blurted Busted Hope. "Another one!"

"Jist like bananas," said Sleepy, "in bunches."

"Don't touch 'em," said Hashknife tensely. "Let's look this over."

"Pat Horan, too!" exclaimed Riley Waters. "Who the hell killed him?"

Hashknife looked at the body on the bunk and then came back to the seated corpse, studying the situation carefully. Then he said:

"Horan has been dead a couple hours, Doc."

"That's right," agreed the doctor. "At least two hours."

"And he wasn't killed here," added Hashknife. "No blood on the table. I figure he was killed some distance from here, and the killer brought him here and propped him up at the table. Oh-oh—here we are!"

It was a small slip of paper, tucked in at the neckband of the dead man's vest. Another coup-note of the White Masks. Hashknife handed it to Busted Hope, who examined it with shaking fingers.

"Looks very much like the work of a soft-nosed bullet," said the doctor. "Very likely a thirty-thirty. And he was shot from behind, too."

"That's the damndest thing I ever heard of," declared Riley Waters. "Pat Horan prob'ly came home and put Steve on the bunk—and then—"



"Went and got himself a bullet," finished Sleepy dryly. "You can have this line-camp as far as I'm concerned, Riley."

"Me, too," replied the JHB foreman flatly. "But why would the White Masks kill Pat Horan? He was just a cow-puncher."

HASHKNIFE said, "Even a cow-puncher can *talk*, Riley."

"You mean—Pat knew somethin' about the White Masks?"

"They put their mark on him. Steve McLeod, who used to be Steve McKeller, was prob'ly afraid I'd discover him—or tried to kill me, because of what I done to his old gang in Wyomin'. He was a bad-boy—and a very bad shot. I dunno anythin' about Pat Horan, except that he was in bad company—bunkin' with a horse-thief—or worse."

"I didn't know much about either of 'em," said Riley Waters. "They never talked much. Both of 'em good cow-hands. If a feller drifts in and we need a man, we don't ask for references. He's either a good hand or a poor hand—and to hell with his past."

"I know," nodded Hashknife. "Well, we can't do any good here, Doc."

"That's right," agreed the doctor. "We'll wrap the two bodies in the blankets."

It was a job that was not relished by any of them, but they soon had the two bodies packed into the spring-wagon.

"I'll cut back to the ranch and take them the news," said Riley. "I can't help any more, can I, Busted?"

"Not a darn thing, Riley. See yuh later."

They fastened the shack door shut and rode away. At the top of the mesa Hashknife looked back, shook his head in a puzzled way, and rode on.

"Somethin' buzzin' in yore head, pardner?" queried Sleepy.

"Oh, not much," replied Hashknife. "Do yuh remember that coat, hangin' on that nail; the one where I found the letter ad-

dressed to me? Well, neither of the dead men was wearin' it and it wasn't in the shack."

"What's the answer, Hashknife?"

"Well, I can't quite figure it out, unless that coat belonged to the man who killed Pat Horan."

"You mean, there was a third man livin' with 'em?"

"Sleepy, I believe there was a third man there when we came yesterday. He was outside somewhere, leavin' his coat on that nail. He didn't show up, until after we were gone. When Pat Horan came back—he killed Pat Horan."

"Why, you said somethin' about Horan bein' dead a couple hours."

Hashknife smiled. "Doc didn't dispute me. As a matter of fact, Horan had been dead much longer than that."

"Then the man who killed Horan is a member of the White Masks, eh?"

"It kinda looks thataway, Sleepy. If he is—one of them three is shore a two-legged lobo—and somebody better stop him pretty quick."

"Have yuh got any bright ideas, Hashknife?"

"If I had any *bright* ones, pardner, I wouldn't be followin' two dead men in a wagon-box."

BUSTED HOPE faced an irate prosecuting attorney and the Board of Commissioners in his office next day.

"Three dead men and one wounded—and nothing done about it!" snapped the lawyer.

"Well," drawled Busted, "I've picked 'em all up, ain't I? I've been too busy pickin' up dead men to give a thought of how they got thataway."

"In the matter of Steve McLeod," remarked the lawyer, "you take the word of two unknown cowpunchers that McLeod tried to kill them. You don't *know* this to be a fact. You have no proof that they didn't also kill Pat Horan."

"I know they didn't kill the sheriff."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," growled the lawyer. "Hope, you are too trusting. What do you know about Hartley and Stevens? They come in here to buy cattle from the JHB. Have they bought any? Have they even looked at JHB cattle?"

"Yeah, I think they looked at a cow the other day," replied Busted meekly. The lawyer snorted with disgust and turned to the other men.

"That," he said, "is your sheriff, gentleman."

"So that's it, eh?" said Busted coldly. "Well, you can all go to hell. I had to take this job, when Ed was killed. I never asked for it. If you think there's a better man for the job—hire him. This idea of goin' around, expectin' hot lead in yore back at any time, ain't my idea of a good job. The men who shot Ed Carlton and Pat Horan won't hesitate to kill a sheriff. You howl about the White Masks. Who do you think I am—a magician? Or do yuh think I've got me one of them there crystal balls? I've been sheriff just long enough to haul in three dead men—and you're already demandin' the killers."

"We—we must have results," said one of the commissioners.

"Well," replied Busted, "I hope to find the guilty ones before they git around to the prosecutin' attorney and the commissioners."

"What do you mean?" demanded the attorney.

"Well, it kinda looks like they was out to make a clean sweep."

"You haven't told us yet who Hartley and Stevens are?"

"Well, if yuh want to know so damn bad, I'll tell yuh. I went out to see Johnston Burke last night, and I asked him. He said that—no, he didn't say it—he had a letter from the secretary of the cattle association, tellin' him that Hashknife Hartley is the best range detective in the country, and that if he could git Hartley on the job he'd soon clean up the valley."

THE lawyer laughed shortly. "Hartley doesn't seem to be doing much."

"I'm tellin' yuh what I read in the letter. What he's done—I don't know. As far as Steve McLeod, or McKeller, is concerned, I went through a stack of old reward notices and I found the one on McKeller. It was a Wyomin' notice. It sure describes Steve McLeod perfectly, and says he was the only survivor of the McKeller gang."

"That doesn't tell why Pat Horan was killed."

"It wasn't in the reward notice," replied Busted. "Nor it didn't say who killed Ed Carlton."

"You are trying to be funny," said the lawyer.

"I'm tryin' to keep calm," corrected the new sheriff. "If yuh don't like the way I'm runnin' this office, see if yuh can't find some other damn fool, who is willin' to act as a target."

"I—I feel that Busted is doing all right," said a commissioner. "He has a tough job, it seems to me."

"Well, of course, that is true," admitted the lawyer. "Perhaps I was a little hasty in my judgment. Just keep on doing your best, Sheriff."

"Thank yuh," replied Busted dryly. "I've done as good as yuh could expect of a bird-dog. Three down, and I've brought 'em all in."

"But we want the killer!" snapped the lawyer.

"Yeah, that's what I thought yuh had on yore mind, when yuh drove up."

Giving Busted a malevolent look as he went out, the prosecutor led the commissioners back to the courthouse, where the inquest was to be held. Busted told Hashknife what had been said about him.

"You can't blame him," laughed Hashknife. "He's anxious to have a victim."

"So am I," sighed Busted. "At least, I'd like to have a suspect. I'm gettin' tired of inquests. All yuh can ever prove is that the man is dead, and we knew that before the inquest. Where's Sleepy?"

"The last I seen of him he was tryin' to get Moses the Hermit to play a game of pool over at the Eureka."

"That would be funny," grinned Busted. "I've never seen Moses do anythin', except set and spit. But I believe the danged old coot would fight. One night Pelley and Dalton got to pesterin' him, and he shore told them a few things. I don't reckon he's spoke to 'em since. They threatened to cut off his whiskers. Man, was he sore! I wonder what he'd look like if he was shaved clean."

"I wonder, too," mused Hashknife aloud.

"He packs a long knife in a sheath inside his pants," said Busted.

Sleepy came sauntering in and sat down.

"Didja get a game out of the old buzzard?" asked Hashknife.

"No-o-o, he wouldn't play," grinned Sleepy. "He's a funny old jasper. I wanted to make a bet with him on the odd and even number of jackrabbits we could scare out of his whiskers—and he got mad at me. Can yuh imagine it? But he's no damn fool—not Moses the Hermit. I asked him what crimes he was guilty of, and he gave me a cussin'. I said that no innocent man ever growed a cover of brush like that to conceal his blushes—and he walked right away from me."

"I wouldn't monkey with him," said Busted. "I was just tellin' Hashknife about the long knife he carries all the time."

"He's about as dangerous as the joker in a deck of cards," laughed Sleepy. "Him and his sway-backed mule."

"Well, I dunno," said Busted, looking at his watch. "I reckon it's almost time for that inquest. You two will be the main witnesses."

THE crowd was not as large this time, but every seat was taken. The prosecuting attorney assisted the coroner in questioning Hashknife and Sleepy. Busted produced the old reward notice, proving

that Steve McLeod had really been Steve McKeller. Hashknife told them the story of the McKeller gang in Wyoming, and how Steve had hidden in the closet, trying to blast him with a rifle. Of course, Hashknife was unable to testify regarding Pat Horan, except to describe how they found him.

"How did McLeod, or McKeller know you were here?" asked the lawyer.

"I don't know," replied Hashknife. "Someone sent me a fake telegram, tellin' me to get off the train at Painted Rock. They signed Johnston Burke's name to it. We thought it was genuine, and got off there, only to get shot at three times. I shot once, shootin' at a gum-flash. The next mornin' Doc Chambers was called out to that line-camp shack to fix up Steve's right arm, which he had accidentally shot. I believe my bullet hit him in the arm. Johnston Burke knew that we were comin' to Santa Lucia—and in some way someone else found it out and told Steve."

Johnston Burke offered to testify, and was sworn.

"I just wanted to corroborate what Mr. Hartley has told you," explained Burke. "I did send for him. He wired the time of his arrival, but was not on the train. But he did arrive later that night on a freight, having stopped off at Painted Rock. I haven't any idea how the news of his arrival reached the two men in the line-camp shack."

"Perhaps you mentioned it around your ranch, Mr. Burke," said the doctor. "Some kinds of news travel swiftly, you know."

"Perhaps I did, Doctor. That is all my testimony."

The coroner's jury exonerated Hashknife, and brought in the usual verdict in the death of Pat Horan.

"If this keeps up," stated the prosecutor, "we will have to hold a daily inquest. But I am going to stop this sort of thing, even if I have to import investigators. This crime wave is going too far."

There was no applause from the specta-

tors, who filed outside and went to get their delayed drinks. Hashknife stopped to talk with the prosecutor and Doctor Chambers. The lawyer was very frank.

"Hartley, instead of your presence lowering the violent death rate," he said, "it seems to have increased it."

"Yeah, I noticed that," smiled Hashknife. "It's kinda embarrassin'."

"Do you think you are going to be able to do anything?"

"If I live—yeah."

"Do you think you are that important—that they would shoot you?"

"Men have been killed for bein' less important."

"Yes, I suppose that is true. Well, I wish you luck, Hartley. My office is behind you—that is, in anything within the law."

"Much obliged," drawled Hashknife. "It shore gives me a feelin' of security."

As Hashknife walked away, the prosecutor said to Doctor Chambers:

"I wonder if he was trying to belittle my offer, Doctor."

"I am afraid," said the old doctor kindly, "that you take your office a trifle too seriously; and it is just possible that Hartley does not. He seems to be a man who is capable of standing on his own legs in most any emergency. I would advise you to let him handle things in his own way."

"As I told him," remarked the lawyer, "as long as he stays within the law."

"Yes, yes, I know. But the fact remains that some of our citizenry are well outside the law—and have had little interference from you. Fear of the law has little effect on a lot of folks, Mr. Craven. Well I must ride out and see how Corey Burke is getting along."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy ran into a warm discussion in the Eureka Saloon, where a group of men were arguing over the condition of things in the valley. Rance Pelley seemed to be the center of the argument.

"I'll leave it up to Hartley," he said, as

Hashknife came in, "if my idea of a vigilante organization ain't the best thing. If the White Masks are goin' to keep on murderin' people it's time we took the law into our own hands. I ain't blamin' Busted Hope. No one man can stop 'em. What do you think, Hartley?"

"Well, I'm kinda new around here," replied Hashknife, "and I've never seen a White Mask—yet."

"But they're blamin' the White Masks for all this shootin'," said Mack Dalton. "What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think. The White Masks pulled off all their jobs before I came here—that is, their robberies. No one has ever told me that the White Masks left their callin' card at any robbery."

"That's what I said," declared Mack Dalton. "Why would they leave a card, claimin' a killin'? It don't make sense."

"Unless they want to scare folks," smiled Hashknife.

"Maybe Steve McLeod and Pat Horan were two of 'em," suggested one of the men. "You got McLeod—and the third one of the gang Horan."

"Why!" asked Hashknife.

"Well, hell, yuh never can tell why, Hartley. That would only leave one of the White Masks."

"I hope you're right," smiled Hashknife. "It cuts down the odds."

"Hartley," said Pelley, "did it ever strike you that somebody might be tryin' to put the deadwood on the White Masks?"

"Yeah, I've thought of that Pelley. And if I was one of the White Masks, I'd shore try and find out who was doin' it. I'd hate to be hung for another man's crime."

"What about the Fisher outfit?" queried one of the men. "Corey Burke and the sheriff were both shot in their house."

"That's the trouble," replied Hashknife. "Because two men were shot down at Fisher's place, we keep thinkin' around in a circle, always comin' back to Fisher. Why not mark Fisher off the list, and start another circle. I don't mind tellin' yuh that

me and Sleepy have received a warnin' from the White Masks, tellin' us to get out of San Pablo Valley."

"You did?" grunted Pelley. "Signed by the White Masks?"

"That's right, Pelley."

"I'm glad it wasn't me," remarked Mack Dalton. "I'd be gone."

"I'd be like Moses the Hermit," laughed one of the men. "He said he wasn't comin' back to town, until they were rid of the ungodly."

"But that all brings us back to the vigilante idea," said Pelley.

"No, I don't like that either," said Hashknife. "There is no proof for a committee to work on, Pelley. Yuh can't do things blindly."

"When the law has proved guilt—and still won't punish—that's time for a committee to act. Why, you might have the White Masks inside yore committee, where they'd be perfectly safe."

"Yeah, I can see yore angle, Hartley."

"But what would you suggest?" asked Mack Dalton.

"I would suggest," smiled Hashknife, "that the White Masks, as they have been called, if they ain't guilty of these murders, get busy and find the man who signs their name. They might save their necks from a rope that's commencin' to dangle mighty close to their left ears."

"That's a damn good idea!" blurted one of the men.

"I'll buy a drink for the house," declared Rance Pelley. "Everybody up to the bar."

IX

KAY BURKE stretched her slim body to a more comfortable position in an old easy chair on the ranchhouse porch, closed her finger on the book, using it as a book-mark, and looked lazily at Riley Waters, seated at the top of the porch-steps, leaning against a post. Riley was resplendent in his black, silver-trimmed chaps, a blue silk shirt, silver spurs.

"The correct answer is no," she said quietly. Riley gazed moodily at her, turned away and looked toward the hazy-blue hills.

"I don't like the answer, Kay," he said "I thought you liked me."

"My goodness!" exclaimed the girl in mock surprise. "Do folks get married just because they merely *like* each other."

"I love you, Kay," he declared.

"Which still leaves it a one-sided proposition, Riley. I do not love you."

"If I could get your father's consent—" he suggested.

"The answer would still be the same, Riley. I believe you asked my father's consent once."

"Oh, he told you, eh?"

"Naturally, he supposed I might be interested."

Riley sighed deeply and fingered the silver band on his white Stetson. "Can't you give me any hope, Kay?" he asked.

"I would be in favor of dropping the subject," she replied.

After a long silence Kay opened her book again.

"You rode alone this mornin', Kay," Riley said. "Yore father wouldn't like that."

"I went over to call on Gale Fisher," she said.

Riley looked up quickly. "You did? Yore father—"

"My father hasn't anything to do with it, Riley. I had never met her. Corey asked me to go and see her. He feels badly over what happened at their place, and wanted to ask her forgiveness."

"Oh, that was it. Well, what do you think of her?"

"I think she's a sweet girl, living under bad circumstances. It was difficult to carry on a conversation, because she seems suspicious."

"Wouldn't talk, eh?"

"Not at first. I tried to find out if she was in love with Corey, but she wouldn't talk about it. She seems frightened over

something, Riley; and takes a long time in thinking things over, before answering."

"There's Injun blood in the family," said Riley. "They don't talk about things like white people. But I'd keep away from there, if I was you. They're not popular here in the valley. And don't ride alone any more. I'll be glad to ride with yuh any time—and you know it."

"You and dad try to make me feel that I need a keeper. Surely no one would harm me."

"I shore hope not. But this range ain't safe. Until the White Masks are stopped. Yuh see, Kay, yore father has plenty of money."

"What difference does that make?" she asked quickly.

"You might be worth money to them."

"You mean that they might kidnap me, Riley?"

"Stranger things than that have been done."

Kay laughed and put her book aside. "You know, Gale Fisher mentioned the same thing."

"She did? Well, that's funny."

"She advised me to go back to San Francisco—for the same reason."

Riley Waters squinted thoughtfully for several moments.

"I don't reckon it's that bad," he said.

"But I wouldn't ride alone any more, Kay. How is Corey today?"

"He wants to get up, but the doctor won't let him."

"He was lucky," said Riley, getting to his feet. "Well, I've got to go to Santa Lucia. See yuh later."

Riley Waters had been gone about fifteen minutes, when Hashknife and

Sleepy rode in at the JHB. They had been out to the Fisher ranch, hoping to have a talk with Root Fisher, but found no one at home. Then they cut across the hills to the JHB.

Chicory Smith, the old cook, met them at the doorway.

"Hyah, cowboys," he grinned. "Git down and try a chair, why don'tcha?"

"Thank yuh," grinned Hashknife. "Is the boss around?"

"Johnston H.?" asked the cook. "No, he went out with Buster Allen to look at a waterhole over across the hills. Ort to be back in a few minutes—or hours. Corey was askin' about you fellers this mornin'. Riley Waters left about fifteen minutes ago, headin' for town."

Kay came out on the porch, where she recognized the two riders.

"Hello," she smiled. "Corey is doing fine."

Hashknife and Sleepy dismounted. Sleepy sat down to talk with the cook, while Hashknife sat down on the front porch to talk with Kay.

"I didn't see you come down the road," she said.

"No, Ma'am, we didn't," smiled Hashknife. "Yuh see, we came past the Fisher ranch, and then cut across the hills. Wasn't anybody home at their place."

Kay studied Hashknife critically. "Dad has a lot of faith in you," she said.

Hashknife laughed quietly. "Well, Miss Burke, that's fine. After all, faith is a great thing to have in anyone."

"Do you have faith in anyone, Mr. Hartley?"

"Well, yeah — in Sleepy Stevens, my pardner."



"Is that all?"

"Yes'm," replied Hashknife. "Yuh see we've been together for years. I've got so that I can almost tell what he's thinkin' about. When I ask him to do a thing, I'm dead sure that he's goin' to do one of two things."

"What is that?" asked Kay.

"The right thing, or the wrong thing. He never fails to do *some*thin'."

Kay laughed. "Does anyone ever know when a cowboy is serious?"

"Yes'm—when they're in love."

"Have you ever been in love, Mr. Hartley?"

"Well, Ma'am, I can't quite say for sure, but I don't reckon so. I've seen fellers that was in love. That is, it must have been love, 'cause nothin' they ate would do that to 'em; and I know blamed well I never looked and acted like they did. Sleepy *thinks* he falls in love with every good-lookin' lady we meet—but it ain't love."

"Then you think you could look at a person and say whether or not they were in love?"

"No, I didn't say that, Ma'am. There's a lot of queer diseases I've never seen demonstrated. How's yore brother?"

"Oh, he is getting along fine. Mr. Hartley, did anyone ever tell you that you have different eyes than most people."

"Wait a moment, Ma'am," said Hashknife seriously. "You ain't tryin' to make love to me, are yuh? I'm a lot older than you, and I'd be a poor provider, and I'd almost never be home."

KAY laughed heartily and shook her head. "I meant that your eyes *are* different. Dad noticed it, too. He said you seem to look right through one."

"Well, I don't," laughed Hashknife. "I'm no different than anybody else, as far as my eyes are concerned. They don't bother yuh, do they?"

"No, except that I'm afraid you might ask me a question—and I wouldn't dare lie to you."

Hashknife shook his head. "I don't reckon you know any answers that I'm tryin' to find, Miss Burke."

"The White Masks, for instance?"

"Well, yeah, I'd kinda like to know who they are. I'd also like to know who shot yore brother, who killed the sheriff and who killed Pat Horan."

"Don't you think that the White Masks did the shooting?"

"The only way I can answer that is to find out who are the White Masks."

"It is quite a puzzle," admitted Kay. "Corey and I talk about it, but we haven't any idea who they are. Riley Waters says it is dangerous for me to ride alone in the hills. What do you think?"

"Miss Burke, it is always dangerous for a girl to ride alone. Many things can happen. You usually ride with Riley?"

"Yes, except when I ride alone."

"Mebbe he *likes* to ride with yuh," smiled the tall cowboy.

"Riley," she said, "takes himself very seriously. I don't like serious people. Why don't we sit in the patio, where it is cooler?"

"Suits me, Miss Burke," smiled Hashknife. They walked through the house and into the walled patio, where several large olive trees gave plenty of shade.

THEY sat down along the wall, where they could look up at the old wooden balcony on the second floor. Hashknife smiled over the making of a cigarette.

"Yuh could play 'Romeo and Juliet' out here," he said.

"A perfectly good balcony," laughed Kay. "I have seen Riley Waters out on that balcony, looking at the moon."

"Well, he'd make a good Romeo, wouldn't he?"

"I'm sure I don't know. That is Riley's room—at that end of the balcony. You will notice that the balcony is divided in the center—so that a Romeo must do all his moon-gazing from his own side of the wall."

"Yeah, I noticed that," nodded Hashknife.

"Riley is quite a reader," offered Kay. "He spends a lot of time in his room, reading books and magazines. I suppose it is a good habit."

"Yeah, I guess so—as long as he sleeps alone and don't bother anybody else at night. I sure don't care to share a room with a feller that reads late at night."

"Riley does. His lamp is often burning long past midnight."

"I just wonder why we are talkin' about Riley Waters," laughed Hashknife. "Or do you like to talk about him, Miss Burke?"

"No, I don't, but I guess we were merely—well, conversing."

WHILE they were talking, Johnston Burke returned to the ranch and joined them in the patio. After a few minutes Kay excused herself and went into the house.

"Anything new, Hartley?" queried Burke anxiously.

"Not much," replied Hashknife. "I've been tryin' to figure out who in this valley could be yore friend Barney O'Keefe. He's only two years out of the penitentiary; so he couldn't be an old-timer in the valley. He can't be a young man. Of course, he might be planted on one of them ranches out from Painted Rock."

"I figure that Steve McLeod and Pat Horan knew somethin'. I feel that one of 'em was responsible for the telegram that got us off the train at Painted Rock. No doubt that Steve tried to kill me that night. After I shot Steve at the line camp, Pat Horan came back there and got killed."

"After I shot Steve in that shack, Burke, I searched a coat that hung on the wall, and I found a letter addressed to me, ready for mailin'. It warned me and Sleepy to leave San Pablo Valley. The next day, when we came back after the body, the coat was gone. I believe the third man was out there, when the shootin' happened. When Pat Horan came back they had an

argument, and this man killed Pat Horan. That man may be O'Keefe."

Johnston Burke nodded glumly. "That may be true, Hartley. Do you think that the same man shot Corey and the sheriff?"

"That's the way I look at it."

"Then," said Burke, "he would stop at nothing to make me pay what he asks, Hartley."

"Unless we stop him first."

"Yes. He hasn't made any demand yet as to how and when the money is to be paid. There have been no notes since the one ordering me to secure the ten thousand dollars and have it ready for delivery."

"Burke," said Hashknife thoughtfully, "have you ever taken a good look at Moses the Hermit?"

"You mean—he might be Barney O'Keefe? No, I thought of that. Moses has a hooked nose, which is about all that is visible of his face. As I remember Barney O'Keefe he could not be Moses the Hermit. I have never talked with Moses. He seems to avoid most people, and has little to say to anyone."

"Well, I dunno how to unearth him," said Hashknife. "We'll just have to wait and let somebody else make the first move. Criminals always make a mistake—sooner or later. Don't let yore daughter ride alone in the hills, nor between here and Santa Lucia; and if yuh take my advice, you won't either. Don't trust anybody—too much. Well, I reckon we'll be goin' back to town."

"Your advice may be sound, Hartley," said Burke, "but what about you and Stevens? They've attempted your life twice."

Hashknife smiled slowly. "Mr. Burke, when yuh set into a game like this, you play yore cards the best yuh can. The other players may be smart, too, and they may have a strong hunch of what yo're holdin'—but as long as you've got one card in the hole—they're never sure."

"Have you got a card in the hole, Hartley?"

"Well, yeah, I have. It ain't a very good

one—yet. Its value depends on what is dealt to me from now on; but it gives me somethin' to build on."

"Remember what I told you, Hartley—a signed check, when this situation is cleared."

"You've done got the wrong angle, Mr. Burke," replied Hashknife soberly. "We came here to buy cows. A killer forged yore name to a telegram and tried to hand me a harp. He's playin' the harp himself now—but the gang behind him are still doin' business at the same stand. When that feller tried to kill me in Painted Rock, he made this a personal affair. Yo're payin' our expenses—and that's enough."

"Bob Marsh told me that money meant nothing to you two, Hartley."

"Yuh better tell that to Sleepy," smiled Hashknife. "He swears that Bob Marsh never told the truth in his whole life."

AFTER breakfast next morning Hashknife suggested a ride into the hills. Hashknife had told Sleepy that Johnston Burke felt sure that Moses the Hermit was not Barney O'Keefe.

"He don't fit the description sent out by the warden," remarked Sleepy. "Moses ain't six feet tall. He's shore a cranky old pelican, and he's touchy about his whiskers. Busted Hope says he packs a long, sharp knife. And more'n that, Hashknife, he don't peer at yuh with a kind eye."

"Well," laughed Hashknife, "yuh can't expect too much from a hermit. Anyway, I've kinda got a hankerin' to see his place at close range. Busted told me how to strike the trail to his shack; so I reckon we'll ride up there and say howdy to the old coot. He can't no more than throw his knife at us."

Moses the Hermit's shack was located a few miles south of Santa Lucia, high up in the broken hills, reached over a winding trail through the mesquite and junipers. The shack was built of mostly everything in the building line, from sturdy timbers, salvaged from some mine, to pieces of tin

and packing-boxes. He had a small stable, made mostly of poles. The heavy brush grew so closely around the buildings that they were only visible from a short distance.

At first sight of the buildings, not over a hundred feet away, the two cowboys drew rein. A surprise visit might not be exactly proper. There was no sign of life around the place. As they sat there, looking at the hermit's abode, they heard someone coming down through the brush behind the buildings.

Quickly they swung their horses off the trail and into the heavy brush, where they dismounted and moved to a spot where they could see the house again.

"Prob'ly the Hermit comin' home," said Sleepy.

"He rides a mule," informed Hashknife. "This man is on a black horse. I caught a glimpse of him, 'way back up there through the scrub-oaks."

A few moments later the rider came out through a trail in the brush and drew up in front of the shack.

"Riley Waters!" whispered Sleepy. Hashknife nodded.

After several moments of scanning the country below him, the foreman of the JHB spread dismounted and knocked on the door of the shack. No one responded, although Waters knocked several times. Then he walked to the side of the shack, looking around carefully.

Finally he picked up what looked to be an empty tin can. After looking at it and turning it around in his hands, he cast it aside.

Going back to horse he rolled and lighted a cigarette, before mounting. A few moments later he came down the trail, passing only a few yards from Hashknife and Sleepy.

After Waters had time to get far down the trail, Hashknife and Sleepy mounted and rode on up to the shack. The one door was locked, but from the inside. There was only one window, built solidly into the

casings. By looking through the dirty glass they could see most of the dim interior.

"Door fastened with a heavy bar inside," remarked Hashknife. "The old man prob'ly has a concealed string some place, which he can pull from the outside and lift the bar. But what a house to live in, Sleepy!"

"I hope to tell yuh! If I ever show any hermit symptoms, pardner, just start shoot-in' at me."

Hashknife rolled and lighted a cigarette. The yard was tiny, rocky and uneven, littered with debris, including tin cans. Hashknife picked up several of them, empty and rusted. Finally he picked up one that had not been exposed to the weather long enough to destroy the label, bent back the jagged top and looked inside.

AT THE bottom of the can was a piece of paper, folded tightly. He shook the paper out and unfolded it. Faintly printed in pencil were the two letters N. G. Hashknife showed the paper to Sleepy.

"Very enlightenin' to say the least," remarked Sleepy.

"Yeah, that's right. But it's somethin', pardner. Riley Waters left that message for Moses the Hermit. Them initials could mean anythin'."

"Well," grinned Sleepy, "them two letters usually mean 'No Good'."

"That's right. Huh! I wonder if that's what it means. Pretty slick way of passin' a message. If we hadn't seen Waters pick up a can, we'd never have looked into that one. By golly, I've got an idea. Wait."

Hashknife tore the paper in two, penciled O. K. on it, folded it and dropped it into the can. Then he tossed the can aside and walked back to his horse.

"What's the good of that?" queried Sleepy.

"Pardner," grinned Hashknife, "yuh never can tell what might happen to a double-crossed hermit."

"That's right. It might—" Sleepy hesitated. Moses the Hermit was coming down

the brushy trail, like a shepherd of old, carrying a long, crooked stick, his white hair and whiskers flaring in the breeze. The huge beard prevented them from seeing the expression on his face, but his deep-set eyes were not friendly.

"Hyah pardner," smiled Hashknife. Moses halted near them, the stick clutched in a bony hand.

"What do yuh want?" he asked huskily.

"Oh, we just drifted past here; so we stopped to say howdy," replied Hashknife. "Riley Waters dropped in ahead of us, but didn't find yuh; so he went along."

Hashknife watched Moses' eyes, which flashed for a moment toward the scattered tin-cans.

"Waters?" he husked. "Do I know anybody named Waters?"

"How would we know?" countered Hashknife.

"I don't know him," declared Moses. "Don't want to know him. All I ask is for folks to leave me alone. Why did you two come here?"

"Of all the damned old wolverines I ever met!" snorted Sleepy.

"I mind my own business!" snapped Moses.

"The trube with you is that you've all gone to hair, pardner."

Moses clutched his stick tighter, his head trembling slightly.

"Get out of here!" he said huskily. "Clear out—both of you."

HASHKNIFE smiled at him. "Yo're gettin' all worked up over nothin'," he told the old man.

"Get out, damn you," he shrilled. "I know who you are. They told me in Santa Lucia that you're detectives. Well, you ain't got anythin' on me! So go about your business. I don't want you around here. Damned detectives, annoying helpless old men."

"Did Riley Waters come here to annoy you?" asked Hashknife.

"How do I know what he came here

for. I live here, because I don't like people. I want to be alone."

"C'mon, Hashknife; let Ol' Poison Ivy have his solitude," grinned Sleepy. "Some day he'll coil up and bite himself."

"Yeah, I believe yo're right, Sleepy," grinned Hashknife. "So long, Mose."

The old man shook his stick at them, as they rode down the trail, and went back toward his little stable.

"I'd shore feel sorry if we've annoyed a kindly old gentleman," remarked Hashknife, as they drifted down the brushy trail, "but I've got a hunch that Old Moses ain't so kindly. He's got a bad idea behind them snaky eyes, Sleepy—yuh can see it. I believe we'll kinda keep an eye on that hairy hermit—he might be dangerous."

X

HASHKNIFE met Ed Whelan, cashier of the Golden Arrow mine, next day in the sheriff's office. Whelan was talking over conditions with Busted Hope, and the talk turned to the White Masks.

"They make it bad for us," said Whelan. "Our men insist on being paid off in cash, and that means we have to ship money from the bank here in Santa Lucia, or by express.

"We have over a hundred men on the payroll, and they are all getting good wages, which amounts to a lot of money in thirty days. We can't even trust the men in our own organization."

"Yuh shore got to be careful how yuh move money," agreed Busted.

Whelan laughed. "Oh, I guess we've fooled the White Masks all right. Twice we had a man, who looked like a drummer, get off a late train, go to the hotel with his valise, and later out to the mine. Nobody even suspicioned him. But we only did it twice. Another scheme worked once—but we're not going to use it again."

"When is payday?" asked Busted.

"Day after tomorrow."

Riley Waters came in, greeted all of

them pleasantly and said to Whelan, "Tryin' to get the law to protect yore payroll, Ed?"

"No, we don't need the law, Riley. Mow's everything with you?"

"Oh, so-so. Mine still operatin'?"

"Yes, we're struggling along. And that reminds me that we better be getting back to the mine. I came in to pick up a shipment of machinery, and the boys must have it loaded by this time. Glad to have met you, Mr. Hartley."

"Nice feller," remarked Busted, after Whelan had gone.

"Fine," agreed Riley. "But he lays awake nights, tryin' to figure out a way to outsmart the White Masks. He sure has some wild-eyed schemes."

"The White Masks seem to have quit operatin'," said Hashknife.

"When yuh say that—knock on wood!" exclaimed Busted. "They ain't quit—they're just dormant. You watch, Hartley; they'll strike again."

"Good! Mebbe we'll catch 'em, Busted. They're bound to make a mistake, if they operate often enough."

"Do yuh really believe that?" asked Riley Waters.

"Anyway," laughed Hashknife, "it makes Busted feel better."

"It would be a feather in his cap, if he could catch 'em," said Riley.

"Feather—hell!" blurted Busted. "It'd be a whole war-bonnet."

"Me and Sleepy went ridin' yesterday," said Hashknife, "and we dropped in to see Moses the Hermit."

Hashknife saw Riley's eyes flicker for a moment.

"Yuh did? Did he run yuh off the place?" Busted inquired.

"Well, yuh might say he did, Busted. He shook his stick at us, called us names, and told us to get to hell off the place. He's a real pleasant old gent."

"Half cracked," said Riley. "I'd be afraid to fool around his place."

"Well, I'm not goin' back again,"

laughed Hashknife. "He's either a crazy old coot, or he's afraid of the law."

"How do yuh figure that, Hartley?" asked Riley.

"Those whiskers. No sane man, who isn't afraid of identification, would ever grow a crop like that."

"He's sure got a crop," grinned Riley. "But I suppose he's happy."

"Anyway," said Hashknife, "he's well concealed."

THERE was a midnight passenger train scheduled to pass through Santa Lucia. It stopped on flag, or to deliver a passenger, which was rare enough, and unless there was a flag the depot agent at Santa Lucia did not sit up to see the train rush past the station.

But this night the engineer gave the station warning, and the darkened train ground to a stop. There was only a flicker of light from a low-turned lamp in the depot office, as a lone figure descended from the platform of the smoking car, and the train rumbled ahead, after its momentary stop.

The dim light of the passing coach revealed the figure of a roughly dressed man—a miner, by his garb—carrying a small, tightly roped bed-roll. He flung it across his shoulder and walked the length of the rough platform, his heavy, laced boots creaking complainingly.

He halted at the end of the platform, facing the main street, shifted the bed-roll, and started down the three steps that led to street-level.

Suddenly three men rose from the shadows at the end of the platform, and the muzzles of three guns jabbed into the ribs of the newcomer.

"Drop that bed-roll!" hissed one of them. The man seemed to hesitate for a moment. There was the sound of a thudding blow, and the man went to his knees, the bed-roll falling ahead of him. Quickly the man picked up the bed-roll, turned and melted into the heavy shadows of some box-cars

on a spur track. It had all happened in a few moments and no one had seen it.

After ten or fifteen minutes the prone figure managed to get to his feet, and went staggering toward the lights of the saloons.

Hashknife had left Sleepy and Busted Hope, playing pool in the Eureka Saloon, about ten o'clock, and had gone to the hotel to write a letter to Bob Marsh, telling him what a mess they had found in Santa Lucia. He finished the letter and read for a while from a borrowed book, which Busted had loaned him, but his mind was too full of local troubles. It was nearly midnight, when he went across to the Eureka Saloon, but did not find Sleepy and Busted.

There was a light in the sheriff's office; so he went down there, where he found Busted Hope alone, trying to figure out the details on some civil-suit papers, which he had to serve next day.

"Where's Sleepy?" asked Hashknife. Busted yawned. "I dunno. He left me about an hour ago. Said he was goin' down to the livery-stable and then goin' to bed. Where you been?"

"Up at the hotel. He never came up there."

BUSTED looked perturbed for a moment, but smiled. "Oh, he's around, I'm sure. Prob'ly playin' pool with somebody. I'll go with yuh."

They searched the saloons, went to the hotel and then to the stable, but no one had seen Sleepy since he left the Eureka. They went back to the hotel, where they heard the passenger train make a stop at the depot.

"That train don't stop here very often," remarked Busted. "Prob'ly somebody from the mines takin' a late train."

They crossed the street to the Eureka and were leaning against the bar, when they heard a commotion near the doorway. A man had staggered into the place, one side of his face bathed in gore from a cut across his head above his right ear. His

rough clothes were dusty and he seemed badly dazed.

Someone helped him to a drink of whiskey, which brought color back to his face, while another took a wet towel and mopped away the blood. It was several minutes before he seemed to realize what was going on, and Busted asked him what happened.

"White Masks," he whispered. "Up by the depot. I—I guess they hit me with a gun. How about another shot of that whiskey?"

"White Masks?" grunted Busted. "Why in hell would they jump you?"

The man tried to laugh, but it was only a grimace. "The payroll of the Golden Arrow," he replied painfully.

"Yuh mean—they got the payroll of the Golden Arrow?"

"No—they didn't get it. I—I brought it in my bed-roll last month. This time—I was only a decoy. Where's that whiskey?"

Hashknife left the saloon and went back to the hotel, where he stood in the heavy shadows. The White Masks had struck again—but missed. They had waited for that midnight train, thinking that the payroll would again be brought in the bed-roll of an itinerant miner.

But where was Sleepy Stevens? Evidently not in Santa Lucia. Had he run foul of the White Masks, wondered Hashknife. He tried to make himself believe that everything was all right, but down in his heart he knew that everything was not all right. Sleepy had told Busted that he was going to the livery-stable. From the Eureka to the stable were at least two long blocks of unlighted, one-story buildings, with narrow alleys.

Hashknife went back to the livery-stable, where he talked to a sleepy stable-hand.

No, he had not seen Sleepy that evening. Yes, he had been there since seven o'clock, and had not been asleep at any time. Hashknife found Busted back at his office. They had sent the injured man down to the doctor, and sent a man out to the Golden Arrow mine to tell them what had happened.

"I'm not interested in anything", except findin' my pardner," said Hashknife grimly. "I'm afraid the White Masks got him, Busted."

"Aw, shucks, he'll turn up, Hashknife."

"His horse and saddle are in the stable—and he's not in town. Yuh see, they mailed us a warnin' to leave San Pablo Valley."

"Yeah, I know, but—well, mebbe yo're right. I'd shore hate to see anythin' happen to Sleepy. Yuh see, I like that feller."

"Me and him have been pardners for a long time, Busted. I was born in the Milk River country, Montana, and Sleepy was born in Idaho. My father was a range minister, with the usual big family and a small salary. In fact, most of the time there wasn't any salary; so us kids went to work early in life. There wasn't enough work up there; so I started wanderin' over the cow ranges. Idaho, Eastern Oregon, down into Wyomin', Nevada, parts of California, New Mexico and Arizona. I took a peck at all of 'em, and I was workin' for the old Hashknife outfit, when Sleepy Stevens showed up there. That was a long time ago, Busted."

HASHKNIFE'S gray eyes seemed a trifle misty, as he hesitated, before continuing his narrative.

"Sleepy was a lot like me," he said. "As long as there was a hill ahead of us we wanted to see what was on the other side; so we rode away together—headin' for a



distant hill. We ain't never made any real money—me and Sleepy. We didn't need money. We've had a lot of fun and made a lot of people happy—kinda helpin' out.

"Just a couple of range-boomers—me and him. We've shot ourselves out of a lot of tight places, Busted. Yeah, we've come mighty close to the old boy with the scythe a lot of times. But there's allus been hills ahead. I wish we was headin' for a hill right now."

Hashknife shook his head slowly. "If he's alive, he's figurin' that I'll find him. He thinks I know quite a lot, Busted; but right now I'm as ignorant as can be. Mebbe I'll do some guessin'—playin' hunches. But I don't like it—not the way it looks now."

"Mebbe it'll look better in the mornin', Hashknife," suggested Busted.

"It's so darn long before daylight—and all I can do is think in a circle."

Speedy Singleton, the marshal, came limping in and sat down.

"Damned rheumatics," he said. "Saw a light in here. Funny about the White Masks stealin' a worthless bed-roll. Makes me laugh—almost."

"Hartley's pardner is missin', Speedy," said Busted.

"Missin'?"

Busted explained, while Speedy grunted dismally.

"What good will he be to them?" he asked.

"They warned us to leave here."

"That still don't explain nothin', Hartley."

"If they captured him—it'll be to force me to quit Santa Lucia."

"Yuh mean—they'd threaten to kill him, if yuh didn't leave here?"

"If they took him alive," nodded Hashknife.

"Well, that's a damn fine situation in a civilized country. What are we comin' to, anyway? We're goin' back to savagery, I tell yuh. Next thing we know, we'll be cookin' and eatin' all our fat friends."

"That'll let all three of us out," remarked Busted. "Hashknife, you better go get some sleep. Stayin' awake won't help none."

"That's right," agreed Hashknife. "See yuh *mañana*."

BUT Hashknife did not sleep that night. Through the long night he sprawled on the bed, smoking innumerable cigarettes, trying to puzzle out some angle to things. Daylight found him still unable to decide just what to do.

Busted Hope was out early, and together they searched the town, but to no avail. There was an old feed corral some distance behind the Eureka Saloon, and on the far side of this Hashknife found a place where a team and wagon had been tied for some time. Busted was unable to say just why anyone would leave a team and wagon at that spot. They followed the faint tracks to where they joined the main road, going away from the town.

"I feel a little better," said Hashknife, as they went back to the hotel for breakfast. "I was afraid we'd find him in an alley or behind a saloon. It means that he's still alive, Busted."

"Yeah, I feel that way about it, too," agreed the deputy. "Mebbe them White Masks caught him, after he started for the stable, tied him up in that wagon, and then pulled the job at the depot. But what'll they do to him, I wonder?"

Hashknife grimly shook his head. "*Quien sabe?* It's their next move."

After a hasty breakfast they went straight to the postoffice, where the old postmaster handed Hashknife a crumpled envelope, posted in Santa Lucia. He knew what was in it, before tearing the end off the cheap envelope. The penciled scrawl read:

WE'VE GOT YOUR PARDNER. IF YOU EVER WANT TO SEE HIM ALIVE, LEAVE SAN PABLO VALLEY AT ONCE AND NEVER RETURN. WE ARE WATCHING.

THE WHITE MASKS.

Hashknife handed the letter to Busted, who read it and swore dismally. Johnston Burke and Riley Waters were riding into town; so Hashknife and Busted waited for them to dismount. Burke noted the expression on Hashknife's face at once.

"Is something wrong?" he asked quickly. Hashknife handed him the letter, which Burke read aloud.

"When did this happen?" he asked. Hashknife explained that Sleepy had been missing since about ten o'clock last night.

"We heard about the robbery at the depot," said Burke, "but we did not know that they had included kidnaping in their crimes. Well, what is the next move Hartley?"

"I'm through," said Hashknife wearily. "They've shore got me where the hair is short, Mr. Burke. Yuh see, my pardner's life is worth more to me than anythin' else on earth. If pullin' out of here will save him, I'll shore pull out."

Burke shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I know how you feel—but I hate to see you fail on the job."

"I can't take a chance on what might happen," said Hashknife dully. "I haven't got very far on this job, and I hate to quit it—but Sleepy's life is worth a lot to me. I'll just have to admit that I'm whipped, and leave. It's all I can do, you understand."

"Yes, I can see that," sighed Burke. "I had faith in your ability to help us clean up this situation, especially after Bob Marsh's letter; but it's all right, Hartley."

"Shore," said Hashknife, "I know. I don't reckon I'm so smart. Just as soon as I can make a little money, I'll send yuh back the expense money we've collected from you, Mr. Burke. I'll be pullin' out for Tucson on the midnight train. That note says that the White Masks are watchin' me. Well, I ain't goin' to antagonize 'em. Mebbe they'll turn Sleepy loose, after I'm gone. If they do, tell him I'm in Tucson, will yuh?"

"I'll tell him," said Busted Hope.

"Thank yuh, Busted. I think I'll go and get a little sleep."

Hashknife went back to the hotel, his shoulders sagging. Riley Waters shrugged, spat dryly and said:

"The old yaller streak, Mr. Burke."

Burke drew a deep breath, but did not deny the suggestion. Busted said:

"He's shore all busted up over his pardner. Mebbe he's yaller, Riley—I dunno. Yuh can't judge of that, unless you've had the same thing happen to you."

"Well, we're right back where we started," said Burke. "Damn it, I did feel that Hartley was getting along on this case."

"I always did feel that he was a four-flusher," said Riley.

"He's shore plumb filled with grief," said Busted. "Still and all, if somebody was gunnin' for me—I might get timid m'self. He didn't seem to get scared when that feller shot at him in Painted Rock. I dunno."

"Well, the White Masks knew how to cure him," said Riley.

"That's right. Well, I'm sorry. Somehow he struck me as bein' a feller that would stick until hell froze over. But I reckon I was mistaken."

"I'll buy a drink," offered Burke. "It seems about the only thing left to do. Did you find out anything new about the robbery last night?"

"Only that the White Masks got about six-bits worth of old blankets."

"Somebody had the wrong idea, I suppose," smiled Burke.

"Yeah. Yuh see, that's how they brought in last month's payroll; and the White Masks thought they'd repeat. It happened that last night a man dropped off at Painted Rock, where a man with two horses were waitin' for him. They brought the payroll across the hills."

"Smart," commented Riley Waters, as they leaned on the bar.

Word had been passed around the town that Sleepy Stevens was missing, and men

in the saloon questioned Busted Hope. Burke told them about the warning in the mail, and that Hashknife Hartley was leaving for Tucson that night.

"Scared out, eh?" commented the bartender. "Well, he's smart, at that. The White Masks have all the best of it, 'cause he don't know who they are. I wouldn't hanker for a bullet in the back."

"Nor any other part of my anatomy," added Riley Waters.

There was plenty of comment all over town, but Hashknife did not care. He slept for a few hours, paced the floor for a few more hours, and then ate his supper alone. He went to the depot, bought a ticket to Tucson on the midnight train, and the agent promised to flag the train.

No one said anything to the tall, lean-faced cowboy, who seemed too preoccupied for conversation. He left a forwarding address at the postoffice—a small hotel in Tucson.

Just before train time he found Busted Hope and told him good-by.

"Good luck to yuh, Hartley," said Busted. "I hope things turn out right for you and Sleepy."

"Thank yuh, Busted; I hope so, too. Well, I'll be goin'."

There was no one at the depot, as Hashknife boarded the day coach. The few people in the day coach were fast asleep, paying no attention to the lean, hard-faced cowboy, with his war-bag. The grumbling conductor glared at Hashknife and at the silver dollar, which the cowboy tendered him.

"Painted Rock," said Hashknife.

"Painted Rock. This train don't stop at Painted Rock."

"It's the first stop out of here," replied Hashknife. "There's my fare to Painted Rock, and yuh can take it or leave it, pardner, 'cause this train stops at Painted Rock."

Hashknife looked square into the eyes of the conductor for a moment. Muttering under his breath, the conductor ac-

cepted the piece of silver and walked on, while Hashknife placed his war-bag on the opposite seat and rolled a cigarette. A few minutes later the heavy passenger train ground to a stop at Painted Rock, and Hashknife dropped to the bare ground beside the little depot.

After the train went on, Hashknife walked cautiously to the saloon, where he inspected the three horses at the hitch-rack. Not recognizing any of them, he went to where he could look through a window of the small saloon. The inevitable poker game was in progress, but the players were all strangers to Hashknife.

Hashknife went across the short street and sat down in the darkness at a corner of the little general store. He had to get back into San Pablo Valley, and was in desperate need of a horse. He had just about made up his mind to help himself at the hitch-rack, when he heard a horse coming toward him from behind the store.

The rider came to within fifty feet of the corner, where he dismounted in the darkness, and walked within a dozen feet of Hashknife. He stopped for a few moments, before walking past and going to the doorway of the store. He stood there for a moment or two, and then slowly crossed the street toward the saloon, evidently to see who was in there.

Hashknife chuckled to himself, picked up his war-bag and walked back to the horse. Quickly he fastened the bag behind the saddle, mounted and rode away in the darkness toward San Pablo Valley, going slowly, until out of earshot from the town.

"Bronc," he remarked to the horse, "I dunno how much you think of yore master, Riley Waters, but he's goin' to have a long walk home tonight."

THE trail was dim in the starlight, but Hashknife found the old line camp of the JHB, which was about ten miles from Painted Rock. There was no one there, the door nailed shut. But Hashknife pried the door open and searched the one room.

Then he closed the door, mounted his horse and went on.

But instead of going back on the old road, which led to Santa Lucia, he turned off on a trail, which Busted had told him led to the property of Rance Pelley and Mack Dalton. The trail led to the left into the broken hills, and was about four miles from Santa Lucia.

The trail led down through a canyon, out onto a rim and around to a huddle of old buildings on the slope of a hill. Hashknife had never been there before, and it was quite dark among the jack-pines and heavy brush. Because there was no trail now he dismounted and led his horse slowly toward the buildings.

Suddenly he saw a light ahead. It seemed to be a lighted doorway, with slowly moving figures before it. Hashknife led his horse in against a tumble-down shack, and went quietly on alone. Another old shack gave him cover and allowed him to approach within fifty feet of the open doorway, where three men were evidently unpacking a horse. He heard a man saying:

"It's a hell of a long ways to that Golden Arrow, but when we can get stuff like this, it's worth the trip. That stuff's jewelry ore, boys."

"Hi-graders!" exclaimed Hashknife to himself. "Pelley and Dalton, the honest miners of Santa Lucia."

The saddle and ropes were stripped off the horse, which turned and trotted away. The three men went into the house and the door was closed.

Hashknife went swiftly over to the house, crouching in against the rough wall. The two windows of the shack were covered, but Hashknife saw a crack wide enough to show that there was a light in the place. Placing his ear against the widest crack, he listened closely. A man laughed and said:

"Just like a handful of gold coin, Alec."

Alec? That was a new name to Hashknife. He had never heard of anyone by that name in Santa Lucia. He listened

closely again and heard his own name mentioned.

"—got yaller and pulled out for Tucson tonight. Yeah, he did."

The conversation was general for several moments, as all three men laughed and talked. Then one man said:

"Of course not. Don't be a damn fool. He'd know where we took him. Here. Drink that down, and forget him."

"I'd feel safer—after I *know* he's gone."

"Who—Hartley?"

"No—Stevens."

"Aw, we've got that all fixed up, Alec. He's in that old Coyote tunnel. It's only about two hundred feet long. The first fifty feet is a mass of rotten timbers. All we've got to do is stick a few pounds of powder about halfway of that timberin', and shoot down the whole front of the thing. He's buried damned good and deep, I'll tell yuh that much."

"Let's go do it now."

"Don't be a fool. Wait until about noon. Nobody pay any attention to a noon blast—they might at night. How about another drink?"

"Where is that old Coyote tunnel?"

"Straight up the hill from here and about fifty feet off the trail. It ain't over five hundred feet from this cabin, Alec. I tell yuh, it's a cinch. Been threatenin' to fall in for several years."

"Yeah, and he's shore right there now," declared another. "When we tie up a man—he's tied. Well, here's luck."

"Well, it kinda looks like everythin' is all right. We're damn well rid of Hartley and Stevens. Even if Hartley comes back, we'll pick him off. He's shore a nosey devil. But I've got to be pullin' out before it gets daylight. I can't afford to have anyone see me."

"Have another, before yuh go, Alec?"

"No, I've had enough."

HASHKNIFE drew back away from the cabin, trying to identify the man who left the doorway, but the light was too

weak. The man circled the cabin, mounted a horse, and Hashknife heard him ride away. Hashknife waited until there was no more light through the cracks of the shack, and then searched for the trail up the hill above the shack.

He found the forks of the trail and made his way over to the Coyote tunnel. The portal timbers were askew, but there was no barrier. By the light of a match he found a candle-stub on a ledge of rock, and made his way back into the tunnel. Even a light blast would crumple those timbers.

Sleepy was there at the face of the old drift, his back against the rock, trussed like a mummy, his mouth full of dirty rags, which were tied tightly to the back of his neck. Hashknife quickly cut the gag and the ropes. It was several minutes before Sleepy could talk coherently, and his first sentence was:

"It took you a hell of a long time to find me."

"Yeah, and yo're lucky I ever found yuh, pardner. Know where yuh are?"

"How would I?" countered Sleepy. "Them snakehunters tied my head in a sack, hog-tied me in every joint, and brought me in a wagon. I'm in a mine—and that's all I know."

"If yuh can work yore legs—let's get out of here before this damn tunnel falls in on us."

Sleepy tested his legs carefully, groaned and leaned against the rocky side of the tunnel.

"I know now how a pretzel feels," he whispered. "But I'll be all right, as soon as my blood remembers its way around. Ouch! Man, I'm one mass of needles."

"Take it easy," advised Hashknife. "You'll be all right in a few minutes."

Sleepy managed to get his legs to support his weight, and they began a slow walk toward the mouth of the tunnel. They were about halfway to the exit, when Hashknife suddenly grasped Sleepy by the arm. From the entrance of the tunnel came the booming sound of footsteps, and they could

dimly make out the figures of two men. Luckily Hashknife had discarded the candle stub, and the two men could not see them."

Then he could hear the voices, subdued but plain, as the two men worked at the side of the timbering of the tunnel. One said:

"Well, damn it, if yo're goin' to worry all night, we might as well shoot the place right now. I don't like to shoot dynamite at night."

"Won't nobody hear it," insisted the other. "Hell, everybody's asleep, and anyway yuh can't hear that blast in Santa Lucia."

"All right, all right. A dozen sticks ort to do the job. Have yuh got that cap on the fuse? Better cut it long enough. Here's a hunk of dynamite to fuse it with. There, she's all set."

A match flared, as they touched off the fuse, and as the fuse spat a shower of tiny sparks, Hashknife shot at the two men. The .45 sounded like the report of a cannon in that narrow tunnel, and loose rock rattled down on the wooden car tracks.

One of the men yelled, and both of them started running toward the entrance, with Hashknife and Sleepy, pounding along behind them. Again Hashknife snapped a shot at them, as they dived out of the tunnel, but there was no indication that the bullet hit either of them. There was no time for Hashknife and Sleepy to locate that burning fuse. In spite of his leaden legs, Sleepy was only trailing Hashknife by a few feet, when they raced out.

Straight across the old dump they ran, and slid down the side, tearing through the brush, while from behind them came the shuddering impact of the heavy dynamite charge, the sound of falling rocks, as the ground crushed the remaining old timbers and sealed up the Coyote tunnel forever.

Hashknife and Sleepy had stopped only a few feet apart.

"I shore got my circulation back awful fast," remarked Sleepy.

"Yeah, you shore moved," agreed Hashknife. "Well, we've got to move again. Wait'll I fill this six-shooter, Sleepy. I was shore scared that the jar of this old gun might cave in that old hole. All right."

They crawled out of the brush, circled the lower edge of the old dump and made their way to the bottom of the hill. There was no sign of the enemy. As quietly as a pair of marauding Apaches they made their way to their one horse, which they led out of earshot from the shack, before attempting to mount the animal double.

The nervous animal objected, but its objections were quickly overruled.

"Well, how'd they capture you, Sleepy?" asked Hashknife.

"Easy," chuckled Sleepy. "I was on my way to the stable, when a couple of pleasant gents, stuck guns into my ribs and escorted me out behind the Eureka, where they had a team and wagon. They pulled a grain sack over my head, tied me so damn tight I couldn't even wiggle a finger, and then dumped me into the wagon. That's the story, pardner."

"Uh-huh. Did they pull right out of town with yuh?"

"No, they didn't. We went a little ways and waited a long time. I heard a train whistle.

"Couldn't have been very far away from the depot. The men left the wagon, but they wasn't gone very long. They throwed somethin' in to the wagon, and then we went on. Where didja get this horse?"

"Painted Rock. I stole it from Riley Waters."

"What the hell was you doin' in Painted Rock?"

"Well, not much. I was supposed to be on my way to Tucson, but got off at Painted Rock. Yuh see, the White Masks promised to kill you, if I didn't leave San Pablo Valley."

"Did they? And you stole a horse. Just the moment I get out of sight, you turn to yore evil ways. Don't you know what hap-

pens to little boys who steal horses, young man?"

"Well, I know what would have happened to two little boys, if I hadn't stolen this horse."

"What would have happened?"

"I'd have had a hell of a long walk—and you'd have been buried under a hundred feet of rock and dirt right now."

"That's right. Well, as soon as I can get somethin' to eat, I'm goin' to leave this country, Hashknife."

"Goin' to leave it? Why?"

"Why? Because I've got enemies here—or rather, you have. And I'm not goin' to be a burnt offerin', like the Bible speaks about. One of them fellers said, 'We ain't got nothin' against you, feller, but we've got to kill you off to prove to that long-nosed, high-pocket pardner of yours that we mean business.' How do yuh like that? Do you think I'm goin' to stay in a place where they feel thataway about you?"

"Hungry?" queried Hashknife.

"Hungry? Say, do you realize that I ain't had anythin' to eat since day before yesterday. Bein' tied up thataway shore don't wean yuh one danged bit. But who in the devil was them two dynamiters?"

"Mr. Pelley and Mr. Dalton, I reckon. There's a third member of the crew, but I can't identify him. They called him Alec."

HASHKNIFE explained what had happened since Sleepy had been captured, and how he had listened in on the conversation of the three high-graders.

"I reckon they suddenly decided to bury yuh before daylight, Sleepy. They said they'd drop the roof on yuh about noon."

Sleepy chuckled quietly. "I'll betcha them two dry-gulchers are shakin' in their boots right now. But what was Riley Waters doin' in Painted Rock?"

"Well, whatever it was, I'm shore obliged to the handsome gent, Sleepy."

"I hope to tell yuh. Say, it's goin' to be daylight pretty quick."

"That's right. We'll unsaddle this bronc

and turn him loose near the town, and nobody will ever know but what we walked in."

"Yeah, I'll betcha. But before they show too much surprise, I'd like to get that extra gun of mine out of my bed-roll."

It was daylight when they went to the little restaurant, where both men did justice to the biggest breakfast ever sold in the place. The boy at the livery-stable saw them, and raced to find Busted Hope. The boy knew that Sleepy had been kidnaped and that Hashknife had taken the midnight train for Tucson—but here they were, calmly eating breakfast in Santa Lucia.

For once in his life Busted Hope was willing to get up early. Half-dressed, he came to the restaurant, staring at them through the window, before banging the door open in his haste to find out where they had been and how they happened to be back.

"Hyah, Busted," grinned Sleepy, his mouth full of food. "Set down and have an egg with us."

"By the Lord Harry!" blurted Busted. "What's the answer?"

"Oh, we just came back," replied Swede airily. "How do yuh like yore eggs?"

"How do I like my eggs! For Gawd's sake, what about you two?"

"We both like 'em straight up," replied Hashknife soberly.

Busted sank back in his chair, rubbed a hand across his chin, and almost upset the table, trying to cross his legs.

"Wait a minute," he begged. "Last night Sleepy was in the hands of the White Masks, and Hashknife was on his way to Tucson. What happened?"

"Well," drawled Sleepy, "I didn't like the way they treated me, and Hashknife didn't like the conductor; so we got together and came back to yore fair city. Ain't yuh glad to see us?"

"Glad? Why, I—aw, hell, that ain't the right story."

The old depot agent came into the restaurant and walked back to them. He

looked curiously at Hashknife and Sleepy, as he handed a telegram to Busted Hope.

"Came in a few minutes ago," he said, and walked out. Busted read the telegram aloud. It was from Painted Rock, and read:

GRAY HORSE STOLEN HERE LAST NIGHT AND MAY COME YOUR WAY. BRANDED XO ON RIGHT HIP AND JK ON LEFT SHOULDER. BLACK SADDLE WITH INITIALS JMK ON CANTLE. WATCH FOR THIS OUTFIT.

JIM CLOVIS

"Jim Clovis is the saloon keeper at Painted Rock," explained Busted. "That horse and saddle must belong to Jack Keys."

Hashknife smiled to himself. It was evident that Riley Waters did not walk back from Painted Rock.

"Where the hell did you go last night, Hashknife?" asked Busted.

"Well, I didn't go very far," smiled Hashknife.

Busted drew a deep breath, expelled it slowly and said, "I didn't think you was as yaller as they thought."

"Who said he was yaller?" demanded Sleepy quickly.

"Well, that's what folks was sayin', when Hashknife quit the job and pulled out," explained Busted.

"Some folks are goin' to get a poke in the nose," declared Sleepy.

Busted grinned. "Now that yo're back, what are yuh goin' to do?"

"Burke didn't take those horses away from the livery-stable yet, did he?" asked Hashknife, ignoring Busted's leading question.

"Not yet."

"I'm goin' up and get my gun out of that war-bag," said Sleepy. "Yuh never can tell when I might need one in this country. Sayin' that Hashknife's yaller—that's fightin' talk."

"Go get yore gun and meet me at Busted's office," said Hashknife. "Never mind what folks say."

OUT at the JHB ranch, Johnston Burke was having a talk with Doctor Chambers.

"Why, I suppose the boy could be moved," said the doctor. "He is far from well, but as long as he isn't jolted badly—yes, I believe it can be done, Mr. Burke. You say you want to leave tonight for San Francisco?"

"On that midnight train, Doctor," replied Burke. "I want to get both my son and daughter to a safe place."

"Yes, I—I believe I know how you feel about conditions here. I wonder if there is any trace of Sleepy Stevens. I understand that Hartley left for Tucson last night, following out orders of the White Masks."

Johnston Burke nodded grimly. "That is why we are leaving. I placed my faith in Hartley, but—well, it seems that he is only human. Then you believe Corey can stand the trip?"

"Yes, I would say he can."

"Good! We will leave at midnight. Perhaps you better come out to sort of superintend the moving of the patient."

"I shall be glad to be of any assistance, Mr. Burke. I will be here at about ten o'clock tonight."

Kay was in the bedroom, talking with Corey, when their father came in. It was evident that neither of them wanted to leave the ranch. Burke had never taken them into his confidence regarding the demands mailed to him, but now he told them all about it.

"But they surely wouldn't harm Corey and me," said Kay.

"Desperate men will do desperate deeds," replied Burke. "They captured Sleepy Stevens and threatened to kill him, unless Hartley left San Pablo Valley. In order

to save his partner, Hartley left last night for Tucson. You can see what they might do, when I refuse to meet their demands. Once in San Francisco, I do not believe they will hound me."

"The great Hashknife Hartley turned out to be a weak-sister, eh?" said Corey. "I could have done better myself."

Riley Waters came strolling in. Burke had already told him about their plans to leave Santa Lucia.

"You look fresh as a daisy," commented Corey.

"For a man who read as late as you did," added Burke. "I was so restless that I went into the patio about one o'clock, and there was still a light burning in your room, Riley."

"Oh," said Riley lightly, "it must have been nearly four o'clock, when I quit readin'. I don't need much sleep. I usually read late. What did the doctor say about movin' Corey?"

"He said it would be all right. In fact, he's coming out tonight to superintend the moving. Are you going to town, Riley?"

"Yeah, I thought I would."

"I'll ride in with you and get the tickets."

"All right. I wonder if there's any news about Sleepy Stevens."

"There wasn't, when the doctor left town."

Riley saddled the two horses, and they left the ranch. Kay went into the patio, where she curled up, on a bench in the shade and began reading a book, which she had just received. She had only been reading a few minutes when she saw a ragged little Mexican boy come into the patio, and hesitate near the rear door of the ranch-house.

She called to him and he came shyly toward her. She spoke to him in English,



but he shook his head and mumbled in Spanish, his big, brown eyes looking at her in a very dumb way.

"You want to find someone?" she asked. He shook his head, but reached inside his ragged shirt and drew out a folded piece of paper. Kay's name was penciled on the outside. She unfolded it and read:

Can I see you for a minute, before you go away?

Gale.

Kay smiled at the little boy and said, "Do you know Gale Fisher?"

He shook his head violently and said, "Sure."

"Well, that is definite," laughed Kay, and gave the boy a quarter. His eyes opened wide and he said, "*Gracias, Senorita—gracias,*" and legged his way out of the patio.

Kay got to her feet, but hesitated. She had been warned to never ride alone into the hills. But this was such a short ride, over an old trail, where few people ever rode. It was broad daylight, with the sun shining. She went to the house, slipped into overalls and shirt, and went to the stable, where she saddled her own horse. No one saw her leave the ranch.

"I'll be back long before dad and Riley return, and no one will ever know that I went away," she assured herself. "Anyway, I believe those dangers are mostly imagination."

XI

IT WAS afternoon, when Johnston Burke and Riley Waters reached Santa Lucia. They spent about fifteen minutes at the depot, and came back to the post-office, where Riley got the ranch mail. There was one letter for Johnston Burke, mailed at Painted Rock, and he recognized the writing at once.

It was another letter from Barney O'Keefe, and read:

Johnston Burke: At midnight tomor-

row night you will ride alone to your line camp, where Horan and McLeod were killed. Take \$10,000 with you and leave it inside the door of the shack. Then go home. Do not try to trap me, as you will be watched every minute by men who are helping me on this deal. Don't fail to follow these orders, as I will not warn you again, nor stand for any delay in the delivery.

You know my name.

Johnston Burke did not show the letter to Riley Waters. By midnight tomorrow night he would be far out of reach of Barney O'Keefe.

He put the letter in his pocket and said to Waters:

"We won't tell anyone about leaving here tonight, Riley. It would be better to slip away quietly, I believe."

"All right," nodded Riley. "It's nobody's business, anyway."

They were about to mount their horses, when Busted Hope called to them. He came hurrying, a broad smile on his face.

"Didja hear about it?" he asked.

"Hear about what?" queried Burke anxiously.

"Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens—they're back!"

"Back?" grunted Riley. "Why—what do you mean, Busted?"

"I found 'em in the restaurant, eatin' breakfast early this mornin'. You could have shoved me over with a toothpick. They didn't tell me a darned thing—just joked about bein' away. Sleepy said he didn't like the way the White Masks treated him, and that Hashknife didn't like the conductor of the train; so they both came back here."

"But I can't understand," protested Burke.

"Neither do I," agreed Busted. "I know blamed well that Hartley bought a ticket to Tucson. Mebbe he got off at Painted Rock. But if he did, how did he get back here. Why, I—well, I'll be dad-blamed!"

"What's the matter?" asked Burke.

"I just thought of somethin'—but it ain't important."

"Where are they now?" asked Riley Waters.

"I dunno, Riley. They saddled their horses a while ago and pulled out. I kinda thought they was headin' for yore place. Mebbe they went out to Fisher's place, I dunno."

"That's rather remarkable," said Burke, "to have both of them come back like that. I—I wonder if we misjudged Hartley yesterday."

"Stevens didn't say where he'd been, did he?" asked Riley.

"Not a word. But he seemed to think it was funny. Mebbe they'll be at yore ranch, when yuh get there."

"I hope they are," said Burke. "I'd like to know what happened."

As they rode away, Busted cuffed his hat over one eye and headed for the office.

"I'm shore dumb," he told himself. "Hashknife got off at Painted Rock, stole that horse from Jack Keys, and rode back here. That's jist as sure as fate—but I'll never try to prove it. And here I read that telegram out loud to them in that restaurant. I thought I seen a grin on Hashknife's wide mouth—daw-gone his hide."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy left Santa Lucia about noon, turned off the road to the JHB, and went to Root Fisher's ranch. Hashknife wanted to have a little talk with Gale, if possible, and they found her out in the yard, romping with a half-grown collie. She came timidly over to the rickety gate. Even in her cheap, calico dress, badly cut and badly designed, Gale Fisher was a pretty girl.

"Howdy, Miss Fisher," smiled Hashknife. "How's yore folks?"

"Fine, Mr. Hartley," she replied bashfully. "How are you-all?"

"Finer'n frawg-hair," Sleepy assured her.

She brushed some hair off her forehead

and said, "The Burke family are movin' back to San Francisco."

"They are?" queried Hashknife. "Kinda sudden, ain't it?"

"I guess so."

"Miss Fisher, this is sort of a queer question, but what is your father's first name?"

"Michael," she said, and then laughed. "Most everybody calls him Mike."

"Uh-huh. Nobody ever called him Alec, did they?"

"Why, I don't believe they did, Mr. Hartley."

"Uh-huh. You spoke about the Burke family leavin' the valley. When didja hear that?"

"Just a little while ago—maybe an hour. Kay Burke rode over to see me."

"Alone?" asked Hashknife quickly.

"Why, yes, she was alone. She's pretty, isn't she?"

"Shore—yeah, I reckon so. She came over to tell you good-bye?"

"Well, not exactly. You see, she said I wrote her a note, asking her to come here. But I never wrote her a note."

"Lova Mike!" breathed Hashknife. "Did she show you the note?"

"No, she couldn't find it."

Hashknife whirled his horse away from the gate, and with Sleepy close behind him, they galloped for the trail, which led to the JHB, while Gale, open-mouthed in astonishment at their sudden departure, learned on the old gate and watched them disappear.

Hashknife and Sleepy probably broke all records for a two-mile dash over a rocky trail, and swept in at the JHB. Chicory Smith, the old cook, was sitting on a bench beside the kitchen doorway, smoking his pipe, and looked with amazement upon the two riders, who dismounted near him.

"Whereabouts in hell did you two come from?" he demanded. "It shore don't fit in with what I heard about yuh."

"Chicory, where's Kay Burke?" asked Hashknife.

"Kay? Why—huh—I dunno. Must be around here, some'ers. Why?"

"Find her."

"Shore. I don't see—"

"See if she's here!"

"Shore. She might be in the house or in the patio. Wait here and I'll find her."

Hashknife sat down on the bench, rolled and lighted a cigarette. They could hear Chicory calling Kay's name. Finally he came back, a queer expression on his old face.

"Damn it, I can't raise her," he admitted.

"Now, what's gone wrong?"

"Where didja see her last?"

"I seen her go into the patio, jist after Burke and Riley started for Santa Lucia. She had a book with her. Most allus she sets at the far end on that bench to do her readin'. But you ain't told me what's wrong, Hartley."

HASHKNIFE led the way through the patio gate, and they went straight to that old bench. The book was there. Hashknife looked around carefully, searching the old flagstones. Halfway to the house he found the little square of paper, which the Mexican youngster had delivered to Kay. He examined it closely and put it in his pocket.

"Damn it to hell, Hartley — what's wrong?" wailed the old cook.

"Here's what's wrong, Chicory. Somebody wrote a decoy note, supposed to be from Gale Fisher, and gave it to Kay Burke. The White Masks have grabbed Kay—not over an hour ago, and between here and the Fisher ranch."

"Oh, m' Gawd—m' Gawd!" wailed Chicory. "What a mess! One of yuh better head for Santa Lucia and tell her father. Tell the sheriff!"

"Wait a minute. It's too late now. They can go a long ways in an hour. What was this we heard about the Burke family leavin' for Frisco?"

"That's right—they're—well, they was goin' tonight. They decided on it yester-

day—after you told Burke you was goin' away. Burke and Riley went in to get the tickets. My Gawd, what'll they say to this?"

Hashknife's shoulders sagged a little, as he puffed on his cigarette.

"It could be worse," he said. "They might have taken her a week ago."

"What's the difference?" asked Chicory huskily.

"Seven days," replied Hashknife soberly. "Yuh can learn a lot in seven days—if yuh look and listen."

Johnston Burke rode in alone and dismounted. He started to greet the two cowboys, but Chicory blurted out the information that Kay had been kidnaped. Burke's face turned white and he groped his way to the bench, where he sat down heavily.

"Is—is that true, Hartley?" he asked hoarsely.

"Get hold of yourself, Burke?" advised the tall cowboy. "I reckon it's true. A decoy note, supposed to be sent by Gale Fisher, took Kay over to Fisher's place. She disappeared on the way back. Where's Riley Waters?"

"Oh, he went past the Fisher ranch. Busted Hope thought you two might be there; so Riley went to see if you were. My God, what can we do?"

"Try to hang onto yore nerve, Mr. Burke."

Johnston Burke fumbled in his pockets and found the letter he had received at the postoffice. Hashknife read it carefully.

"Did you have the ten thousand to deliver?" he asked.

"Certainly not."

"Could you raise that much tomorrow?"

Burke shook his head wearily. "I don't know, Hartley. This has made me dizzy. You see, we were all going to leave here tonight. I got tickets today. Do you—do you think they will hurt Kay?"

"I'm afraid they might. They are tryin' to force yuh to pay that money. Since they wrote that letter and posted it in Painted

Rock, they've heard that you are leavin' here. Man, they've got yuh where the hair is awful short—unless we can bust up the gang before payoff time."

"Oh, they surely wouldn't hurt Kay. My God, she never hurt anybody, Hashknife."

"I never hurt anybody—much—and they shore took me," said Sleepy. "If Hashknife hadn't showed up right when he did, I'd be under a hundred feet of hard rock right now. Them fellers shore play for keeps."

"Well, what can be done?" asked Burke hoarsely. "We've got to do something very quickly, Hashknife. Maybe I can raise the money in Santa Lucia. But will that bring Kay back to me?"

"The thing to do," said Hashknife quietly, "is to play out what little string we've got—but go slow. Yuh can't crowd a bunch like that. Life ain't worth much to them—not when it might save their own necks."

"I wish Riley would hurry," said Burke. Hashknife looked quizzically at the owner of the JHB, who seemed to have shrunk and aged in a few minutes.

"Riley," said Hashknife, "is probably hurryin'. Get on yore bronc, and we'll head for town."

"Wait a minute." Burke called to Chicory. "When Riley comes, tell him to join us in town."

"All right, Mr. Burke—and good luck to yuh."

"And, Chicory," added Hashknife, "when Buster Allen shows up, tell him to come right to Santa Lucia and join us."

"Mebbe I'll come, too," said Chicory. "It don't look like I'd have anybody for supper t'night."

AS THE three men rode away from the ranch, Johnston Burke said:

"This will break up Riley Waters; he wants to marry Kay."

"Yeah, I expect he'll be worryin' quite a lot, Mr. Burke."

"You—you say that rather queerly, Hashknife."

"Oh, I'm just queer sometimes, I reckon."

As they rode toward Santa Lucia, Hashknife was singing softly:

"Take me back where the dogies are
sleepin',

Under a Montana moon;
Back to a girl that I left all alone,
Thinkin' I'd come back there soon.

But the years slipped away
And my hair turned to gray,
And I've traveled from Maine to Rangoon,
But I've allus been true to a girl I once
knew,

Under a Montana moon."

Hashknife's voice was not very strong nor melodious, and he did not even seem to realize that he was singing. Johnston Burke looked queerly at him, as though wondering why anyone could sing at a time like this. But it seemed to impress Sleepy. He drew a deep breath, grinned to himself and fumbled for the makings of a cigarette. Only at rare times did Hashknife Hartley break into song—and Sleepy knew that it meant they were nearing the end of the job.

"There's times when I wouldn't mind bein' a coyote," he remarked.

"What are you talking about?" asked Johnston Burke.

"Nothin' much," replied Sleepy, "except that I have a feelin' that the coyotes of San Pablo Valley are about to get a feed."

They drew up at the sheriff's office, where Busted stood in the doorway. In a few words Hashknife told him what had happened. Busted tried to assure Johnston Burke that everything would be all right, but merely stammered over a few words, shook his head helplessly, and then looked to Hashknife for assistance.

"We — we might go some place," he finally said. "I dunno where."

Hashknife studied the horses at the Eureka hitchrack. Among them was Moses the Hermit's old gray mule.

"Pelley and Dalton haven't been in today, have they?" he asked.

"I ain't seen 'em," replied Busted. "Where's Riley Waters?"

"He will join us soon," replied Burke. "Maybe he can suggest something to do."

"What about Root Fisher and his bunch?" queried Busted. "Yuh say she was decoyed over to their place."

"And Corey was shot in their house," added Burke.

"Jimmy and the old man just came in ahead of you fellers," said Busted. "They are at the general store."

HASHKNIFE snapped his cigarette into the street and turned to Busted.

"Arrest the two Fishers and put 'em in jail," he said. "We need a nest-egg or two right now. Hold 'em on suspicion, Busted."

"Well, I—I—do yuh think they done it, Hashknife?" faltered Busted.

"The finger of suspicion better start pointin' at somebody," replied Hashknife. "Go ahead, Busted."

The arrest of Root Fisher and his son was easily accomplished. Busted brought them down to the jail, followed by several men, who had seen the arrest. Protesting their innocence and ignorance of any wrong-doing, they entered a cell in the jail behind the office, while the information that Kay Burke was missing, and that Root Fisher and his son were charged with kidnaping, spread quickly.

Busted Hope took his horse, together with the two ridden by Hashknife and Sleepy, back to his little stable behind the jail.

It seemed that the sheriff's office was willing to rest on its laurels. Speedy Singleton came to the office later, worried over town gossip.

"More rope talk," he told Busted. "Don't like it myself. Prob'ly be a lot of boys in from the mines this evenin'. Better take

care of them two prisoners—guard 'em mighty close."

"Don't worry, Speedy," assured Busted.

"Where's Hartley and Stevens?"

"Oh they're out some'ers, Speedy."

As a matter of fact, Hashknife and Sleepy had quietly left Santa Lucia and were on their way out to Pelley and Dalton's mine; not on the road, but on a wide circle that would bring them in from an opposite direction. It made for slow traveling, but they finally reached a spot where they could look the place over.

Crouched in the brush on the side of a hill, they watched the place for an hour, but there was no sign of life. From where they sat they could see the old Coyote tunnel, the portal caved in, fresh rock and debris spewed out on the old dump.

"I reckon the boys have pulled out," said Hashknife.

"Yuh don't think they've hidden Kay Burke around here?"

"Figurin' that they've got some brains—no," replied Hashknife. "This is the first place we'd search, after what happened last night. But I just wanted to be sure that the two boys had left here. We'll take a closer look, anyway."

They rode down to the cabin, kicked the door open and searched the interior. Apparently Pelley and Dalton had taken little with them, as the place seemed undisturbed. A half-empty bottle of whiskey was on the table, together with two tin cups.

"They needed some Dutch courage, before they pulled out," laughed Hashknife.

"But where do yuh reckon they went?" asked Sleepy. "I'd hate to lose a chance to notch a sight on them dry-gulchers."

Hashknife shook his head. "*Quien sabe?*" he replied. "Mebbe they've hit for safer spots—but my hunch is that they haven't—yet. C'mon."

Their wagon was under a shed, but the stable was empty, except for a pair of heavy harness, hanging on pegs. The saddle pegs were also empty.

"Turned their wagon team loose, and

rode away on horseback," said Hashknife. "Well, we've got to take a chance that they don't know they're licked. Keep yore eyes open, pardner—yuh never can tell about men."

IT WAS nearly suppertime, when they left their horses in Busted's stable and walked around to the office, where they found Busted, Burke, and Allen. Buster Allen just got in from the ranch, and had informed them that Riley Waters was missing.

"It kinda looks like they've kidnaped Riley Waters, too, Hashknife," said Busted. "Chicory told Buster that Riley never showed up. Buster went past the Fisher ranch, but didn't see him anywhere."

"Why on earth would they steal Riley?" asked Burke.

"Mebbe they're fond of knick-knacks," smiled Hashknife. "I knowed a feller oncet that stole a loaf of fence-posts, but took 'em back, when he discovered that they wasn't any good without the post-holes."

"Ain't nobody that dumb," declared Busted, but added, "yuh mean they might bring Riley back, when they find out they can't use him?"

"It all depends on what they wanted to use him for, Busted."

"Damn it, Hartley, can't we get some action?" queried Johnston Burke. "You don't seem to realize that my daughter is missing. You admit that she is in grave danger—but you don't do anything about it."

"Speedy Singleton is worried over the Fishers," said Busted. "He's afraid of a lynchin', when the boys gather around tonight."

"Yeah, I know," nodded Hashknife. He walked to the doorway, and Busted followed him. The hitchrack at the Eureka was deserted.

"The boys are spreadin' the news," remarked Busted. Hashknife whispered to Busted, who looked queerly at him.

"All right," he said quietly. "But you do the damndest things."

Speedy Singleton guarded the jail, while the rest of them ate their supper. It was dark when they came back to the office. Johnston Burke and Buster Allen mounted their horses and rode out of town, apparently going home. Hashknife and Sleepy went to the hotel, walked out the rear exit and joined Busted at the stable behind the jail. Busted had locked himself in the office, but came out the rear doorway.

The three of them circled the town, where they found Burke and Allen a short distance out of it. Except for Hashknife and Sleepy, Busted was the only one who knew where they were going; and without a word he assumed the lead.

THERE was little light, and no marked trail. They merely strung out in single-file and played follow-the-leader. It seemed to all of them that Busted Hope searched out the roughest country in San Pablo Valley to lead them over. But Busted Hope knew the country better than any of them, and he never hesitated.

Higher they went, over rocks, through thickets of pinyon-pine and juniper, until, after what seemed hours of hard traveling, Busted drew rein among some scrub oaks, and dismounted.

"Keep quiet," he warned them in a husky whisper. "That shack ain't more'n a hundred yards or so down the hill."

"Whose shack?" whispered Johnston Burke.

"Moses the Hermit," replied Hashknife.

"Ain't a damn light showin'," declared Busted. "Hartley, I'm scared we're on the wrong track."

"It's the only track there is," replied Hashknife. "No more talkin'—and watch where yuh step. Go slow."

While there was no light showing from the outside, there was a light on the inside of that shack. The old lantern on a rough table was sufficient to illuminate the room and show the three men—Riley Waters,

Rance Pelley and Mack Dalton. Riley was on his knees at the edge of a hole in the floor, where several pieces of the flooring—rough-hewn puncheon—had been moved aside. Riley Waters' face was white and tense in the lantern-light. Two rifles were lying across the table.

A voice called from down in the hole, and Riley leaned down to help Moses the Hermit bring out a small wooden box. Then the hermit drew himself out of the hole and got slowly to his feet. His face was dusty and there was dust and cobwebs on his huge, white beard.

"That's her," he grunted huskily. "Put it on the table."

"That's the stuff!" exclaimed Pelley. "Open her up, and we'll make the split."

"And the sooner the better it'll hit me," growled Dalton. "I want to get t' hell out of here. After what happened last night—"

"You laughed at me," said Moses. "You should have blasted that old tunnel as soon as yuh put him in there."

"That damn Hartley must be a magician," growled Pelley, glancing at the door.

"Don't worry about him," said Waters nervously. "They've got Root Fisher and his Injun kid in jail. That'll hold 'em for a while. This is the last place they'd go."

"Yeah?" snarled Pelley. "What about that note in the tin can? You say you wrote N. G. on the paper—and Moses saw an O. K."

"They was up here that day. I'll bet they switched the paper on yuh. Don't try to tell me they don't know anythin'. Open that box and let's split the money. Me and Mack are goin' straight over the hill."

Moses the Hermit removed the top from the box, disclosing a large quantity of gold, silver and currency.

"How do we split?" asked Riley Waters.

"Four ways," replied Moses.

"Like hell!" snapped Pelley. "Riley ain't entitled to a fourth. Damn it, we done the work. He never was a White Mask; so he ain't entitled to any fourth of the money."

"You'd have got a hell of a long ways without me, Pelley," said Riley.

"He gets a fourth," declared Moses firmly. "I'm the boss of—"

"Hold it!" snapped Dalton, who had stepped back, his heavy Colt flashing out of his holster. Pelley's gun came out, too, swinging from Moses to Riley Waters. Neither man made a move.

"Jist for that," said Pelley tensely, "there ain't goin' to be any split, gents. Take the box and dump it into a sack, Mack. I'll hold these two, until yuh get it tied on the saddle. You poor fools, didja think we ever meant to split with yuh?"

"We'll get yuh for this, Pelley," said Waters. "You won't live to spend that money."

"Well, you won't live to see us spend it," replied Pelley. "I know all about this place. Moses told us one night that there's enough dynamite panted here to blow down this mountain. You poor fools, you planted it, so yuh can't blame us for what yuh harvest. Unbar that door, Mack, and tie that money on the horses. Then we'll tie up these jaspers, and see where old Whiskers keeps his blastin'-battery."

BUT Moses the Hermit was not going to give up without a struggle. As Mack Dalton flung open the door, and Pelley's eyes were off him for a moment, Moses fairly hurled the table against Pelley's middle. The force of it knocked Pelley backwards, his gun-hand flew up, and both Moses and Riley Waters went to the floor, clawing for their guns.

Mack Dalton dropped the money and whirled, gun in hand. Shots blasted at him from the floor, and he sagged against the doorway, shooting wildly. Rance Pelley was sagged against the wall, working his gun as fast as possible, shot to ribbons, as Moses the Hermit shot at him from back of the upset table.

Mack Dalton slid slowly forward and sideways, sprawling in the doorway, while Rance Pelley slumped to a sitting position,

his empty gun at full cock, still gripped in his right hand. The shack was full of powder smoke, which eddied, cloud-like around the lantern.

Choking in the fumes, Moses and Riley got slowly to their feet. The hermit had been hit, but not dangerously. Moses turned his head and looked at the doorway. Screaming a curse, he threw up his gun. Hashknife Hartley was in the doorway, crouched low, looking at him. And before Moses could level his gun, flame spat from the doorway, and the bullet knocked the bearded man back across the upended table, flat on his back.

And before Hashknife could shift to Riley Waters, the lithe, handsome foreman of the JHB, leaped into the air and dropped feet first into the hole in the floor, disappearing from view. Sleepy and Busted ran in beside Hashknife, with Johnston Burke and Buster Allen close behind.

Sleepy and Busted stepped over the body of Mack Dalton and came inside. Moses the Hermit had not moved, since Hashknife's bullet had knocked him backwards. Rance Pelley was dead, with at least six bullets in the upper part of his body.

"My God, what a shambles!" exclaimed Johnston Burke.

Sleepy stepped over beside the hole, and a bullet splintered the pole flooring at his feet.

"Keep back, damn yuh!" snarled Riley Waters' voice. "I'll kill the first man I can see."

"Riley!" called Burke. "Riley, this is Burke."

"Yeah, I know," replied Riley. "But keep back. I'd as soon kill you as anybody else."

"The man must be mad!" exclaimed Burke.

"Yeah, and if I was in his place, I'd be kinda mad, too," said Sleepy.

"Is—is Kay Burke down there?" asked Busted anxiously.

"Yo're damn right, she is!" yelled Riley. "But if any of yuh try to come down here,

I'll blow everybody to hell. There's enough powder here to blow down a mountain—and if anythin' happens, I'll touch it off."

"Where's Hashknife?" whispered Busted.

Sleepy shook his head and signaled Busted to silence.

"My God, the whole world seems to have gone wrong," said Burke helplessly. "Riley—of all men."

"Listen to me!" yelled Riley. "Do yuh hear me?"

"Go ahead," replied Busted. "What's on yore cracked mind, Riley?"

"I'll show yuh. Listen to this, will yuh? I've got the blastin' battery, and it's all hooked up to give yuh a free trip to hell. Back up away from that hole, 'cause I'm comin' up. I've got that battery, and she's ready to spark. If yuh try to shoot me, I'll live long enough to make the contact—and we'll all go to hell together. Stand back, all of yuh. I've got plenty wire; so back up and keep yore hands off yore guns."

REALIZING that he held the upper hand, at least for the moment, the four men backed away from the hole. Riley Waters, his face smudged with dirt, his hair glistening with cobwebs, crawled out of the hole, the blasting battery clutched in his arms. His face was the color of putty, except for the dust smudges, but his eyes glittered insanely. He got to his feet and began backing slowly toward the doorway, drawing the two strands of fine wire behind him.

"Smart, eh?" he gloated. "Damn yuh, I've outsmarted all of yuh. I've got a fast horse out there in the brush, the money is in a sack outside the door, where that fool of a Dalton dropped it—and none of yuh will ever foller my trail. I'll blow up all my bridges behind me. Ha, ha, ha! That's a good one. Don't move! If I have to go with yuh, I'll go."

Riley Waters was at the doorway, starting to lift a foot in order to clear the body

of Mack Dalton, when Sleepy saw something that the rest did not see. Swiftly he drew his gun, twisted away from the wall, and sent a bullet crashing into the backing Waters. Again the big Colt thundered in the small shack, and Riley Waters went backward over Dalton's body, his feet flailing in the air.

"My God!" yelled Busted. "He didn't shoot that battery!"

Sleepy, visibly shaken, but with a grin, pointed toward the hole in the floor.

"The wire's busted," he said. "I saw the loose ends come out of the hole."

Hashknife's dusty face appeared over the edge of the twisted floor poles, and looked around.

"I busted 'em," he said dryly. "They don't shoot so good that way."

"Kay!" yelled Johnston Burke, coming out of his trance.

"Yeah, she's all right," assured Hashknife. "I had to stop that blast first, Mr. Burke. I'll bring her up."

"How in hell did you get down in there?" asked Busted.

"Out in the stable. When Riley dived down there, I figured there was another hole in the stable; so I went down to stop him. But mebbe he didn't know about it, 'cause he took the hard way out of the situation. But I got down there in time to cut the wires; so it's all right."

They had Kay out of there in a few minutes. She was little the worse for her experience, but dazed and excited. Riley was not dead. They took him in to the lantern light, and Allen brought in the money. Riley seemed to know that he was going out fast.

"Sorry, Kay," he whispered. "Glad yuh wasn't hurt."

"Why did you do all this, Riley?" asked Burke.

"Ask Hartley—he seems to know everythin'," whispered Riley weakly.

"Riley, you shot Corey Burke because he tried to kiss Gale Fisher, didn't yuh?" asked Hashknife. "And then yuh killed

the sheriff 'cause you was afraid Gale might tell him she knew you shot Corey."

"Gale is my wife, Hartley. We were married a year ago in Buena Vista. I warned Corey to keep away from her."

"Moses, Pelley and Dalton were the White Masks," said Hashknife. "I figured they wore the long, white masks to cover Moses' beard. There's a woman's shoe in the cellar. They made tracks with it to kinda confuse things. But there's still Barney O'Keefe to account for, Riley. He don't exist, does he?"

"No," whispered Riley. "He died a few days after he was released from the penitentiary. Moses the Hermit was Alec O'Keefe, his brother. They were both uncles of mine. Alec knew the story, so we tried to force Burke to pay the money."

"That's cleared up," said Hashknife. "You were at the line camp, when I had to shoot Steve McLeod. Why did you kill Pat Horan, when he came back that evenin', Riley?"

"He knew too much—and was pullin' out on me. You see—it's—a—tough——"

HASHKNIFE got slowly to his feet, looking down at Riley Waters.

"Yeah, it's tough, Riley," he said quietly, "but we usually cut our own trails. You played out the string—to the end."

"But I don't understand," complained Johnston Burke. "How could he do all these things without us knowing he was away. Why, he—"

"Riley Waters," said Hashknife, "was a heavy reader—at night. You often saw a lamp burnin' late in his room. But you never stopped to realize that he could go in and out of his room, down that balcony post, leavin' a light burnin'. He had lots of books—Riley did."

They fastened the doors, leaving the bodies in the house, and rode down the trail to Santa Lucia. There was a crowd around the jail, just milling around, as the cavalcade arrived. Speedy Singleton came to Busted Hope, all out of breath.

"They smashed down the jail doors," he told Busted. "I tried to stop 'em, but it wasn't no use. And there wasn't a damn soul in the jail."

"Oh," replied Busted, "Hashknife Hartley asked me to release the two Fishers, before we left town this evenin'."

Word of the battle spread swiftly. Busted Hope made the first long speech of his life in the Eureka, telling them what had happened. Over in the hotel lobby, Johnston Burke, Kay Burke and Buster Allen grouped, with Hashknife and Sleepy.

"Hartley, you know how we feel," said Johnston Burke. "Money and thanks are yours. But I need two good men to run the JHB—and salary is no object. How about it?"

Hashknife and Sleepy looked at each other for several moments. Then Hashknife turned back to Johnston Burke.

"No, I don't reckon so, Mr. Burke. We appreciate yore offer. But yuh see, me and Sleepy have spent years and years, jist—well, jist lookin' and wonderin'—and we'll prob'ly spend a lot more years—jist lookin' and wonderin'. Yuh see how it is, don'tcha?"

"Just looking and wondering?" queried Johnston Burke. "No, I do not believe I understand. Looking and wondering at what, Hashknife?"

"Well, I'll tell yuh, it's jist—it's kinda hard to explain—but we're always lookin' at a hill—and wonderin' what's on the other side."

"I—I believe I understand," said Kay quietly.

"Thank yuh, Kay," said Hashknife.

"But isn't there anything else I can do for you?" asked Burke.

"Well," replied Sleepy soberly, "when yuh write to Bob Marsh, you might tell him how hard we tried to buy cows—and what a liar he turned out to be. No, meb-be yuh better let me write him, 'cause I talk a language he'll understand."

The midnight passenger answered the flag and ground to a stop. There were no other people at the depot, except the two cowboys, who came in through the vestibule of the smoker, carrying their war-bags. With a sigh of relief they placed the bags on the luggage rack, sat down and began rolling cigarettes. The conductor came through, stopped beside their seat and looked down at them. It was the same conductor who had stopped the train for Hashknife. They looked up at him and grinned widely.

"This train," said the conductor sternly, "does not stop at Painted Rock."

"For that good news," said Hashknife soberly, "we both thank yuh."



LOST—A PET HATE

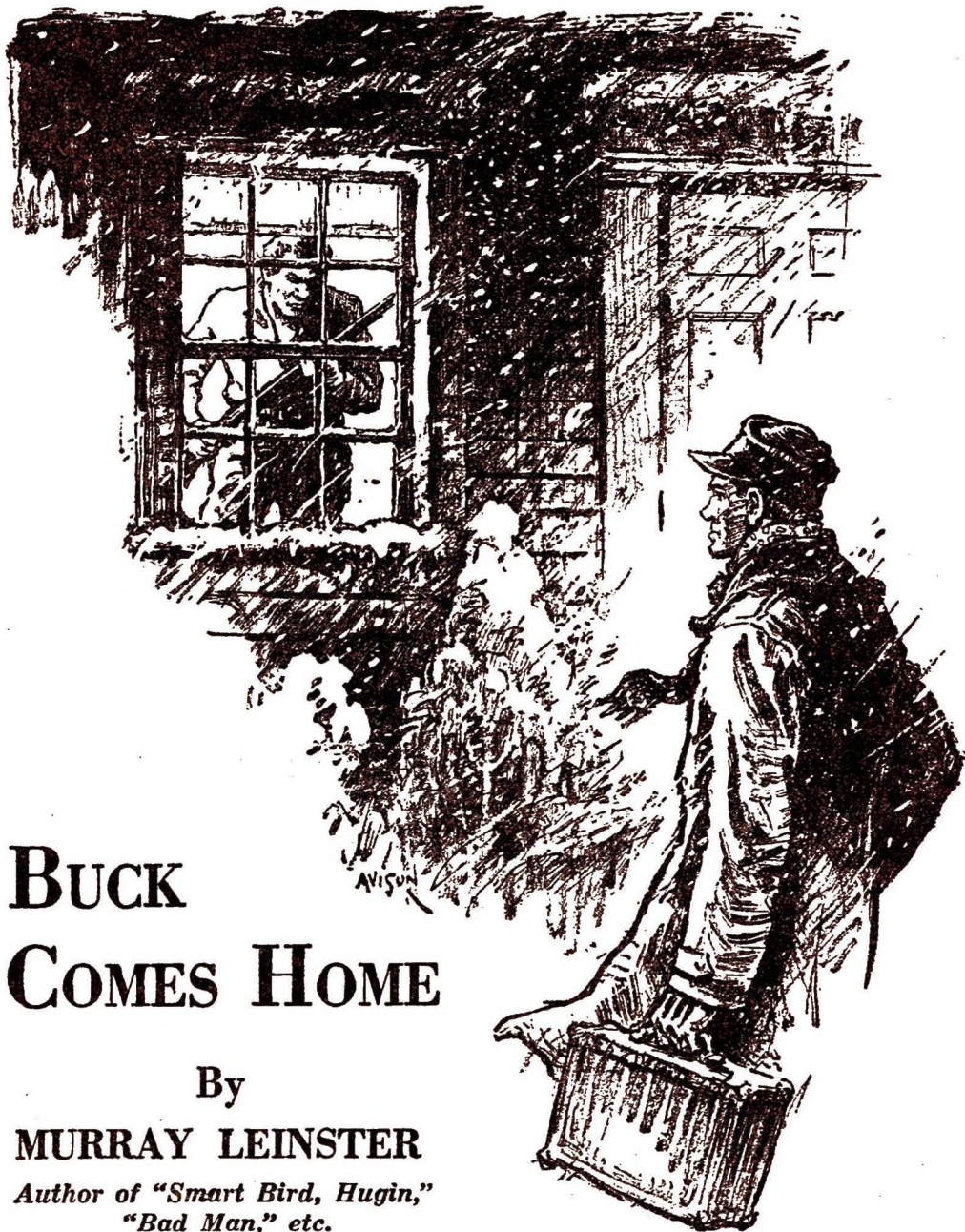
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*Buck Was a Door-to-Door Salesman; and He Got Amazing
Proof of the Strength of His Products*



BUCK COMES HOME

By

MURRAY LEINSTER

*Author of "Smart Bird, Hugin,"
"Bad Man," etc.*

MUFFLED up to his ears, Buck Hansford drove homeward through the early darkness. He steered the second-hand light-delivery truck with a practised hand along a road that was all hard-packed snow and icy

rutts. And as he drove, he thought of that poor devil of a criminal who'd got, they said, almost fifty miles away from the prison where he'd been serving a life sentence, only to be sighted and hunted savagely all day yesterday and this morning. He couldn't get much farther, of course.

Not in weather like this. He couldn't get shelter, and it was six below zero. Probably starving and certainly freezing. He'd die of cold if they didn't catch him. Perhaps he'd rather die of cold than go back. Even though a murderer, Buck felt sorry for him.

The headlights showed fences glittering with frosty rime. Now and again, where the road curved, the headlight beams slipped between fence-rails and swept across vast expanses of luminous snow. Here and there were small pine-woods. Now and again minor dippings in the road. Once a narrow bridge. The road was slippery. Very slippery, but he had his tires slack. Better than chains, any day. The stars were very vivid. It wasn't really dark. Anybody by the side of the road—that hunted convict, if he hid behind a frost-etched bush—anybody could read the home-painted "HOPKINS PRODUCTS" sign on the side of the truck.

Buck tried to put the escaped murderer out of his mind. He'd other and more cheerful things to think about. He wasn't a hunted man, fighting hard for a chance to live. He'd had to fight, once, for his life. He'd been in a sanitarium, in a bed, for a long time. Then he knew what the love of life could be. He'd never forget it. That was why he could feel sorry—But he was out, now. More, making a go of things, selling soap and pancake syrup and home remedies and chick starter and cosmetics to farm-wives at their very doors. Not getting rich, but getting by. Better than that—perhaps even more important than getting by—not even coughing any more. Not a single cough for nearly a month. The climate had something to do with it. The weather, anyhow. Six below zero was cold! But Martha did more than the weather. Sticking. For richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, in sickness and in health. Buck knew what the love of life could be! He had it.

His mouth twisted in a sort of embarrassed grin underneath the muffler about

his chin. He began to think of what he'd have to tell Martha when he got home. A repeat-order on that laundry soap number from the cranky woman in the yellow house. Three bottles of stomach tonic to the deacon's family. Twenty percent of alcohol didn't have anything to do with it. Four repeat orders for the pancake syrup. He could always sell that. A life-saver. Biggest-selling article he carried in the truck. The weather forecast was for still colder weather tomorrow. That poor devil trying to run away in weather like this, with men hunting him—

HIS own lane. He turned into it. The light in the house, a long way ahead. The headlights, bobbing up and down as the ruts dictated, showed the tracks he'd made when he'd left that morning. Buck grinned again. Lonely out here for Martha, but she didn't seem to care since he was getting stronger all the time. Why, he'd be well before long. And it was Martha who'd done it.

He drove into the yard, still grinning under the muffler about his chin. He shut off the motor and the headlights. He took his sample-case—he carried his order-book in it too—and got out of the car. He went to the front door. It was a tradition that when he came home he should come to the front door and ask for the lady of the house. A silly tradition, but all proper families have such things.

He rang the bell, grinning to himself. His breath was a cloud of vapor about him. He stamped his feet as he waited. He could see the light shining on the glass in the front door. Frosted inside. Six below zero, and due to get colder tonight. Martha'd come to the door and he'd say "Is-this-the-lady-of-the-house? I'm-the-Hopkins-Products-man." And she'd smile at him and say, "Won't you come in?" And he'd be home, with Martha smiling up at him and lifting her lips to be kissed.

He stamped his feet and rang again. Then he heard footsteps. On the instant

his heart turned an odd tumble-sault. That wasn't Martha. Maybe something had happened and the neighbors——

A shadow fell on the frost-filmed glass in the front door. It wasn't Martha. It was a man. Squat; broad-shouldered; with a close-cropped head. The shadow was enlarged and distorted by the man's nearness to the light. As he came toward the door the shadow grew more credible. And then Buck saw a rod-like thing—the end of it—the man carried. It was Buck's shotgun.

Cropped hair. Shotgun. Man. In his house. Martha. The escaped murderer he'd been feeling sorry for! Buck's heart stopped stock-still.

He felt suddenly as if there were something pressing tightly and inexorably upon his body, squeezing it dry of blood, and upon his lungs, forcing them utterly empty and as if the same thing clamped upon his brain with a brutal pressure and crushed it so that he could not think at all; could only feel a paralyzing horror. He was terrified, but it did not even occur to him to think of himself.

The man stopped. There was a murmur of voices. One voice. Deep and furtive and desperate. The door opened. Martha opened it. Buck could not see her face clearly in the shadow of the porch, even with the reflection of starlight from the snow. But he saw the light striking on her head from behind. Her honey colored hair was all in place. She hadn't struggled——

She said hoarsely—though she must have known him— "What is it?"

And Buck's brain reeled suddenly with the release of horror and the substitution of a mere awful terror for it.

"Is — is - this - the - lady - of - the - house?" said Buck insanely. "I'm - the - Hopkins - Products - man - and - I'd - like - to - show - you - how - you - can - save - money - on - face - and - laundry - soaps - pancake - syrup - cosmetics - and - custom-ary - home - remedies——"

Then he choked. He didn't have a gun. The man behind the door had his shotgun. That was the only weapon they owned.

Martha caught her breath. She said more hoarsely still:

"I'm—I'm not interested tonight. You'll have to go on and try the neighbors."

SHE was hoping he'd seen the shadow on the door. She wanted him to go away and get help. Neighbors. Leaving her there. With a murderer. But he wouldn't do it. Not Martha. He couldn't.

"I—I-assure-you-madam," said Buck desperately, "that-you-make-a-great-mis-mistake - if - you don't - even - consider - my - products. I - have - not - only - home - remedies - but - chick - starters - and - a - valuable - line——"

His hand on the handle of the sample-case was clenched so tightly that it hurt. He knew his face was ashen. But those things were in the back of his mind. The whole fore-front of his consciousness was terror; terror for Martha.

The man behind the door said:

"Let 'im in."

Buck pushed forward. He was inside. Martha caught her breath in a small gasp which was almost a cry. She touched his arm in an agonized warning to caution. The door closed behind him.

"I'm just eatin' my supper," said the man heavily. His eyes were hard and suspicious. He had on some of Buck's clothes. They were too small for him. "Come on back an' spiel your stuff. Come back in the kitchen. We're settin' back there."

Martha went first, trembling. She was shockingly white. Buck saw it as they passed through the dining-room. Her eyes were terror-filled. Buck felt himself shaking, but his knees weren't weak. Every muscle was tense; taut as wire. The man came last, carrying the shotgun. He was squat and broad shouldered and hugely muscled. Buck had come out here to try to get strong again, but he'd never been as strong as this man.

In the kitchen. A plate on the table. The savory smell of food in the air. Buck understood. The man had been ravenous—starving—when he came to the house. He'd been half frozen and desperate. He'd craved warmth and food more than anything else in the world. Especially food. He'd been prepared to kill for food and warmth—as he had killed for freedom and as before that he'd killed for rage.

He sat down, with the shotgun beside him.

"There's a guy loose from the pen," he said harshly. "That's why I've got the gun handy."

He stuffed his mouth with food again. He ate ferociously, cramming his jaws with foodstuffs. He seemed, for an instant, almost to forget Buck and Martha in the room. Martha stood by the wall, her hand to her throat, looking terrifiedly at Buck. He stood stock-still, ashen-white, his sample-case clutched tightly.

Silence, save for the ravenous noises the man made in eating. The silence grew strained. The man looked up sharply, suspicion flaring in his eyes.

"What's th' idea?" he demanded harshly. "You—"

Buck moved stiffly to open the sample-case. He had no plan. He was still stunned, still dazed by his terror for Martha. There must be some way to secure her safety. But he knew with absolute surety that there could be no compromise with this man. A little while back he had felt sorry for him. He'd felt that he could sympathize with his love for life. Buck had that, too. But the man could not make a bargain. He could not believe in any promise of assistance or of silence for his escape. He had been sent to prison for murder. In getting out of the prison he had killed again. Now he would have to kill yet again and again, as long as anyone could suspect him of being a killer. It was not possible for him to trust any other man, because no other man could possibly have reason for anything but the breaking

of faith with him. And that would mean his death or at the least his return to the prison he had killed to be free from.

"The-lady," said Buck, through stiff lips, "will - no - doubt - be - interested - in - this - laundry - soap - combination—"

He went on like an automaton, reciting the sales-talk he used to get customers started asking questions. When they began to ask questions, they were ready to buy.



THE man listened suspiciously. He seemed to be thinking grimly of something else. Buck knew what it was. Buck had driven in a car. That car could be a means of flight for the murderer. But he could not leave two people alive behind him to tell that he was driving away in a second-hand light-delivery truck with "HOPKINS PRODUCTS" home-lettered on its sides. He must kill Buck. He could not help it. Not to kill him would mean his own death. And he had to kill Martha, too. There was no conceivable way to avoid it—if he wanted to live.

Still no plan. Buck's brain seemed to spin in a dizzy circle, trying desperately to think of a way out, but going over and over the same things. He didn't hate the murderer. He'd felt sorry for him. But he had to save Martha, and it looked like an impossibility. He had no weapon but the shotgun beside the man's place at the table. No other weapon. Nothing!

Time. Gain time to think. Somehow gain time to figure out a way to get the gun or disable it. No. That wouldn't do any good. Buck was stronger than he had been, but he wasn't back to normal. He

could never have fought this man on equal terms. And however desperate he might be, the man was no less desperate. A struggle would be useless. Suicide. He couldn't even hope to keep the man busy long enough for Martha to grab the gun and kill him. Even if she'd think of it—

"You'd - be - surprised - how - many - of - my - customers," babbled Buck, "find-Hopkins - Products - indispensable. Their-reputation - has - preceded - me - so - that - I - find - myself - welcomed - wherever - I - go—"

The man said, through a mouthful of food:

"Y'sell a lotta stuff, hey?"

"My - products - are - in - demand - everywhere," said Buck. His throat ached with sheer strain. He swallowed, and it hurt. "I have a map here," he said more slowly, to gain more time, "a map that shows my customers scattered over three counties, buying everything from chick-starter to pancake syrup. But I could go anywhere in three states and the name on my car would be proof that I was trustworthy and my goods full value."

The man's eyes grew shrewd. He was getting an idea. Picturing himself posing as a salesman—after he'd disposed of Buck.

"Of course," said Buck, "I have to know my wares, but—"

His voice went on. Now and again it stopped. His throat was dry. He wet his lips and started again. Martha stood in a frozen terror—for him—and did not move a muscle. He did not dare to look at her. The man wolfed his food and now and again asked questions. Shrewd questions. He was planning the thing. Kill Buck and Martha. Take the truck. Drive hard, at first. Then at leisure and openly, perhaps selling goods until he was so far away that no one would even have heard of a murderer's escape from the pen. Safety. Liberty.

Buck heard his own voice going on endlessly, while his mind went round

and round like a squirrel in a cage. Disable the man. Disable the gun. No, that wouldn't do any good. Disable man and gun together. With an extraordinary irony, Buck's mind dwelt briefly on the pancake syrup. When he couldn't sell anything else, he could always sell that. He'd told Martha it was a life-saver. He needed a life-saver now. In earnest. Presently the murderer would have the shotgun raised and aimed at him. He would be pulling the trigger. Pulling it with a grimly intent look on his face. Not hatred. He might even feel sorry for Buck. But he couldn't help it. It was a thing he had to do if he was to keep on living. But suddenly Buck, envisioning the spout of flame that should be the last thing on earth he ever saw; suddenly Buck saw something else.

The man said, with his mouth full:

"Sounds like a easy livin' you' got." His voice was heavy. It was ominous. It was strangely hopeful. Hopeful!

Buck wet his lips.

"I've got something for everybody to buy, for man or woman, boy or girl, beast or human." His voice trembled, and he steadied it desperately. "I've been talking about soaps and powders and things like that for the lady. For you, now, there's the most popular article I carry in my sample-case—"

He pulled out the life-saver. The pancake syrup.

"You've heard of somebody being slow as molasses in winter time. Here's a compound of molasses with maple syrup that's just the right blend. And it's full of sugar-energy. Molasses may be slow in the winter-time, but the man who's full of molasses and pancakes in the morning isn't slow. He's got energy. He's had a breakfast that tastes good enough to get up for and stays with him besides. Here! I'll like you just to smell this syrup. If it doesn't give you an appetite just to smell it—"

He started to open it. Patented cover. Tricky gadget. Half the time it didn't

work. He prayed, internally, as he worked at the thing. The cover came off. Thick, dark, glistening stuff within.

"Here, just a whiff of it—"

He tilted it. Stiff. Thick. It didn't want to roll, even in the can. It had to. Please, God, make it—

"Smell," said Buck through stiff lips, but with a professional smile upon his face. The smile was false, but this man would never know. He'd think all house-to-house salesmen were like this. Noticing the mannerism, perhaps, for use after he'd killed Buck and Martha and was on the road away from danger into safety. "Yes, sir, smell it!" said Buck. "It's like maple syrup, but it's better—"

The man sniffed. Martha made a queer sound. Buck turned his head. He stared at his wife.

"What's the matter with the lady?" he asked as if surprised at Martha's deadly pallor. "She looks like she's sick!"

The man turned his head. Martha was ashen. At the flaring suspicion in the murderer's eyes. Martha's mouth worked in an agony of terror. But it was terror for Buck. He stood there, the can of thick syrup extended over the table to the murderer. He stared at her, and his own face went whiter than it had been. His arm stayed rigidly extended. The syrup rolled slowly, stickily, to the lip of the can. Over it. It dripped down on the table-cloth. His hand stirred. On the shotgun leaning against the table by the man's place. The syrup dripped on the muzzle. On both muzzles. A thick, sticky stream of it.

"What's th' matter with you?" demanded the man harshly, of Martha.

"I'm—all right," gasped Martha. Her hand went to her throat. "I'm quite—all—"

She swayed, and leaned against the wall. The man's eyes darted to Buck. Ominous, murderous suspicion flamed in his eyes. Buck stood frozen, his arm extended, the thick syrup spilling slowly from its container.

"Look here!" said the man thickly, his eyes blinking in deadly fashion. There's somethin' phony—"

Buck held the can stiffly. His every muscle was taut and his throat worked convulsively. The stuff dripped insanely, slowly, from the can held absurdly at the end of his arm. His voice wouldn't come. There was the lamplight in the kitchen. He was acutely conscious of that. The clean-painted walls. He'd painted them for Martha. The shelves he'd put up. The cut-out shelf-paper she'd made herself. There was the smell of cooked food, of home.

Buck tried to talk, but he'd done all the talking he could.

"What the hell's the matter?" demanded the man in sudden deadly passion. "You two tryin' to pull somethin'? By Gawd—"

HE GRASPED the shotgun savagely. He stood up with a jerk and a growl, his eyes still rolling from Buck to Martha and back again.

"What're you starin' an' gogglin' about?" he raged. "You' tryin' to put somethin' over—"

Buck put down the empty can. He spread out his empty hands. They quivered and shook.

"I—tried to put something over," he said shakily. "I—had to. I—know who you are. You're that—escaped murderer—I—"

The gun came up. Ready. An absurd droplet of syrup spun down from its muzzle, leaving a fine, silken thread of sticky stuff behind.

"Oh!" said the man. He was suddenly no longer enraged. He was grim. He was hunted. He was bitter. He was infinitely ready to defend his freedom. "Oh! Y'know who I am! That means—"

"It means you think you've got to kill us," said Buck desperately. "But you haven't got to! Listen! I'm her husband! I—knew who you were the minute you came to the door. I could've gone off and

—raised the neighborhood. I didn't. I came in—"

"I made you," said the murderer harshly.

"Maybe! But listen! I was feeling sorry for you as I came along the road. I know how you feel. There's no need for you to kill us. I'll take you in my car. Fifty. A hundred. Two hundred miles! I'll let you out and nobody'll dream you've come—"

The murderer smiled without mirth.

"I mean it!" said Buck more desperately still. "I've laid on my back and waited to die. I know what it's like to have nothing to wait for but dying. And I'm out! I know how you feel about going back. It's the same way I'd feel. I know—"

"Like hell!" said the murderer grimly. "I've been hunted three days. I've been back yonder six years!"

"What you've done," said Buck feverishly, "is no business of mine. I'll promise that my wife won't say one word when I take you away—"

"They got a reward up for me," said the murderer grimly. "You'd want it. It's plenty."

Buck made a despairing gesture.

"I know you can't believe me," he said bitterly, "but for God's sake try!"

THE murderer looked at him steadfastly. It was not possible for him to believe. Buck could see that it was impossible. There was not even hesitation in the murderer's mind. There was no lust to kill in his expression, but there was inevitable necessity in the bare facts of the case. There was no way by which, once he had left this house, these people could be kept silent save by killing them. Every urge of self-interest and public duty would demand that they denounce him instantly. No oath extorted by terror could bind them. No terror could restrain them from reporting him, once it became true that reporting him would bring them protection in a savage instant hunt for him. If he

left them alive, he left a hue and cry hours closer to his heels. And the truck was their livelihood. Taking that . . .

"You'd have t' split on me," said the murderer grimly. "No way out. If you hadda chance to bump me now, you'd do it. 'Bound to. You've been spielin' your stuff tryin' to get a chance at me. It didn't work. But killin' ain't fun, either. I got no choice!"

The gun readied. Martha cried out.

"I hadn't any choice either," Buck said harshly. "Don't do it, man! Don't!"

The murderer regarded him with eyes which were hard without enmity and remorseless without hate. He leveled the gun.

"I got to," he said shortly.

He pulled the trigger just as Martha tried to fling herself in front of Buck to take the load intended for him.

The gun went off. The sound was a harsh, a jagged, a screaming noise. The room seemed full of smoke and reverberating sound. It did not sound like a shot, though. It wasn't. It was something else entirely. It was an explosion. There was a cloud of smoke and that blasting, metallic outcry—and Buck was wrestling Martha fiercely behind him.

"Get back!" he cried. "Get back until I see—"

Then he saw the murderer. Standing. Rocking on his feet, his face and throat and chest curiously pitted. Becoming blurred. Becoming blotted out by stuff welling up from beneath. The murderer seemed to fight for breath and against weakness. The hugely muscled arms thrashed out spasmodically. The shotgun crashed against the wall. Then the murderer's legs crumpled under him.

There was silence save for Martha's gasping. Her eyes were still staring, still terrified. Buck—his face wrenched—picked up the shotgun. It was twisted and torn and destroyed. Shell and shot and breech—all had exploded backward. The other barrel slowly oozed the thick and

viscid syrup with which it had been filled almost to the muzzle. No gun could fire a shot through a barrel choked with stuff like that. Any gun would burst. This one had.

"I—didn't want to do it," said Buck absurdly, gulping. "I tried to stop him. He wanted to live, just the same as me. But—I had to."

Martha clung to him, sobbing in still incredulous relief. Buck patted her back awkwardly, his forehead wrinkled. He foresaw something.

It happened only the next night. He drove into the yard and shut off the motor and the headlights. He took his sample-case—with the order-book in it—and got out of the car. It was a tradition that

when he came home he should come to the front door and ask for the lady of the house. A silly tradition, but all proper families have such things.

But Buck couldn't do it tonight. He couldn't wait, stamping, while Martha came to the door so he could say, "Is-this-the - lady - of - the - house! I'm - the - Hopkins - Products - man," and she could smile and say, "Won't you come in?"—and then press close to him to lift her lips for him to kiss.

No. He couldn't do it. He tried. He actually had one foot up on the first step of the porch. But then he couldn't. He went around the back way and in through the kitchen.

But, Lord, he was glad to be home!

In the next **SHORT STORIES**

Part I of a great new serial of the High North, of a Man's Land, of the Land of Gold, of Stampedes to Back of Beyond, of Sourdoughs and Chechakos and the land of the strong cold.

EDGE OF BEYOND

by

James B. Hendryx

*"And," Exclaimed Kappie. "I Will Have No Devils
Hereabouts—Red or Green!"*



THE DUTCHMAN MEETS THE DEVIL

IT BEGAN as a great many of Kappie De Vries' exploits were wont to begin—with a scribbled note.

Sergeant Jan, that incomparable if wooden-faced non-com, brought it into the inner office one sultry morning, and laid it without a word before his superior. His red, beefy features were expressionless as usual, but a skilled observer might have noted that he backed a pace or

so away from the desk before standing to attention and awaiting Kappie's comment. He knew a thing or two, this Sergeant Jan.

He knew, for instance, that there were certain affairs—two or three of them—that were dynamite and detonator combined with Kappie De Vries. And in that scrawled couple of lines was embodied the chief of these irritants, the one suggestion that was sure-fire for an explosion from Makassar's fiery chief of police.



By R. V. GERY

Author of "The Reef of Stars," "The Dutchman Takes a Walk," etc.

It came, all right. Kappie De Vries scanned the missive, and a rapid crimson flush overspread his already rubicund visage. He slammed the desk-top with his fist, and broke into a torrent of sulphurous Dutch, so that the windows rattled and the scent of brimstone in the air became almost appreciable.

"Again!" he stormed. "Once more they try this very-damned foolishness on me—"

He glowered down at the note. It was an odd communication enough, scribbled in English on the torn-out page of a notebook. "*Kappie,*" it read, "*come on down here if you can. I believe I've seen the devil.*"

It was signed "Chuck," and under the signature, bitten deep into the paper by an agitated pencil, was the further enjoinder: "*For Pete's sake, come down!*"

"Another of these crazy folk with a crack in the brain-pan!" Kappie exclaimed viciously. "An American, now! I had thought that that kind would at least——"

He broke off, because he had caught Jan's cold-boiled, greenish eye, and there was something in that fishy orb that gave him pause. It was true enough—the man who had written that very queer note was about the last person in the world to see devils, or anything else he did not want to see. His name was Chuck Carson, and he was a lean, astringent, matter-of-fact young American medico, living in a tin hut thirty miles down coast, austere engaged in the pursuit of microbes. Chuck Carson had once been an All-American quarterback, which meant precisely nothing at all to Kappie; but the Inspector had thought he knew a level head when he saw one.

"Almighty!" he growled petulantly. "What is the matter with him, Jan? Has he gone mad, like the others?"

Jan shook his head and took the liberty of expressing an opinion. "*Na, mynheer,*" he said decidedly. "He does not go mad, that one. He has seen something—"

IT WAS the sergeant's turn to fall silent now, for Kappie was looking at him with one of his most devastating glares. This was a subject upon which the pair of them had never been able to agree—this question of devils, spirits, and the supernatural in general. In Kappie's wide district, three people out of five still held a belief in such matters, in magic and the power of unearthly creatures lording it over a world outside the every-day one; and Jan, of all people under the sun, refused stubbornly to be anything but non-committal on the subject. In fact, Kappie entertained suspicions that his deceptive-faced subordinate more than half subscribed to certain of these lunatic ideas in secret.

"*Ja!*" he said acidly. "He sees something, eh? A devil, it seems, almighty! Well, listen to me, Jan—I will have no devils hereabouts, red, black or green. Take me a wire to this crack-brain—tell him to mix more water with his schnapps, and quit worrying me over red devils, or pink rats, or—or a ginger-colored hippopotamus, by the Lord! Devils, indeed—*na*, I will have no devils here."

He gobbled with pure annoyance, drumming on the desk-top with his knuckles. Sergeant Jan, impassive as a statue, took his note-book and began to write busily. He knew what he knew, that tough and resilient Dutchman.

He knew, for instance, that by mid-afternoon Kappie De Vries would be at the wheel of his flying power-launch, heading for Chuck Carson and his troubles. In a sweet, lively temper, too, with a cold cigar clamped as usual between his teeth and a scowl ferocious enough to turn the

milk. All the way down-coast he had not said a word—but now, as the river-mouth opened and Chuck's ugly tin habitation appeared among its overshadowing trees, he shut his engines down.



"Jan!" he called testily.

The sergeant left his post amidships, where he presided over the roaring twelve-cylinders, and came aft, saluting. Kappie looked at him with distaste.

"Well?" he inquired. "You imagine this Yankee has seen things, eh? Do you by any chance go so far as to predict what? A devil, I suppose—*O ja*, a devil with horns and a tail—an American devil, maybe."

He was being bitterly sarcastic, Jan knew very well, to cover up uncertainty. The nearer Kappie got to Chuck Carson, the less likely it would appear that this was mere visionary stuff, vaporings. It just didn't render that way, Jan figured. He saluted again.

"*Mynheer,*" he said, with a glance behind him, "I do not know. But he is not down at the beach."

That was true, and Kappie's hard blue

eyes grew thoughtful as he observed it. It was quite unlike Chuck Carson, the lonely research-worker, not to be waiting on the sand there at the sound of Kappie's familiar engines.

"Ja!" said Kappie; and then suddenly, "Jan—in the locker."

The non-com stooped and fumbled for a moment in the beautifully neat cupboards at his feet. He came up with a couple of snub-nosed, black Government automatics in shoulder-holsters. Kappie slipped his broad frame into one and threw his chewed cigar overside.

"Now," he said, taking the wheel again and letting the launch glide shoreward, "let us see what is the matter with this doctor and his devils, almighty!"

THERE was an untidy pathway, and a litter of tins outside the little dwelling. Kappie paused for a moment, glancing about him into the odd silence, his bright eyes shifting warily. Then he marched to the closed door, rapped on it, and when there was no answer pushed it open. He peered inside, and his expression altered.

"In God's name!" he muttered. "Chuck—what is this?"

Chuck Carson, hard-boiled medico, All-American quarterback, sat slumped in a chair, in the middle of his microscopes and slides. He was dirty, unwashed, and unkempt, and he had his head in his hands.

Kappie stared. "Chuck!" he called again sharply. "What goes on here?"

Chuck Carson raised his face, and it was easy enough to see he had been through something. "Oh, it's you, Kappie," he said. "Thought I was just hearing things this time. Damned good of you to come so soon, old man; not that it'll do much good, at that—"

Kappie De Vries regarded him for a moment with the general aspect of one suddenly confronted with the impossible. Then he relaxed a trifle, and dropped across a chair, with his arms folded across the back of it.

"Na, na, na, Chuck!" he said soothingly.

"Let us consider this a little, my friend. You have a touch of a very common complaint, I think—what the Frenchmen call the *cafard*, is it not? Life seems sufficiently damnable, no—there is no sense or use in anything any longer? You have no taste for yourself or anyone else in the world, and liquor does not bite, eh? Chuck, it is the heat, nothing more—heat and overwork. Come with me, and we will fix you in no time at all."

But Chuck Carson merely shook his head. "Don't you give me that, Kappie!" he said edgily. "It's not the heat, and it's not overwork, and I haven't gone bugs. I'm seeing things, I tell you—devils, Kappie, ugly sons of guns; they're looking at me, Kappie, and I can see 'em as plain as I see you. And then you try and kid me I've got nerves. Nerves!" His voice rose to a shriek. "Like heck I've got nerves! It's the devil, Kappie—and God knows what I'm goin' to do about it!"

HE LET his strained face drop in his hands again, and sat there shuddering. Kappie looked at him, with all the ill-humor ironed out of his expression.

"Jan," he said quietly, "go you down to the launch and get me the medicine chest. Bring Schultz and Paulus back with you. And hurry!"

The non-com went out, with a glance at his chief that it was perhaps as well Kappie did not see. He was a very perturbed Dutchman as he hastened back along the path through the growing shadows of the evening. At the launch he summoned the two constables, and while they waited on the beach, he reached into the locker again for Kappie's equipped first-aid case.

He never got it, because there was a sound. It came from that tin house in the trees, sudden and shattering—the report of a gun. Kappie's gun, the Dutch Government's .45, perfectly clear and unmistakable. Again—and yet again.

Sergeant Jan whirled round, grabbing

at his own weapon. In three strides he was across the narrow strip of sand, the constables pounding at his heels. He raced up the path, almost foaming at the mouth, hurled himself through the doorway—and stood there, transfixed.

Chuck Carson was prone on the floor, unconscious, but it was not at Chuck Carson that Sergeant Jan was looking open-mouthed. It was at Kappie De Vries, backed against the far wall, with enormous, baffled incredulity written all over his broad features, and the still smoking automatic swinging in his fist.

"Mynheer—" Jan stammered.

The single word seemed to break the tension, for Kappie slowly lowered his gun. He blinked, running the tip of his tongue over his lips, and shook his head as if trying to clear his eyes of some spectacle or other. Then he walked sharply across to the opposite wall and peered between narrowed eyelids at the three neat bullet-holes punched in the ribbed metal.

"Almighty!" he observed in a flat voice.

Sergeant Jan cast discipline and caution to the winds, and clutched his chief by the arm.

"Mynheer!" he gasped. "What was it? You saw it, too—"

Kappie De Vries tore himself free with a terrific, blinding oath.

"Enough!" he snarled. "I do not believe it—I will have none of such very-damned affairs here. I do not believe it, do you hear me—"

He swung round on Jan, pulling himself together with an effort that was almost galvanic.

"Be silent!" he commanded, in his most case-hardened parade voice. "Not a word from any of you—and pick Mynheer Carson up. There is enough of this foolishness. It is time to think—and act. Now, march!"

II

IT WAS half an hour, sitting in the launch poled just clear of the beach, before they brought Chuck Carson back to

consciousness again. He sat up, shivering a little.

"S-sorry, Kappie," he said. "It's kind of upsetting, that affair—"

Kappie De Vries had lugged out a bottle of rum and a tin cup. He thrust the latter into Chuck's shaky hand.

"Drink that," he said curtly. "And then tell me something, Chuck. You have seen this—this thing how many times?"

Chuck gulped the spirits and choked. "Plenty," he said. "Eight or ten, I'd say, in the last three days. Wh-what the hell is it, Kappie? I—I can't stand much more of it!"

Kappie had been frowning, deep in thought again, but now he laid a hand on Chuck's knee.

"*Na, na!*" he said. "You will not see it again—at least, not without me handy. I do not know what it is, at this moment, except that it is somebody being funny, almighty! A Malay devil, eh—complete! I, Kappie De Vries of the police, see Malay devils, and shoot at them. No, no, no, mynheers, I will not have that—I am a patient man, but that I will not allow, at any price. You hear me, Jan?"

The sergeant had been busy with the first-aid case, doctoring Chuck—and he had been almost completely silent since that scene in the hut. He said "*Ja, mynheer,*" now in a discipline manner, but there was the faint suspicion of a shrug about him, and his expression was unreadable. Kappie scowled.

"So!" he said. "It is like that, eh, Jan? You think, do you, that here at last is one of your old-woman's tales come true. I, Kappie De Vries, have seen it with my own eyes, and there is an end, eh? Very good, mynheer Jan—you are a fool always, but now you are outdoing yourself. You shall hear of this later, almighty! And now, get me engines—we shall go visit a friend of mine who has some sense, by God, and see what he has to say of these—these Malay devils. Engines, I said!"

Chuck Carson glanced at him. "Where

you going?" he inquired. "It won't be any good—"

Kappie De Vries waved him down. "Drink your rum, little man!" he said. "And do not worry. I am going to see a person close here who is wise—as wise as I, and wiser, maybe. His name is—you know it, maybe—Kurt Engels."

Chuck fidgeted. "Kurt Engels?" he said in a peculiar tone. "Sure, I know him—"

Kappie chuckled faintly. "*Ja!* I thought so," he said. "And you know the little Luise as well, eh, mynheer? A pretty child, is she not?"

He wagged a finger at Chuck, and Chuck flushed. "Darn you, Kappie—" he began. The Inspector clapped him on the back.

"There, there!" he said. "Remember I am a very-damned policeman, and paid to know things. I know all about what has been going on up yonder, for this Kurt is an old friend of mine. If there is anyone hereabouts who can clear up this mystery—Almighty!" he said suddenly. "I have an idea. Jan, what is the name of that young scamp with Kurt—the Portuguese?"

Chuck answered the question. "You mean Pereira?" he said. "Damn decent cove, Tony is—a square-shooter, if that's what you're getting at. Good Lord," he continued, "you're not figuring Tony's in this, are you?"

Kappie said nothing. He was looking at Sergeant Jan, with a queer, quizzical expression; the sergeant had forgotten his engines, apparently, and had been listening to the conversation with close interest.

"Well?" Kappie said. "Now what, mynheer the devil-believer? Do we have something there, or do we not? You remember, eh?"

Jan nodded. "*Ja*, mynheer," he said briefly. "I have not forgotten."

"So!" Kappie turned to Chuck again. "This Tony of yours is—how do you say?—a straight-shooter, eh? A friend, a damn decent cove, and so on, was it not? Well, how would it be if I told you that this

Pereira is first, no Portuguese but a half-caste, and second, that he is, we know, interested in magic and devils and all such stuff? How do you like that, eh?"

Chuck shrugged. "Okay," he said. "I know about the magic business. He's writing a book about it—I've seen the script. And as for being a half-caste, what the hell difference does that make?"

KAPPIE bit the end off one of his cheroots. "A great deal, Mynheer the Yankee," he said sourly. "But let that pass for the moment. It has not occurred to you, maybe, that this Pereira and the little Luise might be——"

Chuck sat up straight. "Nothing doing!" he said stoutly. "I know Luise, and I know Tony, and there's none of that between them. I'd gamble on it—but say, what is this, anyway? You trying to suggest I'm getting the old run-around, huh?"

"I am trying to suggest nothing," said Kappie. "I am now going to see my old friend Kurt Engels—*ja*, and this Pereira—and find out, almighty, who is playing funny tricks in my district. But I think I know!"

He motioned to Jan, who had been looking at him all this while as if he was about to speak.

"Engines, I said," he repeated. "Let us go—"

The sergeant moved amidships, still in silence, and reached for the starting-lever—but a sudden exclamation from Kappie made him look up. From somewhere out in the darkness shoreward there had come a voice; a lamentable, off-key, wheezy tenor, raised in whisky-throated, ribald song.

"*She was pore—but she was 'onest,*"
it sang,

"*Victim of a rich man's whim—
Fust 'e loved 'em, then 'e. . .*"

Kappie De Vries was standing bolt up-

right in the cockpit, staring into the gloom. gloom.

"It cannot be—" he muttered. He raised his voice in a stentorian hail. "Griggs!" he called. "Is that you, you *schellum*? Come here and let me see you."

The singer dropped his lugubrious strains in mid-ditty.

"Well, gorbliney!" he observed from the water's edge. "If it ain't old Highy-tighty himself. Wot you doin' 'ere, Inspector, this puffickly lovely night, eh? Fishin' fer sprats?"

There was a swaggering note of impudence about him that made Chuck Carson grin, but Kappie De Vries did not seem to be in the least put about by it.

"Push in!" he told Jan. "And almighty, break out another bottle. It seems we are a party tonight. Come aboard, Griggs," he added. "So they have not hung you yet, eh? Well, I shall have my chance yet, it may be hoped."

THE mysterious singer clambered over the launch's side and stood in the dim light of the cabin lamps—a skinny little fellow in ragged singlet and pants, with a triangular, wizened face alive with cunning and a kind of sparkling malice. He waved a claw of a hand by way of welcome.

"Thank yer kindly for them good wishes, mister," he said to Kappie. "But you ain't goin' to 'ang me, no fear—you're too ruddy crude, way I seen yer in action. Didn't I 'ear somethin' about a bottle, though? Now that is a nice thought—yus, a real lovely thought."

Kappie shoved it into his hand. "Drink," he said, "and then tell me, at once, what you are doing here."

Griggs tilted the bottle long and affectionately, his beady black eyes half-mockingly on the Inspector all the while.

"Me?" he said after a moment. "Wot am I doin' 'ere? Oh, just moochin' around—walkin' the earth an' goin' to an' fro on it, you might say. Let's see," he winked

deliberately, "'oo was it used ter do that, in 'Oly Writ? The devil, wasn't it? Rum things, devils, eh, Inspector—might rum!"

There was a silence for a moment, and then Kappie laughed.

"Ja, I might have known," he said. "I might have known that where the devil was you would not be far distant, little man. And now," he leant forward and his voice grew crisp, "what is this, Griggs? What do you know of devils?"

Griggs had been sucking the bottle-neck again, but now he lowered it.

"Wot do I know, says you?" he queried. "Why, I don't know nothin'—not yet, leastways. I was wonderin' whether you gents could give me any info on the sub-jick. Seems to me I 'eard somebody a-poopin' off mighty gay a while back there. It wouldn't be you, Inspector, would it?"

Kappie nodded. "Ja, it was me," he said. "There is someone around here that



has a funny sense of humor, it seems. Mynhear Carson here has been annoyed by it; and I myself," his face darkened, "was also a victim. You have anything to tell me, Griggs, before I visit Kurt Engels?"

The cockney set the bottle down, but his eyes were still on Kappie.

"Wot's that?" he demanded. "You goin' to see Engels over this business? Gawd, that's rich, that is—that's a good 'un! You're smart, cocky, damn smart, but 'ow'd yer manage to get on the track so soon? Damme, it's took me a week—"

"A week?" Kappie exclaimed. "Then this has been going on for a week. Chuck, I thought you said three days, eh? This Pereira is at work elsewhere, it seems, mynheers. You are sure it is only three days, Chuck?"

Chuck shook his head. "Damned if I'm sure about anything," he said. "Seems like a month to me—"

Griggs interrupted. He had been watching Sergeant Jan and Sergeant Jan's expression, just outside the little circle of light.

"So it's Pereira?" he remarked. "Now 'ow in Gawd's name did yer find that out, Kappie me buck? By crimes, you're a wonder, ain't yer?"

"You have any other theories?" Kappie inquired stiffly.

Griggs applied himself yet again to the bottle.

"Theories?" he said out of the side of his mouth. "Why, strike me pink, Inspector, I wouldn't know what the damn things are. No, I ain't got no theories, so help me—none at all. And 'ere's yer very good 'ealth all around, gentlemen. It's a lovely evenin', ain't it?"

III

"THIS animal," Kappie remarked judicially to Chuck Carson, "is one of my little errors, I fear. I should certainly have hung him long ago—but he has his uses now and again."

He was sitting in the launch's cockpit, watching Griggs deftly polish off the remainder of the rum bottle. Griggs favored him with a totally indescribable leer.

"Ah, yer would, would yer?" he ob-

served. "Don't yer believe 'im, Mister Carson. 'E loves me like a brother, 'e does, with that there tender 'eart of 'is—an' besides, I got enough on 'im and 'is wicked doin's to make my bloomin' fortune, if ever I went into the blackmail lay. You'd be surprised, so help me!"

He put on a mock-pious, killing expression and dodged Kappie's well-aimed cuff with the slipperiness of an eel. Chuck Carson regarded him with interest; there was something undeniably attractive in the little rogue's cheery villainy, and besides, Chuck had a notion that he knew a very great deal more of this odd business than he chose to give away. Chuck glanced from him to Jan at the wheel; that motionless, uncompromising figure also gave him a peculiar sensation, for obviously and by his very manner Sergeant Jan was not in complete agreement with Kappie De Vries' reading of the situation.

Kappie peered ahead. "Ja!" he announced. "There it is. Slow, Jan, and take her in. And you will leave the talking to me," he added to the others. "You, Griggs, most of all. Be silent, if you please."

Griggs pulled a hideous grimace at him. "Me?" he said. "Why, I ain't goin' to talk. 'Ou'd I 'ave anything ter talk about, mister—tell me that! I ain't familiar with no devils, I ain't!"

"Quiet!" Kappie exploded, half laughing. "Be still, animal. What is this—a police investigation or a comic opera, almighty?"

"'Ow in 'ell should I know?" Griggs demanded sweetly. "I been in lots o' things with you, an' some of 'em was funny enough, Gawd strike me! Ho, yus!"

He returned to the bottle again, and was finishing it as Jan maneuvered the launch gently to the side of a coral jetty. There was a figure in white standing on it, hands in pockets.

"Inspector?" it said. "I thought it was you—there is no mistaking those engines."

Kappie De Vries grunted. "You, Pe-

reira?" he queried. "Is the Mynheer Engels at home? I require to see him."

TONY PEREIRA stood outlined all at once in the beam of a miniature searchlight Jan switched on—a tall, swarthy-featured young man with the hook nose and rather piercing eyes that seem to be the Portuguese inheritance in the East. He smiled, showing very white teeth between thin lips.

"He is in the house, Inspector," he said. "At his books, but he will be glad to see you. Is that Carson you have with you? Good evening, Senhor Chuck—you are well, I trust?"

Kappie answered. "No, he is very far from well, Pereira—and I, too, am very far from well. We are sick, both of us, of the same disease—a surfeit of fools, mynheer. But we shall be cured, and speedily, you shall see, even if certain others discover themselves a trifle discommoded. *Ja*, I think so. Come, let us go to the house!"

He was out on the jetty now with Chuck. Pereira stared at him for an instant, but said nothing. Kappie turned all at once.

"Griggs!" he called sharply. "You will stay— Now, where is that little reptile, in the name of God?"

But Griggs was not there. He had faded like a wraith, the instant the launch touched the pier. Kappie swore violently, but there was no finding him in that darkness.

He compromised by stamping up to Kurt Engels' house, obviously in no very sanctified frame of mind.

They found Engels in his library, as Pereira had said—a barrel of a man with a round, bearded face and the aspect of a good-natured gorilla. He welcomed Kappie effusively, thrusting his reading-glasses back from his bald brow, and indicated drinks. But Kappie shook his head.

"*Na*, Kurt," he said shortly. "We are here on business. Mynheer Carson and I desire speech with you—alone."

He glanced pointedly at Pereira, who

had been standing quietly in the background. Kurt Engels blinked.

"To be sure," he said. "To be sure, Kappie. Tony, you will leave us, eh? The Inspector has some private matter—official, perhaps, Kappie?"

De Vries waited until the door had closed before he spoke, and then it was in a most unwontedly thick and petulant voice.

"Kurt," he said, "I ask you a question. Do you think I am a fool?"

Engels stared at him for a moment, and then broke into a wide-mouthed guffaw. "You?" he said. "No, Kappie—that is about the last thing I would say of you, my friend. Why?"

Kappie's scowl deepened. "Somebody does, almighty!" he rasped. "Someone has ideas that way hereabouts. They show me devils, Kurt—"

He fixed the fat man with a glittering, angry blue eye, but Engels merely registered mild surprise. "Devils?" he queried thoughtfully. "You do not say so, Kappie. Tell me—this is interesting."

"It will be interesting for a certain party," Kappie said grimly, "when I find him. Very interesting indeed—" And in a few curt, incisive sentences he put Kurt Engels in possession of the facts. Kurt listened, nodding gravely, his candid brown eyes unclouded.

"A strange business," he said at length. "Very strange. You both saw this thing, you say? Then it could not have been—um, a hallucination."

Kappie almost shouted, "Do I—am I the kind of person to suffer hallucinations? Old women's visions? In the name of God, Kurt—"

Engels put up a hand. "No, no," he said. "I am only trying to see this matter clearly. Devils, eh? It is odd, that—to be sure it is odd. I wonder— No, it cannot be. It is impossible."

He stood stroking his beard and looking down at the floor, in obvious hesitation. Kappie pounced on him.

"Speak!" he snapped. "You know something, Kurt. Out with it, almighty, or I drag it from you."

ENGELS glanced up, and there was an odd, diffident expression on his round face. He looked from Kappie to Chuck and back again before replying.

"It is nothing," he said haltingly. "Less than nothing—only there has been some foolishness here lately. They have been making magic in the villages—for Tony."

Kappie frowned blackly. "Ja, I suspected as much," he said. "It is against the law, Kurt, as well you know. I will have none of it. First it is these magic idiocies, and then it is witch-doctors, and then charms and killings, ja, and the next is a riot somewhere, and then—pfui, trouble. I have seen it before, my friend, and I say I will have none of it. And it was this Pereira began it, eh?"

"He has a book—" Engels began, and Kappie exploded.

"A book! He writes a very-damned book, that yellow cub! Or so he says, eh? You have seen this famous book, no doubt—"

Engels nodded. "I have seen it," he said. "The boy is clever and thoughtful. 'You do not figure,' he added with a touch of anxiety, 'that there is anything else behind it, surely. He is perhaps a little politically minded, I am aware—'"

Kappie pulled a sardonic grimace. "Politically minded, eh?" he rasped. "It is such politically minded gentlemen that stir up revolts, Kurt—and finish swinging on trees. But where do you get this notion, tell me. He has been talking, no?"

Kurt Engels tugged at his beard dubiously. "You comprehend—I would not wish to say anything," he hesitated. "But certainly he has ideas, I fear. He is half Malay, you remember—and bitter, very bitter!"

Chuck Carson took a hand in things without being able to help himself. "You are wrong, Mr. Engels," he said decidedly.

"I don't figure there's an ounce of bitterness in Tony's body."

Engels shrugged. "It is a pity," he said. "A great pity. I would not wish to see him harmed, Kappie. But—a talking-to, now, eh?"

Kappie chuckled grimly. "Oh, ja, a talking-to!" he rumbled. "He has ideas, this young man, and he is bitter, and he plays with magic among the villages, and shows devils to me. And by the way, we have not yet considered how that little trick was worked, I believe. You have any notions, Kurt?"

The fat man wagged his head with decision. "I have been here forty years," he stated, "and I have no opinions, Kappie, upon what these Malays can or cannot do. This magic is queer stuff."

"Bah!" Kappie made an impolite noise. "Magic, eh? Even you believe in such craziness, it seems, Kurt. Almighty, what is the matter with all of you?"

He was working up towards one of his explosions, Chuck told himself amusedly—but at that instant the door opened and Chuck's interest in Kappie faded abruptly.

"Luise!" he cried.

She stood looking up at him anxiously, a fair-haired, blue-eyed Brunnhilde in miniature.

"Something has happened—" she faltered. "What is it?"

Kappie De Vries had been regarding her with the half-paternal, half-possessive cock of the head he reserved for pretty girls. Now he took her and Chuck by an arm apiece.

"Nothing has happened, little one," he boomed. "Nothing, that is, that the excellent Chuck here cannot explain better than I." He propelled them towards the door. "Go—proceed with the explanations, Chuck. Kurt and I will discuss this business further, almighty!"

The door closed behind him, and Chuck Carson was left alone on the veranda with Luise. He found himself wondering, a trifle bemusedly, just what might be

taking place inside that bald-shaven crag of a head of the Inspector's. Something out of the way, Chuck bet himself a cookie.

IV

THAT excellent non-com Sergeant Jan was also more than a trifle bemused just then.

He was sitting in the cockpit of the moored launch, a dim figure against the water's glimmer, looking moodily up at the house and its dark gardens. To tell truth, Jan was infinitely worried as a matter of fact—and worry was something unfamiliar to his phlegmatic, cool make-up. This affair of the supernatural was very much inclined to give him a dose of the willies.

He had the oddest notion that there might, there just might, be something really inexplicable, unearthly, behind whatever it was his chief had seen in the hut. And he didn't care for the idea at all—

Mechanically, he heaved himself to his feet and moved into the launch's waist. He had to do something, Jan figured surlily; the kind of thoughts that had been chasing themselves through his mind were not possible thoughts, after all. They had to be driven away, shut out, and a little work was the best medicine to do that. He began to tinker lovingly with the launch's immaculate engines—it was not the least peculiar side of his redoubtable make-up that he was a first-class mechanic, a born fiddler and coaxer of machinery. There wasn't a thing needed attention in those twelve powerful cylinders, but Jan hoped there would be. This waiting was killing him.

Up on the house-veranda, Chuck was talking in low tones to Luise.

"Don't worry," he was saying. "It was just someone acting smart. There ain't no such thing as the devil."

He was protesting just a little too much, and there were reasons for that. Luise had

gasped when he told her the tale, making a jest of it—gasped and gone white all of a sudden, and sat down on a wicker couch. Chuck stared at her.

"S'matter, hon?" he inquired solicitously. "You don't want to let this get you down. There's nothing to it—"

BUT there certainly was something to it, as far as Luise was concerned. She fell silent and moody, picking aimlessly at the hem of her dress, and Chuck Carson could get nothing out of her.

"For Pete's sake—" he said after a while. "What kind of a shivaree's this, anyway? C'm'on, tell uncle!"

There was a light step on the veranda, and he glanced round. Tony Pereira had come up quietly, and was standing looking at them.

"So?" he said. "There is some trouble here, no? I thought as much, from the Inspector. What is it Chuck?"

He was perfectly cool and composed, as handsome as a prince there in the half-light. Chuck bit his lip.

"Look," he said suddenly, "you ought to know this, Tony. De Vries has seen the devil, in person—and so have I, brother. You wouldn't know a thing about that, would you?"

Pereira stiffened. "The—the devil!" he said. "Chuck, what is this? What are you talking about?"

Chuck let him have it, watching him all the time. Pereira took the story queerly, he thought, in a kind of frozen silence not unlike the girl's. It was a minute or two before he said anything at all, and then it was in a meditative undertone, as if he were talking to himself.

"But that is nonsense," he muttered. "It cannot be. And yet—and yet it might. There are such tales, to be sure. And it appeared," he addressed Chuck, "to both of you—the same thing?"

"Sure did," Chuck said. "I'm all goose-flesh still. Tony, look!" he added suddenly. "You better have this, straight. Kappie's

mad clear through, hopping mad, and he figures you're the guy——"

"Me!" Pereira's face shut up like a nutcracker into a grimace of pure, startled incredulity—or so Chuck Carson could have sworn. He stood motionless, glaring, and Luise gave a choked little cry. Chuck was on the edge of a reassuring speech—they were both of them clearly paralyzed with some emotion or other—when the door behind him opened. Kappie De Vries came marching out, his face set into the forbidding lines half the Indies knew. He tapped Pereira on the shoulder.

"This way, mynheer," he said, motioning to the other end of the veranda. "We must have some words, you and I."

Chuck Carson and Luise watched the pair move away, speechlessly. There was no doubt of Kappie's intentions—arrest, trial, and prison-bars stood out all over him. And Pereira himself seemed deflated all at once, the gimp gone out of him.

"Hey!" Chuck called. "Kappie, you can't do that——"

De Vries whipped about, and there was sheer murder in the steely gaze he bestowed on Chuck.

"Be silent!" he snapped. "I will have no comments, if you please." He swung back to Pereira and transfixed him with that ice-cold, uncompromising stare. "So!" he said. "You are the young man that plays with devils and magic and such matters, it appears. Very good, mynheer—very good; we shall see, we shall certainly see. Kurt!" he called sharply into the room. "Do you send down to my launch. Inform Sergeant Jan that I need him, instantly!"

KURT ENGELS came to the door, blinking. He was dragging at his beard again, and there was deep concern on his face as he looked at Pereira.

"Kappie!" he rumbled. "Is this necessary?"

Kappie exploded. "Ten billion very-damned children of the pit!" he roared.

"Must I stand here arguing like a fool? Get me Sergeant Jan, I said—get him, or it is the worse for you! Quick, I tell you!"

Engels subsided and went inside—but Chuck Carson was not looking at Engels, or at Kappie De Vries either. He was gazing curiously at the veranda rail away in the corner. A face had appeared at it, a queer, wizen triangular face with a grin on it—appeared for an instant, and vanished. Now what, Chuck inquired of his bemused self, was that little guy doing there? It was all extremely disconcerting.

Sergeant Jan, down at the launch, was also finding something disconcerting at that instant, if appearances counted for aught.

He had given over fiddling with the spotless engines, and turned by way of variety to another piece of mechanism in which he took a peculiar delight. It was the powerful little short-wave radio that Kappie had had installed recently, to keep himself in touch with the ships that plied these waters and the island police depots. Jan worshipped this affair with all the intensity of a child with a new toy, and might be found, at any hour of his spare time, frowning over it and a radio manual he had picked up somewhere or other.

But now he was sitting there, the book open on his knee, an extraordinary expression of stupidity on his face. One or two people—Kappie De Vries, for instance—might have told that Jan was never so wide-awake, never so furiously thinking, as when that appalling blank look took possession of him. It was a danger signal, for it meant that Jan had suddenly got him an idea—and Jan's ideas were mighty apt to be remarkable ones.

He had just seen something in the radio book—a single word. His greenish, unreadable eyes hardened, and he grunted, as if with the effort of his thought.

There was a quick pad-pad on the jetty and a white-clad house servant came hur-

rying. He delivered Kappie's message, and Jan rose, first putting the book away in its neat pigeonhole by the radio set. He clambered out on to the coral, jerked his pistol forward into position, and hurried up to the house.

THE group was still on the veranda—Chuck and Luise one end, Kappie and Pereira the other. Kappie was standing with his hands on his hips, contemplating Pereira, and Jan checked for an instant at sight of him. The Inspector was white with rage, breathing through his nose.

"*Ja!*" he was saying. "You would engineer trouble among the villages, eh? A pretty business, mynheer, a very pretty business. You make folk see things, it seems."

Pereira gulped. "I do not," he said in a creaky voice. "It is not possible."

Kappie snorted. "It is not, eh?" he said with a sneer. "Let us see about that, Kurt!" he raised his voice. "Come here, my friend. This so clever young man does not agree with you, after all. It is not possible to—to cook up visions, it appears. Not even by this very-damned Malay magic. And what do you say to that, Mynheer Kurt?"

Engels looked as if he wished he were anywhere else but there, that moment.

"It—it has been done," he said slowly. "There are many cases on record. Tony knows that, perfectly."

De Vries leered. "*Ja*, there are plenty of things he knows, almighty!" he said. "Too many things. Well, maybe I also know a thing or two—we shall see. Jan," he said to the non-com, "Mynheer Pereira is in arrest. You will watch him, you comprehend?"

His manner was that familiar to the ungodly around Makassar—crisp, short, and devastating.

Jan knew it well, and that it was not to be trifled with; he advanced on Pereira, fumbling in his pockets for handcuffs, while Chuck and the other remained

in their places, struck motionless by the little drama developing before them.

But Kappie had another surprise up his sleeve. He waved Jan back.

"*Na!*" he said. "Not yet, I think. First we have a small walk to take, Jan—you and I and mynheer here. Down to the village here, Pereira, eh? You shall show me the mechanism of this devil-business, friend—I am curious to see how it is done. And if it is interesting enough, maybe I do not hang you, this time. So make your mind up to provide us some entertainment, magic-worker."

He had become heavily facetious all at once, and Sergeant Jan put his handcuffs back in his pocket slowly. Pereira merely shrugged, as if this was a matter that had to be gone through with, and the sooner the better. Kappie turned to Chuck.

"You will remain here," he said, grinning. "I do not suppose you will object, eh? And you, Kurt, had better go back to your books for a while. I am sorry to have discommoded you thus—it is no business for one such as you, this police-work, but what would you? If fools will monkey with devils——"

He motioned to Jan and Pereira, and the three of them went down the steps and vanished into the darkness. Chuck Carson looked after them.

"Well, damn me——" he muttered. "Now what, huh?"

V

THERE seemed to be no particular answer to that one. Luise, at Chuck's side, had dropped back on the couch again, her face still clouded with the same doubtful, hesitant expression. Kurt Engels, after a long intent look into the dark, had turned and gone padding back into his book-lined quarters. It seemed as if he had put the whole affair behind him for the time, with a sign of relief. Chuck found time to envy him his detachment.

Himself, he had no such capacity. His

mind was full of this business now, racing—and mostly it was concerned with that extraordinary little cockney, Griggs, and his whereabouts. Kappie's actions had been all odd enough, but there was a kind of wild sense about them, a high-handed reasonableness. But this scrawny, raucous, hard-bitten creature with the raggedy singlet and the trick of popping up out of nowhere—what was he doing in this thing?

Chuck gave him up and turned to Luise. "Say," he began, "that'll be about enough of this. Let's have it, baby—the dope, the dirt, the old truth just for once. What's worryin' you? Pereira? You're not," his voice shook a little, "you're not interested in Tony, by any chance, honey?"

She shook her head, and her hand crept up to his and touched it. She was staring at the closed door of Kurt Engels' study, Chuck observed—staring fascinated, with a look that was at once expectant and apprehensive. For the first time, Chuck realized that it was just possible she might be afraid.

"Steady!" he whispered. "There's nothing to be scared of."

She said nothing, but Chuck could feel her tremble. A surge of irritability swept him, a sudden protest against this unknown.

"Dammit—" he began.

The door opened again and Kurt Engels appeared. He was as big and fatherly as ever, with a heavy curved briar pipe between his teeth and his glasses shining. But his manner was different entirely, curt and masterful, and he was in a hurry for once.

"Luise," he said, "you and Carson must stay here. I am going out—it seems to me that something is very wrong with this DeVries. They will end by making trouble down yonder in the villages. Wait here, the two of you—I will take the back way and catch them before they have gone far."

He ducked back into his room again and

they heard him go through it. A door slammed somewhere, and silence fell. Chuck Carson watched Luise.

"Well," he said. "And that's that? I don't know what's the meaning of it all,



but I suppose it's all right. Or would you say different? Something's eating the old boy—"

SHE nodded. "Something," she said with a queer little twist of the mouth. "He is frightened."

"Frightened?" Chuck gaped. "What in heck's he got to be frightened of? See here, lady, don't we have enough of this in-and-out stuff? What is the matter with this place, anyway? What's your dad scared about?"

She gave him a long, deep look, as if testing him, before she answered.

"Chuck," she said slowly, "he is not my father, that one. My uncle only. And—he is not what he seems, I think. He hides something—"

Chuck Carson whistled softly. "For Pete's sake!" he muttered. "Would you

think of that, now? What's he hiding, might a guy ask? I guess—"

He stopped, listening. A faint sound had come, filling the air—more a ghost of a sound than anything definite, and yet it was there. Luise half-rose from her chair.

"Listen!" she breathed. "You hear that?"

Chuck had a puzzled, incredulous expression. "Sure," he said in an undertone. "What is it?"

"I do not know," Luise whispered. "But I have heard it before—"

Chuck swore gently. "Me, too, by heck!" he observed. "Back in New York, though, that was—in the electro-therapy department of Bellevue. That's a short-wave diathermy outfit, or I'm a coot. But what's it doing here?"

HE stood up, head cocked on one side. The electricians in the veranda wavered unsteadily, but beyond that and the faint, busy hum somewhere, there was nothing for a moment. Then a voice sounded close at hand, a grating whisper that yet held elements of ribald mirth in it.

"Ho!" it said. "So that's what it is, eh, cocky? Well, you got another guess comin', mister doctor, that's all. An' now, by your leave, we'll go and 'ave a *dekko* ourselves. Comin'?"

Griggs had materialized on the veranda after his usual will-o'-the-wisp fashion. He was grimier and more unkempt than ever, but his eyes glittered like a gull's, and he carried a knife in his hand. He slipped across to the door of Kurt Engels' study and jerked it open, showing the cosily furnished room with its big chairs and rows of books. Chuck Carson blinked at him.

"What's the game?" he inquired stupidly.

Griggs was nosing around like a trained ferret, cursing to himself and fingering the shelves. "Just about 'ere," he was murmuring. "Ther *barushoot*—ther ruddy, clever swine! An' there's old Highty-

tighty, arrestin' innercent coves, just as gay as you please. Wait till I— By crimes, 'ark at that!"

There was little need for him to exclaim, for the sound that arose now was unmistakable. It came from somewhere outside the house, in the distant darkness—a universal, concerted yell of terror and excitement from many voices. Chuck Carson, a stranger to the East, had not heard that kind of outcry before; but Griggs had, and his small, vicious face grew dark.

"Crickey!" he remarked. "There'll be mild 'ell in a bit, unless we're careful. Old Highty-tighty's walked slap into it. C'm'on, Yank—give us a hand!"

He fumbled and prodded at the bookshelves, dripping profanity. There was a sudden sharp click, and he broke into a little dance, a double-shuffle of pure glee, as—before Chuck's startled eyes—an entire section swung back, books and all, displaying a dark opening. Luise gave a cry, but Griggs took no notice of her.

"This way!" he snapped at Chuck. "And mind where you're goin', cully. It ain't Piccadilly, this."

He was gone, brandishing the knife. Chuck Carson glanced around him for a weapon; he saw a shell-spiked knobkerry, some trophy of the cannibal seas further south, in a rack on the wall, and tore it down. Then he gripped Luise by the wrist.

"Stay close to me!" he ordered. "I'm not leaving you alone up here."

He dived into the passage after Griggs.

KAPPIE DE VRIES said, "Watch!" He spoke in a hoarse, almost inaudible whisper, lying flat on his face in a mealie-patch. Pereira, to one side of him, was straining his eyes intently at the Malay village a hundred yards away, and Sergeant Jan, his huge back humped like a cat's, was silent too.

There was something stirring in that village. It was getting towards midnight,

and by all ordinary calculations its denizens should have been asleep long since. But they were not; the three in the mealies could see them outside their huts, sitting in restless groups or wandering aimlessly up and down the torchlit, irregular street. Tony Pereira drew a deep breath.

"I do not understand—" he whispered. "They are armed——"

Kappie grunted. "You are telling me?" he said. "You have not seen them so before, eh—in your so-interesting studies, mynheer the magic-writer? Well, I do not wonder."

He peered at the spectacle before him. Certainly there were arms displayed among the groups across the way there—the glitter of steel was perfectly visible, and there was a growing murmur of voices. Somebody emerged from a hut and stood in the firelight, and once more Pereira gasped.

"The priest!" he stammered. "Look!"

Kappie De Vries and Jan were looking, without any urging from Pereira. They had both of them seen this kind of apparition before—a Malay *guru* got up in his witch-doctoring panoply—but it had been a long while ago and plenty far from the civilized environs of Makassar. They knew what it meant or might very well mean, and Kappie's growl of disgust only underlined the situation.

"Ja!" he mouthed. "So I thought—so I thought. Wait and see awhile—in a moment we get more."

He lay still, watching the fantastic figure with its diabolical-looking horns and the skull-and-bone necklace that dangled about its shoulders. Pereira was staring at it with his eyes bulging.

"In God's name—I have tried to make him act so, for months!" he murmured. "He said he knew nothing of such things—the art was lost."

Kappie sniffed. "You do not know what you have been playing with, mynheer," he commented. "That is your trouble—Almighty! There! There it is!"

He froze, immobile, staring cold-eyed at

the village. In the middle of it, backgrounded against the dark wall of the house the priest had come from, something had leapt suddenly to life. And if the priest himself was a shape out of an artist's nightmare, this thing had him stopped, beaten fifty ways from the jack. Its sneering, horrible countenance, and the gleaming red panoply it wore—armor such as one sees in ancient Chinese paintings—made it stand out in the darkness like a denizen of hell itself. There was a pause, and from across the cultivation came a hissing noise—the sound of many breaths caught in the throat.

Pereira was on his knees, pointing. "That!" he rasped. "I have seen that before. It is the old Malay god of war—the picture! The picture in Kornemunde's book."

And Sergeant Jan, the impassive, the unemotional, was also babbling.

"Mynheer—I know what that is—I know how it is done! Almighty, mynheer—in the launch there."

Kappie dragged them both down. "Fools!" he said. "Do you think I did not know long ago. I suspected as much back in Carson's hut there. But now, this way—and hurry! The clever scamp will have half the Indies down on us if we are not careful!"

He sprang to his feet and began to run ponderously back towards the house. Behind him the lurid shape still remained, flickering against the night—and a mutter of voices started, a mutter that rose quickly to a shriek. Kappie caught Pereira's arm.

"Run, little man!" he panted. "For your life, and if ever you desire to finish that so-charming book——"

TOGETHER the three of them raced back over the dim trail, until the confusion behind them merged into a steady, threatening roar. Kappie pulled up at the edge of the gardens.

"Jan!" he snapped. "Run to the launch

—get Makassar on the raido. Get the navy, the commandant, all of them. Tell them to stand by, for in a while comes trouble here, almighty! Run, Jan—and meanwhile, you, Tony——”

The crisp words died on his lips. From the house in front of them, not fifty yards away, there had come a scream. It was a ringing, desperate scream—and it was throttled abruptly, choked off as if a hand had been clapped across the screamer’s mouth. Kappie said something in blistering Dutch, and raced away again, the pistol still in his hand. Jan pounded after him; orders and Makassar and that threatening racket to the rear were forgotten in what lay ahead.

VI

CHUCK CARSON moved cautiously down the passage.

It was very dark and sloped downhill, as if it led to some cellar or underground compartment. The air was cool, but queerly charged with an odor Chuck recognized—the acid, tingling give-off of wet batteries. Of Griggs there was no sign.

There was no more now, either, of that odd, intense hum he had taken for a diathermy machine. That had stopped, as if the power had been cut off, and the whole underground place was silent. Chuck stopped and drew Luise closer to him.

“Stay here,” he whispered. “I’ll be back——”

She clung to him, but he disengaged himself gently—and then the loud, steady humming began again, close at hand. A gleam of light showed suddenly, filtering along the corridor’s wooden walls from a barely closed door. Chuck could see Griggs, backed against the woodwork. He edged up to him, under cover of the machine’s buzz, and stood peering into the room.

It was a long, low, narrow chamber,

gouged out from the soft soil on which the house had been built. Like the passage, it was wooden-lined—but there the resemblance ended, because it was brightly lit with the flickering, wavering electrics, and equipped with tiers of shelves holding dozens of heavy glass tanks. Those wet batteries, Chuck commented, and craned his neck further to see Engels.

The fat man was busy at a contraption such as Chuck had never encountered. It was a complicated arrangement of glass, metal, and wire, but there was no doubt of its essential nature. Chuck had heard of such affairs before—and now the whole affair grew clear to him, for Engels had a big folio volume clipped to the wall in front of him, under a queer greenish light. The book was open at a picture, a vividly colored plate—and Chuck found it hard to suppress a guffaw, because he was looking square at the thing that had given him so snappy a dose of the horrors. It was the devil of his hut-wall, the haunter of his dreams for nights, the apparition Kappie De Vries had been startled into pulling a gun on.

HE CAUGHT the expression on Griggs’ little weasel-face at his side, an expression of sardonic, gleeful triumph, as if he had got something on Kappie De Vries this time and was fixing to make the most of it.

And then Kurt Engels—Chuck saw him do it—quietly reached out a big, soft hand and pulled a switch.

The lights went out with a click, there was a sudden, violent grating sound behind them, and in front the door slammed tight with a clap like thunder. Griggs had flung himself against it at its first movement—but he rebounded and fell in a heap on the floor, cursing ferociously. Engels’ fat chuckle sounded through the panels.

“Quiet, my little friend!” he said. “Keep your breath—you may need it.”

Griggs scrambled up, still mouthing black murder, but Chuck paid no attention

to him. He ran back a few steps along the dark passage and butted headlong into the second of Kurt Engels' little devices hereabouts. It was a door as solid as the first one, and Chuck was half-stunned for an instant. He leant against the wall for a moment until the flashes cleared from before his eyes.

"Luise!" he called. "Luise!"

There was no answer, but through the panels, faint but unmistakable, came the sound of a scuffle. Chuck hurled himself at the unyielding wood and battered it with his useless club—and Engels spoke in the darkness again.

"Let her be, Mr. Carson," he said in his thick muffled bass. "She is being looked after. I'd confine myself to your own rather interesting situation, if I were you."

Griggs let fly again, a scarlet torrent of Limehouse profanity, but Engels' only reply was another chuckle, and they heard him move away from the door and back to his machine. Chuck sniffed all at once, blinking in the dark, and a cold sensation took him suddenly by the gullet.

"Engels!" he yelled. "You can't do that—they'll hang you, man!"

He stopped, coughing violently, and Griggs clutched him by the arm.

"Wot is it?" he gasped. "Wot's the b-bleeder playin' at now, by crimes?"

Chuck groaned. "Chlorine," he said indistinctly. "Salt and his battery fluid. Try and stand up—heavier than air——"

His voice died away—and from outside the door in the corridor, cutting the darkness like a knife, came a scream. Chuck Carson, fighting against the poisonous stuff that tore at his lungs, heard that scream and hung on to it. Somehow it held the faint, vitalizing notion of hope.

THEY had pounced on her, there in the passage outside—three or four men. Luise, writhing and twisting in the dark, heard them mutter to one another in Malay, and found, with a shock, that they

were the white-clad, soft-footed house-servants she had been used to all her life. She tried browbeating, desperately.

"Let me go!" she commanded. "Chugong, you would not dare——"

Chugong, the plump butler, clapped a hand over her mouth, and she was hurried up the sloping corridor and out into Kurt Engels' brightly lit study. The three Malays paused there, looking at one another.

"What now?" said one nervously, with a glance towards the door. Chugong, his hand still in position, stood quite still for a moment. Outside, the swelling roar from the village answered him, and he grinned.

"Listen!" he said. "It is as he foresaw—he is wise, this Engels *tuan*. They rise and kill the policeman. In a while—soon—comes the day, and we sweep the accursed breed into the sea. So says the priest."

He was very earnest and cocksure about it—too cocksure for his own immediate comfort, as it happened, for his fingers relaxed for an instant, and Luise bit him. She bit him hard and enthusiastically, and Chugong dropped her. Luise, without knowing why, without any particular hope or rhyme or reason, threw her head back and screamed, once and at the top of her lungs. Chugong clutched her again, and together they fell and rolled on the neat mats of the floor. There was a shout somewhere, and the trample of feet; sliding downwards into unconsciousness, Luise was doubtful whether the roaring in her ears was just that—or the echoing thunder of a shot.

VII

INSPECTOR DE VRIES said, "Devils, eh?"

He was sitting in the veranda of the Engels house, in full fighting kit, the perspiration streaming from his brow. The time was the next afternoon, and he had just come in from a little of that swift and un-

compromising justice for which he was celebrated—there had been a hanging down in the village there, and the body of the priest still swung, in all its hideous finery, from a tree. Out on the sunlit sea, a quarter-mile from shore, a Dutch destroyer made a grim and ominous blot against the blue; and Kappie's crony and rival, Makassar's military commandant, was abroad in the land with a couple of platoons of his soldiery. It was all extremely matter-of-fact and methodical and competent.

Nevertheless, there was a certain look in Kappie's eye.

"Devils, eh?" he rumbled. "After twenty years here, I shoot at devils—I, Kappie De Vries! Chuck, hand me a drink—there is a thought there I should like to wash away."

Chuck rose and officiated with the bottles. He was a trifle pallid still, and his voice was husky, but otherwise he was little the worse for Engels' chemical ingenuities. He grinned at Kappie.

"I wouldn't worry," he said. "He had me fooled worse than you, the son. Television's a rum concern to find operating in a place like this."

"Ja?" queried Kappie with a leer. "You think so? There are plenty more strange concerns than this television to be seen in the Indies, let me tell you, mynheer the doctor.

Not that it was not clever—*ja*, just a little too clever, Chuck. You men of books always overdo it and trip up. This Engels, for instance—

He gulped his drink, with never a glance over his shoulder at the locked room wherein lay what remained of the bearded man; he had chosen to die fighting, cornered like a rat in his burrow, rather than come out and face Kappie's eyes, the trial and the certain rope. Chuck pulled a grimace.

"Pity," he said. "I guess he tripped, all right—mostly when he picked me to experiment on. But I still don't get that,

Kappie—why me? It doesn't add up, way I look at it."

Kappie raised his eyebrows over the rim of his glass. "So?" he said in an odd voice. "You do not see, eh, Mynheer the Yankee? You do not see why this Engels desired to be rid of you. To drive you away, *ja*? For two reasons, friend Chuck; you are a white man for one, and think what a tale it would have been for the priest yonder—his devils causing a white *tuan* to flee? And there was another matter in that *schellum's* mind as well. A certain person, you comprehend—"

HE WINKED violently and Chuck colored. "Luise?" he said. "What's she got to do with it?"

Kappie shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of mock despair.

"I give you up," he proclaimed, "you romantic Americans! You are not aware, eh, that the little Luise inherits money—that she is rich? Or that Pereira yonder—Well, I say no more. He planned, this Engels, to marry them."

Chuck had been staring at him. "Hell," he said shortly, "that's screwy. Tony isn't that kind, I tell you."

Kappie De Vries snapped his fingers impatiently. "He is not, eh? Well, he is a decent boy. I say that for him, for all that he is a half-caste. But for all that, he might very well have married the pretty Luise, Chuck. Engels had a hold on him. You see, he was Engels'—son."

He finished his drink with an air of quiet triumph, while Chuck Carson continued to stare at him speechlessly. There was a sudden, familiar interruption—a crow of whiskey-throated mirth—and Griggs came skipping up the veranda steps.

"Wot-oh, wot-oh!" he chortled. "Wot's this I see—swillin' and guzzlin', the pair of yer, right in the middle of the afternoon. It's a shyme, that's what it is, a cryin' shyme, and I've 'alf a mind to report yer both to me Auntie Liz, so I 'ave."

He was helping himself with both hands as he spoke, and stood grinning all over his narrow little face, brimming glass in hand.

"Well, 'ere's to us!" he said. "Our noble selves, gents, and me most partic'lar. You told 'im, Kappie—if it 'adn't been for me, yer wouldn't none of yer 'ave so much to be a-chucklin' over? I s'pose you ain't said nothin' about *that*, eh, bein' a bloomin' narrer-minded copper. But it was me spotted it fust-off, wasn't it?"

Kappie nodded. "It was you, little man," he said. "Show me that affair again—"

GRIGGS fumbled in his lamentable pantaloons and dragged out a three-inch copper-and-porcelain gadget. "This 'ere," he observed judiciously, "is wot Jan calls an 'igh-frequency somethin'-or-other—I dunno what in 'ell 'e's talkin' about 'alf the time, since 'e's got this wireless bug in 'im. But I do know it ain't nothin' to be lyin' outside a doctor's tin bungalow, mister—an' that's where it was, four nights ago. I picked it up."

"What were you doing there?" Chuck demanded.

Griggs closed one eye. "Now, now!" he said. "Gettin' nasty, what? Well, if you gotta know, doc, if you really gotta know— Say!" he interrupted himself abruptly. "If I didn't forget it! I see a lady down the garden there—looked like she was waitin' for someone."

He broke off, staring, for Chuck Carson was gone; he had jumped out of his chair and vanished without a further word. Griggs looked at Kappie and shook his head solemnly.

"Gawd!" he observed. "'Ow it do dis-integrate, don't it, Inspector—this 'ere love business? Surprisin', what?"

Kappie frowned portentously. "What," he demanded, "were you doing around the doctor's hut that night, Griggs?"

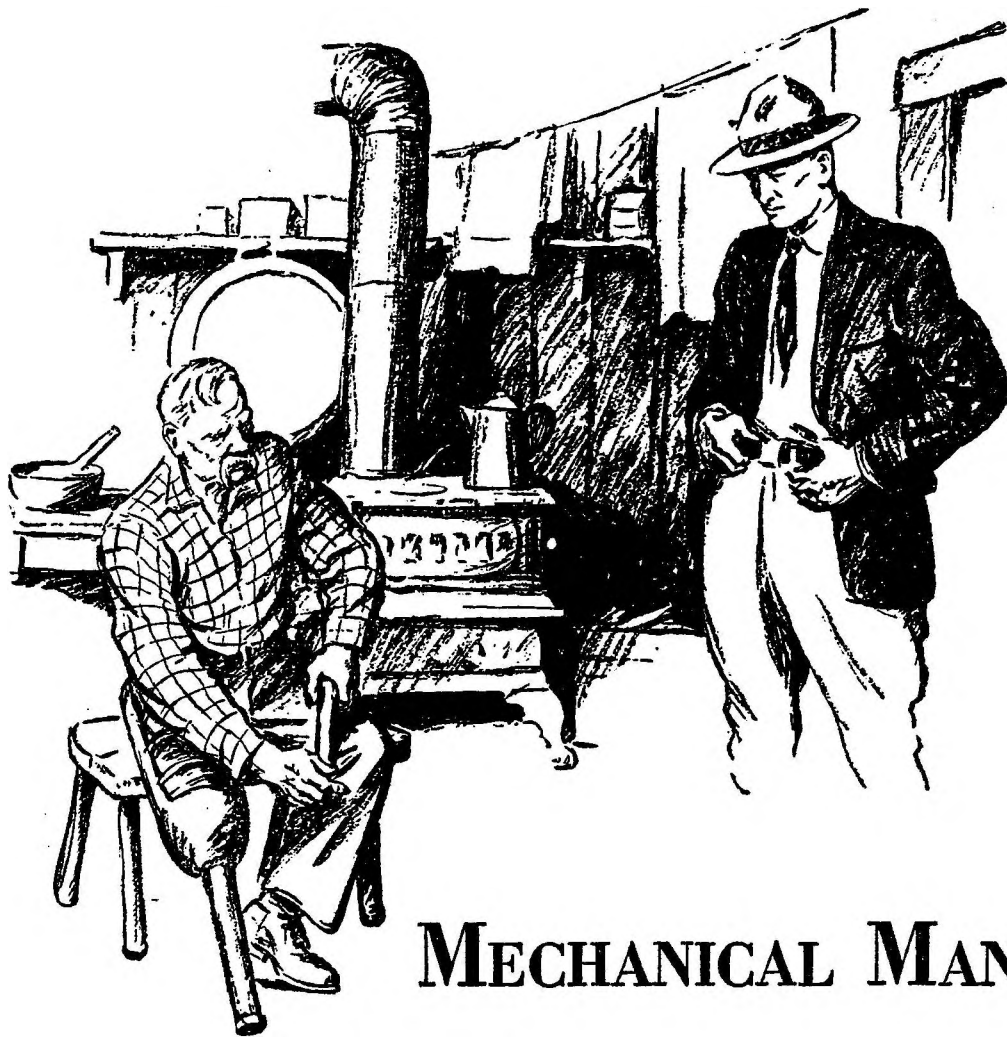
The cockney made a great show of being aggrieved. "That's it!" he complained. "That's it—pryin' into a gempman's urgent private affairs. Damme if ever I 'eard the like. But if you really gotta know, Kappie, same as I said, I was conductin' an experiment."

"Speak!" roared Kappie. "Or I will kill you, animal!"

Griggs obliged. "'E keeps some stuff, that there doctor," he confided, "for picklin' 'is bloomin' specimens, I reckon. It's about a 'undred percent above proof, by crimes, and," he licked his lips and then broke into a raucous crow of laughter again, "if you wanten see devils, Kappie—real devils—you just go take a snort or two o' that. You'll see 'em, an' there won't be any blinkin' television either. They'll come right down an' bite yer, so help me they will. And them," he said pompously, finishing his drink, "them's the kind of devils for me!"



Mechanical Men Don't Sleep and Don't Forget—and Don't Think!



MECHANICAL MAN

By CLIFFORD L. SWEET

Author of "Spare Time," "Streaks of Rust," etc.

OLD PEG MORTON awakened an hour earlier than usual that afternoon. For the first time that he could remember, the homely atmosphere of the lonely bridge-tender's shanty squatting beside the track failed to arouse any feeling of peace or contentment in his breast.

After strapping on the bit of hand-hewn pine which had given him his nickname, he clumped to the window and peered out. A

fine, cold mist was falling on the rails, shrouding the high trestle that spanned the Arroyo LeJos, a quarter mile west from the shanty.

Old Peg was aware that something out of the ordinary was going on out there. In a vague, uneasy way he sensed impending change in the air. For several days now, men had been working in the vicinity, drilling holes in the rail ends, connecting the joints with wire. Now there was a tall iron mast with a signal arm, barely visible

through the mist, on the far side of the arroyo. Another just like it guarded the approach from the east.

Baffled and ill at ease, Peg turned back from the window and pulled the coffee pot to the front of the stove. After he had made a pretense of eating his frugal meal, he reached for the club-like piece of pine standing in the corner. Roughly, it was beginning to resemble the wooden peg strapped to his right thigh. Running his hand down into his pants pocket, he drew out his knife. He opened the big blade and tested the edge tentatively against a calloused thumb. Then, instead of carving thin shavings from the spare leg as was his usual custom, he sat motionless for long intervals staring moodily at nothing at all.

"Come in," Old Peg called an hour later in answer to a smart rapping on the shanty door.

The door swung back. A brisk man in khaki and leather puttees came in. Old Peg recognized him at once. He was the signal engineer in charge of the goings-on at the bridge, and he hated him for no particular reason at all.

With a proprietary air that the other resented, the signal engineer swept some things from a chair and sat down.

"You won't need to patrol the bridge tonight—or any other night," he began with disconcerting abruptness. "Another man has taken your place."

PEG missed the glint of suppressed amusement in the other man's eyes. All he saw was a man wrapped up in mechanical things; a man who understood no need for delicacy in dealing with human emotion. In white-lipped silence, Peg gripped the wooden leg which lay crossed on his only knee. Gnarled hands trying to fit a large iron tap to the bottom of his peg trembled so that the chunk of iron slipped and clattered on the floor.

"This man I'm speaking of," the signal man chuckled, "is a mechanical man. He

never goes to sleep on the job or forgets."

Old Peg bristled. There was a spirited gleam in his eyes as he straightened from retrieving the nut off the floor. In his twenty-five years at Arroyo LeJos, not once had he fallen asleep on duty. And he had never forgotten to make his hourly patrol of the bridge to see that all was safe for the trains that pounded across the high trestle all through the night.

He said so in plain, outspoken language.

For the first time the signal engineer seemed to remember he was dealing with a human being and not some mechanical appliance.

"I hadn't thought of it before," he said, apologetically, "I guess you do hate to lose this job here, don't you?" His interest switched to Peg's hands. He sat watching the other screw the heavy iron tap onto the bottom of his wooden peg. When the feat was finally accomplished, he asked, "Why do you wear that tap on the end of your wooden leg?"

"Saves wear an' tear," Peg growled, none too graciously. "Without something to p'tect it, these cinders grind a stump down till it's too short in no time."

THE engineer nodded. "That's a clever idea," he said. "I suppose it is quite a job whittling one of those things out by hand."

Then the case-hardened look returned to his face.

"Sentiment and progress never mix," he said it defensively, as if he might be trying to justify his own actions. "Economy and safety are two mighty important things on a railroad. That is why those signals are out there now. They spell economy. Instead of a watchman's salary, hereafter the only expense to the company will be a little blue vitrol and water for the track batteries. A remarkable saving right there. And they are fool proof and dependable because they are operated by electricity. A current flows through the rails connecting the two signals. Anything that breaks that

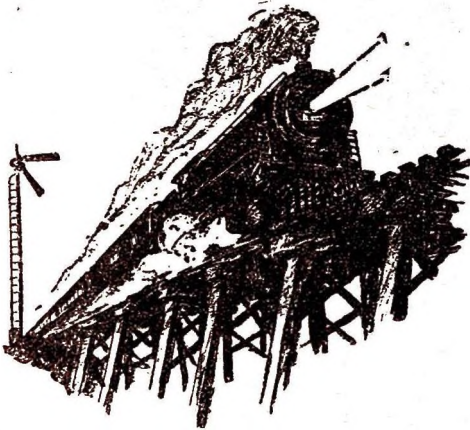
circuit, a broken rail, for instance, automatically sets the signals in stop position. All trains will be stopped and held off the bridge in case of trouble."

Peg didn't pay much attention to what the signal man was saying. The technical details of those signals were of mighty little interest to him.

When the signal man finally stopped talking and got up to go, he lingered in the doorway, as if there was something else he ought to say before he left. Glancing out at the mist-cloaked scene, he said, "I wouldn't get out in this weather tonight, if I was you. It really isn't necessary. The signals are working perfectly. Turn in and enjoy a night's sleep for a change."

Peg's answer was an inarticulate sound in his throat that sounded suspiciously like a snort.

The signal engineer stepped down out of the door and his eyes fell on the iron mast standing silent and grim between the shanty and the trestle.



"I'm catching the midnight express at LeJos," he said—LeJos Station was four miles west of Arroyo LeJos. "I'll have the pleasure of riding the first passenger train to test out the new mechanical man."

"Hm-mm-ph!" Old Peg snorted disdainfully after the receding form of the signalman. "When Joe Carson says quit watchin' here, I'll stop!"

And that, he reflected with sagging shoulders, would probably be tomorrow.

Joe Carson was the division superintendent. While he was known on the Desert division as a square shooter, that did not mean that he was a philanthropist when it came to spending company money on duplicate service.

OLD PEG mechanically filled his lantern with signal oil and screwed the burner back in the font. With bits of soft paper, carefully hoarded for the purpose, he polished the chimney until objects in the shanty mirrored themselves in its glistening surface. From time to time he would sigh heavily and stop polishing to stare for long moody intervals into the crystal-like globe.

It was nearing eleven o'clock and when he was getting ready to patrol the bridge ahead of the midnight express that Peg cocked his head on one side to listen. He had heard a sound uncommon to Arroyo LeJos. Or he thought he had. It could have been his imagination. He was jumpy as an old woman tonight and his stump of a leg was full of rheumy pains from the damp.

Stepping to the door, he cupped his hands to his eyes and peered long and earnestly in the direction of the trestle.

"Like lookin' in a well," he fretted a moment later. He was turning back to the warmth of the shanty when he heard a faint squeal, muffled and eerie. Stepping outside, he stalked out to the track, his wooden leg thudding softly on the cinders. Crouching down, he placed his ear against the rail.

A minute passed. A wolf's howl, long and quavering, came from down the arroyo rim. Then he felt rather than heard the unmistakable whine of metal against metal. Traveling along the cold steel, the sound reached old Peg's experienced senses telling him that somewhere a track bolt was being tightened or loosened.

Arising stiffly, his first impulse was to investigate the source of the sound. As he came erect his gaze met the unblinking

green eye atop the signal mast. Hot, rebellious anger instantly gripped him.

"Mechanical man!" he exploded, wrathfully shaking his fist at the light. "Don't sleep and don't forget—and don't think!" He swore at the unwinking green eye that seemed to be glaring right down into his soul. "Go on out there, why don't you?" he jeered. "See what's goin' on. It's your job, damn you! I'm goin' t' bed." With vast contempt Old Peg stamped angrily into the shanty.

Emerging one minute later, shame burning deep down to his toes, Peg Morton thrust one arm through the bail of his lantern and set out for the trestle. An old army overcoat put on to shut out the cold mist whipped around his wooden leg.

THE heavy iron tap on the bottom of his stub made solid contact with the sodden ties and added immeasurably to Old Peg's confidence as he paced the dizzy height. Midway of the long trestle, Peg slowed, filled with the growing knowledge that something uncanny was going on there. The unmistakable whine of a track bolt being twisted reached his ears again. Once there was a muffled curse, the clank of metal striking metal.

Old Peg pressed on. A moment later the yellow rays of his lantern fell upon two cloaked figures kneeling over a rail joint. One was using a track wrench, the other gripped a bar.

"Howdy, Stumpy!" A man wearing a wide-brimmed hat glanced up, exposing a coarse face slit by a leering grin. "Ain't this a hell of a time to git called out to fix track?"

Peg unconsciously fell back a step from the evil glitter in the other's eyes.

"Who are you?" he asked suspiciously.

The man under the big hat winked at his partner who looked to Peg like a Mexican.

"Why, we're track snipes," he said, affecting surprise. "We're here to fix a low joint."

Old Peg drew himself up to his full

height. He wasn't fooled by any such pretense. No one, unless prompted by evil, would loosen a rail in the face of a passenger train without flag protection. Peg denounced them as impostors and ordered them off the trestle.

The big man paused, the wrench slack in his swarthy hands. "Now, Stumpy," he began, placatingly, "jest take it easy. Don't get to havin' notions."

The swarthy man nudged his companions, "Keeka him off the bridge, Pecos. Perhaps the old fool has a gun."

"Hell, he's plumb harmless!" Pecos grunted, swinging his weight again on the wrench.

Old Peg, resembling an eagle about to pounce, again ordered the pair to leave the trestle. He started forward to enforce the order.

IT WAS then Pecos discarded all semblance of friendliness and bellowed, "Git back there you old fool! Don't make me kick you off this bridge."

Old Peg shivered and stopped. It was a hundred feet to the bottom of the arroyo. While Pecos blocked his path, the Mexican finished knocking the bolts and angle bars from the rail joint. They had previously drawn the spikes the length of the rail, Peg noticed.

"Don't make any more mistakes," Pecos warned, his evil grin betraying his true nature. "There's a hundred grand in the express car on the midnight flier tonight. We aim to git it. And we don't aim t' let no one-legged gent spoil our plans. When Shorty gets that rail tore out, we'll retire to the bottom of the gulch to wait for our train." He chuckled at Peg's utter helplessness.

The latter, listening in mortal dread for the first warning sound of the express, glanced anxiously in the direction from whence the ill-fated train must come. In doing so, his gaze came in contact with the pencil of light slanting away from the top of the signal mast. Hope stirred in his

breast. Those signals he had been despising all evening——

Old Peg's mind was in a whirl. What was it the signal engineer had said about a broken rail? He racked his brain trying to recall the exact words of the engineer. Something about a broken circuit—throwing the signals red. That was it! He cast a contemptuous glance at the man prying the rail. The rail was not broken, he knew, but it would amount to the same thing. The instant they tore the rail out they would break the circuit. The signals would instantly flash red and stop the express!

Peg's elation must have given him away for Pecos spat into the black void over the side of the restle and grunted.

"We know all about them signals," he said. "They won't hinder our plans no more'n you will. We know how to handle 'em."

Peg's mind was torn between a desire to believe the other was lying and fear that he might be telling the truth.

The Mexican, his shoulder straining under the end of his bar, swore wickedly in Spanish.

"Why all thees talk? We mus' move this rail before the train she come."

"Right, Pedro." Keeping one eye on the bridge watchman, whom he treated as a minor menace, Pecos turned to help his partner. As he grasped the track bar the lonely wail of the midnight's whistle cut clear and sweet across the desert. The sound spurred the evil pair to frantic haste.

"Steady!" Pecos cautioned. "Don't shove it more than four inches. If we break them bond wires the dam' signals will flop red—stop the train before she hits the bridge."

Old Peg stood rooted to the ties. The bloody thieves were wise to the signals. They were leaving the bond wires intact! Peg shivered. The first intimation the engineer would have of trouble, would be when he felt the wheels hit the spot where the rail was out of line! Peg hurled a

contemptuous oath at the signal standing silent and impotent in the face of impending disaster. He gripped his lantern bail with desperate resolve. The instant the headlight of the express came in sight, he would start swinging his lantern in arm-length circles—the washout sign. And pray the engineer was looking.

Inch by inch the rail slewed out of line. When it was far enough to deflect wheels from their proper course, yet not enough to break the bond wires, and the circuit, Pecos lurched to his feet.

"That's enough," he panted. "We ain't got no time to lose, 'less we want to git tapped up here. C'mon."

His gaze fell upon Peg's lantern.

"Say, you danged old bat! Throw that lantern away. Heave it over!"



Peg's fingers clamped tighter around the lantern bail.

Seeing nothing but defiance on the watchman's face, Pecos let out an enraged growl and hurled himself at the other.

Hardly knowing what he was doing, Peg threw all his blasted hope into a despairing gesture. He swung the lantern in a wide arc, brought it crashing down at the other's head. Pecos saw it coming, sidestepped and took a glancing lick on the side of the head and shoulder. The blow extinguished the flame and all but the bail left the old Peg's tingling fingers. Dazed but only slightly hurt, Pecos lunged wickedly again at Peg, missed a tie with one foot and plunged screaming overside into darkness.

The Mexican saw his partner go to his death. With a murderous oath he leaped

at Peg, bent on revenge. Peg was still clutching the useless lantern bail. He stepped backward to elude the Mexican and his peg leg came down between the rail and the heavy bond wires. He jerked frantically to free his leg. His efforts only entangled him the more. The big tap on the bottom held him fast.

Trapped, he threw up his hands and took a smashing blow in the face. Toppling backward, the heartrending scene at Arroyo LeJos ended in oblivion.

THE midnight express ground to a screeching stop on the brink of Arroyo LeJos. The mechanical man had performed its task well. A long and three short ear-splitting blasts from the whistle sent the flagman hotfooting it back to protect the rear of the train.

The conductor, seeing the red signal guarding the approach to the trestle, swore softly and climbed back up the step. He stuck his head into the door of the private car from which he had just emerged and yelled, "Hey, Durkee! This mechanical man you've been blowing about has gone haywire. Come out and see if you can fix the confounded thing."

Durkee, the signal engineer who had installed the signals, was on his feet in a jiffy. "Haywire, says you!" he exploded. "If it's red, you can bet there's something wrong at the trestle."

He followed the conductor down the step, old Jim Carson, the super, hard at his heels.

The three of them, walking close to keep in the narrow ball of light from the conductor's lantern, trod out onto the mist-cloaked trestle. Well out from the approach, the lantern light gleamed dully on a polished object.

"What's that?" Jim Carson asked, pointing.

The signal engineer was in the lead.

"Don't know," he said. "But something unusual, to be sure." His gaze fell upon the end of a rail pushed out of line. He

shot a quick, appraising glance at the damage, then threw up his shoulders. "Just as I thought," he said, importantly. "Someone has loosened the angle bars and deliberately attempted to wreck us. Good thing I had these signals working tonight."

"Where's Peg Morton?" Joe Carson asked, a little out of breath.

"Great guns!" the signal engineer cried. The next instant he was down on the ties flat on his stomach. He grabbed a piece of pine with a bright object on the end of it and dangling in black space. "Lend a hand," he grunted.

The conductor dropped down beside the signal man and reached over the ends of the ties. A second later, Joe Carson, grunting from the pressure of the ties against his protruding stomach, was doing likewise.

The porter came trotting out of the mist, stopped short with bulging eyes at the sight of three of his superior officers groveling on the ties.

"Mose!" yelled the conductor. "Go get me the clinker hook. Beat it you black rascal!"

Mose sprinted off the trestle hitting every other tie with an agility gained from much night flagging.

A moment later a brawny figure in overalls, a flaring torch in one hand, a clinker hook from the engine in the other, hove onto the scene.

It was but the work of a moment then to insert the hook in old Peg's belt and haul him back to safety.

Jim Carson released the old watchman by slashing off the tail of the army overcoat, the only thing that had prevented Peg from following Pecos to the bottom of the arroyo.

"Carry him back to my car, boys," said Jim Carson.

When they started to pick up the unconscious watchman, his peg leg was entangled in a bond wire.

"Hold it," Jim Carson said, and bending down, he unwound the stiff wire.

When he stood up again, he looked at the signal man who was loudly telling arriving members of the crew how his signals had saved their lives.

"The signa's and this old man," said Jim Carson, shaken by the narrow escape from tragedy. "Without old Peg, your signals would have failed completely. The men who loosened this rail evidently knew how the signals worked. They loosened the rail but they were careful to leave the bond wires intact. By the looks of things, I'd say Peg got his leg between the wires and the rail and in some manner broke the wires."

"Oh, yeah?" The signal man started to protest, but Jim Carson shut him up.

"Look at this peg leg if you don't believe me. It's sawed half in two by a bond wire."

The signal man's ego was punctured. At that instant a well-defined moan drew all eyes farther out toward the center of the trestle.

They moved in a body and a hundred feet out they found the Mexican. One leg hung down between the ties, the side of his head was blood soaked where he had evidently struck the rail when he fell. He stirred, drew his leg up and staggered to his feet.

"Did it run over me?" he chattered. "Did it—"

"No," said the conductor. "You're not hurt. Who are you?"

"Pecos and thees other man—the peg leg one, they both went over the side!" The Mexican trembled violently.

"Scared crazy," said the conductor.

"Bring him along and get back to Peg, boys," Jim Carson said. "He's hurt. Carry him back to my car."

Old Peg was still unconscious when they picked him up and started off with him. The movement, however, acted as a restorative to his tough old fibre.

"I don't think so damned much of those fool proof signals of yours," Peg heard Jim Carson telling the signal engineer. "But by the time Old Peg gets too old to watch at Arroyo LeJos you may have them perfected so they can be trusted alone."

Something happened to Peg right there. He jerked his feet violently, freed them from the hands that carried him. With a mighty effort, he heaved himself upright and shook a steadying hand from his shoulder. "What's the idea of carrying me around like a baby?" he growled. "I guess I've walked these ties enough to know how it's done."

In our next issue

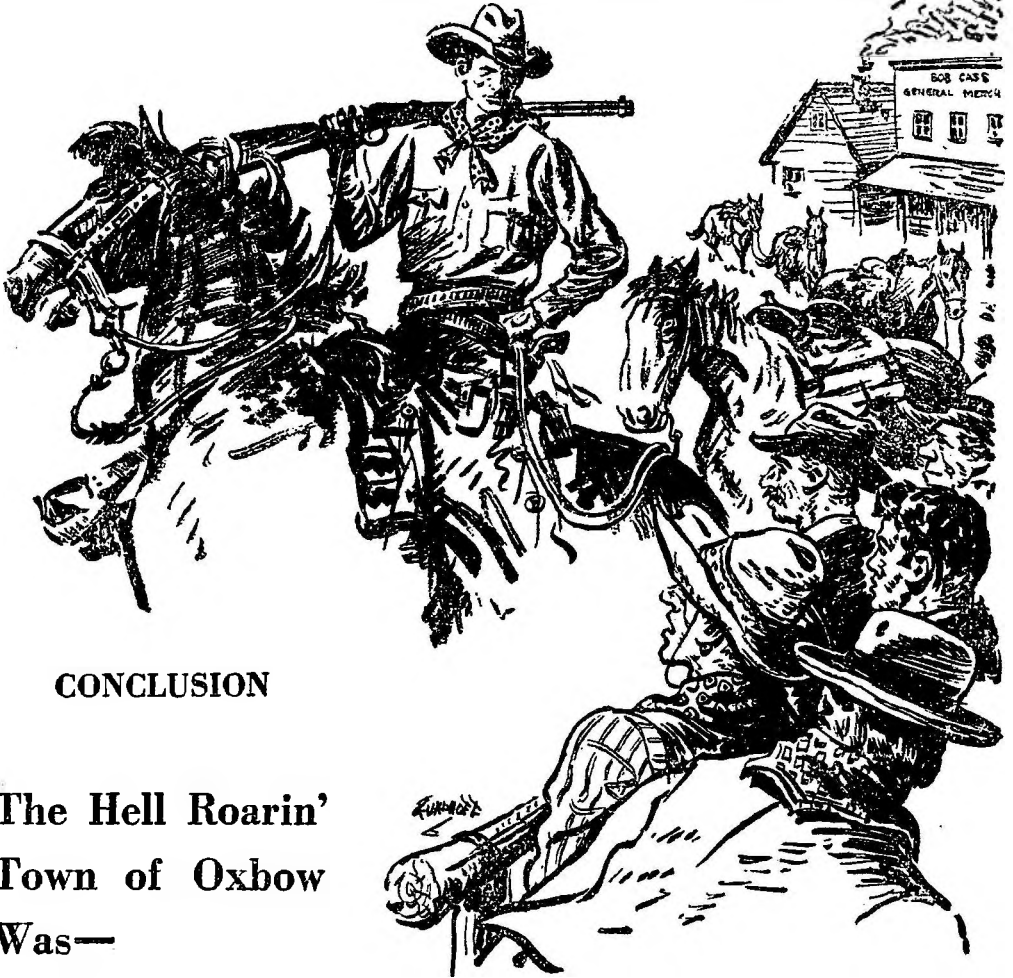
BREAD UPON THE WATERS

An adventure of the Major—who puts stirrings of the old diamond game

by

L. Patrick Greene

*"I Done Learned That You Can Kill a Man, but His Wagon
Jest Keeps Rollin' Along"*



CONCLUSION

The Hell Roarin'
Town of Oxbow
Was—

DUE FOR A HANGIN'

By CADDO CAMERON

Author of "Them Damned Twins," "At the End of a Texas Rope," etc.

CHAPTER X

"THEN I'LL KILL YOU"

THE old trail out of the west had, during Oxbow's relatively short but remarkably full life, dropped many amazing things into her lap without warning and with no apologies.

But, according to statements made and profanely sworn to by the oldest sober citizen, never had the trail done 'em the dirt it did about two hours before sundown on this bright and hitherto peaceful day, when a very large young man astride a giant black horse rode down the middle of Main Street leading another horse—saddled but riderless—it in turn leading

by a rope knotted in its tail a second horse with an empty saddle on its back, and so on until twenty-one saddled but riderless ponies were counted by the popeyed spectators. At the tail end of the procession rode an extremely tall man on a high and lanky roan, a rifle in the crook of his left arm and a stern look on his long bony face.

Belial walked with his customary equine swagger and Solomon seemed to be his normal business-like self, but most of the riderless ponies were either fretful or dejected in appearance. They had been pushed hard on the trail by the Rangers and their Mexican friends to within a few miles of Oxbow so as to make them easier to control when Badger and Blizzard took charge of them unassisted. Moreover, these saddle ponies were strangers to travel in this formation and may have felt the disgrace of it.

At any rate, one old man said to another on the sidewalk, "Damned if them pore nags don't look like dead men's ponies to me."

Before this unique procession had traversed half the length of Main Street, the sidewalks and hitchracks were lined with men and some women, too, and scarcely a second story window was without its spectator. At first, very little was said; but the shock of surprise soon wore off and a murmur of voices rippled up and down the street, rapidly increasing in volume until it approximated the noise of a crowd viewing a circus parade.

Blizzard had his ears attuned to a certain note which he hoped and expected to hear and presently he caught it.

Said a man on the sidewalk, "Why, by dogies! Yander's Bud Stone's claybank."

And another, "Damned if there ain't Jimmy Polk's niggah hoss."

And still another, "I'd know that there Braunfels saddle of Tom Watson's anywhere."

Thus it went until the sergeant grimly swore to himself that every horse in the string must have been recognized—exactly

what he had in mind when planning this grandstand play. He knew that the owners of these ponies were small frogs in the outlaw puddle, too numerous for him and Badger to handle and too small to justify calling a company of Rangers; and he was convinced that by exposing them as they would be exposed before he finished this performance and later, he hoped, wiping out their leaders, they'd scatter and run for their lives—so to speak. After all and in spite of appearances, there were more good men than badmen in Oxbow and he figured the good ones would be encouraged to get busy when they saw two strangers making fools of the supposedly invincible toughs.

BLIZZARD was listening for something else and it wasn't long before he heard it.

A voice from the sidewalk, "Howdy, Badger! What you got there?"

"Vigilantes' ponies!" boomed the big Ranger, loud enough for half the town to hear. "Twenty-one of 'em. If you don't believe it, Jake, jest count 'em."

The word "vigilantes" struck the crowd with telling force. Those who heard distinctly, silenced others who did not and the noise level quickly sank to a murmur punctuated by oaths.

But Jake Vinson was a buffalo hunter who didn't care two whoops about vigilantes, and besides he was half tight. "What you aim to do with 'em?" he thundered. "Auction 'em off?"

Badger reined Belial to a halt. The ponies stopped in an irregular line, some disposed to make trouble but too tired to do it, others reconciled to their fate. With a wide grin on his good-natured face, the young Ranger looked up and down both sides of the street before answering.

"That's a mighty fine idee, Jake," he said a moment later, "but I reckon I'd better talk it over with Webb Slayne if I can find him."

Badger had no more than finished speak-

ing before the crowd on the Wagonyard porch opened to let a man pass through. The tall marshal came from the door and strode unhurriedly into the street. He stopped six feet from the Ranger and folded his arms.

"Well, you done found him," he remarked quietly. "Talk."

Badger waved a big hand in the general direction of the ponies. "They're yourn, Webb, and I'll be tickled to git shed of 'em."

Slayne scarcely glanced at the horses, but he looked hard at Blizzard who was coming toward him. His handsome blond face showed no emotion, merely the tiny lines that betrayed deep thought.

He waited for the sergeant, nodded to him, and asked coldly, "Where'd you rannies get these ponies?"

Blizzard answered just as coldly, "At Linchpin Springs. They belong to a gang that was stickin' up a Parker and Bosch train."

By this time a crowd had gathered about the three men in the street, and many eloquent glances were exchanged when the sergeant made this blunt statement. He saw Sandy Fraser standing slightly to one side, surrounded by several of the older heads, all looking very serious.

And leaning carelessly against a porch post in front of Chapa's store less than fifty feet away he saw John Smith, an elegant figure in a black Prince Albert and Stetson and boots of fine leather, smiling as if vastly amused and dying to burst out laughing.

Although Slayne was doing a first-rate job of hiding the fact, Blizzard would have sworn that the last thing Webb wanted right then was a public discussion of the vigilantes' horses. Instead of firing a dozen questions about what happened to the train, or how they got hold of the ponies and why they brought them to Oxbow, he simply told them to take the animals to the corral.

Turning away, he added curtly, "Then I want to talk to you private—savvy?"

"Don't make a particle of difference to me where I talk," retorted the sergeant icily. "We'll be here tonight and gone to-morrer."

WEBB SLAYNE pushed his way through the crowd and strode off toward the jail without once looking back or speaking to anyone.

All eyes were upon the Rangers as they sat their horses in the middle of the street with the ponies strung out behind them, and every face beseeched them to tell their story; but little Jake Vinson was the only man who dared to ask a question.

He burrowed his way to Badger's stirrup, stared owlshly up at the big Ranger for a moment, then growled, "D'you mean to set there baldfaced and tell me that you done wiped out twenty-one men and took their ponies off'n 'em?"

Badger pulled a sober face and otherwise contrived to look as modest as it was possible for him to look. He glanced over his audience a bit backwardly, and drawled, "Well sah, Jake, I never was no hand to brag, but—"

Jake interrupted in a loud voice. "Stop right there! Twenty-one men a-wallerin' in blood. I cain't stand to listen to you no more. Pile off. I'll buy."

A burst of laughter and yells started the ponies to fidgiting in a way that threatened to get them tangled. Sandy Fraser and a dozen other volunteers went along the line straightening them out. Blizzard allowed they'd better hit for the corral before the horses got rested up enough to go to raising Cain. The volunteers accompanied the procession, reinforced by other men who no doubt figured there still was a chance that they'd hear the story behind this strange performance.

As they were passing the Aherne and Boston store, Blizzard looked hard at the second story windows and was rewarded by a glimpse of a golden head and a beautiful white face—just a glimpse, for Roma closed the drapes quickly. And the sergeant

made a little bet with himself that yonder was a woman who had things to think about.

When the ponies were corralled Blizzard made inquiries and learned that Sandy Fraser had bought the business from Pop Henderson's married daughter, who lived near Concho and attended her father's funeral. He accordingly took the old saloon-man outside to the crippled wagon where they could talk unmolested, for he had some important things to say to Sandy. He had long since decided that Fraser was a square man and one who could be trusted to use his head.

After a casual preamble, Blizzard came to the point. "If you'll tell yo' corral-boss to make shore and recollect who-all comes after them ponies, betcha that by the time the last one of 'em is gone you'll know a heap more 'bout this here Oxbow country than you do now."

GAZING off toward the northern horizon, old Sandy ran a thoughtful hand down the side of his long jaw. "Wouldn't be at all surprised, and if you was to talk a leetle—chances is I'd listen close and wind up a-knowin' less'n I do now. But go ahead."

So the sergeant placed his cards on the table face up, or rather—most of them. As a reason for the presence of himself and Badger in Oxbow, he regaled old Sandy with substantially the same story he told to Lafe Tucker; and with respect to the captive ponies he told the approximate truth.

He concluded by saying, "We're a-drawin' down good money for gittin' shot at and beat up, but we're due to gether a fat reward when we salivate this gang complete and we're a-fixin' to do it."

The old-timer twisted the nigh side of his mustache, and drawled, "Knowin' what I did 'bout you two wildcats, I suspicioned somethin' like that fust time I laid eyes on you. Got any idee who's a-bossin' this here gang?"

"A pussonal friend of yourn."

Sandy Fraser sat up very straight. "Huh? Hell!"

"Yep."

"Don't believe it! What's his name?"

Blizzard glanced at the sun as if he figured it was about time to go. "Names don't mean nothin' much in Texas. I done knowed a whole slew of fellas that shed they names ever so often jest like a snake sheds his skin. So it don't never pay to be shore 'bout a name. More'n likely this here pussonal friend of yourn has got hisself a new name sence the last time I talked to the cuss."

Old Sandy's only comment was a blistering oath.

Blizzard arose and grinned down at the old man. "Reckon I better go see can I make shore 'bout yo' friend's name. It'd be a damned shame to shoot or knife a fella and then find out he was somebody else."

Sandy Fraser creaked to his feet, shaking his head as if to clear it, but he didn't ask another question. Moreover, he failed to mention the topic of their recent conversation while walking back to town with the Rangers.

As they were passing the Prairie, Badger paused at the door and looked inside. "Don't see Goldie nowheres. Wonder how she's a-makin' out."

The old-timer promptly told him what



he wanted to know. "Goldie's a-makin' out right well, I'd say. She told Louie Bloch to go to hell and went to live with Chapa and her dad. Mighty fine folks, Chapa and old Federico."

The Rangers both declared that they were glad to hear it.

"So was I," continued Sandy, "but ever sence it happened I been worried as hell 'bout Chapa and the old man. Louie Bloch is bad and he's been talkin' some, mostly after dark."

"But Webb Slayne is buildin' a loop for Chapa," stated Blizzard, "and Louie knows better'n to lock hawns with Webb."

"Mmmm-huh," muttered the old-timer. "Webb allus gives Webb a powerful big helpin' fust, then if they's a smidgin left he gives it to his friends right charitable-like."

In Blizzard's estimation, Sandy's somewhat cryptic statement contained food for thought. Aloud he said, "And don't forgit John Smith."

"No sah-ree! Don't *never* forgit John Smith."

Of course they went to the Sand Hill bar to wash the alkali out of their throats, but Blizzard didn't stay long. While Badger and the old-timer were swapping lies, he drifted through the back door and around to the large wagon shed and warehouse behind the Aherne and Boston store some distance down the street. When riding past with the ponies he had noticed six wagons standing near the shed — large wagons of the type preferred by Parker & Bosch and Lohman & Woertz; and he proposed to have a look at those wagons in broad daylight, regardless of who might see him fooling around them.

THE wagons were painted steel gray with red running-gear and their heavy tarpaulin covers bore the Aherne and Boston name with a number beneath it. The first thing he did was to lean his rifle against a front wheel and crawl under a wagon. It didn't take him long to find that which he had expected to find—points where the painter who applied the red paint had failed to cover the original black, bright blue beds and black running-gear being the colors with which this type of

wagon invariably came from the factory. Blizzard had positive knowledge regarding these factory colors, having received the information from A. Staacke, agent for the manufacturers, while in San Antonio making a preliminary investigation of the case. When he crawled from beneath the wagon and picked up his Winchester, his bony face wore a look of stern satisfaction.

He next went to work on the tires, patiently going from wagon to wagon and subjecting each of them to a minute inspection. Finally, at the nigh hind wheel of the fifth wagon he stopped, studied its track in the dusty yard, then thoughtfully ran his palm over an irregularity on the surface of its wide tire—a poor job of welding. He swore comfortably to himself. Here was the tire whose tracks he had discovered in Dead Horse Canyon!

While standing there looking at the tire and thinking things over, he heard light steps coming from the street and turned quickly. John Smith was coming and Blizzard was glad to see him. He calculated he could talk to the gambler for quite a while and not waste a minute of his time.

John's fine slender features were composed as usual, but a dry grin played at the corners of his rather full lips and there was a mirthful twinkle in his eyes.

He said, "If a man didn't know you as well as I do, Blizzard, he might think you were a tenderfoot who'd never seen a freighter's wagon before."

The lanky sergeant shifted his rifle from one arm to the other, and drawled, "Maybeso. And if a fella savvied you like I do, John Smith, he'd figger you been standin' 'longside that there stack of powder cans inside the store over yander a-peekin' through a back winder so's to watch every move I made. But most folks don't savvy you wuth a damn."

John Smith laughed. He took off his hat and ran a slim brown hand through his sliky hair. "You win," he exclaimed in the best of humor. "But it's a wonder to me

that somebody hasn't shot out those cat's eyes of yours before this."

"It's been tried more'n once."

"I can believe that," declared the gambler. "By the way—wagons interest me, too. Did you learn anything new about 'em while you were lookin' these over so thoroughly?"

BLIZZARD glanced thoughtfully down at his rifle, then looked John Smith squarely in the eye.

His voice was low but hard, and his words fell slowly, "Yes sah, I done l'arned that you can kill a man but his wagon jest keeps a-rollin' on."

The gambler's face sobered instantly. He looked, perhaps, ten years older; a man with a load of responsibilities riding his trim shoulders, a burden which he ordinarily kept hidden beneath a jovial and in-souciant exterior.

He said quietly, "In this country that's somethin' worth knowing. How did you find it out?"

A quick smile lighted his face. He added, "You can see that the customs of the West don't keep me from askin' questions when I want to know somethin'."

Blizzard hitched his weight to one leg. Whenever he did that he lost twelve inches in height because the knee supporting the load was inclined to bend backward, and his lean body warped and sagged in unexpected places as if he were about to come uncoupled.

"Yes, sah," he drawled lazily, "and they ain't nary a custom that can make me tell you what you're a-hankerin' to know onless I'm a-mind to do it. But I will say that lookin' these here wagons over close has set me to thinkin'."

John Smith nodded, an amused light in his eye. He hooked the fingers of both hands in the lower pockets of his brocaded vest, thus opening the long skirts of his Prince Albert. The sergeant saw that he was wearing two guns.

"Thinkin' about what?" asked the gam-

bler. "Another question that won't draw an answer, I suppose."

Blizzard solemnly glanced at the wagons. Afterwards he looked closely at John Smith's heavy, silky hair, so much of which hung below his hat.

"I been thinkin'," he casually replied, "that if me and Badger was to lift yo' hair, I know where we could swap it even-up for one of them wagons loaded with a outfit that'd set us up to housekeepin' on the buff'ler range in grand style. That's what I been thinkin'."

The gambler listened politely, displaying neither surprise nor consternation. "I'm hurt, deeply hurt," he said calmly, "to think that my scalp isn't worth more than that. Didn't the—ah-h—lady offer you somethin' to boot?"

Blizzard snorted to hide his feelings. He had pulled a surprise that backfired a-plenty. How in hell did this slick sport know that a woman was behind the dirty work?

Aloud he spoke as imperturbably as the gambler himself, "Not *me*, and I ain't never give her no chance to talk private to Badger. She don't pack no diamonds in sight, but somehow or other I got a idee that she's done cached a whole slew of 'em and I wouldn't be surprised if Badger could git some of 'em off'n her."

John Smith inclined his head ever so slightly, a gesture at once courteous and crafty. "I'm sure he could, for he's a charmin' fellow. I'll buy if you'll drink."

"I'll drink."

THEY had their drink, cut Badger out of a bunch of hilarious men who had him and old Sandy, backed up against the bar, and set out for the hotel to wash up for supper. A moment after leaving the saloon, they saw Louie Bloch and another man come from Chapa's store and walk diagonally across the street. The Rangers and John Smith exchanged glances.

He said quietly, "I'd like to speak to Chapa before we go to the hotel."

"And I'm clean outa smokin' again," drawled Badger.

"Let's go," curtly said Blizzard.

THEY found the girl slumped in a chair near a back window. When she looked up her eyes were brimming and tears clung to her smooth olive cheeks. She tried to return their greetings, but her voice faltered and she buried her face in her hands.

John Smith placed a hand on the back of her chair and bent over her. "Estrella," he said tenderly, "please tell us what's the matter."

The girl shook her bowed head. Light from the window glistened on her coal black hair which now hung in confusion about her shoulders. "I—I don't want to tell you," she sobbed into her hands. "It's no-nothing."

The gambler's slender fingers tightened on the chair. He said softly but firmly, "We know it's Bloch. You *must* tell us what he did."

At mention of the dive-keeper's name Chapa seemed to take hold of herself. She looked up into John Smith's troubled face. Fierce anger burned through her tears.

"Yes it's that man Bloch," she exclaimed in Spanish, continuing in the same tongue, "but I did not intend to tell you because—because, well——" She looked away, through the window.

"Because of what I might do to him?" suggested the gambler. "Go ahead, please."

"No, John!" she cried softly. "Because of what Bloch and his men might do to— to you."

He touched her shoulder briefly, then sat down on a box beside her. "Thank you, Estrella. Now please tell us what Bloch has been doing to you."

The girl turned from the window and talked to all three of the men, rather than to Smith alone. "He has been threatening me ever since I let Goldie come to live with us, but I thought he would not dare to harm us. I have changed my mind now. I

know he is mean enough to do anything. Just now he told me that if I did not turn that poor little girl out of my home tonight, my father will be hung like Señor Henderson was."

John Smith's voice didn't change in the slightest, low, soothing and very tender. He asked her, "Did Bloch molest you personally?"

"No——" She stopped suddenly, looking down at her hands.

A bit of steel crept into the gambler's tone. "He did! What did he do?"

"Yes! Yes!" she burst out in excited Spanish. "He grabbed my arm and jerked me around and shook me and said he would smash my pretty face and show me how he handles his women. That's what he did!"

John Smith sat perfectly still for a moment, gazing at the floor, then he arose. All his movements were calm and unhurried. With an apology to Chapa and a casual remark about the evening being warm, he took off his coat and hung it on a nail in the wall. Badger watched him closely, looked hard at his face. He sensed that the man had changed—changed so completely as to be an entirely different person, but there wasn't the slightest evidence of it on the surface of him. Knowing for a fact that Smith was in a red rage, the Ranger swore to himself that never before had he seen a poker face like that one.

Blizzard spoke up, "Miss Estrella, if it's a fair question—how come you didn't go straight to the marshal fust time Louie pestered you?"

"Oh, but I did!" she answered in Spanish. "And Señor Slayne was most angry. He said that he would run that man Bloch out of town, but it might take a little time to do it. Señor Slayne was very nice, indeed."

The sergeant growled something under his breath and picked up his rifle.

Again John Smith went and stood with a hand on the back of her chair, bend-

ing over her. "Close the store and go home, girl," he said softly, "and I don't want you or your father or Goldie to worry any more about Louie Bloch."

He smiled for the first time since they came in and found Chapa in tears. "And tell Don Federico that I'll be around after supper for chess," he stated in Spanish. "The last time we played he mated me in forty-one moves and I want my revenge."

The calm assurance in his voice and his appealing smile worked wonders. The girl brightened noticeably and walked part way to the door with them, her hand on his arm.

As they were leaving she murmured scarcely above a whisper, "I know where you are going and I know I cannot stop you, so I am very, very sorry I told you anything."

John Smith took off his hat. His large, brilliant eyes looked deep into hers for an instant as if he were trying to read the thoughts that lived behind them.

He said in courtly Spanish, "My Estrella, I only wish you would tell me everything."

Before the three men had gone far toward the Prairie, the gambler stopped and quietly told the Rangers, "I'll see you boys at supper."

"Oh, shore," said Badger.

"Calc'late we'll be there all right," drawled Blizzard.

Neither made a move to turn back toward the hotel.

"Then I'll leave you here," said John Smith, starting away. "So 'long."

But the Rangers fell into step, one upon either side of him.

Again he stopped. "This is my affair."

"Shore is," said Badger.

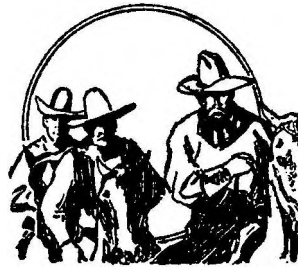
"That's what I allowed," drawled Blizzard.

"Then we understand each other," observed John Smith. "Come on."

Since this was one of the few quiet periods in the day of a frontier saloon, the three men found the Prairie practically deserted. A dismal twilight closed down

upon them when they walked in, for the lamps had not yet been lighted. Bottles and glasses on the backbar at their left had a dull and disconsolate look. Scattered about the room were several decrepit tables with rough board tops and legs askew. Near the right wall a drunk sat at one of these tables, sleeping with his head on his arms.

TWO beefy bartenders stood behind the bar, leaning their elbows upon it and eyeing the newcomers with frank hostility. At a table opposite the rear end of the bar sat Louie Bloch facing the door, straddling a chair with his heavy arms crossed on its back and his fat legs hooked around it. Near him sat a small man whose sharp, vicious face was not improved by his colorless eyebrows and the yellow hair that straggled about his ears. Badger recalled having seen that fellow walking the street with two guns tied down on his thighs, carrying himself like a bad man on a hunt for trouble.



Blizzard stopped just inside the door and moved to the right so as to place a blank wall at his back. Somehow he seemed to fit into this gloomy place—a lean, hard and dusty figure with a long rifle in the crook of his left arm, his right hand at its grip. Badger angled across the room to the right wall, halting beside an open window. He stood with his big hands hooked in his belt, convenient to the six-shooters that hung low upon either thigh. The big Ranger rarely assumed this belligerent pose, but he now did it for the effect upon those bartenders whom he figured to be plenty bad.

Of course Bloch and his men saw that trouble was brewing, and they behaved as if they were ready for it. One of the bartenders moved several feet down the bar, no doubt to where his shotgun lay, and the other dropped one hand beneath the bar. The blond gunman shifted his chair so that the table was beside him and far enough away not to interfere with his movements.

John Smith walked leisurely down the center of the room toward Bloch. His arms hung at his sides and in that dim light the sleeves of his fine linen shirt looked very white against an otherwise black garb. Not a word was spoken by anyone.

The only sounds that arose inside the place were the gurgling snores of the drunken man and the click of the gambler's heels.

He stopped six feet from Louie's table. "Bloch," he said in his usual calm voice, "you've insulted my friend Miss Rios and threatened to hang her father, so you owe them an apology."

One of Louie's arms slid slowly from the back of the chair and came to rest across his thigh. Badger saw this and hoped that John wouldn't take chances with the man, for he was fast as hell with that belly gun.

John Smith stood at ease with arms folded, waiting.

Bloch's thick lips twisted into a shape that was more of a grimace than a grin. He retorted in a husky, guttural voice, "Pretty boy, I don't apologize for a damned thing I do. That greaser friend of yours made off with one of my best girls, and by God I won't stand for it!"

Again John Smith spoke calmly, impersonally, "But this is *once* you're goin' to apologize."

He pointed a finger at the floor in front of Bloch's chair. "You're goin' to get down on your hands and knees right there, Bloch, and crawl every foot of the way to the Rios store—down the middle of the

street with your fat paunch plowin' the dust. Now crawl!"

Louie Bloch sat perfectly still.

"Very well," said John Smith quietly; "then I'll kill you."

BLOCH'S hands darted to the waistband of his trousers. The sharp-faced gunman made a tricky draw with his left hand. John Smith's arms whipped forward, a flash of white in the twilight. There followed a burst of flame and smoke, the building trembled at the shock of gunfire. A bullet went home to the blond man's breast, flinging him from his chair to the floor. Bloch wilted where he sat, but, while his bullet head lolled grotesquely at the end of his fat neck, he tried desperately to lift his gun. The gambler shot him through the head as coldly as if it were an inanimate target.

In the meantime, the nearest bartender demanded and received Badger's attention. The fellow's hand came up from behind the bar with a sawed-off shotgun. Prepared and waiting for something like this, the big Ranger had plenty of time. He fired with more care and less speed than was ordinarily possible in a close-range gunfight. His slug caught the burly bartender high in the right shoulder as he intended it should, and flung him against the backbar. The shotgun slipped from the wounded man's fingers and he made no attempt to pick it up.

Blizzard didn't wait for the other bartender to show a weapon. The crack of his rifle joined the roar of six-shooters. Without moving the Winchester from the crook of his left arm he sent a bullet splintering through the front of the pine bar at waist level, for his man had stooped while reaching for a gun until only his head was visible. The bartender let out a yell and clutched at his middle, a shotgun clattering to the floor. The sergeant levered another cartridge into the chamber of his rifle.

He shot a glance at each of the windows

and at the stairway on his right, which ran up to the second floor. Two startled women appeared at the top of the stairs. They gazed through the smoke at the scene in the room below, then turned with horrified faces and ran away.

A moment later he heard one of them screaming from a second story window, "Help! They've killed Louie! They've shot Louie and Pinkie Ross! Help!"

He went to the door and looked out. Men were already coming from all directions. Less than two hundred feet down the opposite side of the street Marshal Webb Slayne and Deputy Dave Omer were running toward the Prairie.

Blizzard turned quickly and strode to where Badger and John Smith were behind the bar with the wounded men. "Git away from here damned fast!" he barked. "Back door. I'll kivver these crippled barkeeps. Slope!"

They took him at his word and left without an argument. He joined them outside a moment later.

"What in hell's the hurry?" growled Badger. "Got me all worked up over nothin', I betcha."

John Smith grinned, thumbed cartridges into the cylinders of his guns and said nothing.

"Plenty hurry," snapped Blizzard, leading the way to the fuel shed a few yards distant. "Whole damned town is a-b'ilin' down onto us and Webb Slayne is amongst 'em."

When they were safely hidden by the deep shadows inside the shed, he went on to say, "I figger Bloch is the big dog wolf a-bossin' a pack of wolves. We done trapped the big dog but the pack is a-rangin' wide. Slayne has jest been waitin' for a chance to git me and Badger with a mob—he'd call 'em a posse—and this is it. That there pack'll take one look at old Louie and figger somebody oughta be hung, 'specially us."

John Smith spoke up softly, "But I shot Louie and Pinkie."

"Uh-huh," drawled Blizzard, "but you're John Smith."

The gambler laughed without a sound. "So you figure they won't bother me."

"Calc'late they won't."

"Why d'you think that?"

"'Cause you're John Smith," dryly answered the sergeant.

HE MOVED closer to the front of the shed and looked out. While standing there peering through the dusk he listened to the noise that had suddenly taken possession of the town. Ordinarily a killing in Oxbow caused some excitement—nothing like this, however, so he knew for a fact that someone was getting the crowd riled to the point where it would do things and think them over later; and he'd bet his bottom dollar that Webb Slayne was the man. Soon he caught the words "Badger and Blizzard" shuttling up and down the street, tossed boldly from man to man, or at times spoken more quietly with an attempt at caution; and once they were screaming from the windows of the Prairie, tagged by a hysterical woman's profanity.

He went back to where his companions had stood watching him in silence. "We gotta ramble," he said crisply. "Reckon it's dark enough now for us to make the corral all right, and what I mean—we'd better git there befo' one of them damned fools out yander recollects that we got hosses. So 'long, John. Take good keer of yo'self."

John Smith shook hands with each of the Rangers, remarking quietly, "So 'long, boys. Thanks for the help you gave me."

Badger chuckled. "I'd a heap ruther side you than to fight you, you gunslingin' old tinhawn."

And he meant every word of it.

Starting for the corral, the Rangers slipped from the shed to another outbuilding fifty feet away. Behind it they found a woman in a dark dress with a black shawl drawn closely about her head—Roma Aherne's Mexican servant!

She spoke rapidly in Spanish, "I have been following you and waiting for you, señors, and I thought you would never leave that man Smeeth. The senora wants to speak to you immediately."

"So do a whole slew of folks right about now," drawled Blizzard in English. He added in Spanish, "Tell the señora that if we live, we will soon have big news for her."

CHAPTER XI

LET THE MAN HANG!

AS THE Rangers were loping along the trail a mile or so east of town, Badger suddenly made a pretense of reining in. "Say," he sang out, "come to think of it, we didn't git nary a bite of supper. Let's us go back and eat. I'm hongry."

"Shet up and come on," snapped Blizzard. "If you was to show yo' ugly mug in Oxbow now, in less'n thirty minutes you'd be a-settin' on a redhot rock a-eatin' chicken fried in sulphur and peppered with brimstone. Come on!"

Badger cursed him, and growled, "Then shake that there stack of bones into a rattle so's we can git along to Tailgate and eat frijoles and dust with Carlos and Faquita."

"Damn Carlos and his burro!"

Mile after mile they rode in silence for the simple reason that Blizzard was busy with his thoughts and refused to talk. At length, after many futile attempts, Badger hit upon something that loosened his partner's tongue.

"Why in hell did you lie to John Smith like that?"

"Like what?"

"'Bout Louie Bloch bein 'a big dog wolf," rumbled the young Ranger. "You know durned well he wa'n't nothin' much."

"Huh!"

"No critter in britches would ever let a thing like Louie boss him 'round."

Blizzard came out of his shell. "Which jest goes to show that 'tain't safe to jedge a fella's brains by the size of his boots. You got big feet."

Badger started a hot retort, but the sergeant cut him short. "Hush yo' mouth and you'll l'arn somethin' 'bout human nature. If a fella's got wimmin—enough wimmin—he's dead shore to have a bunch of no-'count men a-hangin' 'round jest a-hon-in' to he'p him with his dirty work."

"How come?"

"'Cause one of them wuthless cusses thinks he's mighty nigh God when he moseys into a dive like Louie's and some gal comes up and grabs into him and tells the balance of 'em that he's her pussonal man and she'll claw hell out'n ary feemale that makes a pass at him. Purty soon it gits 'round 'mongst the boys that he's got him a gal down to Louie's, and then he's dead sartin he's God. So every time you run across a critter like Bloch, jest calc'late that he's a-bossin' a bad bunch and you won't never miss it very far."

"Maybeso, but—"

"Lemme be!" barked the sergeant. "I gotta see can I figger how in hell we'll manage so's to git away from this damned country with our hair."

They found Carlos and his men at Tailgate where Blizzard had told them to go, comfortably grouped around a mesquite fire in front of a vacant adobe with their mules picketed near by. The caporal's broad face beamed with boyish pleasure when the Rangers rode up in the moonlight, and two rows of very white teeth glistened beneath his formidable mustache. The four drivers—tough men, every last one of them—also smiled from ear to ear, touching their sombreros and bowing like polite but diffident children.

After learning that the Mexicans were all right and answering many questions about how the string of ponies behaved and what happened in town, the Rangers went to put up their horses and rustle some grub for themselves. They routed out the old storekeeper and bought enough to last them a few days. Later they returned to the drivers' fire, having successfully dodged old Tom Sparks the saddle-maker with the

brawny curiosity and a multitude of man-killing remedies.

WHEN Blizzard told Carlos and his men that he and Badger were stopping in Tailgate no longer than necessary to feed and rest their horses and get a few hours sleep before going on to Dead Horse Canyon, he started a courteous but persistent argument. In fact, it threatened to persist to the point where the Rangers would get no sleep at all. The caporal and drivers were determined to go and fight to the death for their friends and their beloved wagons, but the sergeant had other ideas. In the first place, he had promised Lafe Tucker to keep these men out of danger as far as possible; and in the second place, he didn't want them under foot.

Employing his fluent Spanish, Carlos had recourse to a brand of oratory fit to stir the soul of the most phlegmatic man, but Blizzard merely told him that he'd make a damned fine Texas politician; and when he breathed entreaties so pathetic as to wrench tears from a petrified rattlesnake, Blizzard simply grinned at him.

In desperation the caporal at length exclaimed, "But Señor Weelson, you do not understand. I shall ride the Faquita—the jewel, the fighter!"

"That settles it!" barked Blizzard. "You stay in Tailgate!"



And thus the discussion was finally terminated.

The Mexicans took turns at standing guard in order to make certain that Badger and Blizzard were called at the proper

time, and when the Rangers awoke they found their horses saddled and dozing nearby, and a pot of very black coffee simmering on the coals. Fifteen minutes later they hit the trail, pursued by the concerted gaze of ten dark and longing eyes that burned with the fires of polite rebellion — controlled, however, for the time being.

Refreshed by sleep and food, with a grand horse under him and a larrupin' moon above him, a frisky breeze in his face and trouble ahead of him, Badger Coe felt as if he owned half of Texas and could get the balance without half trying. He burst into a song that galloped across the plains putting to shame a distant loafer wolf's efforts, to which it may have borne some slight resemblance except in the matter of pitch. For the wolf was usually a lyric tenor and Badger was always an untamed basso profundo.

While his young partner sang, hummed and whistled the miles behind them, Blizzard rode in silence. His long body slouched in the saddle, his head thrust slightly forward as if he was peering through the moonlight in search of danger or gazing into the future to see what it had in store for them.

The Rangers scarcely exchanged a dozen words while riding from Tailgate to Dead Horse Canyon; but, when nearing the entrance which they used upon their former visit, Blizzard reined in beside a clump of bushes that cast sufficient shadow to hide a riderless horse.

"Pile off and we'll let the nags blow for a spell," he said, dismounting, "'cause they might need their wind befo' long—cain't never tell. Likewise, I calc'late it's time we made a leetle medicine."

Badger sprang to the ground. He felt that way. Old Blizzard was fixin' to talk, so his curiosity would get a bellyful. Moreover, when Blizzard called for a powwow there was serious business on the fire—bad business, as a rule.

When they had loosened cinches, straightened blankets and sat down with

a pair of cigarettes the sergeant coiled his arms around his knees, and declared, "We're a-ridin' into a mess. I ain't been able to figger no way to keep from doin' it, so we jest bow our necks and tear in a-hop-in' to hell that we come out with enough hide to cover our nekkedness."

"My neck's bowed and my hide's flint. Show me yo' mess."

"'Course the wagons ain't got to the canyon yet," continued Blizzard, "but it stands to reason that one of them bandits forked him a mule and fetched the news hellbent, so the folks up here know what happened. Likewise, I'll gamble that ten minutes after we hit town with them ponies somebody was a-burnin' the breeze for Dead Hoss."

Badger cut in, "Which makes it damned nigh sartin that old Dead Hoss will be a-crawlin' with skunks on the lookout for us. Is that what you're a-makin' out to say?"

"Exactly."

"Then why in hell didn't you up and say it?"

Blizzard could ignore a taunt in a manner so superior as to be very irritating. He now did it.

"They all think," he resumed, "that we was makin' off with them wagons and they know for shore that we won't let 'em git away from us so daggoned easy, so they'll be a-settin' up for us. We won't have no trouble gittin' into the canyon."

The sergeant stopped as if it were better to leave the rest unsaid.

"Bully! No need to worry none 'bout gittin' out. We may like it there."

"Hope so," drawled Blizzard, "'cause we may stay there permanent."

He gave Badger time to weigh this possibility, afterwards going on, "When the play starts and the air gits so full of lead we sneeze our fool heads off, I calc'late you'll spook and run clean to our company's camp down on the Sabinal—shet up!—and here's what I want you to tell Cap'n Hank the minute you see him:

"Jest tell the Cap'n that Buck Aherne

used to be a fust rate buff'ler hunter and then he went to tradin' and done right well by hisself, but he's got too much ambition for six men his size—big as he is—so he goes to robbin' a freighter off and on until purty soon he's got him some wagons damned cheap and a whole slew of goods that didn't cost him a copper. Buck's doin' mighty fine even if he ain't nothin' but a two-bit bandit as bandits go in Texas, when along comes a powerful dangerous man with guns on his legs and brains in his head. Fust off he reads Buck's keerde same as if they was marked."

"John Smith!" exclaimed Badger. "By dogies, I knowed it!"

"Shet up!" said Blizzard. "Now I done forgot where I was at. Mmmm-huh. So this here rattler with brains makes his talk and pore Buck takes keer to keep his hands in sight and plumb empty, and the upshot of it is that Mistar Rattler cuts Buck's dollah herds a-plenty from then on. Fact is, he's still doin' it. But the way it turns out, Buck gits hisself a eddication in cussedness even if it is damned expensive 'cause Mistah Rattler shows him how to build up a powerful fine gang of bandits and slap gunnysacks on they heads and call 'em 'vigilantes'."

"Ain't that jest like John Smith?" rumbled Badger. "Poor Chapa! I knowed I'd oughta make up to that leetle gal so's she'd give him the mitten, but I jest been too sorry and triflin' to do it. If I had've done it she wouldn't feel noways bad when she finds out what a sarpint-in-the-grass John is."

"Huh!" grunted Blizzard. "She'd a-felt a damned sight wuss when she found out that you're jest a big-wind-blows-nowheres. Now hush yo' mouth and listen 'cause you got a heap more to tell the Cap'n. Make shore to tell him that pore old Buck ain't got no better sense than to go down into Old Mexico and marry the smugglin'est woman that ever snapped her purty fingers under Uncle Sam's nose."

"What's that? Don't believe it!"

"Yep, and right away she gits Buck into the smugglin' business plumb to his forelock. But Missus Buck is plenty slick. She don't allus use his wagon trains. Ever so often one of her men below the line plants stuff in other folks' trains, then when they cross over onto this side Buck steals 'em, smuggled stuff and all, and there you are."

"And I ain't no closer to believin' it," growled Badger. "How d'you know that Roma's a smuggler?"

"Never you mind 'bout that," snapped the sergeant. "I'm fixed to prove it when the time comes. Don't forgit to tell the Cap'n that Mistah Rattler hawnd in on the smugglin' business, too."

The big Ranger chuckled. "Damn old John's ornery hide, he shore fooled me a-plenty 'cause I figgered him for a tin-hawn and a gunslingin' fool and nothin' else."

"Uh-huh," drawled Blizzard, crushing his cigarette under his heel, "and he jest keeps on a-foolin' you."

"What in hell you drivin' at?"

The sergeant got slowly to his feet, yawned, stretched and hitched up his belt. "'Cause Mistah Rattler's other name is Webb Slayne!"

SITTING cross-legged on the ground, glaring up at Blizzard, Badger appeared to sort of spread out like a puff-adder. "What—then you lied like a houn' dog 'cause you said it was John Smith!"

"Nope, never said it. *You* did."

The big Ranger bounced to his feet. "Then who in hell is John Smith?"

Blizzard picked up Solomon's reins. He drawled, "I been thinkin' that more'n likely—" he swung into the saddle, "he's jest John Smith."

As a result, Badger's dignity was offended to the point where he rode stirrup-to-stirrup with the sergeant for quite a while without speaking to him; and during this period of silence they passed into the canyon, on to a point near the timber in which headquarters buildings were located.

By the time they had gone that far, Badger quit thinking about how Blizzard made a fool of him and began to devote some serious thought to his surroundings and the possibilities of the situation into which they were riding with their eyes wide open.

A man couldn't ask for better light than the moon had been giving them, but the young Ranger thought it was sliding down the sky mighty fast and he wondered whether Blizzard was going to let daylight catch them out here in the open. The east showed symptoms of dawn. He looked ahead to where the timber spread across the floor of the valley like some black monster crouching on a silver carpet, and thought of their narrow escape from death the first and only time they ventured in there. For an instant he recalled too vividly how the Tar Baby's iron fingers tore at his throat.

Low and cautious though it was, he found comfort in the sound of his own voice, "Powerful dark in them trees, I betcha."

"Too damned dark."

There was no comfort in what Blizzard said or the way he said it. With those three words he forcibly drove home to Badger the realization that this was serious business, that they had left their jokes and horseplay back yonder at the entrance to Dead Horse Canyon.

The sergeant reined in at the edge of the undergrowth which fringed the timber. He pointed to the right toward the east wall of the canyon—two miles or so distant and not yet visible.

"They's a notch in the wall over yander," he declared in a low voice, "and from the looks of the things I seen growin' in it when we was here befo', I calc'late it's got a leetle water at this time of the year. We'll cache ourselves there if it has."

Badger made his impatient horse follow in Solomon's path, noting with a touch of envy the ease with which Blizzard shaped their course over ground and through vegetation that made their trail a difficult

one to pick up. Near the head of the notch, which proved to be a narrow box canyon opening into the main canyon, they discovered a small spring—evidently a rainy season spring; and in the trees and shrubbery which floored the little canyon the full two hundred yards of its length, they found excellent cover for themselves and their horses.

The young Ranger ran an eye over the perpendicular walls that towered a hundred feet high upon three sides of them, sort of wishing that the place had a back door as well as a front door. But he wouldn't let on to Blizzard. He was used to having his partner move with the utmost caution up to a certain point and then, having found no way around it, cut loose and do the most daring things in order to finish the job. But in this particular case he could see no good reason for coming in here after Buck Aherne when it would be so simple to catch him in Oxbow where the odds against them wouldn't be so great.

While they were unsaddling he tentatively broached the subject, "Too bad we didn't git no chance to land old Buck in town."

Blizzard went to rubbing Solomon down with a handful of dry grass. "We done had plenty chances or we could've waited for the cuss in Oxbow, but I don't never aim to put a man onderneath the sod for somethin' until I ketch him with the goods—regardless of how guilty I figger he is. This here canyon and them wagons is the goods."

AFTER the horses had been cared for, the sergeant said they'd spend the day taking turns standing guard and sleeping. He took the first guard and armed with the small telescope which he captured from the bandit at Linchpin Springs, chose for his station a burly liveoak that lifted its dense foliage above lesser trees just outside the mouth of their box canyon. From a point high in the tree where branches and leaves were especially thick,

he was pleased to discover that they should be able to see most of the clearing and all of the headquarters buildings when the light got better; also, he figured they could watch the trail from the north and have a clear view of the canyon from the timber to its south entrance.

Blizzard remained in the oak until an hour before noon by the sun, and when climbing down he had the satisfaction of knowing that the time was well spent. For he had seen Buck Aherne and three other men at headquarters, two of whom appeared to be workmen, and somewhere around ten o'clock he saw four riders push a band of ponies into the canyon through the south entrance—each horse wearing an empty saddle!

Having agreed to call Blizzard three hours before sundown, Badger took his post in the tree with the glass. And when at length he climbed down, he was packing a load of excitement which made him trot most of the way to where the sergeant was snoring on his blankets and tarp beneath a cluster of mustang grapevines that draped a young maple. For he had seen a man ride out of the timber into the clearing from the west, and the newcomer was John Smith!

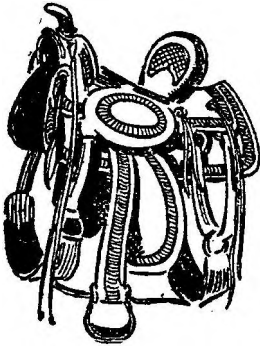
When he got the startling news, Blizzard stretched his arms above his head and yawned. In a moment he drawled, "John showed up kinda early. I wa'n't lookin' for him befo' tonight or mebber to-morrer sometime."

The sergeant stood guard until close to dusk. He saw the gambler and Buck Aherne a number of times, walking about the clearing, sitting in the shade and talking to the other men, and in all respects conducting themselves as if on the best of terms. No one rode into or out of headquarters and the outfit gave the impression that it was taking things easy while waiting.

Upon returning to camp Blizzard said he figured it would be safe for them to have a little fire, provided they used dry,

wood and screened it with blankets, and before long their old coffee pot was simmering over a tiny bed of coals.

Later, while they were sitting cross-legged on the grass eating cold grub and drinking hot, black coffee, the sergeant declared, "The way I size things up, Buck don't know whether we're in here or not and he don't give a darn. He ain't got men enough to ketch us nohow, so he figgers he won't do anything to skeer us off befo' the wagons and his crew roll in. Then I calc'late he'll set men off to close this here canyon tighter'n a jug."



Badger grunted. "That's when we explode inside his old jug and bust it to smithereens."

"Uh-huh," agreed Blizzard, "and until the wagons show up we behave ourselves so's not to rile him. After that it's simply a question of who moves fust, fastest and meanest—him or us."

Badger stood guard near the entrance to their hideout during the first half of the night, Blizzard the last, and the following day they resumed their watch from the liveoak. The young Ranger had nothing of interest to report when he left his post shortly before noon, and Blizzard perched in the tree until the sun was no more than two hours high before things began to happen.

SUDDENLY a column of dust boiled up north of the timber, and a few minutes later he was able to make out the wagons with the aid of the glass. While

he squinted through the brass tube his long jaw set, he grimly muttered an oath. Switching his attention to headquarters, he saw four men mount their horses at the small corral and hit the northbound trail through the trees at a gallop. John Smith and Buck Aherne remained in the clearing with the others, seated beneath a large tree near the bunkhouse. It seemed a long time to Blizzard before the wagons rolled out of the timber into the clearing, escorted by the four riders who went to meet them. Men poured from the wagons until he thought they'd never stop coming, although he knew there were probably no more than eighteen of them at most. During the next few minutes all was confusion and he couldn't make heads or tails of things, but he never lost sight of the massive figure of Buck Aherne, for the trader towered over the gang that milled about him.

Presently the wagons swung in a half circle to a point in front of the shed and stopped. While part of the crew unhooked the teams, others loosened the wagon covers and removed the tailgates and went to burrowing into the loads. Obviously Aherne supervised this operation, occasionally waving his arms or pointing. John Smith stood near by, looking on. Blizzard's thin lips closed a little tighter as he watched bales—probably hides—and sacks—no doubt beans—come from the wagons and go into the shed; and he would have given a year's pay to hear what was said when these bandits found low-value copper ore in the bottoms of the beds where they had expected to find Mexican silver coins in kegs.

He saw the giant Aherne surging about, waving his arms and shaking his fists, and he saw him knock a man down with a single blow. Men backed or sidled away from him or frankly ran, and soon he had the wagons to himself. He climbed into one, disappearing like a furious bear diving for its den. Bales, sacks and boxes came hurtling out, quickly followed by the trader himself. While this was going on,

John Smith stood still not far away—a slender, black figure, apparently undisturbed by the storm that raged about him. Blizzard grinned, for he imagined he could see John smiling, or perhaps laughing in that noiseless way of his. Aherne strode over and stopped facing him, towering over him. John Smith didn't move. Aherne turned on his heel and stalked away to the corral. Again Blizzard grinned.

The sergeant guessed that Buck was thundering orders at his men who were unharnessing the mules and taking them down to the spring. In a moment three of them ran to the bunkhouse. Others began to rope out ponies in the corral and saddle them.

As fast as the mules returned from water they were thrown into the large detached corral and the men thus released went to work on the ponies. Presently smoke blossomed at the top of the bunkhouse chimney. Throwin' some grub together in a hurry, 'cause them fellas has been on the trail and they're hongry, reflected Blizzard, and now they gotta ride soon as ever it gets dark enough. He sat a-straddle of a limb and waited with the patience of an Indian. It wasn't long before the crew tramped into the bunkhouse, leaving the horses standing in the yard before it—twenty-two as nearly as he could count them.

Dusk closed down slowly as if the sun were lingering just below the horizon, reluctant to leave when a drama was about to be enacted upon the floor of Dead Horse Canyon.

Blizzard sat a-straddle of his limb and waited. Lights appeared at the bunkhouse and cabin windows. Sometimes they seemed to wink maliciously at him, often they glared at him. He could barely see the men when they mounted and rode away in all directions, obscure figures easily swallowed by the dusk. He didn't know where they were going, but he knew why they were going there. He climbed down from the tree.

A FEW minutes later he stood near the coals of their cooking fire. Its red beams glanced from his eyeballs. He said to Badger, "They're on the move. What yo' knife!"

When at length the moon lifted its face above the eastern wall and poured its light into the valley, the Rangers set out afoot through the timber toward the clearing. They left rifles, chaps, boots and hats at camp, having put on moccasins and tied bandannas around their heads to hide the white of their foreheads. They worked their way through the timber to a point not far from the log cabin which stood near the south end of the clearing. Although the night was comfortably warm, the wooden shutters and door were closed; but light showed through large cracks at the windows and beneath the eaves where chinking had fallen out.

Blizzard quietly said to Badger, "Buck and John will be in there. We'll Injun 'em. Stop at the woodpile and kiver my back. No shootin' if they's any way 'round it."

Slipping from darkness beneath the trees into moonlight that was doing its level best to turn night into day, the Rangers bent low and ran swiftly to the woodpile behind the cabin. While Badger strained his eyes to watch every foot of the clearing, and his ears to catch every sound that broke the stillness of the night, Blizzard moved to a cabin window as silently as a great white owl which floated lazily over their heads.

The sergeant looked through a wide crack between the wooden shutters that covered the unglazed window. He saw Buck Aherne and John Smith smoking at a table in the center of the room between the cabin's two bunks. The gambler was coatless but still fastidiously dressed in black and white, the trader even more uncouth than usual. At first glance it appeared that Aherne had been drinking, but a closer inspection showed Blizzard that anger rather than alcohol had worked the change in the big man's face. It was no longer

the jovial face of a rollicking fellow. Beneath their bushy brows, his eyes looked small, mean and bloodshot. The hair that fell to his shoulders in heavy waves was tangled and disarranged, his short black beard seemed fairly to bristle.

Evidently they had been talking about the Rangers, for Blizzard arrived in time to hear John Smith say, "Why don't you calm down, Buck. Those two wildcats ain't to blame for your men grabbin' the wrong wagons."

The gambler paused for a moment, laughing silently, then continued, "In fact, they got fooled before you did."

The trader dropped his cigarette to the floor and crushed it viciously with his heel. "But by God, I betcha them skunks is at the bottom of it somehow or other! And jest look what they done to my crew. Peered their ponies and riggin' through town until everybody knows who they are. Them damned fools of mine are skeered plumb outa they hides right now and you mark what I say—I'll have one hell of a time a-keepin' 'em from scatterin' to the fo' winds."

He glared straight at Blizzard's window. For an instant—before he had time to think—the sergeant swore that Buck saw him.

John Smith nodded slowly, candlelight dancing in the gloss of his silky hair.

Aherne rumbled on, "And what I mean—Mistah, I'll nail them two dirty devils and snake their carcasses down Main Street at the end of a fo'ty-foot rope!"

Heaving himself to his feet, he concluded, "Stay awake the balance of the night if you're a-mind to, but I'm a-rollin' in. Got a busy day a-comin' up."

THE gambler arose and walked leisurely to where his long black coat hung on the wall. "Too early for me to sleep. Think I'll mosey out to the stable and see how Cotton Top (his California sorrel) is makin' out. It wouldn't surprise me if he's been fightin' through the stall with that ornery plug of yours."

Blizzard slipped from the window to the back of the cabin. Motioning for Badger to follow, he darted across the fifty feet of open ground that separated the cabin and bunkhouse which was now unlighted. The young Ranger joined him at its far side a moment later. They listened and waited for John Smith to open and close his door. Through the wall against which they crouched came the snores of tired men. Blizzard wished to hell that he knew how many were in there. He guessed the number at two.

Presently they heard the gambler leave the cabin and by shifting to the southeast corner of the bunkhouse, they were able to watch him stroll toward the stable. In the meantime, Buck's light went out.

It seemed to the impatient young Ranger that John Smith took a long time to walk that hundred yards, and he wondered what their next move would be—what with that pesky scalawag a-roamin' 'round. He soon found out and got a big surprise to boot. As the gambler passed beyond one of the four wagons which were standing in front of the shed, Blizzard ran like the devil for fully fifty yards toward the stable and flattened out behind an old log that was barely thick enough to hide him. Cursing beneath his breath and thrilled to the marrow by this dangerous game of hide-and-seek, Badger plunged over the open space to the log. He thought he'd never get there and with every jump he expected a bullet in the back.

They listened. In a few moments John Smith's smooth voice reached them faintly, talking to his horse. And he was saddling up! They heard the unmistakable sound of a stirrup and cinch rings striking wood as he handled his saddle none too carefully in the narrow confines of the stall. Motioning for Badger to follow, Blizzard got quickly to his feet and moved cautiously to the wagon first in line. Again they paused to listen. The gambler hummed a little tune, accompanied by the tinkle of bridle chains. Blizzard hastily crawled into

the shadow beneath the wagon and then stretched flat on the ground behind a pile of miscellaneous odds and ends—mule harness and collars, some sacks of feed, rolls of canvas and other things, and Badger joined him. They now had a clear view of the stalls and shed.

John Smith led his horse from the stable and tied it to Wagon Number One where it could not be seen from the cabin or bunkhouse. He then went into the shed, passing within twenty feet of the Rangers' hiding place. Badger could scarcely believe his eyes when he saw the gambler go to ripping open the sacks of beans which the bandits had stacked in there when they unloaded the wagons. John Smith slashed one after the other with his knife and emptied them onto the ground, scattering the beans with his feet as if looking for something. When the last sack had been emptied he shrugged his shoulders, and looked thoughtfully at the wagons for a moment, then walked to his horse. He mounted and rode slowly away.

BADGER watched the gambler disappear in the timber at the western edge of the clearing. "By the Eternal!" he rumbled softly. "I never seen the beat of it."

"Me neither."

"What was he lookin' for?"

"Hard to tell."

"But damn it, man!" growled Badger. "He was a-huntin' somethin'."

"Peared so."

Blizzard crawled part way from under the wagon and sat cross-legged on the ground. "To hell with John Smith," he said, keeping his voice low. "We got us a job to do and I wish it was done."

"Then let's us do it."

"Gotta make shore that Buck's a-sleepin' sound," stated the sergeant. "Soon as ever he is, we hush them fellas in the bunkhouse."

"Hush 'em?"

"Uh-huh," answered Blizzard. "No need to kill 'em none. Jest beef 'em cold and

leave 'em in they bunks. Then we go git Buck."

"And hush him?"

"Uh-huh, permanent."

Fifteen minutes later the Rangers were at the bunkhouse door, Blizzard with his ear against it. While his partner listened Badger shot a glance about them, his eyes darting from Buck's cabin fifty feet away to all parts of the clearing that were within range of his sight. He was looking for unexpected trouble, a dangerous surprise of some sort. Things were moving too smoothly. He knew that Blizzard was gambling the limit on their luck and he couldn't believe that it would hold. He expected to hear the clatter of hoofs at any moment, for some of the men were bound to return to headquarters before long.

The sergeant carefully pulled the latch string. The door swung open with but little noise. It was difficult to see anything inside the room, but the Rangers nevertheless went in. They crossed the threshold as silently as ghosts. From the two rows of bunks, one against either wall, came the sound of men sleeping—snores and heavy breathing. Badger's heart gave a sudden leap. Blizzard had guessed wrong. There were at least three, maybe four men in the room!

It went against the grain to strike a sleeping man and he knew that Blizzard would feel the same way about it, but this was no time for squeamishness; besides, these men were outlaws and perhaps murderers. So he struck downward with his gunbarrel at a head in a bunk on his right, indistinctly visible against the blanket upon which the dark bearded man was lying. A glancing blow that hurt but didn't shock!

Before Badger could strike again, the fellow jerked up in his bunk with a howl followed by an oath. Men awoke in three bunks on Blizzard's side of the room. One of them apparently slept with a six-shooter under whatever he used for a pillow, and he was a man who obviously had trained himself to wake up shooting. His gun

flashed almost in Blizzard's face, but he missed and the sergeant knocked him out before he could fire again. Badger's man caught the Ranger's second blow on his arm and his yell followed the roar of the other outlaw's gun, but a third short vicious slash stretched him back on his bunk. In the meantime Blizzard's gunbarrel put one of the remaining men out of action. The other, apparently unarmed, seized him from behind and they went to the floor. Badger turned in time to see them go down. He bent over the swiftly moving, rolling, twisting figures with gun upraised to strike, scarcely able to distinguish one from the other in the darkness.



Suddenly he heard a voice bellow somewhere outside, "What in hell's goin' on in there?"

Buck Aherne!

Badger whirled and dashed to the bunkhouse door just as the giant trader came plunging through it. The Ranger fired without conscious thought, the muzzle of his gun almost touching the outlaw's wide breast. The shock of the bullet and the force of the explosion staggered Aherne as he slipped the hammer of his own Colt, and his slug merely grazed Badger's side beneath his left arm. Blizzard sometimes declared that Badger had no equal at the speed with which he could throw five shots into a target at close range. And now he needed all that speed. It seemed that the outlaw's massive body would *not* go down. The Ranger emptied his gun into it. Heavy slugs ripped at it, tore through it, jerked at it until it lurched and reeled and turned half around, but it stayed erect. Aherne's

head lolled drunkenly. His arms hung limp from his shoulders. His legs trembled. His knees sagged, then straightened. He stood like a man unable to fall, fated to die on his feet. He tried to lift the hand that had lost its weapon. He plunged forward as if in dying he hoped his great weight might crush the man who killed him!

Blizzard sprang from the bunkhouse door. Moonbeams struck the knife in his hand, then darted away as though terrified.

"You all right?" he snapped.

Badger gazed down at the body at his feet. He rumbled hoarsely, "Yes, but I been pumpin' lead into a nightmare!"

The sergeant stooped and took hold of Aherne's feet. "He'p me carry him over yander."

They moved the dead man to the large oak that stood a few yards north of the bunkhouse. Blizzard ran to the stable and quickly returned with a rope. They hung Buck Aherne's body to a projecting limb.

Blizzard stepped back and looked at what they had done. The moon lifted the bones and deepened the hollows in his face. He said grimly, "Now we're a-gittin' square for what they done to Pop Henderson."

"Plumb square?"

"No. Less'n halfway."

THE words had scarcely left his lips before he turned in his tracks and stared off to the south, listening. A moment later he declared quietly, "Riders a-comin' hell-bent. No wonder. What with the way sound bounces 'round in this here canyon, betcha mighty nigh all of 'em heard the racket we made."

Badger pointed north. "Listen! More of 'em."

Blizzard nodded. "Uh-huh. Buck's Winchester may be in the cabin where we'll hole up, but you better go into the bunkhouse and git a pair of rifles and all the ca'tridges you can find in a hurry."

"Why not take to the timber?"

"No need to. Chances is they'll run soon as ever they see their boss a-hangin' out

yander," prophesied the sergeant, "and they're bound to see him fust off. Likewise, they'll never once think of lookin' for us in the cabin."

Badger soon found the rifles and joined his partner in the cabin. He demanded, "What's the *real* reason you're so all-fired sot on stayin' here?"

"Them mules of Lafe's," calmly answered Blizzard. "Done promised to give 'em back to him, so I aim to take keer that these here skunks don't make off with 'em."

They left the door and shutters ajar. Through them came the pounding of hoofs from all directions it seemed, no doubt because of echoes in the canyon. Those from the south were first to arrive. The Rangers saw them through the window, six of them.

Blizzard crawled under one bunk, Badger the other. The outlaws jerked their horses to a halt at the cabin door, yelling for Buck. By the sound of things, one man caught sight of the dead leader's body before any of them had dismounted. Cries of amazement were followed by dead silence. Then they walked their horses toward the tree. One pony snorted and evidently shied into another. Two men cursed in low voices.

THE Rangers scrambled from beneath their bunks and went to the north window where they could hear nearly everything that was said.

In a jumble of excited words, these stood out clearly, "There he hangs, but I can't hardly believe it."

"I do, and I'm on my way."

"Me too."

"Everybody in Oxbow knows us."

"What I mean, I'm a-headin' for the border country."

"Yander come the boys from the no'th end."

A deep voice declared seriously, "When I found Chuck and Pete at the south pass with their throats cut, I allowed I'd better

keep on a-ramblin' and never stop until I got clean to South Ameriky."

Badger looked inquiringly at Blizzard.

The sergeant nodded as if he had been expecting something like that.

The bunch from the north arrived shortly and the performance was repeated. Not a single voice suggested that they hunt down their leader's killers. True to the breed, their first thoughts were for themselves. They didn't give a damn for Buck. He had ruled by force. Most of them hated him, serving him because there was money in it. Now that Buck was dead, let him hang!

From a point somewhere southeast of the clearing, a sudden and tremendous burst of gunfire rolled up the canyon!

Without exception, the outlaws hit the northbound trail at a gallop. Frenzied cries of "Posse!" arose above the beating of their horses' hoofs.

Badger opened the shutters wide. He grinned at Blizzard. "Carlos and his boys, I betcha. Them needle fifty's make one hell of a racket."

The sergeant strode to the door. He tossed a dry remark over his shoulder. "Yep, it's Carlos and the Faquita."

The five Mexicans arrived in impressive style. With the broad-shouldered Carlos in the lead on Faquita they literally burst into the clearing, the little mules running like rabbits and the riders bending low in their saddles. The thought struck Badger that they'd probably stolen those saddles, since they had none of their own. Each Mexican had a gunbelt around his waist, a pistol in his holster, a rifle in his hand and no telling how many knives concealed about his person. They jerked their mules to a sliding stop, flourished their needle guns and yelled like Comanches.

Said Carlos with a grand air, "Señors, at your service! We come to rescue you."

Blizzard tugged at the end of his long nose, thereby hiding his mouth with his hand. "Much obliged, Carlos," he drawled, "'cause we shore need it."

The caporal magnanimously waved a hand at his followers, continuing in flowery Spanish. "And how we have fought to reach you! Many men guarded the pass, desperate men. But inspired by thoughts of our two very good friends and our beautiful wagons and faithful mules, we fought with the ferocity of tigers. No living thing could long stand against us. So we come, señors, leaving dead men behind us."

Badger swallowed some smoke and had a coughing fit.

Blizzard pulled a long face. "'Bout how many dead men?"

Carlos dismally lifted his shoulders. "Who knows? I prefer not to think of the carnage."

Suddenly he thought of something else. His voice rang triumphantly, "And Señor Blizzard—the Faquita! She is a jewel in peace, but she was magnificent in war. Indomitable courage, deadly—"

"Fall off'n them jackasses, load yo' wagons, harness yo' mules and git to hell outa here!"

The Mexicans bobbed their heads and touched their sombreros respectfully.

Blizzard went on to say, "While I go after our hosses and truck Badger'll stay here jest to keep a screech owl or some-thin' from skeerin' you-all plumb across the Rio Grandy, then we'll guard you a ways so's to make shore that one two ornery scalawags don't steal yo' wagons off'n you again. Lemme borry one of them burros for a short spell, will you?"

Silently Carlos held out his reins. He showed a huge mouthful of white teeth in a grin that was almost worshipful. "Señor, she is yours—the Faquita, my jewel."

WHEN the Rangers returned to Oxbow the following afternoon, having circled so as to reach the corral without passing the jail, their buckskin packhorse ambled along ahead of them—a sure sign that they didn't aim to leave the place at a faster gait than it could travel; and when

they walked up the north side of Main Street there was a pugnacious swing to Badger's shoulders and a cold glint in Blizzard's eyes—dangerous symptoms.

This being a lazy hour in the daily life of the town, the sidewalks were practically deserted, for which the Rangers were thankful. Badger didn't want to lead a parade today, and he was glad to forsake the street for the Sand Hill Bar when they came to it. Moreover, he was pleased to see that the place was empty except for Sandy Fraser and a bartender.

All the sign indicated that he was tickled to see them again and as nearly as a man could tell from a face so much like Blizzards, the lanky old-timer had important news. A few moments later they were seated in his back room, windows and door closed and a bottle of his personal liquor on the table before them. In short order they learned that Oxbow had received a number of reports relative to what occurred in Dead Horse Canyon, no two alike except in one important respect: Buck Aherne was dead. No one seemed prepared to prove that Badger and Blizzard did it, although everybody suspected them, and it was rumored that they invaded the canyon with a posse.

Sandy went on to say that he and several other men were keeping their ears to the ground, and they knew that Roma wasn't particularly upset by Buck's death. In fact she had already engaged in a couple of long talks with Webb Slayne.

Blizzard nodded thoughtfully.

John Smith? Yes, he was in town just sorta moseyin' around and getting under foot, but you could usually find him at Chapa's store or thereabouts.

The old-timer said that day before yesterday the stage rolled in with four mighty interesting passengers. Two of 'em looked like middle-aged cowmen with plenty stuff in their brands, and they didn't deny that they were sorta scoutin' 'round for a new range. The other two were gunmen if Sandy ever saw a gunman—"gladiators" he

called them—and they turned out to be friends of Webb Slayne. Before they had time to wash the dust down their throats, Webb made 'em deputy marshals!

"Mmmm-huh," mused Blizzard. "Jest when you're gittin' shed of one gang he's a-settin' out to put him up another'n."

"That's exactly what I was tellin' some of the boys last night," declared Sandy, "and if it wa'n't for Slayne they'd he'p me run them new gunslingers outa town or string 'em up, one or t'other. But Webb has got Oxbow buffaloeed a-plenty, and I ain't talkin'."

In response to Blizzard's questions, he said he was positive that Slayne and Deputy Dave Omer were now sitting in a poker game that had been running in an upstairs room at the Prairie ever since last night; also, that the two new deputies—Doke Summers and Joe Patty—were in the jail office half an hour before when he walked past there.

BLIZZARD pushed his chair back and stood up. For a fleeting instant his stern features relaxed while he looked down at the square old saloonman.

"You got you a mighty fine town here, Sandy," he observed quietly, "and if she was to git a good scrubbin' with sand and lye soap I betcha you'd keep her slicked up from then on."

Sandy didn't answer at once. He gazed at both Badger and Blizzard with a far-away look in his keen old eyes. Presently he said, "D'you jaspers figger you'll ever settle down a leetle?"

"Hard to tell," answered Badger. "They's still a heap of country that we're a-hankerin' to ride."

The old-timer nodded. "That's what I allowed, but I been talkin' to the boys and if you was to give 'em yo' word that you aim to stable yo' hosses in Oxbow permanent they'd up and deed yuh mighty nigh half of the town—so to speak. For a fact they would."

Badger chuckled.

Blizzard grinned. He drawled, "That shore is neighborly of 'em, Sandy, but what in hell would we do with half a town? I been tellin' Badger that we're a-carryin' too many fixin's with us as it is."

The Rangers left through the back door.

Blizzard knew that they were bound to be seen before they could get to the jail in broad daylight, but he wanted to attract as little attention as possible. Accordingly, they kept to the rear of buildings fronting on the street until they reached the last one—the Aherne & Boston store. From there they took the sidewalk, ambling along as if they had no particular destination in mind. The sergeant was gambling upon the possibilities that the new deputies might not look through the window and see them or recognize them if they did, and in any event the deputies wouldn't be expecting their visitors to do what they were going to do.

Soon the Rangers were close enough to the jail to hear voices in the office. Blizzard glanced carelessly at the window, but no one was within range of his sight. They stepped onto the porch. One of the voices stopped in the middle of a sentence. The door stood open. Badger went through it at a stride. He put everything he had into a draw that must have amazed the men who found themselves looking down the throats of his guns a split second later. And beside him towered Blizzard with his rifle at full cock and held slightly above his waist, covering a wiry red-headed man who sat at the marshal's table facing the door. A burly sandy-haired man with a florid face occupied a chair that was tilted against the wall on Badger's right, and three feet from the stranger sat John Smith!

"H'ist 'em!" thundered Badger.

Momentarily befuddled, no doubt, the deputies were slow to obey; but the gambler smiled a bit ruefully and lifted his slender hands chin high, palms outward.

"Reach, you damned fools!" barked Blizzard. "You ain't got a ghost of a show."

John Smith spoke up quickly, and sharply for him, "Don't try it boys! I

know 'em. They're bad and they mean business."

The deputies' hands went up reluctantly. There was treachery in their faces. Blizzard took no chances with them.

He harshly commanded the gambler, "Drap yo' belts right where you're a-settin'. Make yo' hands be-have, Mistah!"

John Smith shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. He untied the thongs which held his holsters down on his thighs, cautiously unbuckled his belts and let them drop across his chair.

THE sergeant then ordered his prisoner to stand. The deputy said nothing, made no move to obey. Blizzard snapped his rifle to his shoulder. "Git up befo' I drive lead through yo' gun hand and fix it for life!"

The man almost leaped from his chair.

Blizzard told John Smith to disarm him, a command that was quickly obeyed. Afterward the whole performance was repeated with Badger's prisoner.

The sergeant moved aside to where he could see the cell through the back door to the office. The cell door was open, a key in its lock. He wondered what had become of Billy Harkness, doubting whether Webb Slayne had ever locked him up the second time.

"Now you rannies jest mosey back yander to the cell," commanded Blizzard, "and mind you, no monkey business."

John Smith lifted his eyebrows, politely inquiring, "I also?"

"You go *fast!* Git a move on."

The prisoners obeyed, encouraged by Badger and his two six-shooters. Blizzard locked the cell door, put the key in his pocket and the Rangers left.

John Smith called after them, "Tell me, please—has the stage come in? It's late and I've been waiting for it."

Badger glanced through the office window. "Yep!" he answered. "She's jest now a-rollin' in, but she cain't do you a particle of good where you are."

As he turned away the gambler's smooth voice caught up with him. "That's right. I forgot. Sorry."

This time the Rangers walked briskly down the street, making no effort to conceal their movements. Blizzard wanted another word with Sandy Fraser before going to the Prairie to smoke out Slayne and his deputy. When they came to the Aherne & Boston store, Roma suddenly confronted them!

Dressed in black that reached to her smooth white throat, with her golden head uncovered and her eyes blazing, she stepped from the door onto the porch and stood directly in their path, trembling in the grip of a rage that made her at once beautiful and repulsive.

She burst into a torrent of venomous words, spoken low but none the less terrible in the ears of men who respected women and ascribed to them virtues which such as Roma Aherne did not possess. Neither Ranger offered an excuse or an apology, or made any effort to stem the flow of invective that lashed them. Instead, they looked her squarely in the eye and took it like men who could face the music when their jobs required it.

At length she paused. Her eyes jerked from the Rangers to the street. Following her glance, Badger saw two sober-faced men who had the appearance of prosperous cowmen coming from the hotel and stage station. They stooped to pass under the hitch-rack, halting between it and the porch.

The elder of the two, a large man with iron-gray hair and mustache and a kindly face, took off his hat and inquired, "I calc'late you're Missus Aherne, ain't you, ma'm?"

She answered crisply, "Yes, I'm Roma Aherne. What d'you want?"

He pulled back his coat. On his vest he wore a badge!

"Me and my pardner here are Dippity United States marshals, ma'm," he said as if he hated to say it, "and we gotta arrest

you for smugglin'. Mighty sorry, ma'm, but we jest cain't he'p ourselves."

SHE stood very still while he was speaking, tall, lithe, utterly scornful in face and bearing. Evidently she took the deputy's fine courtesy to be a sign of weakness.

"Go home, old man!" she told him loftily. "You haven't got a thing on me."

The younger deputy came onto the porch and halted facing her, not far away. He spoke politely but quite firmly, "It ain't been our job to get things on you, ma'm. Some of the government's best men have been on yo' trail for quite a spell and I reckon they done plenty gettin'. My pardner and me got orders to arrest you and yo' husband, that's all."

Apparently undaunted by his convincing statement, she held her head high, her lips firm. "I'm not to blame for what Buck Aherne did!"

This unfeeling remark brought a hardness to the older deputy's sympathetic face. He went close to her and said in a level voice, "Yo' husband is dead, ma'm. Let him rest. But we know you got him into this here smugglin' game. Now, we'll go along while you get some things. I'm a-holdin' the stage. You're a-ridin' with us. Let's be movin', ma'm."

Roma momentarily weakened. She took a quick backward step. Her small white hands clenched at her sides. She opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it firmly. Abruptly turning her back to the officers, she went into the store. They followed.

Before the Rangers had taken ten steps toward the Sand Hill, the roar of a six-shooter awoke the sleeping street. Blizzard's hat was jerked from his head as if whisked away by an invisible and mischievous devil. He staggered. His rifle slipped from the crook of his arm. His knees crumpled and he wilted to the ground as if unspeakably tired!

The blast of the gun set in motion Badger's lightning-like reflexes, those un-

conscious muscular reactions which some men develop by long practice and keep continually on the alert by living lives of unceasing danger. Blizzard had not yet staggered when the young Ranger's Colt began to hurl lead into a mushroom of smoke that hovered before one of the Prairie's upper windows. Glass fell to the porch roof. Bullets gnawed at the sash and window frame; splinters flew.

From the corner of his eye Badger saw Blizzard go down, saw a red line creep across his white temple and into the beard on his unshaven cheek. He thundered a hoarse cry and went plunging into the street through the smoke of his own gun. He bent low and dodged from side to side. The shattered window now gaped down at him in silence, but from its neighbor came a burst of shots fired by the hand of a master—amazingly fast, too fast for accuracy at that distance and a target that was never still. Bullets plucked at Badger's clothing, angrily split the air that brushed his face, ripped at the dust about his feet, but he reached the cover of the porch unhurt.

The big Ranger paused at the door, reloading the gun he had emptied. One bartender was behind the bar, showing his peaceful intentions by standing with arms folded, and two very frightened men were heading for the side entrance. Badger listened for the sound of women upstairs, heard none, and concluded they had left since Louie's death.

The room was unceiled. Through the flimsy upper floor he heard a door grind on its hinges. Almost directly over his head he saw a warped board move and heard it squeak. Like a flash he jerked his left-hand gun and sent five slugs ripping through the floor at and near the point in question. Other boards groaned beneath a heavy, staggering tread!

Then Badger did something which an enemy up there might not have expected him to do. At the rear of the room was a relatively safe stairway, at his right

another—its uncovered opening onto the second floor yawning like a death trap. While in the act of firing his last shot so that its reverberations smothered any other noise, he sprang to the steps and took one stride to where he could see into the central hall with only his head exposed.

That staggering tread was a trick!

For there in the hall stood Webb Slayne, apparently unwounded. Coatless, his white shirt open at the neck and his blonde head bare, he looked toward the back stairs landing with as little concern as if he were expecting a friend to come that way. But the gun in his right hand, the body of Dave Omer sprawled across a threshold near by, the splintered floor at his feet and the blue smoke that swirled about him transformed the scene into one of violence and death, despite his composure.

Warned, either by a side glance of some mysterious instinct, Slayne jerked his eyes to Badger an instant after the Ranger appeared. They fired together. Webb shot at a man's head, Badger at a large man's body. The marshal's bullet bit into the floor and glanced over its mark. The Ranger's bullet drove home to Slayne's breast. It flung him against the wall. His six-shooter slipped from his fingers. His handsome face twisted in a weird grimace, then quickly resumed its frigid calm—something even more weird to see, since the man was dying. His left hand groped for its gun, found it, dropped it. He sat down, back to the wall and died there.

Blizzard slept on the floor in Sandy Fraser's back room for all of thirty minutes, during which time the doctor sewed him up and tied him up.

Upon awakening and getting his bearings, he felt the bandages and grinned at Badger. "As I was fixin' to say when that there mule kicked me," he drawled a bit uncertainly, "this here Oxbow country shore is hell on haid."

As soon as he was able to get around they walked straight to the jail. At

the front door they heard a woman's voice, and accordingly tip-toed across the office to a point where the cell was visible.

John Smith had his arms thrust between the bars and they were locked about Chapa's slim waist. She, in turn, was alternately kissing him and shaking the cell door with all her strength.

Badger slapped a hand over his mouth an instant too late. The girl spun around and came at the Rangers without a noticeable pause between the spinning and coming. Again they faced the fires of a woman's wrath.

At length, when she had him backed up against the wall, Blizzard lifted a hand to his bandages and groaned, "Oh, Lawdy lady! My haid!"

Chapa stopped talking as suddenly as she started. Her eyes, which were long and narrow during the fiery monologue, now opened wide and brimmed with sympathy.

Before she had a chance to say anything, Blizzard nodded for Badger to close the back door, then told her. "Here's the key, Miss. Onloose him whenever you're a-mind to. And fust time you ketch him by hisself, jest ask the cuss if he ain't powerful glad I locked him up thataway so's Roma Aherne didn't git no chance to onkivver him. Uncle Sam's under-kivver boys shore cain't sleep without kivers."

The sergeant folded his arms. He teetered back onto his heels, grinning at Badger's anger and Chapa's surprise.

The girl stamped her foot, demanding. "How did you ever learn that about my—my so very good friend, John Smeeth? Why, he just this minute whispered it to me!"

Badger swaggered over, answering her question en route, "I told him, Chapa. Fust time I laid eyes on John Smith I read his brands and marks like they was a open book."

As the Rangers ambled away, Badger gazed thoughtfully down at his hairy fist.

"It's Either That White Silk Flowers or Lilies," the Regular Air Guy Will Argue, "And to Hell with Costly Equipment."

THE GENERAL LAUGHED AT CHUTESMITHS



By **ANDREW A. CAFFREY**

Author of "Beyond Control of the Pilot," "Everything Seemed Super-Super," etc.

STREETER, the civilian in charge of Parachute Section at Federal Proving Ground, sat at his desk and gazed, a bit sleepily, at the rather small activities going on out front of the nearby Headquarters hangar. There was a two-place, open-cockpit biplane of rather ancient vintage warming up on the line. A few mechanics were standing by; and two men, adjusting helmets and goggles as they walked, were strolling out across the cement apron toward the biplane.

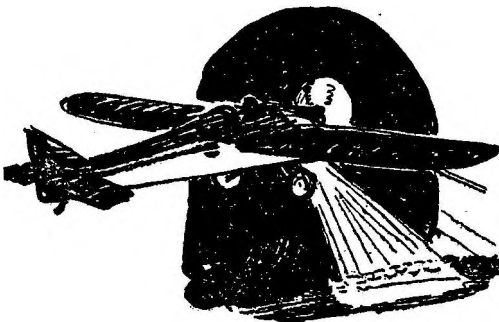
Jack Lang, Streeter's garrulous striker,

sat on the desk's edge and helped his boss with the lazy fieldward gazing. The two strolling men—the ones adjusting helmets and goggles—caught Lang's roving eye. "'At's the new general," he mused. "D'ya know the old bird, Street?"

"From way back," Streeter said. "Knew him in France. Knew him at Kelly. Was in the Islands under him when I was an enlisted stiff. Me an' the general's like that." And Streeter tangled the index and second finger very tightly. "Game guy—the general."

"Guess Lieutenant Shaw's gonna give him the old official trip round the field—see if the new arrival can fly, eh?" Lang said.

"He can fly, an' how," guaranteed Streeter. "But you just keep an eye on me." Streeter got to his feet and started for the door. "That old stiff ain't gonna fly, as is. Watch me take him down two-three promotion grades. You know, Jack, that's one swell thing about bein' a high-class civic, I can tell the general some-



thing, right now, that no officer on the post has the crust to mention. Come on, see me talk turkey with the old bird."

Streeter and Jack Lang strolled out to where the general and Lieutenant Shaw had climbed aboard the biplane—Shaw in the front seat and his superior in the rear cockpit. The mechanics were getting set to jerk the chock-blocks when Streeter yelled, "Don't do it! Hold that ship!"

Streeter strolled in alongside the rear cockpit, tapped a finger on the general's shoulder and chirped, "You ain't goin' no place, young feller."

Shaw turned in surprise. The bystand-ing macs stared with bug-eyed amazement. The general turned slowly and gazed through his goggles. "Oh, hello, Streeter. Why, you old heller! You here on Proving Ground? Why, of course, you'd be goldbricking some place on your old Uncle Sam. See you after this hop, Streeter."

"You'll see me, all right," Streeter said. "And you'll see me before this hop. Hop outa this ship. Damned if I wouldn't have lotsa time for me rest if it wasn't for you high-rankers. Come on, come on, you're gonna walk over to my parachute shop and buy yourself a silk umbrella before you quit the ground."

Oh, so that was it? The general, contrary to Air Corps regulations, had intended to go aloft without a chute, eh? Well, he couldn't do that now, now that his attention had been called to the slight oversight. But the general could argue.

"So, as usual, you're in charge of parachutes, eh?" the General said to Streeter. "Well, look: this is just the usual hop round the field required of all incoming pilots on any post; and the lieutenant and I won't go high enough to use a chute."

"Argument No. 1," said Streeter. Then he looked ahead to Lieutenant Shaw. "This high-rankin' gentleman," he said, "has always been Parachute Enemy No. 1, Shaw, an' here's where we turn his damper down. You're an officer and two gentlemen, Shaw, an' don't you quit the ground till this here

new pilot is wearing one of my best form-fittin' pack chutes."

LIEUTENANT SHAW, poor young guy, sort of colored up under his be-goggled eyes. And he turned to gaze at the general, better to see how matters really stood. Shaw was sort of in a spot, for a pilot sure had no right to be taking a parachuteless passenger aloft, even though said passenger was of high rank. And to spare Shaw further embarrassment, no doubt, the general cast off his safety-belt, stood up and began to swing down out of that cockpit. Streeter took it on the lam, the general in hot pursuit. Back over his shoulder, Streeter was yelling, "Follow me, General. The way to safety. I'll buy your dam' ol' wiolets, little girl; an' furnish you with a chute, too."

When the general had received, and signed up for, one brand-new parachute, then departed for his waiting ship, Streeter watched him go, laughed, then said to Lang, "I'm not kiddin', Jack. That there swell guy is sure hell on chutes. He hates 'em, always has hated 'em, an', I guess, always will. Hell, it's a regular hate disease with him. Yes, sir, he'll argue by the hour that a chute tears down a flyin' man's courage. If he had his say, Air Corps pilots would fly like the airline gang—without chutes."

"Maybe the guy's correct as hell," said Jack Lang.

"Hey, maybe you'd like a sock in the nose," said Streeter. "Right, hell! You want that guy to talk you an' me outa a job, Lang?"

"I never thought o' that," said Lang. "The big guy's nuts."

Streeter was right about the general. No matter where the big boy was stationed—at Air Corps Headquarters, Washington, D. C., or on the training fields in Texas or California, or in the field with active, tip-top fighting groups, or in the Islands or Canal Zone, or at War College, cadet school-rooms or officers' clubs—he

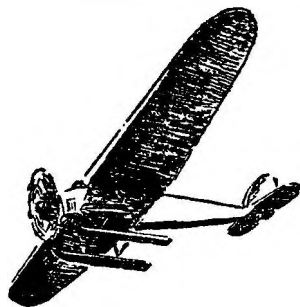
was the most active of that hard-shell, old-line, die-hard group that advanced the undying belief that a service airman was entirely too quick with the chute if said service pilot took to the silk before the Grim Reaper actually had a hand on his shoulder. Why, at times, the general was known to advocate an Air Corps absolutely without parachutes.

"You're filling the air with open umbrellas," he'd lecture. "Also, you are overstocking the salvage hangars with piled-up, costly wrecks. And where's all the money going to come from to buy more ships? Ever think of that? Hell, men, ships don't grow on trees. That is, not all trees. Of course, I've seen 'em hanging to some trees, after our service men took to the chutes. And they don't look good on trees, damned if they do!"

The general, as Streeter had hinted, was an old man in air. Fact is the general had come all the way with U. S. air, having been one of Uncle Sam's first flying officers, way back when U. S. Air Service was one hangar and three old ships, out on North Island, San Diego. But he wasn't the man to boast of his early prowess. "There're plenty others," he'd say, "who've grown old in this man's branch of the service. Yes, sir; we've aged, and mostly in the wood. In the tough old wood of ships that had to be flown. And sometimes we lost parts of that wood, and stripped off large areas of the linen skin, too, but we brought 'em down. Yes, sir, lost the wood and linen, but didn't reach for silk. Didn't have silk. Didn't want silk."

AND there it was again—hard on parachutes. But perhaps there was a bit of a boast there. Some said there was. Some said that all the early, die-hard pilots of the threshold days of N. S. air were given to I-knew-it-when boasting. And many—especially the members of the newer crop who objected to the general's objection to parachutes—claimed that the

general talked only to hear himself talk, that he was doing a bit of whistling in the dark, seeing as how the game was getting faster and faster and the general older and older. In other words, they said, the thing was getting out of the general's hands. The science of air had outstripped him. Left him behind. Yes, he'd want to go back to parachuteless days. And, no doubt, he'd be tickled to death if he could set the game back to pushers, outriggers and open-cone radiators at the pilots' backs.



The general, on this occasion, was making more than his usual short, routine visit to Federal Proving Ground. He had come in a few weeks ahead of time to sort of set up field headquarters and make all arrangements for Air Corps' share in the yearly war games to be held—in close cooperation with all other army branches—on the extensive, far-flung miles of the proving ground's ocean-fronting site. During the days to follow, the tip-top squadrons of Air Corps' East, West, North and South posts would wing their way to Federal and there report to the general. There'd be the bombing groups from the Coast; pursuit from up around the Lakes; observation, attack and all other air branches from a dozen dromes. And there'd be big air doings over Federal. And there'd be big inside flying pulled off, after hours, in officers' clubs, barracks and hotel lobbies. Yes, and of course, there'd be school sessions and lectures; and, no doubt, a certain general would get his chance to run off at the mouth and have his full say on the matter of "too much

parachute" in Air Corps. However, said general would be badly outnumbered by the real air guys, outnumbered by the guys who were up there doing things.

It was the regular air guy who always took exception to the general's view on chutes. Fact is, the regular air guy and the general seemed to tangle—not directly, of course—wherever and whenever they came in contact on any such doings as these now scheduled for Federal Proving. The regular air guy, being the under officers and wild flying cadets, claimed that he did all the work in air. And when the general spoke, sometimes with levity, of the skyful of open chutes above just about all Air Corps posts, the regular air guy couldn't really laugh at anything uttered in direct opposition to that life-saving spread of silk which, occasionally, does dot the high sky where some ship has gone wrong. "It's either that white, silk flower or lilies," the regular air guy will argue, "and t'hell with the piled-up, costly stuff that fills the salvage hangars."

STRONG talk, that. And the general knew full well that just such he-ish words were uttered directly following each of his official or semi-official lectures on the subject of chutes. But the general didn't mind. Why, more than a few of his high-ranking brother officers—the majors and colonels and such—had even gone out of their way to tell him that he was all wet on the topic. What's more, the general could take it. The general, you know, was a real flyer. A regular pilot. He had rated Military Aviator when that was quite some rating. And you could talk to him, discuss a point, make known your own good stand. Dam' right! He wasn't asking anybody to bow low to him. However, few of the younger brood appreciated this fact fully; and they were inclined to believe that this tin hat was just like all tin hats. That is, he was above you.

Well, it seems that somebody was always

furnishing the fuel for the general's fire. And the boys who furnished most of that fuel were those same regular guys who had absolutely no desire to pick wood for the general's eternal blaze. The war games hadn't started, all the squadrons hadn't reached Federal, when the first chutes were opened—and the first two good ships went spinning down toward their ultimate destination in one of Federal's salvage hangars. But it wasn't as brief and easy as all that. The thing had its tragic flash, also its dam'-funny side.

Young Lieutenant Daisy, known as "White Flower," not because of his dainty surname but because he had used chutes no less than three times during his brief few years in air, figured prominently in the accidental doings of this pre-war games mixup. White Flower Daisy was connected with one of the crack pursuit groups up from Texas. It seems his ship required a change of motor, something having gone wrong with his power plant during the last few miles of the Texas-to-Federal hop. When the new engine had been installed, White Flower, naturally, took it up for a test hop. It was a cloudy day. White Flower's reputation wasn't based entirely on his ability to quit ships and open parachutes. Truth is, the young fellow was wont to remind you that, as a rule, a pilot had to do something to get that way—to get to a place where a chute became necessary. Well, it's a fact young White Flower Daisy could kick 'em round with the best men of pursuit. And when you say that a pilot can kick 'em round with the other fine pilots of pursuit, you've said just about all that can be recorded on the subject. In the first place, a young fellow is chosen for pursuit solely for one reason—because he has lots on the ball. White Flower and his combat prowess were known far beyond the limits of his own home post; and even the oldest of Air Corps' old hands admitted the kid was good.

But he came a cropper this day, and while making the motor-test hop with

his fast pursuit job. As before said, the day was cloudy. White Flower, as he later admitted, was kicking it around just a bit—to make sure the new motor wouldn't cut out or act up when put in strange positions. And while so stunting, the kid came out of a barrel-roll to discover that he'd rolled his way right into a flight of heavy bombers. This flight of big ones was more or less unscheduled over Federal, owing to the fact that they were just arriving—with a wind on their tails and ahead of time—from the Coast. Needless to say, White Flower Daisy was very much surprised to find himself—a pursuit man—in such company. Also, the bombers were a bit taken back. Especially the one which lost a full eight feet of dural wing tip when White Flower's ship clipped that panel. Well, that's about all, except to add that the bomber's crew of six men went overside and quickly opened exactly one-half dozen chutes. And White Flower, just to make that a baker's half dozen, bailed out too. Up to this point, you'd say she was all tragedy, no near-tragedy. But all seven men made ground in good style. And it was then, or shortly after, that the dam'-fool aspect struck home on Federal. That pursuit job of White Flower's flew itself twenty-five miles out to sea. Advised to be on the lookout for the wreckage, the Coast Guard began looking with all eyes. A cutter located the pursuit ship five hours later. That pursuit job was intact save for a totally destroyed propeller, a dented nose cowling and some deep crevices in the under skin which showed where it had slithered across that bomber's wing tip. The laugh was on young White Flower Daisy. He had picked his share of wood for the general's fire. He, and the rest of 'em, would never hear the end of this. A ship landing itself after its pilot had taken to the chute! Awful. But not new, for the strange thing had happened before. Just what the general always claimed! Too much parachute, too dam' much parachute!

And sure enough, the general broached

the subject during his very first get-together with all flying personnel present on Federal Proving Ground. He brought it up in a sort of don't-let-'em-point-the-finger-of-scorn-at-us manner. That is, the general reminded all Air Corps men present that in these games about to begin each and every branch of the army would have its eyes on the white-haired boy of Service—Air Corps. And especially did the general stress the urgent need to keep face before all these other army men, which meant that no Air Corps man must do what other branch men wouldn't dare do—be wantonly careless of their equipment. "Look here!" he said. "The infantryman is accountable for his rifle. The cavalryman brings back his mount, or else! The artilleryman doesn't quit his piece till the last mule or horse is down. So why in hell should we men of air kiss a small—or large—fortune good-by, bail out, and think no more of it? We shouldn't, I say. But we do. And it's being done, I contend, without justification. Now, only day before—" But the general pulled his punch there. Still and all, everybody knew what had happened day before yesterday. "These parachute jumps," the general continued, "are seldom strictly in the line of duty. That is, entirely necessary. No nation can afford such almost weekly abandoning of costly aircraft. No nation should. And as for we men of air—why, er, we're leading into weakness through usage of the parachute. I say the parachute is a breaker-down of courage, the white ally of cowardice.

"Talk about ducks to water"—and the general here roared into a bit lighter manner of talking—"gosh, you men out-duck the ducks when it comes to taking to thin air. Why, hell, you know no fear. Time there was when only summer-resort and circus-day dare-devils were brave enough to break out a chute just for the hell of it. Not so now. No, sir, we don't turn out a single cadet flyer who, apparently, isn't just itching all over for the chance to abandon ship, dive overside, then bet that

the thing will open at the end of his ten-count, or his three-count. Three, I believe, being the number used by the real snappy boys. Yes, sir, overside they go; and down goes fifty, sixty or a hundred thousand dollars worth of first-class, best-in-the-world flying equipment. And that, men, is whereof I shout—this wanton destruction of government property. You and I”—and the general spoke slowly—“owe this U. S. government plenty, everything. The old uncle is good to us.”

AND it was at this point that young White Flower Daisy spoke up in class, as was his right and privilege, saying, “But, sir, the general does not overlook the fact that Army Regulations, Air Corps regulations, require, demand, that each and every person going aloft must be equipped with a parachute; and, sir, they’re not for eating purposes.”

The general shared the laughter. “The lieutenant is correct,” he agreed. “So, as the boys in the hangar say, so what?”

“Then, sir,” White Flower went on, “the general perhaps will agree that it is Army regulations that is the real breaker-down of courage, the bleached ally of cowardice.”

“Yes and no,” said the general. “Those same regulations—God bless ‘em—also say that you must wear side-arms under certain conditions. But they don’t specify that you must use the side-arms for suicidal purpose.”

A little later, back in their quarters where they were sort of chewing the thing over, White Flower Daisy, still sore as the very devil, was saying to his pursuit-group mates, “Paradoxically speaking, the general was all right, paradoxically speaking. Damned, though, if I can get his side-arms-parachute-suicide slant on this thing, even paradoxically running off at the mouth. If it’s suicide to quit a ship when she’s on fire, and your pants have begun to burn, then what in hell is it if you stay and take it?”

“It’s seat-recide, White Flower. Seat-

recide, nothing less,” one of his mates told him.

“Your answer,” White Flower said to that mate, “is every bit as sensible and convincing as any anti-chute argument, at least, so let me have your name, my fine fellow, and I’ll remember you when I get to be Chief of Air Corps. Knocking the chute! Damned easy for any guy to knock the old white ally when said guy was born and bred to the swivel-chair. She’d be one hell of a different story if the big boy had to go up and kick ‘em around in combat and—”

“Eh-ah, wrong idea,” a new voice warned. It was the pursuit group’s C. O., Major Killcane, speaking. Killcane, as all these young pilots knew, was a very close friend of the general. Both bachelors, Killcane and the general were even sharing quarters there on Federal during the war games. “I’m afraid some of you men get the general wrong. Don’t take his anti-chute talks too much to heart. He means what he says, being a man of his convictions, but the general will never clamp down on you for entertaining your own persuasions.”

THEN Major Killcane turned to Lieutenant White Flower Daisy. “Rip the mountain back to a molehill,” he said to White Flower. “And at the same time, Lieutenant, don’t underrate the general’s present airworthiness. He was a first-class aerial combat man when most of you fellows were still wet behind the ears. With my own eyes, back in ‘17-’18, I saw the general, then a major, accept combat from the best men on Field 8, Issoudun, and better than those best men U. S. Army Corps has never seen. He was past thirty then. That was very ancient. Why, there was a legend, maybe a myth, that the French had a forty-year-old pilot. But anyway, the general went round and round with the best of them; and that was in the days when no man sat on a parachute. Not that I care to bring up the chute thing

again, but it is well to remember—to remember that that thing of going round and round with another ship, missing it by inches, perhaps not missing it, called for all a man could muster. And, Lieutenant, I say that, at time, they *did not* miss each other at Issoudun. Moreover, as the general so often tells, they usually brought those damaged ships back to earth. We don't do it that way now. I don't know which way is the better. There's room for discussion—if not argument."

Young White Flower Daisy advanced the usual argument that the general, while kicking those old ships around in the skies of France, without possible benefit of parachute, was kicking around ships far inferior to those in use, for pursuit, at present. "There's a devil of a lot of difference, sir," he said to his superior.

"Not so much," said Major Killcane. "If a wing or elevator has been clipped, she's been clipped; and it makes little difference as to the speed of ship at time of clipping. Same goes for a prop that's been shattered, or a motor that's been kicked loose of its bed, bearers or fixation plate. You were as much in a spot in the old days as you are now. Every bit as much!

"Well, at any rate," Major Killcane continued, sort of making an effort to get the contentious aspect out of the conversation, "the general is one of you—a pursuit man, first, last and always. In the next few days, when we begin mixing things up, you'll appreciate this. Chances are, the general will lead the Red pursuit group in these games. He usually does; and if he does, you'll find him right in there where the milling is fast and furious."

"And, sir," White Flower Daisy added, more or less applying the old backhand slap, "seeing as how the general's ship will be nicely galaxied with the allotted stars of his rank, all hands will observe the niceties, keep their distance and make dam' sure the sky is safe for high-rankers. Intending no discourtesy to you, sir."

"None taken, Lieutenant," Major Killcane said. "I'm afraid you're adamant. I'd prefer a different spirit. But enough is enough of any one subject, so we'll move on to orders of the day."



That evening, doing a bit of a clean-up in their own bachelor quarters, the general stopped shaving, turned to Killcane and asked, "Who the devil was that young squirt in your group who took me into camp today—the young feller who dragged in Old Man Army Regulations?"

"Daisy's the name," Major Killcane said. "The boy's a good bit of a wild flower, all right."

"Daisy? Oh, the fellow who quit ship the other day, eh? No wonder he took exceptions to my views on the chute. Suppose he thought I was training the gun right on him. How big is he?"

"Plenty good," Killcane answered. "Yes, sir, the White Flower—that's what they call him in the outfit, in view of the fact that the other day's parachute was No. 4 opening for him—is a real snappy combat man. After more than two years in air, and some 1200 hours on the wing, the kid still has that same umph your old war-time squirts had after only about fifty hours of the stuff. That is, he's still on the upswing. No signs of wane, no loss of edge, no hint of ship-against-ship fear."

"Not parachute courage, is it?" the general asked.

"No," Killcane said. "No, it isn't. I think he'd do it without a chute. Oh, he's there. He's Austin, Osgood and Munroe all rolled into one. And he flies like that

war-time triumvirate—as part of the ship.”

“I’ll have to look him over,” the general said. “But, say, Kill, wasn’t the young devil rough on me, eh? By the dam’—what’s this man’s army coming to? I wasn’t on the post a day when that crusty old Streeter—you know old Gabby Streeter—jumped me for not wearing a chute. Yes, sir, Kill, that Streeter all but yanked me from a ship and put a chute on me.”

“Trying to tear down your courage, eh?” Major Killcane laughed. “They’ll get you yet.”

“The devil they will,” said the general. “Kill, I honestly have a mortal fear of that silk contraption. No kidding. I don’t think a man can be a good soldier if he knows there’s always such an easy way out. The second an airman quits his ship, that man and that ship are no longer fighting instruments; and the aim of each branch must be to keep its equipment in the fight. You know, and I know, that a ship brought back to earth is a ship that can fight again; and the man who can discipline himself against taking to the chute is a man—”

“Whoa! Whoa!” Major Killcane begged. “You know that I know your dam’ old stock speech by heart, so why pen me up in this small room and ask me to swallow it again? After all, I’m your friend.”

The general laughed. “All right, my friend,” he said, “we’ll wash that out for today. But about this young Daisy—I want to see him in action. I want to see him go round and round. What ship will he be flying? What’s the number, Kill?”

“He’ll have a new ship to replace the one he abandoned; for that one goes to the ship for minor repairs. Let’s see—this new job has a Proving Ground test-hangar number on it, P-44, I think. But, anyway, you won’t need to identify a ship’s number to recognize young Daisy in action. And while we’re on the subject—you’d better take care, old one, that this young one doesn’t get on your tail and shag hell outa you.”

“Oh, tush!” said the general. “Maybe

I’ll jump his tail and shag hell outa him. We men of the Red air forces are out to burn you lily-whites to the ground, Kill. Tell you what, there’s lotsa life left in the old hoss. I feels me oats, Kill. Can’t wait to get you lily-whites at me mercy. We’re going to have fun.”

A few days of routine war maneuvers went by. There were the usual mishaps and serious accidents—to all branches taking part—and the usual round-table sessions of Staff wherein those accidents were brought out in the raw open for a thorough going-over. Air Corps had its share of things that went wrong. Two more parachutes were opened. Four men died when a bomber hit too hard on a landing. Other ships went to salvage. And then the games went into the final week.

THE general’s Red pursuit group had been having things all its own way. Some argued that the general’s group should have things all its own way, seeing as how the general’s combat pilots were poling the very last word in small, fast, all-metal, low-wing equipment.

Each time the general strolled out to climb aboard his ship, Streeter, without fail, strolled right along and made the observation, “That’s all I want to know! You’ve got the chute on, eh?”

“Yes, you gabby wahoo, and I’m laughing at you,” the general would, in turn, observe, also without fail.

And now and then, during those days, Streeter would stand there with his striker, Jack Lang, and ask, “Now what do you suppose that old die-hard means—he’s laughin’ at me?”

Way over on a marked area of Proving Ground, off on the oceanside frontage of the vast reservation, the Red army was crowding ahead into the last day of the games. Everything that Uncle Sam holds in the line of latest-type field guns and mortars was belching its load into the sky. Infantry was either making a stand or pushing ahead with all that is new for

that branch. Tanks were rolling. Pill-boxes were spitting fire. Mines were tossing imaginary troops into the air. Tractors were catting their loads and, here and there, mock-up cities and towns were in flames. High overhead the air corps of both White's and Red's were in action. The Red bombers, it seems, were showering telling blows; while the Red pursuit, under the general, was flying swell coverage for those damaging heavies of the sky. But now the White pursuit, under Major Killcane, was roaring down from where they'd been blind-spotting in the sun at 25,000 feet. There'd be hell to pay now! The general's Red outfit, properly jumped, would be put to it to stay, even though they were flying the latest in pursuit equipment.

Killcane's White pursuit hit. First hit, and the major himself picked off the general's high-defense-rear ship; and the official observers had to score it that way.

The rest of Killcane's group, each picking his man, went right in among those Reds. The Red bombing group broke, cut for a quick out, and the attack was broken up.

Then there was a dogfight, a dogfight to thrill all Air Corps men within sight. Ships going round and round! Combat pilots kickin' hell outa 'er! Ships going down—according to the scorers—in flames, spinning down, down to figurative crashes. Oh, there was the roar of high-flown power, the whistle of surfaces, the howl of props, the glint and slash of bright sunlight on slick ships and the game skill of all those Yanks aloft. Enough to make a pacifist lay his olive branch down.

In that noisy, mixed-up mess of fast ships young White Flower Daisy, as usual, was doing all right. During the first few minutes of play the scorers had to credit him with two Red ships downed; and the wild young heller was just polishing off a third Red victim when he saw a shadow creeping ahead right across his low wings. Daisy glanced up. He'd been jumped,

properly jumped, and, if not already scored as down, it was high time to get from under that other ship. White Flower pushed his stick to the instrument board, held the full throttle on his motor, stood on the rudder and let the ground come up.

He was in a hard dive. All those other dog-fighting ships were sailing straight up overhead. At first 22,000 had been on his altimeter. Then 21,000, 20, 19, 18, 17,000; and back over his left shoulder he could still see that other ship, and it was right on his tail. That ship's power dive was every bit as good as his ship's; and the man in that other ship was every bit as willing to hold 'er in the dive and let 'er run. But a mile of dive is plenty dive for any man, especially when it's real, vertical stuff. Tell you what, that's bad medicine for any pilot! And even White Flower Daisy made up his mind to lift 'er out of that one. So he pulled up his nose. She took the lift. He was coming out all in one piece. That's all you can ask of any ship. And the Red follower was doing the same.

Then, out of the dive, and with full gun still on the motors, both ships were zooming. Maybe, thought White Flower, he could outclimb the Red and top him in this zoom. But the Red had a zoom that climbed right up White Flower's back. That was a zoom!

In the zoom, White Flower shot a glance across the short space that stood between those on-end ships, and took a good look at that other craft. The young fellow's heart missed a few shots—that other ship carried the general's stars.

"By the dam'!" said White Flower to himself, "I should've known. Should've expected this. The big guy's playing hoss with me. Taking a ride outa me! . . . All right, up here she's all even-Stephen, and a raw-john loot can even ride a general." And so deciding, White Flower Daisy got real rough. To hell with danger! He rolled off the top of that zoom, and when he rolled off he rolled right in the direction

of the general's ship, which was still standing on its hind legs in the zoom. White Flower's roll rolled right under the big boy's rudder. Snapping out of the roll, still carrying full gun, he shot her up and over in a half loop, and all the time bearing right in on the other ship. The general's bus, right then, had reached the top of its hard zoom. For a split second the big boy let 'er hang on the prop. And while hanging on the prop, the general was gazing aft along his brief, blunt fuselage, down through a short opening of air to where White Flower's ship was screwing itself up in a sort of corkscrew, power climb. And White Flower was sure pouring it on—trying a stunt like that, when the top ship was hanging, as you might say, out of control. Yes, two could play hoss, and, for the time being, White Flower's was the whip hand. 'At old guy would jump him, would he! Let's see him jump out of this box!

Well, the general didn't get out of that trap, nor did White Flower, not exactly. At the tight moment when you'd expect Daisy's propeller to chew a hunk out of the general's tail service, the general's motor, laboring, coughed a rich mixture of gas and burning oil. That foul motor loading came aft away from the engine like a smoke screen, and the black mess blew right back over and between ships. It was quick. So was White Flower. But he wasn't quick enough to get from under. In that blinding few seconds, the general's ship slid back—and right into White Flower's propeller.

Again, White Flower was quick, but not quick enough. And he didn't kill his power as suddenly as he should have. Instead, he tried to work out of that tangle. But his propeller was damaged, and now his ship was vibrating, so he had to cut the switch; and for the rest of whatever was ahead, he'd be without power.

The two ships, still tangling, fell together. End over end, down a thousand, two thousand. The general had cut his

switch early. All that smoke had been left higher up. The tangle of falling ships was in the clear. A score of dog-fighters had quit the fight to dive along and see just how bad matters were. Matters were very bad.

At 15,000-foot elevation the two ships broke apart. Then the following pursuit ships could sort of size up the damage. Nearly the whole tail service of the general's craft had been torn away. He still had half of the stabilizer and his right elevator, but no rudder. And the rudder is the most important control surface. With what was left of his tail service, the general was still trying to fly, but he was just going from one spin to another. All onlookers knew that the general hadn't a chance in the world to land that ship. But never once did those onlookers—and they were close—see the general make a single move toward the abandoning of his craft.

White Flower's ship was just as hard hit. His right wing's tip was gone, about three feet of it, and all of that aileron. His rudder, too, had been carried away by the general's ship. White Flower was also fighting ship, going from one spin into another, leveling now and then, but not for long. And at about 10,000 feet, the onlookers saw White Flower sort of come to a stand, hands on the cowling, ready to bail out. But then the kid looked across space to where the older pilot, the general, was still fighting ship, still sticking by his equipment. The onlookers saw White Flower slide back into his seat and get back on the controls. Man, there was a decision for you! Why, the kid, like the general, hadn't a chance in a million to bring his damaged ship safely to earth. But he was going to sit in and stay just as long as the other player. No more of this thing of being laughed at because of self-landing ships doing their stuff after he'd bailed out. More to the point: if a general could set 'em down, in bad condition, so could he—or he'd know the reason why!

So they twisted and turned, fell, spun, fell and spun some more. At times the two ships were very close together. And still very close were all those diving on-lookers. Federal still claims that never before was there such a moving, diving audience sitting in on any sky tragedy; and just about every one of said audience agree that never again do they want to sit on the sidelines and witness such a tough battle.

Both men, so it seems, were trying for the long beach that is Federal Proving Ground's eastern boundary. The general never made that beach. When his ship hit ground, it hit still in the spin, and all but the trailing edges of the wings, and that damaged tail, were down under the calm waters of the salt marsh where it drilled in.

White Flower Daisy reached the beach. After a fashion, taking everything into consideration, the kid made a fine landing. He had certainly brought his equipment home—like an old-timer, like the general and his men used to do it back during the big war.

It was Major Killcane, helping the ambulance crew, who made his way under the salt marsh's waters and worked the general's crushed body free of that wreck. And the major even stripped the chute—that never-used chute—from his old friend's remains before the Medical Corps boys started for the morgue.

Streeter, that gabby old civilian in charge of Parachute Section, sat, as before, on the edge of his desk and gazed, very dejectedly, out on a deserted flying space that had seen so much activity that day. It was past quitting time. Streeter, of course, knew that the general was dead. And the general, they said, never even quit his pit, never used his chute.

Major Killcane's car pulled up before Streeter's door. Streeter knew Killcane from way back. He watched the major climb out, open his luggage compartment

and pull out a chute. Well, people were always doing that out front of Streeter's shop.

The two men just looked at each other for a full half minute after Killcane came in and swung the chute atop Streeter's desk. Then Streeter said, "The dam' old hard-shell. The game old devil. He never used it, eh?"

"He couldn't use it, Street," Major Killcane said.

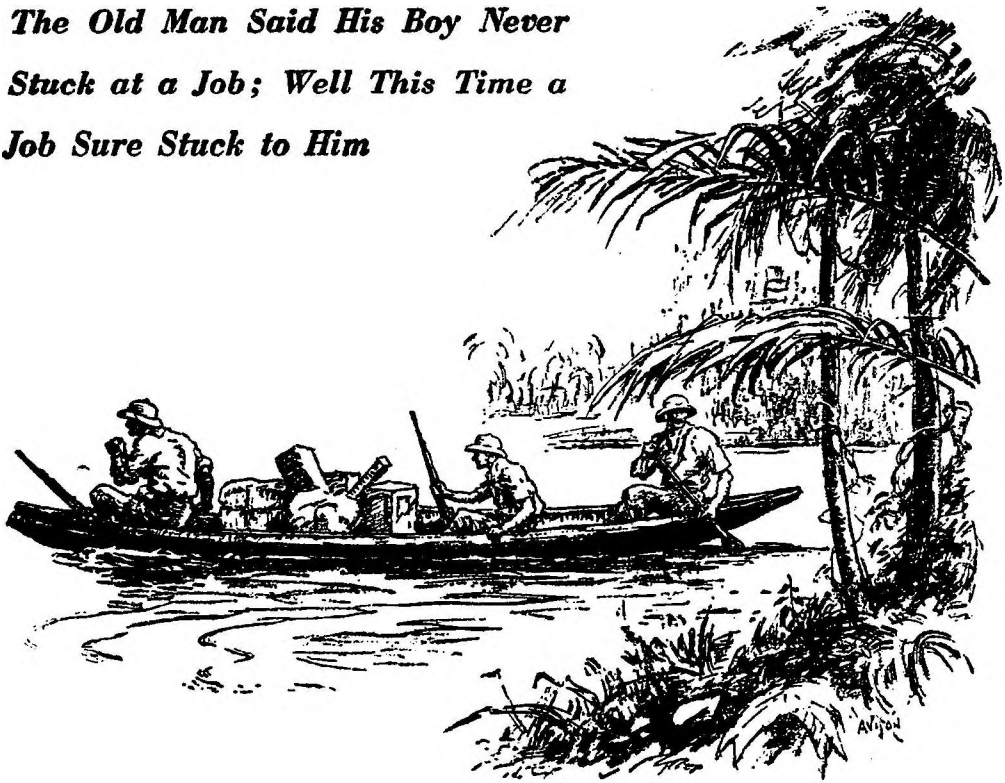
"What? Couldn't—why the hell not, Kill?" And Streeter reached for the chute. He took it up by the harness, held it away from him, studied it. And the man's expression was awful to behold when his fingers went to the ring pouch. That small fabric pouch, the pouch that holds the pull-ring and protects it from accidental pull, had been stitched with stout O.D. thread in such a manner as to prevent the ring's pull.

Major Killcane took a penknife from his pocket. He reached over and started ripping the threads out of that pouch. "You and I are the only ones who know about this, Street," he said. "I thought you should see it, so's you can perhaps take some steps that will make this thing impossible in the future. You see, Street, I walked in on the general while he was sewing this up. Guess that was the day you insisted he wear a chute. It was in quarters. I thought the general was just doing as we all do—just taking a few loose stitches here and there in the harness to keep the straps from bulging. Hell, I didn't pay much attention. I never guessed he'd do this."

"It's beyond me, Kill," Streeter said. "Why, you couldn't believe this of any man. It just don't add up."

"For the general it does," said Major Killcane. "In the final analysis, he made his point. You'd understand that better, Street, if you'd been there to see that kid Daisy set his ship down."

*The Old Man Said His Boy Never
Stuck at a Job; Well This Time a
Job Sure Stuck to Him*



THE OLD MAN'S BOY

By EATON K. GOLDTHWAITE

OLD MAN SHORT kept his faded blue eyes on the visitor, but his mind wandered again to the letter beneath the bandana on his hip. "... *writing to you at Iquitos,*" the boy's clear, schoolmarm's penmanship had said, "... *decided against chemistry . . . too dull . . . I'm quitting.*"

"*Quitting.*" Old Man Short groaned inwardly. The fourth job in as many months. First off he'd wanted to go on the stage. Then it was printing. And after that, because of some friend, he was going to be a surveyor. And finally, the job in the paint factory at Pará because

he wanted to be a chemist. No sense. No direction. As unstable and unpredictable as a monsoon, and just as impetuous. But a fine lad, Bob Short—and ruining himself. "*I'm quitting—*"

"Hey! You ain't listening!"

The Old Man's visitor was stiff. He was upright and uncomfortable as a shingle. His broad, angular body was ill-covered with frayed, unkempt ducks and he sat like a man not accustomed to the luxury of chairs. Even when sitting he showed himself to be a tall man, and his lean face was nearly black above the pink space where a beard had recently been. His hair was closely-cropped, red and curly, and

from behind his prominent nose twinkled wise, wide-set eyes. His mask of a face developed a painful grin.

"What's the matter, Cap'n? Love or business?"

The Master of the *Great Island* snorted. "Hunh. I heard you. Rubber—hunh!" He wagged his grizzled head slowly and made a wry face. "Sorry, Kelly. Don't think the owners would go for your scheme. Like to oblige, but——"

The man named Kelly squirmed and his big fists unrolled themselves into an argumentative gesture. "But, Cap'n I don't see where you're runnin' any risk. The firm in Pará'll guarantee your freight, and besides, there's tons of quinine bark. All I'm askin' is that you lay over a couple more weeks until we can get back——"

"Where is this stuff?" the Old Man wanted to know, fidgeting, half his mind on cargo and the other half on a fool boy that wouldn't stay put. That damned kid, rubber! Hunh—

"Up the *Masuni*," Kelly answered quietly, his face a mask again and his thin lips scarcely moving.

The Old Man exploded into roaring wrath. "What?" he yelled. Gone now was the rankling memory of the letter. "You want to take two of my men into *jivaro* territory for worthless cargo? Risk their necks? Make me lay over here maybe a month besides? You're crazy!"

William Kelly grinned. "I still got *my* head, and I'd have my stuff too if I hadn't paid them damned thievin' Indians in advance. That's why I want white men I can trust."

The Old Man growled and showed his teeth like a bulldog. "Nope. I got enough trouble now. Nothin' under Number Two hatch but air; Thorger, my First's, had an offer from the Holt Line and wants to quit; ; the tubes in the portside boiler's leakin' and I got other troubles besides. And you want me to risk two of my men on a fool errand. Hunh! Nothin' doin'."

Kelly blinked his eyes and nodded his

head. He blew air through his lips. "Okay. Guess I'm licked."

The Old Man melted a little. "Need a job? I can use a stoker."

The red-head shuffled his *alpargates* to the door, blotting out the reflected light. "Nope," he said finally. "I can take it. How about havin' dinner with me, ashore? It's nice to talk to a white man again."

Old Man Short was cautious. "This ain't no bribe? Because if it is——"

"Hell!" Kelly said in a disgusted voice.

The Old Man snatched up his cap with alacrity. "Now you're talkin', he said as he put his feet down. "I'd ask you to eat with me, but I seen what Carstairs was puttin' together. But how'd you like somethin' to go with it? I'll do the honors!"

OVER the remains of food, Old Man Short lovingly handled a bottle of Sauterne. "Never touch the hard stuff," he confided, "but I always got some of this stowed away in the hold. Makes you eat good and sleep better. Nature's gift."

Kelly sat morosely hunched, eying the crowded café. "I never found no trouble sleepin'," he growled, "but sometimes eatin' comes hard."

The Old Man's ruddy face crinkled. "I heard about you, some place. How'd you ever get mixed up in this rubber deal?"

Kelly shrugged. "Money. I was lookin' for gold and found rubber and quinine." He sighed, and his eyes lighted on something in the motley crowd at the bar, but his expression did not change. In a quiet voice he said, "There's a guy at the bar been lookin' at you. A knife-in-the-back look. Got any dirty linen in this place?"

The Old Man's face froze into a grim smile. "Sort of squatty, dark hair, puffy lips?" he asked, without moving his head.

"Yeah."

"Stoker. I fired him yesterday. Troublemaker," the Old Man's smile broadened and he pushed his chair back inches from the table.

At this sign of movement the squat,

puffy-lipped man surged forward. His eyes gleamed darkly, and with apparent carelessness he appropriated an empty beer bottle from the table behind the Old Man.

William Kelly grinned at the dark-haired fellow and in a voice edged with steel he suggested, "I wouldn't do that if I was you."

The short, heavy-chested stoker paused undecidedly and appraised Kelly with a glance.

His eyes blinked and then he started coming again. The Old Man hadn't moved.

With a swift shove of his big hand Kelly pushed the table and the Old Man behind it into a crashing heap of dishes, cloth and chairs. The stoker side-stepped the mess neatly and with a vicious swing aimed the bottle at his tall, red-headed target.

Kelly ducked. In a sweeping rush his left came up, ending with a solid, satisfying "clunk" against the squat man's jaw. Instantly bedlam reigned. The crowd at the bar paired off and the café was a maelstrom of seething, slugging men.

"COOKIE" CARSTAIRS, Lord of the *Great Island's* galley, stared into the pot from which the voice had come and crossed himself.

"Mother of God!" he chattered, "I'm goin' daft!"

"Here I am, Cookie," the voice said with inviting nearness, and Cookie swallowed hard, for this time the voice had come from the pan locker.

"Oh, oh!" Cookie roared. "So that's where you be! Come outa there or I'll dent your skull with this skillet!" He edged forward and yanked open the cupboard door, only to stare in baffled rage at nothing more than his battered and blackened cooking implements.

Whereupon Cookie contemplated flight, and the decision made, wasted no time. He was charging down the deck when he

saw, in passing, the silent, shaking figure beside the door.

"What—what—" Cookie spluttered, and then subsided into sullen and righteous wrath. "Oh, you. The Old Man's boy. What the hell you want to do, scare somebody to death?"

Bob Short's smiling eyes belied the frown that creased his freckled forehead. His hatless, blond head wagged. "You don't seem very glad to see me," he drawled.

"And why should I be?" Cookie snapped. "The trouble we're in, and you like a bloomin' hyeeny." The diminutive Carstairs regained composure with a dog-like shrug and returned to his sanctum.

Bob Short followed, his slender form keeping gracefully abreast. "Trouble?" he questioned swiftly. "What trouble? And where is dad? Where's everybody, for that matter?"

Cookie Carstairs lifted the pot-lid and peered into the mess he was concocting. He sucked his teeth with evil satisfaction and turned to stare levelly at the Old Man's boy.

"Your pop is in the Ickey-toss brig," Cookie announced without emotion, "on a charge of murderin' that scrummy Porty-gee stoker he fired a couple days back."

Bob Short's jaw dropped and he stared unbelievably. "Wh-what?" he gasped. He passed a shaking hand before his eyes. "Let me get this straight. You say dad's been charged with murder?"

"He's practically hung," Cookie solemnized.

"Well—" Bob Short's eyes blazed and his thin shoulders squared defiantly. "Well, what's the idea of just standing here? We've got to get him out! We've got to do something!"

"Set down," Cookie ordered unfeelingly. "You can't git him out and nuther c'n anybody else, yet. We wirelessed the owners and can't do nothin' till we hear from 'em. The Old Man's under five thousand bail and you can't even get to see him. So

don't go gettin' your underwear in a uproar."

Bob Short sat down, weakly. Some comprehension of the situation was beginning to dawn on him. "Five thousand—" he stared white-faced. "Is he guilty?" he asked quietly.

"How'n hell would I know?" Cookie retorted. "Him'n a guy named Kelly got into a keel-hauled double-scuppered brawl in a café ashore. That's all I been able to make out'n it. The Old Man's in the brig, but Kelly ain't. He's around tryin' to get somebody to go after a cargo o' rubber he's got someplace. And you got to show up here scarin' people."

Bob Short's face was sober. "Thought my ventriloquism'd be a good joke." He squirmed. "Just came in on the *Maranon Queen*. We've been a day behind you all the way from Manaos. Cookie, we've just got to do something for dad. If it was a brawl, he could plead self-defense."

Cookie Carstairs eyed the Old Man's boy sourly. "You don't know much about how they run the law here, do you? The guy that got hisself croaked was kind of a blood relation to some of these spigs around Ickey-toss. The judge says five thousand, and that's that."

"What if the Company refuses?"

"That's what we're all worryin' about, bucko," Cookie admitted cheerfully. "Your old man's as good as hung."

The young fellow shook his head in a dazed way. "This Kelly—if he has cargo he must have money. He was in on it. Maybe he'll help."

Cookie sucked his teeth thoughtfully. "He's offered, but it's a offer nobody wants to take."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Kelly claims he's got this cargo, and he says he'll hock it if we'll help him go after it. But it's in *Jivaro* country and them guy's got too many heads now."

Bob Short jumped up, eyes blazing from his freckled face. "Mean to tell me nobody of this crew has guts enough to take a

chance for dad's sake? What's wrong with you? What's wrong with Thorger? It's his duty—"

Cookie grunted. "Look," he said pointedly, "if anything should happen to the Old Man, why Thorger—"

A new voice came from the galley door. "What about Thorger?" it said in flat, harsh tones.

THE first mate of the *Great Island* was husky and his eyes carried a mean look. His heavy face was screwed into a scowl and his bunchy shoulders were thrust threateningly forward. He stood, half in, half out of the galley, scowling at Cookie Carstairs and the boy.

Bob Short bristled. He couldn't remember, now, that he had ever liked Thorger. Thorger took himself pretty seriously, and his efficiency was just a little too obvious. The Old Man's boy got hot and unloaded a speech:

"You mean to tell me there's cargo for this ship, and a chance to free my father, and you're afraid to go after it, Mister? What about all this 'Men of the Sea' stuff you used to feed me? I thought you said you weren't afraid of anything that could walk or talk. Even if you want my dad to stay in jail, or hang, you've got a duty to the line when there's cargo, haven't you? That's what you used to tell me. And listen; you owe a debt of loyalty and gratitude. Gratitude! Do you know what it means?"

Caught off balance by the attack, Thorger recovered. He glared and balled his fist. "Why, you—" he roared. "I'm in command here! Talk to me like that—"

"He didn't mean it, Mister," Cookie shoved his oar in. "He's all awash from the shock."

Thorger glared and relaxed. "Okay, little skipper," he growled. "Kelly's in the Old Man's cabin now. If you want to help your pa, we'll go in and talk. If you want to stay here and continue the argument, it'll suit me fine."

The Old Man's boy was pale behind his freckles and he swallowed. "Sorry, Mister. I lost my head."

From a puffed and swollen eye, William Kelly watched narrowly. "The cargo's there," he repeated, "and I can get you to it. But you," he paused in his stomping and inspected Bob Short. "How old're you?"

"What's that got to do with it?" came the level response. "If Thorger's willing, as he says, you'll find me man enough. I owe that much to my dad to be willing to try."

"Kinda free with your offers to take chances on our lives, ain't you?" Thorger sneered. "A ship's no stronger than her weakest rivet, kid, and you never been off a main street. 'Sides," he grinned "you might change your mind and want to start back when things got a little tough."

"Stow that," ordered Kelly. He stopped with feet wide apart and flexed his biceps. "All right, boy," he announced abruptly. "My canoe's ready and the outfit's stowed aboard. We start tomorrow morning, and if luck's with us, we'll be back in eighteen days. The Old Man comes up three weeks from now. It's touch and go, but it's the only out."

"Then it's settled," Bob Short spoke from pale lips. "Now, what about the money for dad?"

Thorger laughed harshly. "Kid, after you've been to sea awhile you'll learn that you get paid off at the end of the trip. Me, I'm gonna go over my Winchester and see if she's still okay. Maybe you better sleep in a bunk while you're still able."

THE sluggish surface of the *Yacu Masuni* offered little resistance to the cedar *piragua* and throughout the day Kelly, acting as steersman, watched his two companions with concern bordering on amusement.

"Not that way," Kelly would groan to Bob Short. "Jumpin' cats! Save your strength, man. Easy does it. There's two

things you got to remember; first and foremost is not to advertise. The only danger we can expect from Jivaros is to run into a way party, and there's no use sendin' 'em a telegram to stop and add our *mukas* to the *tsantsas* they'll have. And the other thing is, we're goin' a good ways. We're goin' a good ways. We're willin' for you to carry us five percent of the way, but we ain't aimin' to carry you the other ninety-five."

And to Thorger, who grinned every time the Old Man's boy came in for criticism, "You, Thorger. Maybe you're a bucko mate on a scummy tramp, but keep that Winchester o' yours in the boat. We're only shootin' for two things; food, and to save our necks. Right now, everything's peaceable. We got plenty to eat, and no trouble. But once you loosen one of them forty-fours a few days from now, no tellin' what to expect."

The cedar canoe was, as Kelly explained it, an exact duplicate of the other two he had sunk, upriver, waiting for the outward trip. Thirty feet long and beautifully built, he had received it in swap for a *carissa* of *jambi*, the highly prized poison made from the *barbasco* vine, from the *Iuturis*.

"Iuturis?" questioned Bob Short.

Kelly snorted. "They're the local Jivaros circulating around my territory. "Iuturi" is the name of a red ant whose sting brings fever. The woods is full of 'em. They're well named, all right."

The Old Man's boy showed amazement. "Mean to tell me you traded poison to headhunters for a canoe?"

"For three canoes," Kelly corrected.

"And you're still alive? Impossible."

Kelly bent his broad back to a stroke, straightened out. "Not quite. You see, they got to thinkin' I'm the *chamaco* of *Yacu mamá*, the son of the God of the Rivers and Rain. He's a pretty powerful god in these parts, and it don't hurt none for them to think it."

Thorger, at bow, glanced over his shoul-

der. "You talk about advertisin'," he scowled.

"Right you are, Thorger. But there'll be damn little said after this day, if I'm any judge."

The *Masuni* was narrow. Thus far its widest point had not exceeded thirty or forty yards. It was also deep and full of guile as Thorger, the husky First of the *Great Island* was soon to discover.

Thorger, less from experience than from natural caution, had refrained from exuberance and over-exertion. A trained navigator, he had swept the river's glittering surface with keen eyes, on the watch for sunken logs or snags. Now he raised his paddle and pushed at an object.

"Big log, hard-a-port," he sang.

At stern Kelly backwatered savagely and swung the canoe broadside. "Log my eye," he yelled after a moment's inspection. "That's an anaconda! About fifty foot long. Paddle!"

They needed no second command. The scooped-out log shot by and beyond the sleeping beast, and Kelly at length ordered, "Enough. Let that be a lesson. Take nothin' for granted. That baby could've upset us and our stores and we'd've been in a fine fix. Now, it ain't far to where I've got a palm shanty, "*armariaris*" they call 'em. We'll put in for the night. Tomorrow, if the water don't drop some, we'll have to haul over some big logs across stream. That'll give you boys all the physical culture you want, I reckon."

KELLY's palm shack was located away from the jungle, on a little *playa* where rushing high water had straightened out a bend in the river's course. Over sizzling bacon and *chájap*, eggs of the *charapa* turtle, the big red-head outlined his plans.

"Beginnin' tonight, we'll stand guard. It's good practice, and what's more it's necessary. We'll split the night into three watches. You, Thorger, 'll stand the first; me the second, and Bob the last. Keep

the fire up and the *tigres* will stay away. You'll hear noises, but don't let 'em bother you. Mostly they'll come from the *ambusha*, night-singing birds, or from *tuta-cuchillo*, monkeys that roam around after dark. We're in no danger from surprise attacks by Jivaros, now or later. If we run into 'em, both them and us'll be wide awake."

Thorger, munching his food, patted the Winchester and nodded silently. From the corner of his eye he watched Bob Short, aloof and alone, squatted on his haunches, probably occupied with thoughts of his Old Man. A fine lad, the Master of the *Great Island* had called him, but a quitter. To himself, Thorger laughed. And what was there about a quitter that was so fine? Lucky thing that Kelly apparently recognized and had figured in advance the boy's weakness. This Kelly seemed a capable sort—strong, wise and unafraid. Thorger decided, until he knew the ropes, to stick with Kelly and recognize his authority. They were away from the ship now, and as boss of the expedition, Kelly was the law.

And Kelly, that red-headed wanderer from Brooklyn through whose worn and calloused fingers the phantom Gold flitted with maddening elusiveness, was thinking thoughts of his own. His cargo, he knew, was safe. It was of fractional value, but he hoped to salvage enough to outfit a trip into the *cordilleras* of the Andes where lay the alluvial gold deposits of the ancient Incas. It hadn't been his idea to bring the Old Man's boy along. Still, thus far the kid had acted like a man. He showed he could take orders. He was strong, with the coursing strength of youth, and could recover quickly from fatigue. How would he react to a crisis? Kelly didn't know, and as he covered himself with netting for sleep, didn't give a damn.

KELLY opened his eyes and blinked at the bright sunlight. He raised his head, and a feeling of giddiness forced it

down again. Groaning, he turned and pushed with his arm. Near where his head had rested lay a pool of clotted blood.

"Thorger! Short!" Kelly shouted and pushed himself to his feet. He thrust aside the folds of netting and looked about the enclosure of the *armariari*.

Thorger stirred, opened his eyes and sat up. Near the mate's exposed foot Kelly saw a dark, coagulated spot, seething with flies and ants. Thorger saw it too, and he looked puzzled and scared.

Kelly stepped from the shack. "Short!" he called angrily.

From the river's edge Bob Short came running. In his hand he carried a fishing pole. "What's wrong?" he asked anxiously.

Kelly eyed him accusingly. "You were last on watch. You fell asleep!"

"No, sir!"

Thorger came down from the shack, scowling, disgruntled.

"You fell asleep," Kelly repeated sternly. "During your watch Thorger and I were attacked by vampire bats. If you'd been awake, they'd never bothered us. Look at your own neck. They got you too!"

Bob Short raised his hand involuntarily, flushed and brought it down again. "I didn't," he insisted, but his voice was flat and unconvincing.

Thorger stirred. "You're no damn good," viciously. "If we had another canoe, we'd be better off to send you back. You're a yella-bellied quitter!"

The Old Man's boy recoiled at the insult. His face paled beneath its freckles. Hunching his shoulders he clenched his fists.

"Step aside, Kelly," Bob Short commanded in a low voice.

Kelly shrugged and squatted. "You're a damn fool, Short," was his comment. "Thorger's got forty pounds on you."

The stocky mate grinned and licked his lips. He balanced himself and not so much as threw off his cap. "Come on, yella!" he taunted.

White with rage, the slender youth came swinging. Swift though he was, his charge was ineffective and he spun backward and to the ground, downed by a jolting right.

Thorger, schooled on the decks, in boiler rooms and bar brawls, didn't wait. He leaped, catching Bob Short with a wicked uppercut as the boy got off his knees.

"Okay, Thorger," Kelly commanded briskly, "that'll be enough."

But the heat of battle was in the First Mate. He stepped forward, grabbed the prone youth by the collar and cocked his right for another devastating blow.

Kelly moved in with the swiftness of light. "I said enough!" he said through clenched teeth. His muscular arm wound around the Mate's neck, yanked him from his feet, choked him until he was purple.

FOR the next few days, Bob Short stayed pretty much within himself. Automatically he paddled, lifted, pushed, stepped ashore, ate and slept. On watch, now, he remained awake, and at times Kelly caught the boy's eyes shrewdly watching the movements and tricks of habit peculiar to First Mate Thorger. Insults, thinly veiled or openly administered, seemed to move him not and he remained outwardly cold and impervious. But occasionally, when Thorger piled it on too thick, Kelly saw the boy's jaw muscles stiffen and the back of his neck would arch.

These little crises somehow managed to pass, for Kelly, mindful of the heat and the fragile tempers of men, kept his objective in view. Crouching, watchful, the red-head diverted their attention time and again with crisp, low-voiced tales:

"Right beyond this bend it is. Here's the place. I'd heard a black monkey, *maquisapa* they call 'em, and I stepped ashore for a shot. I got 'im, blasted his entrails out, but he hung to the limb an' I couldn't bring 'im down. So I come back to the boat and then I heard a sound like three Flatbush expresses in a row,

crashin' through the bush. Me, I got behind a tree and waited. Along comes two tapirs, big as houses and blind as moles. Smasheroo! They hit the water and my boat, bustin' her to smithereens. So I had to cut a barrel palm an' plug the ends with mud to get out. Them tapirs 're funny. Big's they are, they got a voice like one o' them plush rabbits kids squeeze when they go to sleep."

And again, stories momentarily exhausted, Kelly dipped into the encyclopedia of his mind for Jivaro lore. "You'd think these jungles was full of game. Well, they are, but not much of it's fit to eat. You take the black turkeys. If they been eatin' wild garlic one taste and that's enough. And there's fish in these pools, *pañas*. They got teeth and they'll eat a man to bones in no time. Catch 'em and pull 'em into the boat and they bark like dogs. Then there's the *yungaruru* bird, like pheasant, and rare. The Jivaro's say they got a worm in their eye, and if you shoot one, put the worm in your eye and you can see like a bird."

All the while he talked, Kelly, like a symphony leader, watched, led and played upon the emotions of his companions. For a time it worked. Literally he engulfed them and left little opportunity for introspect.

But at length even Kelly fell back before the wall of indifferent hate and lapsed into philosophical silence, interrupted only by picturesque cursing of the heat and insects.

ON THE eighth day it happened. The last camp before Kelly's *chacra* was another *armariari*, pitched on an island at the juncture of two streams. The food supply was running low, and from an earthen jug submerged in the river, the Brooklyn Irishman produced a cache.

"Giamanchi," he grunted. "We'll eat this. Don't dare risk a shot, because up that stream lives my neighbors."

"Just what is this *giamanchi*?" Bob

Short's cracked lips moved grotesquely behind his uneven, youth's beard.

Kelly wiped his mouth. "Made from *yuca*, chewed."

The rhythmic bobbing of Thorger's heavy black beard stopped. "Whaddaya mean, chewed?"

"Preserved with human saliva," Kelly responded laconically. "A present to me from the *Iuturis*. It's their principal food item."

Thorger's eyes blazed. With an expression of disgust he spat the *giamanchi* from his mouth and rubbed his hands on his breeches. Wordless, he arose and made for the boat.

"Where are you going?" Bob Short asked quietly.

Thorger bellowed, "Nobody can make me eat a savage's vomit! I'm takin' my Winchester for meat, and if you want any, get it for yourself!"

"You heard what Kelly said," the Old Man's boy recalled, not moving and eying Thorger coldly.

Kelly munched methodically, looked at the ground and stayed out of it.

Thorger stopped and turned. He came back half a step. "And what if I did?" he countered sarcastically. "This is an emergency, I'm an officer, and I'm in command. You'll take my orders."

Bob Short settled on his haunches. "I don't agree with you, Mister."

The First of the *Great Island* grew purple. "What?" he yelled. Advancing threateningly he balanced on the balls of his feet and roared, "Stand up! Stand up, or I'll kick your teeth down your yella throat!"

The Old Man's boy half-smiled and scrambled to his feet. "Try it," he invited.

Still munching, Kelly rolled out of the way, and with a howl of rage the Mate charged. In range he swung, a tree-felling blow.

The youth stepped aside, kicked Thorger neatly in the shins, and stood back, pale and bright-eyed, awaiting the return.

Thorger bellowed, skidded in his tracks and came back. His eyes were gleaming slits and his bearded face a blur of passion. He swung again, and again the Old Man's boy ducked and kicked him in the shins.

The last kick had hurt. Thorger was hobbling now, and he was cautious. Slowly he came, taugth and wound-up like a snake. Patiently he followed his back-stepping adversary, and swiftly lashed out.

YOUNG Short spun backwards and against the *armariari*, crashing it to the ground. But he was up in an instant, ducking under Thorger's bull-like rush, placing another telling kick in the shins, coming up behind, fists held in readiness.

Thorger tripped on a strand of *bejuco*, fell heavily. More slowly he recovered. He was shaking his head, apparently dazed by his fall. His huge fists seemed to waver and he swung at empty air. The Old Man's boy came closer, loosed a haymaker and landed in a heap. Thorger had foxed him, drawn him in, and landed a crushing right.

Yet again the lad stood up, unsteadily, but wiser. He kept away from that punishing right, feinting a little himself and getting in another shin-splitting kick. Thorger had gone from hot to cold. Death was in his eyes, and with the inescapableness of Fate he plodded forward. Like an old fox he forced the boy back, cut off his rushes, blocked escape until he had him at the water's edge.

A yard away, Thorger paused and measured. His right was cocked. The boy stood defensively in slippery mud, his eyes darting for the avenue of escape that was not there.

Then, it happened. From behind Thorger came a voice, low, pulsating. "Put up your hands or I'll plug you in the back," was the clear command.

Thorger hesitated and his hands shot up. He turned his head sideways, straining his eyes to look back. He couldn't see

the terrific swing that Bob Short threw at the angle of his jaw.

The Mate dropped without a sound.

From the wreck of the *armariari* Kelly stood up and brushed his hands. "Okay, kid," was his unemotional comment. "Kind of foul, that, throwin' your voice behind him. Startled me too, at first. But considerin' the difference in size and the fact he asked for it, I guess it's okay. Now, turn in. Tomorrow we load and start back."

"WHAT'LL we do about—?"

The words died in Bob Short's throat. Straightening his back from depositing a load of *cauchou* balls he beheld, rounding a bend in the river, a flotilla of *piragua*s. In single file, like a giant *anaconda*, they bore down, filled with men and bristling with *lumbiqui*-tipped *chonta* spears and machetes. There was no sound from the *Jivaros*. Silent and stolid, they moved nearer with each dip of the paddle.

Kelly saw them too. He muttered a curse and flung his battered hat away, exposing his flaming curls to the sun.

"*Mai mon ringuichi?*" the red-bearded giant shouted. "Where are you going?"

The leader, whose file-pointed teeth were dyed as black as the rest of his skin, raised a hand and the flotilla rested. Insolent blood-lusty eyes surveyed the three *huiracuches* and with insolence the leader returned, "*Mai manta chamungui?* Where do you come from?"

"We come in peace, bearing presents for the Iuturis," Kelly announced with dignity.

"The Iuturis?" Evilly, the squat leader scowled. Then, raucously, he laughed. Over his shoulder he called to his men, "The *huiracuches* bring presents for the Iuturis!" The laughter grew until it became a babble of mirth. Then, from canoes, appeared the *chonta* spears, and upon each was a shrunken human head.

"The Iuturis! Ho! Ho!" and the leader bent himself double at the joke.

From behind Kelly, Thorger edged for the boat and his Winchester. "Cut it!" the red-head growled. "A false move and we're gonners! Stay where you are!"

The mirth died out. Jivaros in the boats fingered their machetes and covetously eyed the waiting prize of three white heads.

"You are great warriors," Kelly praised boldly. "You have exterminated your enemies, the lowly Iuturis. Well done!"

The Jivaro chief smiled childishly, and with child-like guile invited, "Come with us to our village for the feast. We will give you much *giamanchi*. We are mighty. We are the *Mitayeros*."

"They'll take our heads too, the blasted heathen," Kelly growled. To the Jivaros he declined, "You are mighty and we appreciate your invitation, but we must finish our work. Then, perhaps, we come."

The thin veil of guile disappeared. "You will come now," the leader ordered, raising his machete again. Upon its end was a head, the *tsantsa* of the Iuturi chieftain.

The moment was filled with pregnant, itching silence. No one of the three *huiracuches* moved. Minutely, the flotilla crowded nearer.

Suddenly from the *bejuco*-sewed mouth of the *tsantsa* of the fallen Iuturi chief came words! Guttural, frightened, understandable words:

"*Chamaco Yacu Mámam! Supai mâchan!* He is the son of the God of Rivers and Rain—his brother is the Evil One!"

With one great howl the mighty *Mitayeros* went overboard. Swimming madly they churned the surface of the Yacu Masuni. The flight was complete, disorganized, an utter rout. In a few minutes the jungle covert had swallowed up

the warriors and their canoes were floating downstream, abandoned.

FROM the bridge of the *Great Island* Old Man Short sourly eyed the heavily laden *piraguas* coming alongside.

"All right! Look lively there," the Master bawled. "Uncover Number Two hatch and start the winch. You, Carstairs, make some tea! Rubber, hunh!"

The Old Man's boy pushed his bearded face up the iron ladder and batted his eyes in astonishment. "Dad! You're——"

"I'm what?" the Master roared. "Keepin' us here three weeks for a stinkin' twenty tons o' cargo! Rubber, hunh!"

"But I thought——"

"You thought?" the Master's bellow was like a fog horn in the lowlands. "Precious little you ever thought! Four jobs in four months! 'I don't wanta be this. I don't wanta be that!'"

Bob Short never could face the Old Man down. "All along I wanted to be a sailor, Dad," was his dogged defense. "I didn't——"

"A seaman?" the Old Man yelled. "All right! Get for'rd, then! Help load this cargo. The bridge is for officers! And don't call me dad. It's Captain to you."

The Old Man watched his boy's retreating back and blew hard into the bandana. Leaning over the side he yelled at a grinning, red-haired man whose face showed black above a flaming beard, "Hey, Kelly! I left a few bottles o' that Sauterne at the hotel. Thought you might be kinda dry. And watch yerself in town. There's a Portygee stoker layin' for you. If you need any help——"

His final words were lost in the rumble of the winch as young Bob Short eased the steam to her.



*The Sheriff Had Been
Accused of Hound-
Daugin' Around on a
Cold Trail While Some-
one Else Brought Home
the Bacon!*

HOGBACK HUNCH

By S. OMAR BARKER

Author of "Gettin' Old," "A Mighty Cold Day," etc.

SHERIFF HUNCH McELROY, of Pintada County, rode slowly, his weather-paled eyes studying the ground.

"Dang your skinny ol' gizzard, Hunch," complained the deputy he called Bug-Eye, "we won't never ketch up with him snailin' along thisaway. That stage-robber ain't ridin' no burro, y'know!"

"Nope," agreed the banty officer, dismounting to squint closer at the dry, hard-packed earth. "Near as I can figger he's on a full-shod hoss, No. 2 shoes in front, No. 1's behind. If the ground wasn't so dang dry an' hard, or if he'd kep' to the trails an' all these other fellers kep' out

of 'em, it'd make him a heap easier to track."

"Yeah," snorted Bug-Eye impatiently, "an' if hell didn't have a lid on it you'd step in it! Don't you realize ol' Hackberry Smith an' what he calls his Citizens' Committee is already more'n an hour ahead of us?"

"I never thought to time 'em," grinned old Hunch, remounting. "Looks like we got to hunt us a sandwash an' cut for sign, Bug-Eye. I wish I could smell like a Tonkaway Injun. Put one of them Tonkaways on a trail an' he—"

"You'll smell more like a took-away sheriff if ol' Hackberry Smith beats you

to the grab on this stage robber," broke in Bug-Eye, still snorting. "You know dang well he's out to git your job come election time. Let him show you up a time or two like this an' he'll git it, too! I don't see why the hell you ever give him a depitty's commission anyways."

"Well, the Good Book says to love, honor an' obey your enemies, so when ol' Hackberry come in with his neck all bowed for a commission so's he could give Pintada County a sample of shore-nough sheriffin, I give it to him. If he's got the whiskers now's his chance to flourish 'em. I ain't see no sign of him makin' a monkey outa me yet."

"You hain't, ch?" growled Bug-Eye. "Then looky yonder!"

Out of the hills ahead broke a body of horsemen. Old Hunch didn't need but one look to see that it was Hackberry Smith and his so-called "committee," coming fast. A couple of lengths out front rode Hackberry himself, leading a good sized iron-gray horse on whose back rode a man who seemed to be tied there. According to One-Eye Sneed, the bandit who had robbed his stage was riding a biggish iron gray.

"What did I tell yuh?" said Bug-Eye. "While you're hound-dawgin' around on a cold trail, ol' Hackberry lights right out an' brings home the bacon!"

"Don't look like bacon to me," observed Hunch, but the dried-apple face behind his hoss-tail mustache looked mighty sober. "More like a Mexkin."

IT WAS a Mexican, and a badly scared one at that. Hackberry Smith and his posse reined up with a triumphant flourish. Hackberry was a biggish man with a triangular face and a lengthy lower lip.

"Well, if it ain't Ol' Man Roomatism himself!" he chortled. "Was you goin' some place, Sheriff, or jest out to air off?"

Old Hunch ignored the hurrawing. He studied the prisoner's frightened face appraisingly.

"Thought I knowed all the Mexkins

from here to Gehenna," he twanged, "but I cain't seem to place this 'un."

"We'll place him all right!" laughed one of Hackberry's posse. "In jail!"

"No, no, no!" whimpered the prisoner. "I wassn't to do nosseeng by God my-self! Don't took to preeson! Don't—"

"Shut up, greaser!" broke in Hackberry. "This *viejo* ain't the judge nor jury around here."

"Nor he won't be sheriff, come election time," laughed a posse-man named Neff.

"Maybe not," agreed Hunch, "but I still got on the sheriff's britches today. How'd you happen to pick this feller up, Hackberry?"

"Well, in the first place," Hackberry grinned in high good humor, "I didn't waste my time follerin' rabbit tracks. The way to ketch a stage robber is to light out an' ketch him, specially when you know what color hoss he's ridin'. So when we spied this feller ridin' along a ridge-top back yonder in them Cerros Pelones an' noted he was on a gray hoss, we jest lit in after him an' grabbed him before he could spit an' holler howdy! He seen we meant business an' never even put up no fight!"

Obviously Hackberry Smith was proud of himself. But the wizened, banty sheriff looked doubtful.

"No doubt you done noble, Hack," he observed, "accordin' to your lights. But y'know—I got a hunch you've nabbed the wrong hombre."

"Wrong hombre hell!" snorted One-Eye Sneed, who had chosen to ride with Hackberry. "I recognized him by the hat!"

"An' look at this!" Hackberry thumbed a new ten dollar bill out of his vest pocket. "'Cordin' to the numbers, this here bill I found in his hatband is some of the stolen money!"

"Some of it?" inquired One-Eye. "Where's the rest?"

"Don't you worry about the rest," said Hackberry. "Time I git through with this hombre he'll tell where he's got it hid out, all right, all right!"

"Lies, lies! Alla time beeg lies!" cried the Mexican. "Alla time I'm tell to heem I'm don't know nosseeng from thees! I wass joost—"

"Shut up, *chili!*" snarled Hackberry, whipping a doubled rope end across the prisoner's back.

"Wup!" said old Hunch's dry voice suddenly. He laid a skinny hand on his gun. "You cain't abuse a prisoner while I'm sheriff around here! Coil up that rope an' tie it on your saddle!"

For an instant Hackberry's hand hovered toward his gun holt. Then he laughed and began coiling up his rope.

"You gonna let him bluff you thataway, Hack?" inquired Mitt Williams.

"Hell, he ain't bluffin' nobody! But if I'm goin' to be the next sheriff of Pintada County I don't aim to have it held over me that I go around gun-fightin' ol' grand-paws with one foot in the grave!"

"I'll stand on the other foot if it'll oblige you any, Hack!" Old Hunch's voice was more chuckle than challenge. "But hell's behind the barn, gents! There ain't no call for a ruckus no-way. It looks like ol' Hack has kinder made a monkey outa the ol' sheriff by rushin' out an' grabbin' him a stage-robber before I hardly got apast the taw-line.

"Natcherly he's feelin' purty ringy about it, an' I don't know as I blame him. Prob'ly means he'll git voted into my job, come election time; that is—" old Hunch paused, batting his pale eyes—"if he ain't arrested the wrong man!"

"Wrong man hell!" repeated One-Eye Sneed. "Ain't I told you I—"

"*Amigo,*" Hunch addressed the Mexican, ignoring Sneed's outburst, "I s'pose you got a good story made up by now, eh?"

"What's for the use?" shrugged the prisoner, sullen now. "I tell to heem true, but nobody bleeve it!"

"Look!" exclaimed Hackberry Smith impatiently. "This greaser claims he was jackassin' along, when he met a gringo that swapped him a hat, this gray hoss an'

ten bucks to boot for his ol' hat an' his burro. Does that make sense?"

"Imagine a white man, knowin' he had a posse on his heels, swappin' a fast hoss like that gray for a burro!" Mitt Williams' voice expressed disgusted unbelief.



"Yeah," said Hackberry Smith with sarcastic humor, "even Mister Sheriff Mc-Elroy could ketch up with a bandit on a burro—if you'd give him time!"

"It shore don't sound likely, does it?" grinned old Hunch, batting his pale eyes. "You say you spied this Mexkin ridin' the ridge-top—didn't happen to observe no burro tracks nowheres, did you?"

"Nary a track!" agreed Hackberry Smith. "Are we goin' to set here pow-wowin' with gran'paw all day, boys, or are we gittin' on to town with this prisoner? You comin' with us, Sheriff, or wait an' sneak in after dark?"

"Maybe I *better* wait," grinned the little sheriff ruefully. "Bug-Eye, you ride in with the boys—an' help 'em deliver this prizner to jail. You'll do an ol' man the favor not to abuse him none till you git him jailed, won't you, Hack—seein' you kinder got me where the hair is short this-away?"

"Sure, sure!" agreed Hackberry, magnanimously. "Anything to oblige a pore ol' has-been! What you aimin' to do—track a few rabbits?"

"Why—why—I got a hunch maybe I'd better!" stammered the banty officer. "Looks like that's about all I'm good fer any more, don't it?"

As the posse prepared to leave, he dis-

mounted and sat dejectedly on a grass clump, his wizened face sad and mournful. But once they were out of sight he remounted briskly, kicked the spurs to his horse and lit out at a fast lope toward that ridgy criss-cross of bare-backed hills known as Los Cerros Pelones.

TWO hours later he was afoot again, leading his sweating horse while he stooped to squint anxiously at faint, scuffy marks on a rockbound hillside. Slow as an old coon-hound he worked at a pains-taking zig-zag across slope after slope, always emerging to follow some high hogback from which, for half a mile or so, he could view the country behind him.

The sun was getting low when the faint trail he followed dropped off to a little cove with a spring in it. There he found the dead ashes of a very small fire, put out by wet coffee grounds. He shoved a scrawny hand into the ashes and found them still warm. The trail led out again to a ridge-top, but this time the wary old sheriff did not follow it boldly into view. Instead he sided the hill near the crest, keeping to the cover of scant timber when he could—and hurrying.

The fourth time he left his horse to crawl up on the ridge for a long, careful look, his searching eyes were rewarded by the sight of a slouch-hatted man riding a burro along the open hogback ahead of him.

He was traveling slow, as burros do.

It took old Hunch half an hour of cat-footing around the timber-motted hillside to emerge out in front of the burro-rider in a saddle-dip of the ridge. The man paused on a high point for a long, careful look back over the lower hills behind him, then came on, unsuspecting, down into the saddle.

Suddenly old Hunch rose spryly from behind a down log.

"I had a hunch you was a white man," he twanged dryly. "Put 'em up!"

With a startled grunt the burro rider

un-straddled to the ground, reaching for his gun. But the old sheriff could move quick as a cat when he had to. The stage-robber looked at the gunsight stuck almost under his nose and put up his hands.

WHEN Sheriff McElroy, weary as a choused wolf, arrived in town about midnight with his prisoner, he saw that there was a light in his office, and from an open window came raucous voices raised in argument.

With his handcuffed prisoner in tow he entered the narrow passageway between his office and the jail. Now he could hear what was being said inside, and who was saying it.

With an inward chuckle he snapped his prisoner's handcuffs to an iron window-bar of the jail and pussy-footed to the plain plank door leading into his own simple sanctum. Evidently there was some sort of a citizens' meeting inside.

"I ask you," bellowed the voice of Hackberry Smith, "how long are we goin' to intrust this tottery old hunch-hound with enforcement of the law in Pintada County? Us citizens risk our lives to go out an' bring in a dangerous criminal while he sniffs around on rabbit tracks! We bring in a man guilty of stage-robbery, an' Bug-Eye, this simple-minded deppity of a simple-minded sheriff locks him in jail where we cain't git at him to make him talk—an' hides the key!"

"Feller citizens, I say enough is enough an' too much is a plenty! We've waited half the night for this see-nile, rabbit-trackin', so-called sheriff to show up so we kin git at this here prizner an' find out where he hid the loot, an' he ain't come. Now I say the time has come to *do* some-thin'! All them in favor of bustin' oper the jail an' draggin' this greaser out, hol-ler aye!"

There was no doubt that Hackberry had a considerable number of citizens stirred up. A chorus of angry "Ayes!" rose from inside the office.

"All them opposed," began Hackberry, "holler—"

"No!" said Sheriff McElroy dryly, as he stepped inside the door. He tossed a sack on the table. "Examine it, gents. It ain't rabbits!"

He dumped bundles of money out on the table.

"There's the loot, boys. Bug-Eye, here's my key. Bring out the prizner."

"*Amigo*," he addressed the scared Mexican when Bug-Eye brought him out, "I'm right sorry you been put to all this trouble, but you're free now."

THE Mexican grinned, then doubt and fear came into his expression again as he looked at Hackberry Smith's men all around him.

"They won't harm you, *amigo*," Hunch reassured him. "For the first 'un that tries it, I'll shoot the same hole through both his ears."

"But look here, McElroy," protested Hackberry Smith, "even as sheriff you cain't—"

"Who's stoppin' me?" broke in old Hunch's twang. "I had a hunch you had the wrong sow by the ear right from the start, Hack, even before I heard his side of it. You recollect you said you spied him ridin' right out in plain sight on a ridge top? That give it dead away that

he wasn't no stage robber, for when a Mexkin has done anything that's li'ble to put the law on his trail he always follers the bottoms of the draws an' canyons so nobody won't see him. It's jest his nature to hide out thataway; whilst a *gringo*, he'll keep toppin' the high spots where he kin see if anybody's follerin' him. If you hadn't been behind the door when the brains was passed out, Hack, you'd of knowed them facks an' had a hunch that—"

"Hunch my eye!" sneered Hackberry Smith. "Admittin' you somehow stumbled onto the loot, if this here's the wrong hombre, looks like it's kinder up to you to bring in the right 'un."

"Done did," said old Hunch dryly. "He's hitched outside. Even after goin' to all the trouble to swap for an ol' hat an' a burro so anybody sightin' him would figger he was jest some harmless ol' Mexkin, bein' a white man, he still kep' toppin' out to the high spots to see if he was follered—jest like I had a hunch he would."

"An' speakin' of hunches—" the banty old sheriff's tone grew suddenly sharp—"as long as I'm the sheriff an' this here's my office, I got a hunch this meetin's adjourned. Anybody opposed, let him holler 'no' while he's able, for I've got a hawleg mighty handy here—an' a hunch that it's loaded! Now git!"



*Old Cockeye Had To Take a Hand When He Saw a Good Kid
on the Skids*



COCKEYE METHOD

By H. S. M. KEMP

Author of "Northern Frameup," "Police Call From Grassy Portage," etc.

PERCHED on the top of an empty wharf at Cariboo Lake, old Cockeyed McDonald watched the half-dozen passengers disembarking from Ken Norman's big Lockheed. Three of them were company employees, returning from a brief holiday in civilization. A couple more were prospectors whom Cockeye knew casually. The other man Cockeye didn't know at all.

"One more pilgrim lookin' for a job," Cockeye told himself. And he sized the man up, wondering how he'd do.

But a dozen yards away the old-timer

couldn't tell a lot. The man seemed to be in his early twenties, with a soft felt hat pulled low over his eyes. His suede-leather windbreaker, snugged by a belt at the waist, set off broad shoulders, narrow hips and long legs. And there was grace and easy movements in the manner in which he pulled a couple of valises from the plane and set them down beside him.

Later, however, Cockeye was to get the chance to see a bit more. A mechanic began to service the plane; and Ken Norman came across to the empty gas-drum.

He drew out a package of cigarettes,

offered them uselessly to Cockeye and took one himself. He beckoned the newcomer over.

"Shake hands, Bob, with the man who put Cariboo Lake on the map. Cockeye McDonald—Bob Wallace."

Now Cockeye found that his estimate of Wallace's age had not been far out. The man was dark, with a short, straight nose and a well-moulded, determined chin. His eyes were frank-looking, gray in color; and an old scar showed on one of his high cheekbones. But in the brief second or two that Cockeye was shaking hands with him, he noticed other details. His eyes were pouchy and slightly bloodshot, and a couple of lines at the corners of his mouth seemed out of place in one so young. Cockeye was struck, too, with an air of restlessness about the man, an air of abstraction.

"Glad to know any friend of Ken's," observed Cockeye. "I've met a lot of 'em and they all stacked-up all right."

If he had expected to raise any warmth in young Mister Wallace, he missed out. The man nodded curtly.

"Glad to know you, Cockeye." He glanced around him. "So this is Cariboo Lake?"

Cockeye shot a look at Ken Norman. Ken winked, the meaning of which Cockeye failed to understand. Then the pilot was answering his passenger, Bob Wallace.

"Sure; Cariboo Lake. And now you're here, where are you going to stay?"

Wallace shrugged. "Dunno. Guess there's a hotel?"

"Sure there's a hotel," cut in Cockeye. "See that unpainted buildin' right between them two log shacks? That's her—five bucks a day, flat."

Without a word, Wallace picked up his valises and strode off up the wharf. Cockeye gazed after him, then turned whimsically to Ken.

"One of them strong, silent fellers, eh?"

Ken nodded, lit his cigarette. "And heading for the devil on greased skids."

THE fragrance of Ken's cigarette induced Cockeye to get out his own foul pipe. While he chipped tobacco from a thick plug, he waited for the pilot to enlarge on the statement he had made. When none came, he looked up. "Greased skids, y'said?"

Ken gave a brief smile. "Ever read the sporting page, Cockeye?"

"Don't never see the paper at all—if Fat gets a holt of her first."

"Then Bob Wallace means nothing to you?"

"The only Wallace I ever knew of was the guy in prison. Raised spiders, didn't he? Usta watch 'em crawl up ropes."

"Bruce, you're thinking of," corrected Ken Norman. "Same family-tree, and both fighting men."

"Fightin' men?" frowned Cockeye.

"Bob Wallace, up until a month or two ago, was the most promising middleweight you'd want to meet. That was before he hit the rollers."

Cockeye turned for another glance, at the disappearing Wallace. He nodded sagely.

"He's got the build, got the jaw, and likely got the speed. What finished him?"

"A girl." Then Ken hastily corrected himself. "No; it wasn't the girl. They don't come any finer than Mary Mason."

Cockeye waited. "They don't, eh?"

"I'll say they don't! But this mug of a Wallace didn't know it. He thought he could stand her up while he hit the primrose path. He was good enough in his way—went through the amateur ranks, turned pro, and laid 'em out as fast they threw 'em at him. But all it did was to go to his head."

"Couldn't stand prosperity," suggested Cockeye.

"Prosperity? He got in with a wild crowd and raised merry cain from one end of town to the other. All the time, of course, Mary Mason was supposed to sit back and like it. But she didn't. She wasn't sharing her man with every silly

little jitterbug that came along. So there was the natural blow-up—and Bob Wallace found himself out in the cold.”

Cockeye digested the information. “And how did he fancy that?”

“He didn’t fancy it at all. It hurt his pride and cost him the next two scraps he ran into. It was common knowledge that Mary detested the fighting racket, but she was big enough to keep quiet about it. And this lug, instead of playing the game with her as she was playing it with him—tried to deal both ways from the middle. He ended up where he belongs; out in the ash-can!”

Cockeye tamped his pipe and watched the smoke drift across the water.

“This Mary Mason a local gal?”

“Nurse in the General Hospital. You know,” grinned Ken crookedly; “if Bob had kept up the way he was hitting, he’d have been there too. In the D. T. ward.”

“Then why did you fetch him in here?” demanded Cockeye. “We ain’t got no prize-fighters.”

“Who said anything about prize-fighting? So far as that’s concerned, Bob’s finished. He’s so soft right now, so full of bum liquor, that anybody could step in and trim him hands down.”

“Not me,” grinned Cockeye. “Nor you, neither.”

“Well, you know what I mean,” said Ken. “But he’s through with the fighting-game and has only himself to thank for it. My personal opinion is that at some time he took inventory. He discovered that his future was shot, that his fine friends had all quit him, and that he’d lost the only girl that really mattered. So now all he wants to do is to get out of the way, soak up all the booze he can get his hands on and forget everything else.”

LATER, Cockeye inclined to the same idea. Twice during the week he paddled across from his cabin in the bay, merely to see how young Bob Wallace was doing. He saw him but once, and heard

tidings of him from others. Apparently Bob Wallace had contacted a couple of bootleggers who flourished right under the Consolidated’s nose, and was now on the verge of the jim-jams.

Cockeye hunted him up. Following directions, he found him in the parlor of the Company’s big clapboard hotel. He was sitting in a chair in the window, feet up, glowering out across the expanse of Cariboo Lake. Cockeye spoke.

“How you doin’, Bob?”

The man turned slowly, and Cockeye was shocked at the change in him. Cockeye knew all about these solitary boozers who went days without eating; and Bob Wallace seemed to be one of the brotherhood.

His face was drawn, his eyes hollowed and more bloodshot than ever. He turned on Cockeye, truculently.

“Talkin’ to me?”

“Sure,” said Cockeye. “Anythin’ wrong with that? If Ken Norman thought I needed a permit to talk to you, he’d have given me one when he introduced us.”

Wallace frowned, then his eyes seemed to clear. “Sure. You’re McDonald. Eh?”

Cockeye nodded; waited a while. “Workin’ yet?”

Wallace shook his head. “Tried for a job. They’re full up.” Then, with a sudden change of front. “Who wants to work, anyway?” he demanded. “And what for?”

A moment went by before Cockeye spoke again. “Tell you—she’s midsummer now; and I aim to take a trip up to the Dog Lake country. Prospectin’, sort of, on somethin’ I heard about last fall. How’d you like to come along?”

Wallace stared at him. The pupils of his eyes expanded, contracted again. He wetted his lips, shook his head. “Not for me, ol’-timer. Nice of you to offer and all that, but I can’t work up the energy.” He swayed slightly in his chair. “But how about a drink? I got some off a feller I know. Pretty fair stuff—”

Cockeye gave him a steady look. “Did

anybody ever tell you, Wallace, that you was a blamed fool?"

Wallace blinked and his eyes went hard. "You talking to me?"

"Seein' there ain't nobody else in sight except the desk-clerk, I reckon I am. And this is what I'm talkin' about— You're a strappin' young feller with all yer life before you. You're good-lookin' enough, and I can tell you're educated. But instead of gettin' out and usin' the gifts God's given you, you set around drinkin' rotten liquor that'd eat the bottom out of a cast-iron pail and broodin' yourself into a straitjacket. It's time you woke up."

Bob Wallace went white about the lips and he clutched at the arms of his chair.

"If anybody but a half-pint little runt—"

"Oh, I know it all!" retorted Cockeye, disgustedly. "If it was anybody else you'd chew 'em up and chuck 'em down the drain. Mebbe. But right now I can out-paddle, out-pack and out-run you—and you're twenty-five and I'm sixty-three!" He suddenly stood up. "But it's all right, Bob, and there's no hard feelin's. If you run outa liquor or get sick of yourself, you'll find me over there across the bay. Look me up some time."

HE PADDLED home in a thoughtful mood, only to find Fat Morris had arrived from his workings on the Snare River and was waiting for him at the shack.

"You ag'in?" exclaimed Cockeye. "And what's wrong now?"

"Ain't somep'n always wrong?" growled Fat. "This time it's a connectin' rod off the drill."

Cockeye grinned. "What I claim, a feller should sell his stuff instead of tryin' to work it. Take me, now. I peddled off my holdin's for important money, and now I take her easy. You figure yours is the better way—and you're always bogged down in grief."

"Grief 'r not," snarled Fat, "I need a new rod. When's Ken due in?"

"Tomorrow. Goin' right back, too. You should get what you need from town in a couple o' days."

Cockeye's prediction was correct; for Ken Norman touched in at the bay that afternoon with a load of foodstuffs for Windy Jessup's restaurant. He took Fat's order for the connecting rod, then went roaring off across the bay for the Consolidated's property. Fat, with nothing else to occupy him, helped Windy stow his freight; then invited Cockeye to sit in and try Windy's coffee and pie.

FOR fifteen minutes Cockeye listened to the report of doings on Snare River. According to Fat, the diamond-drill was bringing up rich stuff. Interested in what Fat was saying, Cockeye almost missed the opening of the restaurant door. But he saw Bob Wallace lurch in and drop into a vacant seat at a table.

Fat shot the man a glance of inquiry, then turned back to speak to Cockeye again.

"Yeah. And now the claim is showin' what she's got in her, you say for me to sell out. You may be locoed, but I ain't."

Cockeye shrugged. "Mebbe she does look good. But like I told you, I ain't losin' no sleep over somethin' I ain't interested in no more. This stuff of yours can go haywire yet. If it was me—"

"But it ain't you!" pointed out Fat.

"You're danged right it ain't! But if it was me, I'd sell. Half the time you're frettin' over this thing goin' wrong or the other think breakin' down. You're gettin' so danged cranky with it all—"

"Cranky!" yelled Fat. "Hark at the feller. Why, you bald-headed ol' buzzard, you got yer gall tryin' to tell me that! When it comes to someone bein' cranky—"

There was the scrape of a chair, and Bob Wallace came lurching across. His bloodshot eyes were glinting, and red spots burned in his stubbly cheeks.

"What's all the row about?" he snarled at Fat. "Pickin' on him? Try it, feller,"

he invited; "and I'll hang one on your jaw that'll slap you silly!"

Fat glared at Wallace, at Cockeye, and scrambled to his feet. Cockeye slid in between the two men. "Now justa minute, Bob. You don't understand—!"

"I understand enough!" snarled Wallace. "No beer-bellied palooka like this is pickin' on you!"

Fat Morris sunk his chin and doubled his fists. "Let 'em come, Cockeye! I'll straighten him out!"

It was all that Bob Wallace needed. He flung Cockeye to one side and drove with a vicious short-arm jab. Fat saw it coming, ducked, and smashed Wallace in the jaw in passing. Wallace went down, and out like a light.

It happened as quickly as that. Cockeye was breathing hard, staring from the inert man on the floor to the scowling Fat Morris. Said Fat. "Somebody tell me what it's all about. And who's this jughead, anyway?"

FROM the kitchen, Windy Jessup came blundering in. There was a poker in his hand and the light of battle in his eye. "If you clucks wanna start somep'n aroun' here—!"

"Aw, forget it!" snarled Fat. "Chuck a pail of water over that slob and bring him to."

Windy stared down at the unconscious Wallace. "Who is he?" he demanded.

"When I find out, I'll tell yuh," retorted Fat.

But already Bob Wallace was stirring. Cockeye raised his head. There was a glass of water standing on the table and Cockeye told Fat to pass it across. Half of it he forced between Wallace's teeth, the rest he threw in his face. Wallace woke up.

"You fainted," Cockeye told him. "See can you get in that chair."

The man succeeded, and Cockeye, with a scowling, meaningful look at Fat Morris, reached for another glass of water.

"If you ever think—" began Fat, truculently.

"He won't!" snapped Cockeye. "No more will you. Get out, and leave us alone."

Fat opened his mouth twice; then gave a short laugh and dropped into a nearby chair. Cockeye addressed Bob Wallace.

"It's that rotten liquor," he told the man. "Wonder you come-to at all. But it's fresh air you need. If you're feelin' peppy enough, come down to the shack with me."

Wallace nodded, pushed a short curl of black hair from his damp forehead.

"Got anything to drink? I don't care what it is."

"I got some good Black and White," Cockeye told him. "But anything'll be good enough after what you bin guzzlin'."

Before the amazed eyes of Fat Morris, Cockeye reached the other man's cap from the floor, took his arm and walked him out. At the shack he produced a bottle of whiskey, gave it to him and told him to take a gentle slug.

Wallace's idea of a gentle slug was half the bottle. Cockeye finally pried it from his lips and slammed it down on the table-top.

"Just a hog!" he told Wallace bluntly. "If ever I get in the shape you're in, may someone step up and plug me!"

But Wallace merely giggled. He dropped onto Cockeye's bunk, sat there for a moment, then keeled over dead to the world. A moment later, Fat Morris walked in.

"Now mebbe," suggested Fat, "I'll get a word of explanation."

"It's comin' to you," admitted Cockeye. And he gave Fat a history of the case as he had heard it from Ken Norman.

"And what are you goin' to do with him now?" asked Fat at the end of it all.

"I dunno," Cockeye confessed. "It's a cryin' shame to see a youngster go to the devil like that and not put out a hand to save him."

"It's a free country," pointed out Fat. "A feller can do as he likes."

"Yeah," nodded Cockeye. "But I got to live with myself a long time after today. I was tellin' about that Dog Lake trip I got in view. If I could get him out there for a month—" Cockeye broke off to cross to the bunk and shake Wallace by the shoulder. "Hey, Bob! I want to talk with you. Snap out of it, eh?"

Fat gave a grin. "He'll snap out of it all right! And pickled in alcohol like he is now, he'll go a trip to Dog Lake!" And then his grin grew broader. "But if you're set on that trip and want him to go, here's your chance. Kidnap the guy, and take him along!"

Cockeye stared at Fat for a moment. His hand came up to claw at his goat-like beard. A slow smile crept over his leathery cheeks.

"By gypers, feller; you got somep'n there!"

AT NINE o'clock that evening, Cockeye's motor-driven canoe swept around Tamarack Point and came to stop on a sandy beach. The canoe was loaded with Cockeye's packsack and bedroll, as well as a can of gasoline, a grub-box and two suitcases. The suitcases were the property of Bob Wallace, who slept drunkenly but peacefully on another blanket spread in the bottom of the canoe.

Cockeye got out, took a glance at the red-splashed sky, and picked up an ax. He kindled a fire at the edge of the bush, boiled coffee, fried bacon. He was just on the point of sitting down to eat when there was a movement in the canoe. A moment later, hatless and dishevelled, Bob Wallace came blundering ashore.

Midway between canoe and fire, he stopped. He blinked dazedly, stared around him and up at Cockeye. Cockeye grinned back at him.

"Supper's cooked and all ready to eat. Set in, and tell me she's good."

Again Wallace stared around. "What's all this?" he suddenly demanded. "Where am I—how did I get here?"

"You're thirty miles from Cariboo Lake settlement," Cockeye replied. "And you didn't swim here, neither."

"I came up—" Wallace indicated the canoe—"in that?"

"Sure. Didn't you tell me you was callin' me on that prospectin' trip? So I let you come along."

"I—I—*what?*"

"Let her ride," suggested Cockeye. "I'm hungry. And hot coffee don't do nobody no harm. Set in and eat."

Baffled, Bob Wallace followed part of Cockeye's invitation. He gulped a couple of cups of coffee, black, but balked at food.

"Good enough," Cockeye told him serenely. "You'll be ready to eat some time. And mebbe I don't know. By the time you get to Dog Lake—"

"Who's going to Dog Lake?" demanded Wallace. "Not this kid! I'm going back!"

"Walkin'?"

"In the canoe!"

"Mebbe not," said Cockeye. "There's only gas enough for ten miles. I got fifteen gallons stored away up on the Portage. But you don't know where that is."

Wallace's lips compressed and his face looked murderous in the light of the flickering flames.

For a second a certain qualm took Cockeye, but he gave no sign of it.

"Listen, Bob," he said in a quiet, even tone. "I've took a real shiner to you. You've everythin' I haven't got. And I hate to see a young feller go plumb to the devil for no reason at all. Now this trip—"

"Never mind the trip!" rapped Wallace.

"Okay, then," agreed Cockeye. "But tell me—what made you come over to the bay today? Wasn't you lookin' for me?"

Wallace frowned, and tried to remember. A flush came to his cheeks.

"Yes, I was. Seems like my money ran out. I couldn't stay at the hotel any more. I thought—well, I thought maybe you could stake me to the price to get home. I

don't know why I came up here in the first place," he finished lamely.

Cockeye was quick to notice his changed attitude and was quicker to take advantage of it. "Then here's your chance," he told him. "You say you're broke, and I know your health is about gone. This trip may be the means of takin' care of both them little troubles. The stuff, the mineral I heard of, should be there; and if it is we're in it together. I made one little pile out of a hole in the ground; and there ain't no reason why we can't do it ag'in."

But Wallace was frowning. "You mean I put up nothing, and we split the purse?"

"Sure. I've prospected all my life. The only way I ever did it was with a partner on a fifty-fifty basis. And at sixty-three years of age, I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks."

Suddenly, to Cockeye's vast amazement, Bob Wallace's head went down in his hands. His shoulders heaved and Cockeye heard him sobbing. Cockeye nodded grimly.

"The jim-jams! Boy," he muttered, "if you don't get 'em tonight, you never will!"

But he stood up and prepared for bed. From four sticks driven into the ground and a hanging bough, he strung a two-man mosquito-bar. He brought up the blankets, unloaded the canoe and turned it over. With the bed made, he turned to Wallace.

"All right, Bob. Let's roll in."

Wordlessly, the younger man obeyed; and in a few minutes Cockeye thought him asleep. Cockeye dropped to sleep himself. But sometime later he aroused to find his companion sitting up in his blankets, shivering violently. He spoke to him.

"What's matter, Bob?"

"A drink! I've got to have a drink! I'm going mad!"

"Well, wait," ordered Cockeye. "Maybe we can fix you up."

He went out into the darkness beyond the camp, dug a quart bottle of liquor from a spot where he had it hidden, and came back with a half-filled tin cup. He

reached under the bar. "Here, boy. Drink her down!"

Wallace clutched at the cup like the proverbial drowning man at a straw. Cockeye heard his teeth chattering against the tin. A gurgle, a deep sigh, and the cup was pushed back to Cockeye again.

"Now try her," suggested Cockeye. "Grab yourself some sleep." He shook his head grimly again.

"You rode herd on cattle in your younger days, McDonald. Looks like any time now you can start ridin' herd on a flock o' snakes."

BUT Bob Wallace passed the night quietly enough. In the morning there was another bad session till Cockeye gave him his drink. "But," Cockeye told him bluntly, "don't you get the notion I'm not wet-nursin' you permanent. You'll get another snort at noon and one more tonight; but them's a long piece from here."

Wallace tried eating some breakfast. The breakfast was merely a slice of toast, but it showed that his stomach was beginning to assert itself. Several times in the day he begged for a drink of whiskey, only to be firmly turned down. He tried coaxing; he offered to go without the nightly ration to have it now; finally he cursed Cockeye with savage vindictiveness. Cockeye opened his packsack and tossed him a bottle of beer. The man's eyes went wide, and Cockeye stopped the motor to open the bottle for him. But Cockeye produced something else as well as the beer. And that was an old model .44 revolver, which he showed to Wallace and then shoved in his belt.

"I got a dozen of them bottles. I got the crock of hard-stuff. And I got the gun, too. You can have 'em all if you want 'em. And mebbe you know what I mean."

That night there was another ration of whiskey, and Wallace went to sleep more easily than the night before. Cockeye told himself it was the fresh air, the food that

Wallace was beginning to eat, and a tapering-down on the liquor. By tomorrow would see something else.

They were following the winding Cariboo River. So far, this had been engine travel, but tomorrow would see them bucking the first of the rapids. That would mean pole-work.

"And if he'll take it, more of that rotgut hooch 'll get sweated out. And somehow I think he'll take it," Cockeye opined. "I think he's that sort of a kid."

At least, Bob Wallace did his best. Cockeye went ashore at the foot of the rapids cut two light poles and whittled them smooth.

"There's a knack in polin'," he pointed out. "And you won't get it all at once. But let's see you try."

Cockeye took the stern, waving Wallace to the bow; and they swung out into the current. Followed then fifteen minutes of slavish labor. The sun blazed down mercilessly and in a moment or so both were wet with sweat. Feet braced against the thwarts, they leaned to their poles while they shoved and heaved. It was tricky work as well as hard work. White water bubbled around the bows and the light craft threatened a dozen times to capsize. They made a few feet, the poles slipped, and they lost what they had gained. But by taking advantage of the eddies, they finally reached the top.

Bob Wallace all but collapsed. He slumped down in the bow, the canoe-pole slipping from his fingers. Cockeye caught it as it went by and drove into shore.

"Tough work, eh?" he grinned.

But there was no answering grin from Bob Wallace. Face streaming with sweat, he looked up and began a savage outburst of cursing. "That's enough, see? I'm no Indian!"

Cockeye, holding the canoe with the pole, drew out his pipe and lit it. He smoked for some minutes in silence, then shoved the pipe away. "Let's go!" he said.

Wallace glared round at him. "I said I'd

had enough. Or don't you savvy English?"

Cockeye looked at him coldly. "Quitter, eh? When the going gets mean, you throw in the towel. Okay, boy. Sit where you are, and I'll take her up alone."

He began to, till Wallace clambered to his feet. The man's sweat-streaked face was harsh and twisted. He held himself while he raked Cockeye with bitter names. Cockeye's own jaw tightened, but for that, he ignored Wallace completely. A moment later, Wallace snatched up his pole.

THEY made but a short stay. Out of sympathy for his companion's sufferings, Cockeye pulled into camp while the sun was still high. They ate, hooked up the mosquito-bar, all in heavy silence. But when Cockeye handed him his whiskey, Wallace colored hotly.

"I'm a heel, old-timer. You're doing what you can for me, and I'm handing you dirt."

"Forget it," advised Cockeye. "We all slip now 'n again. Anyways, it's just the hooch comin' out."

For a couple of days after that they merely loafed along. Night and morning, Bob Wallace got his dose of whiskey.

They came to Dog Lake on the fourth day, but Cockeye, unknown to Wallace, passed it up. Cockeye had said he would be gone a month; and although a month would not now be necessary to effect Bob Wallace's cure, he did not want to risk returning too early.

In the succeeding days, Wallace became a creature of moods. There were times when he plainly wished to be left alone. He had surly spells, outbursts of black temper. These alternated with periods when he seemed almost normal. He hummed a little tune, took interest in his surroundings. Once Cockeye caught him weaving and shadow-boxing behind the camp.

But whatever his mental attitude may have been, Bob Wallace was already different physically. His cheeks filled, his

eyes cleared, and his skin began to tan. And then one night, to Cockeye's frank surprise, Bob Wallace unburdened his soul.

It was more than an unburdening; it was a confession. He told Cockeye of the hopes he had held of winning the middle-weight crown; he spoke of Mary Mason; and he even told of the manner in which he had treated her.

It was just before they rolled in for the night, and Cockeye did not interrupt him until he had finished. Then it was only to make a suggestion.

"Seems like this trip is just what you needed to put you in shape. You can go back and start right in where you left off."

Bob Wallace nodded. "Sure; as far as the fighting goes. But not with Mary."

"Oh?" observed Cockeye. "And why not?"

Wallace gave a short laugh. "You don't know Mary. When she cans a feller, he stays canned. And no woman—I don't care who she is—is going to tolerate the stuff I pulled off. A woman has as much pride as a man; probably more. And where a man can forget, a woman remembers."

There didn't seem to be much for Cockeye to say; and when in a few minutes Bob Wallace got up and headed for the mosquito-bar, Cockeye let him go.

THE following morning Cockeye began to circle for home. At least, he began to swing for Dog Lake. Midday found them boiling the kettle beside a small stream. The bacon was cooked and the coffee brewed when a motor-driven canoe swung around a nearby willow point. In it were two men, and men that Cockeye not only distrusted but heartily despised. The slim, dark-featured fellow in the bow was Dago Rosetti, the swarthy and bulky one in the stern, Big Bill Heaps.

The two suddenly backwatered and landed. They hailed Cockeye, dug out grub-box and tea-pail and came up to the camp. Big Bill Heaps wore a grin.

"Fire all ready for us, eh? Now ain't that nice?"

Cockeye looked up from his plate of food and gave a curt nod. "Help yourself." Bob Wallace took his cue from Cockeye and went on with his dinner. But Big Bill Heaps was unabashed.

"Great day, ain't she?" he suggested as his mate hung the kettle over the fire. "And what you boys doin' up here? Just nosin' around?"

"Just nosin' around," agreed Cockeye. "Tendin' to our own business—like we gen'ly do."

Big Bill nodded, a little less cordially. "Just like Dago an' me."

The meal went on, and finally the other two started in to eat. But before he was well into it, Big Bill clambered up.

"We don't run into a white man every day," he observed. "Seems like we should mark her as such." He went down to his canoe, returning in a moment with a quart-size unlabelled bottle in his hand. "Some of Baldie's—from down the lake. Good stuff, even though he don't brand her." He drew the cork and held the bottle toward Cockeye. "Take a drink."

Cockeye looked up, and shook his head. "Me, I never drink in the middle of a meal. Spoils what's gone and don't help what's to come."

Big Bill grunted, offered the bottle to Bob Wallace. "Here, you!"

Cockeye caught his breath. This was the last thing he wanted to happen. Bob wasn't over his cure, and this might upset all that had been done. He watched him—watched his hand go out, his eyes gleam. And then he saw Bob Wallace drop his hand and shake his head.

"No, thanks. I'm on the wagon."

The words were curt, more curt even than Cockeye's own. And Big Bill felt the rebuff.

"Yer on the wagon? And Cockeye don't drink in the middle of a meal. What's the matter with you guys—feelin' snooty?" Big Bill waited. When no answer came

he felt more bold. "Here!" and he shoved the bottle at Bob Wallace again. "When I ask a feller to drink with me, he *drinks!*"

Wallace looked up at him. His lips were tight, his eyes bleak. Then slowly he put his plate to one side, stood up and faced the man.

"I don't know you," he told him, "from the next bum. And I'm not drinking your booze!"

Big Bill drove the cork in the bottle-neck and shoved the bottle into his pocket.

"Tough guy, eh?" he sneered. "Well, you'll never learn younger, kid!" And he suddenly smashed a blow at Bob Wallace's head.

But Wallace's head was no longer there. Cockeye had a vision of pumping fists, a bit of ducking—and Big Bill Heaps was flat on his back, and knocked out cold.

Cockeye was too startled to move. He saw Wallace standing over the man, waiting for him to rise. He saw him turn to Dago Rosetti. "You! Want some of the same?" And when Dago backed up hurriedly—"All right!" barked Wallace. "Then grab your grub and get outa here!"

He meant it, and Dago hastened to obey. Plates, cups and food, he dumped them all into the grub box. By the time he had the box in the canoe, Big Bill was stirring.

The man crawled to his knees, looked groggily around him. He found Wallace at last, standing over him. "What hit me?" he asked.

"I hit you!" said Wallace. "And if you aren't outa here in a couple of minutes, I'll hit you again. And next time it'll be harder!"

From the canoe, Dago Rosetti bawled advice. "Aw, come on, Bill. You can get him some other day!"

"Some other day!" echoed Bob Wallace. "If I don't get you first!"

Slowly Big Bill got to his feet, then turned and blundered down to the canoe. He said nothing; and in a moment or so, Cockeye and Bob Wallace were left with **their unfinished meal.**

Cockeye said nothing either. This was one of the times he deemed it best to keep his thoughts to himself.

THEY reached Dog Lake, and spent three days poking around its craggy shores.

"I'm lookin'," Cockeye told his companion, "for a place where there's bin an old rock-slide. There's weathered stone, rotten stuff, tumbled right down into the water. An Injun told me about it. Of course, you can't believe half what them Nitchies tell you. But it don't do to pass 'em up."

In this instance it certainly did not. For they found the place, and with it found what practically amounted to a native-copper showing. Cockeye was slackjawed at the discovery. He dug out a prospector's pick, and he and Bob Wallace went to work. The deeper they went the more of the mineral they found. There was galena, more native copper, and a showing of silver.

"I ain't sayin' this is a million-dollar prospect," Cockeye cautiously admitted. "But we can option this off to some goin' concern for quite a hunk o' cash. Ten thousand apiece wouldn't be too high."

Bob Wallace blinked, and seemed to have trouble in getting his thoughts into words. "I understood that prospecting was a gamble. That a feller might spend a lifetime—"

"Sure. Like me," agreed Cockeye. "But what's to stop you hittin' her when you first start out? Of course, we had the Injun's yarn to go on. Which reminds me that there's got to be a piece in this for him—for Charley Head." He looked around him. "Let's see what more we got. This bein' a point, we'll paddle around the shore a ways, then hit in the bush from there."

So half a mile from their original landing, they beached the canoe and went into the bush. They were gone a couple of hours; and although the showings were not as rich as before, they were enough to

show that the strike was no more flash-in-the-pan.

"Fine and dandy," approved Cockeye. "Now we'll go back and see about stakin'."

They started off, but as they rounded the point they saw two men scuttle out of the bush and pile into a waiting canoe. Cockeye let a yelp.

"Them two ag'in—Dago and Heaps!"

Bob Wallace, whose eyes were younger, stared at the bush and then turned to Cockeye. "And what's that up there? Ain't it a post of some kind?"

Cockeye followed Wallace's pointing finger. "Sure! Them rats knew I'd got somep'n, and they've bin follerin' us around. They've staked her!"

But the two men were in their canoe and racing off. Three hundred yards intervened, and Cockeye gave his own engine full-throttle. As he did so, something squealed over his head, making him duck instinctively.

It was a bullet, dangerously close.

While he held the tiller, Cockeye dug out his carbine. He shoved it ahead to Wallace. "Aim fer the canoe!" he yelled. "Sink 'em!"

It became a running fight, with the far shore and the mouth of the Dog River less than a quarter of a mile away. Due to the heave of the small waves and the strength of the wind, neither side scored a hit till they were well near shore. Then Bob Wallace suddenly dropped the carbine and clutched at his leg.

Cockeye could have stopped, and knew that he should, but it was too dangerous out here. He yelled at Wallace. "'S'matter, kid? They get you?"

Wallace half turned and spoke through clenched teeth. "My knee!"

Cockeye caught his breath. The knee! That would be bad. The best thing would be to hit for the portage and stop there. The portage opened up right at the mouth of the river where a rapid began.

He pulled into it, seeing the other canoe swing down the rapid and disappear. He

let it go. The important thing was to give attention to Bob Wallace.

He got him from the canoe and laid on a blanket. The leg was bleeding badly, and when Cockeye had it bathed with clean water, he realized the seriousness of things. The kneecap was shattered, and splinters of bone were sticking through the flesh.

Wallace fainted while the old-timer performed his crude surgery. Cockeye removed the splinters, broke boards from the grub-box and bound up the leg. There was still a little weakened whiskey in the bottle, and some of this he managed to get Wallace to swallow. At last the man opened his eyes.

Almost at once he spoke. "Am I hit bad?"

Cockeye nodded. "Bad enough?"

"Just how bad?"

Cockeye hesitated. "Well, that's for the doctor to say."

Bob Wallace looked him squarely in the eye and Cockeye knew he had read his thoughts. He suddenly winced as a wave of pain swept over him.

"If you could make it to the canoe—" suggested Cockeye. "Lean on me, sort of, and hop across—"

"But how are we going to make to the settlement. There are portages—"

"One way," agreed Cockeye. "But this river empties into Trout Lake. Trout Lake is ten miles long and Snare River flows into her. Up Snare River apiece is Fat Morris's claims. By travelin' steady we can reach there before dark. Fat's got a crew on hand, and we can get two-three of the boys to pack you over the portages. We'll have to try her, anyway."

Somehow Cockeye managed to get Bob Wallace into the canoe and made comfortable on a bedroll amidships. The man almost fainted again, but the weakened whiskey revived him. Then Cockeye ran the rapid, followed the Dog River and came out on Trout Lake. There he found no sign of Bill Heaps or his canoe, and

Cockeye ground his jaw when he thought of him. Big Bill would probably reach Cariboo Lake settlement by tomorrow night, grab the first plane and hit for town. There he would register the claim, and Cockeye and Bob Wallace would be left holding the bag. But Cockeye tried to forget all this. The immediate urgency was Bob Wallace.

AT seven that evening, Cockeye pulled into Fat Morris's Snare River camp. And if Cockeye believed the day of miracles was past, he had to revise his judgment. Tied into the wharf was Ken Norman's plane.

They came down the wharf to meet him—Fat, Ken, and a dozen of the boys. Briefly Cockeye put them in possession of the facts, then appealed to Ken for assistance.

"You got three hours of daylight, Ken. And three hours with that fast job of yours'll put Bob in town. Come on, how about it?"

"Well what d'you think?" demanded Ken. "Get him aboard and we'll go!"

There were a lot of things that Cockeye would have liked to discuss with Fat Morris. Things pertaining to Big Bill Heaps, and other items. But these would have to wait. Ten minutes from when he landed, Cockeye was in the air and hitting for town.

They landed on the river as daylight was just about finished. Bob Wallace, white-faced from the pain of his knee, was slid into an ambulance and taken immediately to the hospital. And soon thereafter an interne went to work.

The operation took an hour, and when it was over, Cockeye asked the interne for an opinion.

"He's all right," was the professional reply. "Of course, he'll always have a stiff leg. Too bad."

"D'you know him?"

"Know Bob Wallace?" The interne grinned. "Who doesn't—in this man's

town? But it'll wash up his ring career. If it wasn't washed up already."

Cockeye went out of the hospital feeling very low. The thought that he had reached town some days ahead of Heaps did not occur to him. He was thinking of Bob Wallace, and the stiff leg he was going to have. Then suddenly he wheeled, and entered the hospital again. At the desk he asked the girl, "You know a Miss Mary Mason? And can you tell me where she lives?"

The girl patted her finger-wave. "Mary Mason? Off duty now. Suite Fourteen, Campbell Block."

Cockeye found the Campbell Block and he found Suite Fourteen. He also found Mary Mason. Curiously enough, she was just like Cockeye thought she'd be—not too tall, not too short; a girl with hair as black as Bob Wallace's own, and with eyes as friendly and blue as Cockeye had ever seen. Cockeye introduced himself; and when he said he came from Cariboo Lake, the girl gave a start and asked him to come in.

Cockeye noticed the start; and he looked down at his own smoky, tattered trail-clothes. But he went in anyway, hat in hand.

"It's about Bob Wallace, Miss. Y'see, he's up in the hospital. Hurt."

The girl blinked. "Hurt?"

"Well, shot-up some. Got a busted knee. I thought you'd like to know."

The girl was trembling. "Of course I'd like to know. But what happened?"

"It's like this—" began Cockeye; and so that the girl would understand to the end. He finished up by saying, "The Bob Wallace that landed in Cariboo Lake was just a liquor-soaked tramp; but the Bob Wallace that come home—bum leg an' all—is just as clean and as square a kid as I ever want to meet. And as Bob'll be feelin' pretty blue when he comes out of the ether, I thought—well, I thought that mebbe it wouldn't do no harm if you dropped in on him and said 'How-do.' That is," added

Cockeye, humbly, "if you still think anythin' of him at all."

The girl's eyes were moist. "If I think anything of him? Why, I never think of anyone else! He may be a tramp, but I'd rather starve to death with Bob—"

"There won't be no need for that," broke in Cockeye, dryly. "Not if them claims of ours stack up like they'd oughta."

"And I'll go to him at once," said the girl.

"Yeah; but there's this to it," pointed out Cockeye. "Right up to the end Bob always figured on gettin' back into the

fightin' game. He's a scrapper, born. And when he finds this o' leg of his has let him down—that he won't never walk proper ag'in—well, he's apt to be pretty bitter about it all."

"I understand."

"I hope you do," said Cockeye. "Bob has prob'ly had some pretty tough scraps in his day, but the one he's facin' will be the hardest. I hope he wins it."

The girl's eyes were starry, with hope and faith. "He'll win it, Mr. McDonald. I'll be in his corner taking good care of him all the time."

Sea Terms Ashore

SEA terms are puzzling enough to the uninitiated, but the landsman who is bewildered by many that he hears would be vastly surprised did he know how many of the expressions which he uses most commonly had their origin on the ocean.

Of the many sea phrases which have come into everyday use, there is none commoner than "I was completely taken aback." A ship is taken aback when the wind heads her and lays her sails back. When this happens the ship stops in her tracks as a man would who received a great surprise.

The term "bitter end" is also of sea origin, but it entirely changed its meaning since it came to live on shore. Originally, the bitter—or, as it was sometimes called, the better—end of a cable was the part abaft the bits or heavy stumps to which the cable was made fast. Naturally, when a cable was paid out to the bitter end, there was nothing more left.

It is in this sense that the words came to be applied to the extreme of a controversy of any sort, but the original significance of the nautical word bitter has long been lost.

For the term "rakish," many derivations have been suggested. As used today, it describes an individual whose appearance is not altogether as respectable as it might be and who has, nevertheless, a certain dash. At sea, as every one knows, a "low rakish craft" invariably turns out to be a bloodthirsty pirate.

As matter of fact, rakish was a recognized technical term for masts which inclined toward the stern more than usual. Such masts were formerly characteristic of the fast schooners and pirates, and, somewhat later, slave ships were very partial to schooners, which of course they wished to imitate and be as fast as possible. It was, therefore, quite inevitable for a rakish vessel to appear suspicious in the eyes of all peaceful traders.

An expression which betrays its origin more plainly, although the spelling has become somewhat distorted, is "all plain sailing." The learned assert that this phrase, whose meaning is obvious, was originally "plane sailing." Before the time of Mercator, we are told, the charts of the world which seamen used were made on a "plane projection." Navigation on this principle was very erroneous, but it was at least simple, and from it has been handed down to us the term "plain sailing."

Kenneth P. Wood,

A hard land, a man's land, the land of gold, black gold beyond the great ridges of the desolate barrens—and a daring chechako who was determined to find it.

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**IN
THE
NEXT**

Short Stories

Adventurers All

Hidden Waters

I AM a petroleum geologist. In September, 1931, I was making a research survey in Watson Township, Warren County, Pennsylvania, covering the area on foot for surface geology. I had been told by woodsmen and hunters of a mysterious underground stream under a great escarpment, along the foot of which wound the deer-trail that I was following. It had been my wish to verify this tale. As I walked slowly along, I could distinguish a faint murmur as of flowing water, apparently coming from far beneath the rocks.

Carefully I inspected the cliff face for some spot which would allow me to view this stream, said never to have been seen by man. I finally discovered a cavernous fissure, and upon approaching it, my ears were greeted with sound of a wild surge and rush of water flowing swiftly over broken rock. The opening was only about three feet in height, and fairly wide. From a rock platform approximately ten feet square upon which I stood, I estimated the stream as sixty or seventy feet from entrance.

Having with me a heavy corduroy coat, I donned it, buttoning it up closely as the cavern might be wet and clammy. Dropping to my knees, I crept forward into increasing darkness. As I proceeded, the cavern roof slanted rapidly until I was flat on my belly, ears ringing with a booming roar of rapidly running water confined. It was dark as the interior of Jonah's whale. Squirming like a worm on a hook, I managed to get matches and a steel tape

from my pocket, estimating the stream as approximately ten feet wide, fourteen inches deep in the middle, and flowing at a rate of 800 gallons per minute.

Finishing, I attempted, foolishly, to back out. I was shivering with cold and damp, so perhaps the alleged brain failed to function. I had taken about four creeping steps, when I stuck fast. Endeavoring to get loose, I only wedged tighter. I could feel cold sweat feathering my forehead as I contemplated my plight. My car was nearly a mile away, hidden in a laurel thicket; no one had seen me enter the reserve. The family would not be unduly alarmed at any absence, as I was often away for weeks. There was no good reason for anyone to come here before deer season in December, and then some wandering hunter might—well, I took hold of myself, tried to burrow down into the stone floor. Nothing doing.

Back and forth, from side to side I wriggled vainly. I could feel a lump on my back and reaching up, an investigating handful of fingers found that my heavy coat had rolled up from the bottom, wedging tighter as I worked backward. I must crawl forward until it unrolled, turn gradually, facing ahead. I found this necessitated snailing out into the stream some three feet, about-facing in the water.

Soon I was headed for the entrance, an infinitesimal spot of light apparently miles away; my clothing was wet and soggy from the icy water, I was gasping and sneezing. I reached the edge of the flat rock some fifteen feet from the entrance,

was just beginning to heave long sighs of relief, when I stopped dead, a numbing horror which my recent adventure had failed to produce, creeping over me!

The sun had come out, shining warmly and brightly on the big flat rock at the cave mouth. Gliding in from the rocks at right was a huge, flat, triangular head, followed by a sinuous, shining body, slithering easily out on that warm rock, stretching more than four feet from tip to tip! Less than ten feet separated me from a rattlesnake's poisonous venom!

Lying motionless, my nostrils were filled with the heavy, reptilian odor of him—like an old cucumber—as he lay full length. He was a monster for this region.

Time stood still. I scarcely dared breathe. I have no fear of these chaps when out in the open, but here in this low-roofed, narrow cavern he had me foul.

Suddenly the snake raised his head, quivering. I heard a rustle in the dead leaves of the trail, a loud, whistling snort. With the speed of light, Mr. Rattler whipped into a striking coil. Again the snort. I peered out past the snake, seeing four slender legs advancing upon the reptile, whose rattles sounded warningly.

INTO my limited sphere of vision stepped a big, buck deer, snorting angrily, his great eyes red with rage. I wondered if the snake would stand his ground, or retreat into my cave, necessitating a bare-handed battle. The buck stamped, snorted, rose high on his hind legs, rapped hard on the rock as he dropped back to all fours. In my wide

experience of woodcraft and wild animal habits, I had never known a deer to fight a rattler, but this deer had his own ideas.

He was now within three feet of the snake. He lowered his head, spread his front legs, swung his head from side to side like a disgruntled grizzly. Great muscles in his shoulders and buttocks bunched and rolled. The snake's lidless gaze never wavered, his rattles buzzed like an angry bumblebee. Loudly the buck whistled, then leaped, his knife-like fore hoofs coming down squarely on the snake's head and neck as the reptile struck. A sound as of rustling, whispering leaves followed as the snake's body, his poisonous head crushed to pulp, thrashed and swished upon the bare, dry rock.

I barely suppressed a wild Indian yell. It would be mighty unhealthy to crawl out and interview that buck right now. The animal swung his head down, sniffed loudly at the dying snake, then rose high once more, coming down with his forefeet drumming a tattoo on echoing rock as he ground the crawler's body to bloody ribbons. His anger worked off, he swung away, trotting down the trail, his white flag raised in triumph. I crept gingerly past the ripped-up snake and out into the most glorious sunshine I've ever known. I consulted my wristwatch. I had been in the cavern exactly forty minutes!

I have that set of rattles—ten and a button. I've lost all desire to investigate underground streams in person.

Some people ask why my hair is white. Well, shouldn't it be?

John P. Ruggles.

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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, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Manuscripts which are not accepted will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for that purpose.

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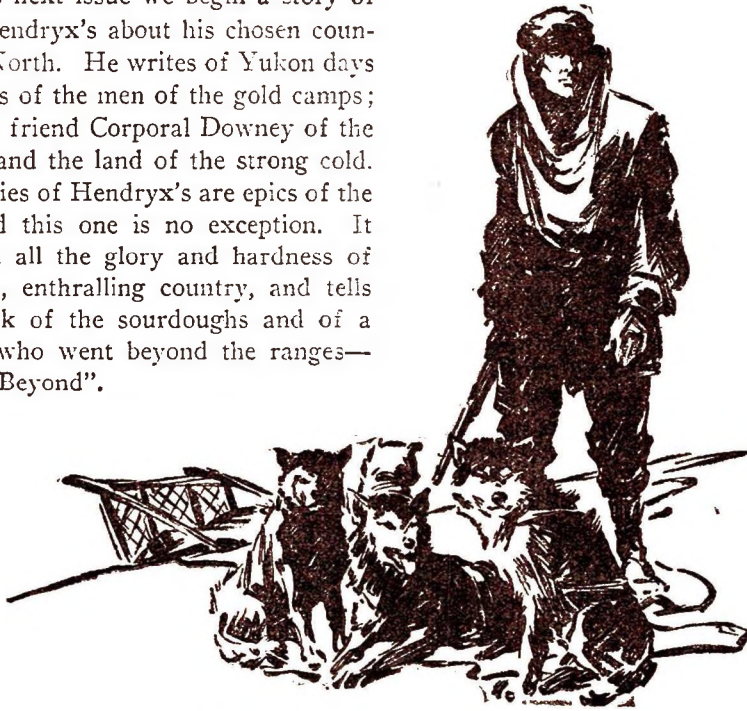
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The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

IN THE next issue we begin a story of Jim Hendryx's about his chosen country—the North. He writes of Yukon days and strikes of the men of the gold camps; of our old friend Corporal Downey of the Mounted and the land of the strong cold. These stories of Hendryx's are epics of the North and this one is no exception. It brings out all the glory and hardness of that bitter, enthralling country, and tells of the luck of the sourdoughs and of a chechako who went beyond the ranges—"Edge of Beyond".



Australia Still Prospectors Paradise

AND talking of gold strikes, today very typical of present-day Australia, is the gold prospector. On the other side of the world from the Yukon, time hasn't changed him. He is as hardy and hopeful as ever, a good deal of a gambler, and ready ever to play dice against fate with his own life as forfeit.

It was way back in 1831 that the gold magnet first began to draw men to Australia. The first fields were around Bathurst, New South Wales. But soon the discoveries near Ballarat and Bendigo, in Victoria, eclipsed all others, and the settlement of Melbourne became the port of entry into Australia for all the swashbuckling adventurers on earth.

Wild beyond imagining were the scenes of those days, rivaled only by our own mad

stampede of '49. A stream composed of all the elements of humanity poured into the goldfields. Lords and dukes from England jostled side by side with wild cowpunchers from America, deserting sailormen from foreign ships, doctors, lawyers, tradesmen, and workers of all sorts, including a goodly proportion of ruffians. The story was that gold could be picked up in the goldbelt just as stone might be picked up from the average country road.

Great fortunes were made by the lucky turn of a pick, and then lost again by the unlucky turn of a card. Money—vast sums of it—came into the most incongruous hands. But it did not remain long with them, for what had come quickly went just as quickly. In the true gold digger's blood the fever always burned. He made wealth, spent and gambled wealth, and was then out again prospecting for more.

It is characteristic of the typical Australian gold miner that he hates to work for regular wages. He likes "to be his own boss," and will prefer to work on some little claim of his own, making just about enough to keep him in food, rather than accept high wages from an employer. He always cherishes the hope of striking it rich once again.

In the hinterland prospectors usually work in pairs, following up the bed of an old stream, or searching the hills around where alluvial gold has been found, for the most part near the "parent reef" from which it originally came.

THE outfit of the prospector is simple enough—pick or spade, as the nature of the country may happen to demand—a little stone mortar and pestle for grinding down quartz if he is working reefs, and a tin washing pan. It is this big washing pan, more than all else, which marks the gold seeker.

When gold is discovered, the lucky finder stakes out a claim, and if he can manage it, lets his friends know of the find before it is publicly announced, and there is a wild rush of fortune hunters to the spot, which hold such golden possibilities.

Prospecting in its primitive form still goes on in most of the Australian State, and there is no doubt that the biggest discoveries are yet to be made. The Northern Territory, which is as yet practically unexplored, except in the most superficial way, will probably be the site of the next great gold discoveries on the continent. The country is known to be mineral-bearing, and around Port Darwin the glittering yellow ore has already been uncovered. Once the news circulates of a big alluvial deposit, and the story of Sofala, of Bendigo, and of Coolgardie will be repeated, and again from all quarters of the globe will stream the usual motly crowds of fortune hunters, eagerly following the siren call of gold.

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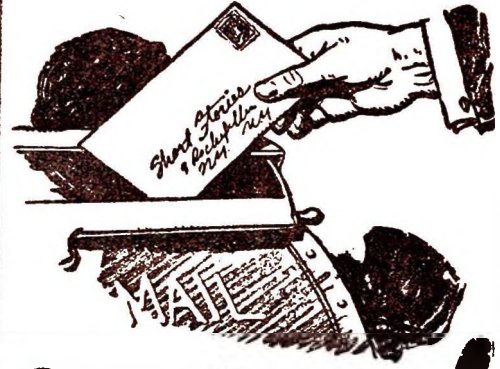
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SEZ YOU!

The Editor,
 SHORT STORIES,
 9 Rockefeller Plaza,
 New York City, N. Y.

Some years ago, while visiting a friend, he gave me a bunch of magazines, among them were several copies of **SHORT STORIES**. I read them, liked them, and have read them consistently ever since.

I can honestly say, that your magazine without exception, has some of the finest fiction stories that I have ever read.

It offers the largest, and most interesting variety of stories, than any other magazine I know of. One can cover a lot of miles in one night's reading. Your stories are so varied, that they do not get monotonous.

I have just finished the January 25th issue, and am looking forward to your next edition.

Red Clark—Two Gun Man is very entertaining, and one can always enjoy a story about the Major, *Home Range*, and *Under Dog* were good. *Night Haul* and *Two Ways North* also struck my fancy. And one can always depend on *Cockeye McDonald* in a pinch. *Red Dynamite* seemed just a little bit exaggerated. It seems impossible for a slight boy of sixteen, that doesn't look his age, to do the things he does.

I always turn to the Ends of the Earth

Club first. I find it very interesting to read the letters sent by readers from the four corners of the earth. And a person can find some good reading in Adventurers All.

I want to congratulate you and your staff on the fine reading you have given us. And also let me commend you on the attractive covers. I wish you continued success, and hope that in the future you will give us the same fine stories that you have in the past.

Sincerely yours,
Edward W. Cullinan.

Chicago, Ill.

The Editor,
SHORT STORIES,
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York City, N. Y.

I read your request for letters from readers, and as I have been a "silent partner" for several years, please allow me to present my views. I don't see many letters from the so-called "weaker sex"; so I hope to see this in print.

I have traveled extensively, having been to Brazil, and Trinidad, British West Indies. I have mingled with smartly dressed people at the fashionable resort, Praia Copacabana, in Rio de Janeiro, and slept 'neath the stars in the romantic interior—and SHORT STORIES is still my favorite magazine.

I am an adventurer at heart, and thrill to the escapades of my favorite characters. I like all of the Black John Smith stories, he is such a colorful character, and so amusingly different. I like stories with good strong plots, true to life, real action, and with suspense.

I love all the Gene Van stories, mainly for the human interest, Little Partner is so lovable.

My favorite authors are: Gene Van, Robert Carse, W. C. Tuttle, H. C. Wire, H. Bedford-Jones, Robert H. Leitfred, Alfred Batson, and Frank R. Pierce.

I am familiar with steamships, and I en-

25

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28x4-17-18	2.45	28x4-17-18	2.45	30x4-17-18	2.45	32x4-17-18	2.45
28x4-15-18	2.50	28x4-15-18	2.50	30x4-15-18	2.50	32x4-15-18	2.50
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28x4-17-18	4.05	28x4-17-16	4.05	30x4-17-18	4.05	32x4-17-18	4.05
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28x4-20-18	4.30	28x4-20-16	4.30	30x4-20-18	4.30	32x4-20-18	4.30
28x4-17-18	4.35	28x4-17-16	4.35	30x4-17-18	4.35	32x4-17-18	4.35
28x4-15-18	4.40	28x4-15-16	4.40	30x4-15-18	4.40	32x4-15-18	4.40

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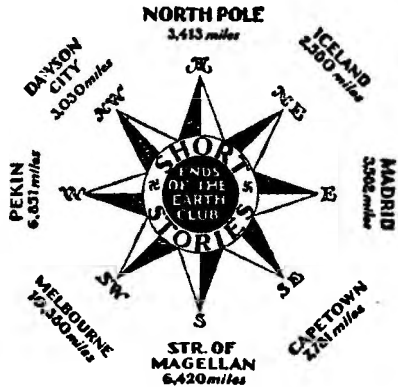
joy all sea stories, but there is one thing which I would like to see in the future **SHORT STORIES**—no continued stories, and more short ones. I also like humorous stories.

Thank you for the many hours of splendid entertainment, and I look forward to enjoying a wonderful magazine for many years to come.

Anne Jennings.

Hopewell, Virginia.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, **Ends-of-the-Earth Club, c/o Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.** Your handsome membership - identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

A call from Belgium for pen pals.

Dear Secretary:

Being a regular reader of **SHORT STORIES**, I read about your **Ends of the Earth Club** and realized it must be a real pleasure to be a member of it and thus be able to come in touch with people who are

willing to correspond with foreign countries. Therefore, I beg to solicit membership of the Ends of the Earth Club.

I am 23 years old and am a secretary of one of the most important armaments of Belgium. I would like very much to correspond and I am sure that members of your club, who would be interested in an active exchange of ideas about the various subjects, would find me a good partner.

Hoping that my plea will reach far, I am,

Yours faithfully,
Barnewald Willy

Rue Geu Mahieu 10,
Merxem-lez-Angers,
Belgium.

Have you some pins or medals you'd like to exchange with this chap.

Dear Secretary:

Will you please enroll me as a member of your Ends of the Earth Club. I collect different kinds of pins and medals. Will be interested in hearing from anyone, either sex, and will answer all letters.

Sincerely,
Robert J. Harvey

313 Pelican St., Dunkirk, N. Y.

We can't have anyone lonesome so get busy and fill this chap's mail box.


Dear Secretary:

I am taking the liberty of asking you a favor, which if granted would make me very happy.

I am a young man and an unfortunate cripple for the past 27 years. Due to a serious accident a decade ago, I haven't walked a step. Doctors diagnose my case as hopeless. I must sit in a chair all day long and I'm all alone in this world. I have no parents, brothers or sisters.

All these long years I have been shut in from the rest of the world, deprived of all comforts and pleasures of life. Since my mother passed away, I have been very lonely. I would like to have people in every state in the U. S. and Europe write to me. If any of them live in New York,

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intend to come to New York, I would be happy if they would visit me. I would also appreciate if anybody writes me, if they would enclose postage stamps as I cannot afford to buy stamps. I also have hobbies in collecting foreign and canceled stamps and meeting celebrities of the stage, screen and radio and collecting their pictures. I have about 2,000 pictures of stars. The following are some of the stars that visited me: Jean Harlow, Paul Muni, Belle Baker, Billy Rose, Sophie Tucker, Fannie Brice and others. I received a letter from Jean Harlow two weeks before she passed away, which I treasure.

God will certainly bless you if you could bring a little sunshine, cheer and happiness into my life.

Pen pals from everywhere will be welcome.

Sincerely,

Irving Gross

189 E. 2nd St., Apt. 4,
New York, N. Y.

A call for aviation fans.

Dear Secretary:

A friend of mine gave me an issue of SHORT STORIES and since then I am an ardent admirer of your magazine. I've been reading it for six months now and am very satisfied. Your stories are paramount and have many readers here in Brazil. Personally, I enjoy those by Tuttle, Kemp and Leitfred.

I am very interested in the history of aviation and I ask you to enroll me in the Ends of the Earth Club, where I hope to find some fellows who like the same subject.

I promise to answer all letters promptly and be a good pal to everybody. So, don't disappoint me.

Yours sincerely,

Sidney Cooper

6r Barbosa Rodrigues,
Cascadura,
Rio de Janeiro,
Brazil, South America.



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Here in my school you work on generators, motors, dynamos, you do house wiring, wind armatures and do actual work in many other branches of electricity and right now I'm including valuable instruction in Diesel, Electric Refrigeration and Air Conditioning at no extra cost. Our practical shop methods make it easier to learn—First the instructors tell you how a thing should be done—then they show you how it should be done—then you do the actual work yourself.



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You can get this training first—then pay for it later in easy monthly payments, starting 60 days after your 12 weeks' training period is over—then you have 12 months to complete your payments.

If you need part time work to help out with expenses while training in my shops, my employment department will help you get it. Then after graduation this department will give you valuable lifetime employment service.

Send the coupon today for all details. When I get it I'll send you my big free book containing dozens of pictures of students at work in

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