JAMES B. HENDRYX—R. H. WATKINS—WILLIAM M. RAINE

Short Stories

April 25th

Twice A Month

25c

They moved—those white sands!

THE HOUSE THAT VANISHED

by

Andrew H. Hepburn

Get yourself killed somewhere else, and don't worry the Chief of Police

THE DOG COLLAR MURDER

by

Neil Martin

Pityrosporum ovale, regarded by many leading authorities as a causative agent of infectious dandruff.

ıtter do something about it now!

HOSE embarrassing flakes, those distressing scales, are a black mark against you . . . can np you as an objectionable person. Moreover, y're a warning that if you don't do something ıut the condition at once you may be in for a e of infectious dandruff.

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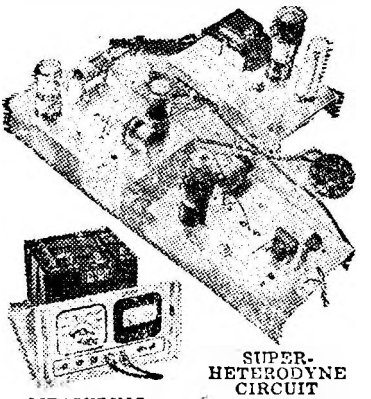

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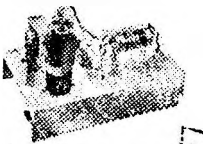

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CONTENTS

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LAMONT BUCHANAN, *Associate Editor.*

BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

APRIL 25th, 1945

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

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The Story Tellers' Circle

Johnny Fletcher Is on His Way Back!

BACK in 1939 we gave readers of SHORT STORIES, *The French Key*, which introduced Johnny Fletcher, book salesman extraordinary, and his pal, Sam Cragg, the strongest man in the world. When *The French Key* was published as a book, early in 1940, it was hailed with delight by critics everywhere. Later it was voted "the best mystery novel of 1940"—and was one of the most successful mysteries published in the last ten years. *The French Key* was followed by *The Laughing Fox, The Hungry Dog, The Mighty Blockhead*—seven Johnny Fletcher novels in all, a mighty successful mystery series, all in SHORT STORIES. In the book field they have been equally successful, the astonishing total of 2,500,000 copies of Johnny Fletcher books having been sold to date in the numerous, various editions.

Then—in 1942—Johnny Fletcher disappeared. The last instalment of The *Gift Horse* was, in fact, delivered by Western Union messenger, sent from the Grand Central Depot, even as the creator of Johnny Fletcher was boarding The Chief for Hollywood, which is in California, we hear.

Rumors and vague rumblings came to us from California. A new Johnny Fletcher book was coming—no, it wasn't coming! Yes—no— The years rolled by.

Once in a while we'd see a movie over on Times Square—The Kansan, written for the screen by Frank Gruber. Errol Flynn in Northern Pursuit, screen play by Frank Gruber. Mask of Dimitrios, screen play by Frank Gruber.

Items in the Hollywood columns—Frank Gruber signs with Warner Bros.—RKO buys original by Frank Gruber—Frank Gruber signs long-term writing contract—

But no Johnny Fletcher book!

Hope died.

And then, with the blizzard—no—yes——!

Yes! A manuscript—*The Silver Tombstone*, by Frank Gruber, a Johnny Fletcher story.

Right in the old groove. Johnny and Sam are in California—broke as usual, and as in the old days—sharp! They get mixed up in an affair involving a silver mine and before they know it they are in Tombstone, the fabulous old mining town in Arizona. They—

But read it! *The Silver Tombstone* starts in the next issue of SHORT STORIES magazine—out April 25th.

Some Sands—In a Quiet Sort of Way!

IN TELLING us more about his "nearly new" character Peter Pembroke ("The House that Vanished" is only his second time out in SHORT STORIES) Andrew H. Hepburn explains:

"There is probably no one in the world just like Peter Pembroke, who makes his second appearance in SHORT STORIES in 'The House That Vanished.' Peter is a pure figment of the imagination.

"But there is nothing figmentary about the place where Peter lives, the unique gypsum desert, the White Sands of Alamogordo. In a quiet, shy sort of way the white sands are truly spectacular. They also have strange migratory habits.

"It was this refusal of the sands to stay put that suggested the idea for 'The House That Vanished.' On a visit there a couple of years ago, I was told about actual houses which had been slowly engulfed by the creeping, wind-driven progress of the dunes. That suggested the idea for 'The House That Vanished.'

"As for Peter himself, the gentle old bachelor hermit who lives on the edge of the white sands, though he isn't a real person, he ought to be, perhaps. He's a true American blend, Yankee sagacity mellowed, aged, weathered and gentled by the desert. His particular desert is unique. For those who like statistics, the government says that the white sands area is 'the largest of the rare gypsum deserts, made up of 225 square miles of huge snowdrift like dunes, some of them more than fifty feet high.'

"For those who say 'what's it good for,' it might be added that gypsum is very useful stuff. It is the principal element of plaster of Paris, in one form it is alabaster, and it's employed in a lot of ways. In fact, it's so useful that voracious, profit-hungry industries threatened to devour the dunes completely. That's why the government finally stepped in and set aside about a third of the area (137,000 acres) as a national park. And hundreds of thousands of Americans who have gazed goggle-eyed at immaculate, dazzling splendor of the giant

(Concluded on page 6)

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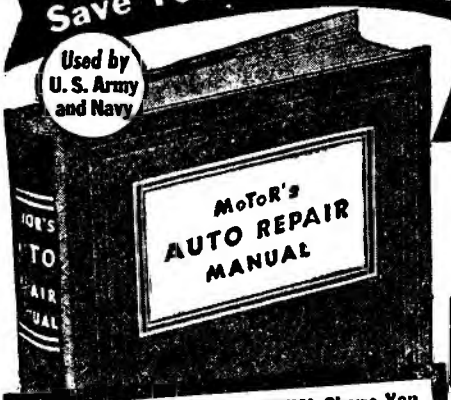

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The Story Tellers' Circle

(Concluded from page 4)

dunes, since the park was established in 1933, are glad the government did step in. To get specific as to location, the sand area is almost due north of El Paso, Texas, just across the line in New Mexico. The nearest town is the little city of Alamogordo, which looks a good deal like its name sounds, Spanish. Not far away is the completely fabulous Carlsbad Cavern. Peter Pembroke, who knows and loves his southwest and the desert, has been there, too, and quite possibly may go again."

Andrew H. Hepburn.

Tobacco-Eating Deer—Guess Who!

FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE whose "Black Market" yarn adorns this issue of SHORT STORIES, lets us know something about animal life in Mt. Rainier National Park.

"Rainier, like most of our national parks, is a game preserve. You may fish under certain regulations, but the animal life is protected at all times. Guns and dogs are prohibited, and nature's 'balance' maintained. If the predators become too numerous then Uncle Sam will do a little light adjusting—a cougar here, a coyote there.

"Over fifty kinds of mammals are found in the park, which include elk, deer, bear and mountain goats. Yes, and bats. There are various kinds of birds, including migratory in season. Of course, there are really no 'tame' wild animals. They just aren't afraid. In Rainier, as elsewhere, a buck deer or a she bear with cubs can give a careless visitor a bad time. There's quite a temptation on a visitor's part to rub a buck deer's nose. Yet the very act of pushing against a buck's head is enough to start him butting. Or a bear cub's whimper will cause the old gal to think something is wrong and knock a visitor into the middle of next week.

"A tobacco-eating deer started the Panhandle Pete series, and occasionally I meet people who have visited the park frequently and who say they know him. Chances are that they do. Throughout the park you find good roads and trails. And yet step a few yards into the timber and you're in surroundings untouched by man. It's all a swell example of government money well spent. One of my postwar *musts* is visiting, or revisiting, our national parks. I've visited the two extremes—Carlsbad Caverns and Mount McKinley Park in Alaska."

Frank Richardson Pierce.

"Terre Tremblant"

THE author of our complete novel in this number, "The Dog Collar Murder," Neil Martin, tells us he could write a volume about the marsh country and the people who live in it. Here is a "slightly" abridged version we think will interest you.

"It is probable that many people living outside the states of Louisiana and Mississippi never have heard of the 'Terre Tremblant,' the vast shaking prairie which begins a few miles below the city of New Orleans and stretches to the mouth of the Mississippi, extending far on either side of the great river.

"If one were traveling west over the Louisville and Nashville railroad to New Orleans, one would be impressed by the sudden change soon after crossing Pearl River, which is the boundary between the states of Mississippi and Louisiana. Gone now is the pleasant scenery of the Mississippi coast counties, with their quiet bayous lined with stately pines and gnarled live oaks. Ahead lies a dead level of gray green that stretches in eye-wearying monotony to the horizon, threaded with innumerable canals, spotted at long intervals with 'chenieres' or shell mounds, that rise like lonely islands above the sea of grass. Such would be one's first impression of the Louisiana Marshes.

"A green desolation—so one would think. From the train windows, one would see the marshes as miles and miles of emptiness. Nevertheless, the marshes fairly teem with life—ducks, geese, teal and countless numbers of other species of bird, nest in the long grass and on the chenieres. Uncounted muskrats are trapped along the canals. Even rabbits may be found on the chenieres—rabbits that swim like otters. Sounds goofy, but it's true. And mosquitoes—great black gallinippers with voices like the drone of a dive bomber—are a prominent part of marshland life from May to November.

"Oddly enough, there are numerous settlements scattered through this apparently empty void, usually situated on a cheniere alongside a canal, settlements whose inhabitants have followed the same pattern of life since French colonial days, fishing, shrimping and trapping. Many of these people are said to have descended from Lafitte's men, and in the Barataria section there are plenty of people who can prove their claim to such descent.

"The marsh country is rich in natural resources—salt, sulphur and oil. And the soil, once properly drained, can grow anything.

"A word about the 'Cajuns': Many people seem to believe that Cajuns and Creoles are colored people. Such is far from true. The Creoles, who are numbered among Louisiana's first families, are of pure French or Spanish descent. The Cajuns are French people who came to Louisiana by way of Acadia, now Nova Scotia. In 1766, some eight hundred of these arrived at New Orleans, having been driven out of Nova Scotia by the British. A few years later, more arrived, making altogether about one thousand people. These, in the lapse of a century, increased to about forty thousand, and spread over the western and southern part of the state. They still adhere to their French tongue, although today the 'Cajun' dialect has many variations. But they remain in many respects the same primitive people who came from Canada nearly two hundred years ago."

Neil Martin.

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THE DOG COLLAR MURDER

By NEIL MARTIN

Author of "Headlines for Henry" and Other Stories of the Cajun Country

THE HANDS of the dashboard clock were pointing to 7:15 when Henry Pou swung the police car off the bayou road and steered it carefully between the stone pillars marking the entrance to the grounds of the old de Joinville place.

Before him a broad, shell-surfaced drive curved to the right, swung in a half circle before the old mansion and curved again toward the entrance to the grounds, enclosing a vast oval of lawn over which was distributed a bizarre array of marble figures that loomed like ghosts in the September dusk.

"This place," Henry murmured, as he fol-

Trying to Get Even Wit' Somebody Else Lands a Lotta Folks Behind Bars

lowed the right-hand drive toward the house, "she always remind me of a graveyard, by damn!"

Henry rolled the car past the house, which was one of the few remaining examples of French colonial architecture in lower Louisiana. Following the semi-circular drive, he pointed the police car toward the gateway, then stopped in the shadow of a spreading magnolia. Lifting from the seat beside him a dog collar that seemed large enough to fit a Brahama bull, he studied it in the light of the dashboard lamp, his thrifty Cajun soul distressed at the thought of its probable cost.

It was an ornate affair, studded with rhinestones, fitted with a heavy gold buckle and

further embellished with a large gold plate bearing the inscription:

"I am Orrin J. Shipley's dog,
PRINCE
Whose Mutt Are You?"

Henry shrugged and switched off the ignition. Evidently, this rich Yankee who had leased the old de Joinville place had an odd sense of humor. Already, Henry was prepared to dislike the fat, little man who was punching oil wells all over Papillon Parish.

With the dog collar swinging loosely in his right hand, Henry walked toward the house. As he approached the worn stone steps leading upward to the iron-railed gallery surrounding the second story, he noticed a mud-spattered sedan parked close to the northwest corner of the building.

CLIMBING the steps to the gallery, he passed before the huge, glass-paneled door and yanked the old-fashioned bell-pull. Through the glass of the front door he looked over a hall that seemed large as an ordinary room, with several doors leading off it, and at its inner end another glass door opening to a spacious living room, from which a delicate spiral staircase ascended to the upper floor.

Henry was about to ring the bell a second time when he saw a man emerge from a room on the left side of the hall and stride importantly toward the entrance. Switching on the outside lights, he scrutinized Henry through the glass door panel, then opened the door a scant foot and declared haughtily:

"Really, me good man, you should 'ave gone around to the tradesmen's entrance."

Henry stared in silent amusement at the rotund figure in black coat and striped trousers—a flabby man of medium height, whose short, thick eyebrows and slim sideburns made dark smudges on a face that otherwise was undistinguished as a peeled potato.

Henry grinned, pushed past the other into the hall and said:

"How 'bout telling yo' boss man the chief of police has come wit' news of his los' dog?"

The black-coated servitor stared at the wall a foot above Henry's head. "Oh, yes!" he spoke with just the right amount of hauteur. "The name is Poo, is it not?"

"It is not," Henry corrected. "It is spelled P O U, and pronounced P E W. Jus' lak' pew in a church, you understand."

"It really doesn't matter," the serving man declared. "Just step this way." Leading the way itno a small ante room, he motioned Henry to a chair and continued, "The mawster won't see you for some time, since he is dining with a friend, and would not care to be disturbed."

"Hokay!" Henry agreed. He settled himself comfortably in the huge, leather-upholstered chair and smiled at a befrilled cavalier who looked sternly from a gilded frame above the fireplace. "Jus' lak' in the movies, by dam!" he murmured.

The butler said, "Beg pardon?"

Henry stroked his imposing handlebar mustache and drawled, "I was jus' thinking, me, that it mus' be nice to be rich. Yes!"

The butler nodded. "It has its advantages." Noticing the dog collar in Henry's hand, he offered, "I'll take that to the mawster, if you don't mind?"

Henry surrendered the dog collar and followed the servitor with amused dark eyes as the latter strode from the ante room like a storm trooper doing his stuff.

"That wan, now," Henry murmured, again addressing his remarks to the cavalier above the fireplace, "he don't seem real. I never believe befo', me, that anything lak' him exist', by damn!"

HE GLANCED approvingly over the room, then rose and began a silent study of the few pictures on the walls. Moving past a tall mirror, he grinned at his own reflection. In growing up, he had stopped upon reaching a height of five feet and four inches and had, instead, grown outward. Standing with his small feet together, his short, compact figure formed a wide V from ankle to shoulder. His broad face, with shrewd dark eyes on either side of his short, pugnacious nose, beneath which sprouted the luxuriant mustache that fell in hirsute cascades on either side of his boulderlike chin, suggested the face of a belligerent walrus.

A door opened silently behind him. A girl attired in a black suit of mauve silk glided into the room, a long ivory cigarette holder

held with nonchalant grace in a right hand with purple tinted fingernails.

"My stars!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "Ain't he simply devastating?" Undulating past him, she sank languidly into the upholstered depths of another chair and looked up at him from beneath heavily mascaraed eyelashes. "Hello, Hank!" she grinned.

Henry put his right hand over the region of his heart and bowed from the waist. "It is some time now," he murmured, "since I have me the honor of seeing you, Miss Pauline."

The girl crossed her slim legs and studied the glowing tip of her cigarette, her overrouged lips curved in a reminiscent smile. Henry thought her very attractive in a pale, blond way. But he couldn't reconcile himself to her lavish use of make-up.

"The last time you had the pleasure, Hank," she said, "was last Wednesday—just eight days ago—when you had me up before the mayor on a charge of driving a motor vehicle while under the influence of liquor."

"And fo' knocking over half the lamp posts on Main Street wit' yo' car. Yes!" Henry reminded her. "It is too bad!"

She raised her eyebrows. "My knocking over the lamp posts?"

Henry shook his head. "No, I mean yo' getting dronk. W'at must yo' papa, Mr. Shipley, think?"

Her blue eyes darkened. "For the love of Mike," she pleaded, "don't call that fat little slug my papa. He's only my stepfather. And my name isn't Shipley—it's Forster." She waved her cigarette holder like a conductor's baton and added, "And don't give me any guff about my mother. She's been dead for eight years now. And I prefer letting her stay dead." As if to change the subject, she asked, "By the way, what brings you here at this time of night?"

Henry glanced at his wrist watch and noted the time—twenty minutes to eight. "I jus' came to see Mr. Shipley about his big dog," he declared, adding, "Somebody shot him and then ran over him wit' a car."

HER expression never changed as she queried, "Where did that happen?"

"Herb Mathieu, the highway patrolman, found the dog lying dead on the highway jus' north of town," Henry explained. "He had the road repair gang bury the dog and brought me the collar to give to Mr. Shipley."

"And you expect to be rewarded?" she asked mockingly.

Henry's face darkened with suppressed anger. "Listen, lady," he drawled, "I brought the dog's collar at the suggestion of a gentleman name' Armand Roulet, who 'appens to be mayor of this ville. You see, Monsieur le Maire figured it would be more courteous fo' me to call in person wit' the news than to telephone it. Monsieur Roulet, he thinks Mr. Shipley is wan very impo'tant man. Yes!"

The girl laughed. "My stars! Imagine anyone trying to be courteous to that little toad! It's funny, though, about Prince being killed that way."

Henry, who liked dogs, failed to see anything funny in the wanton butchery of a valuable Alsatian. He asked, "You got any idea who'd want to kill that dog?"

She shrugged. "Search me! But I'll tell you this, Hank—someone whom that dog knew and trusted killed him. Probably to spite old Ship." She smiled reminiscently and added, "He's been scared half to death since the dog disappeared yesterday."

"W'at's he got to be scared about?" Henry probed.

She rose and closed the door opening on the hall. Resuming her seat, she declared, "I don't know what he's scared of, but he's in a constant state of jitters. Before the dog disappeared, he kept the big mutt constantly at his side, and even made it sleep on the floor beside his bed. Besides all that, he keeps a gun handy at all times. It's really funny!"

Henry said softly, "You don't like Mr. Shipley, no?"

"I hate the little toad—and everything connected with him!" the girl snapped.

"Including the big dog, yes?" Henry prompted.

"Yes, includ—" The girl broke off and sat suddenly erect in her chair. "Say, are you trying to hang that dog killing on me?"

Henry smiled benignly. "I was jus' wondering, me," he drawled.

"Well, don't wonder too hard—it might give you a headache," she snapped back, her blue eyes dark with anger.

From somewhere outside the house an

automobile horn sounded the first four notes of the well-known refrain, "How dry I am!" The girl popped out of her chair and hurried from the room without even a parting glance at Henry.

He listened for a moment to the quick patter of her footfalls on the steps, then looked at the cavalier and chuckled:

"That wan, now, she reads too many gang stories, or hears them over the raddio. Yes. Bot nobody need to tell me now who killed that big dog, by dam!"

He glanced at his watch and became suddenly impatient to complete his errand and be on his way home. The time was now five minutes to eight, which made him realize that the mistaken courtesy of the mayor had caused him to lose his free evening. He listened expectantly as footfalls thudded softly on the hall carpet. He heard the front door open, heard the buttery voice of the butler saying:

"I'll carry it to your car, Mr. Rhoaden."

THE other's reply was muffled by the closing of the door and the shuffling of feet on the gallery. A minute or two later Henry heard the faint thud of a car door being closed, followed by the whirr of the starter. He glanced at his watch, swore softly when he saw the hands pointing to five minutes past eight.

Another fifteen minutes passed. At last, feeling like the Forgotten Man, Henry rose from his chair, opened the door and looked over the hall, which was now in darkness, except for a rectangle of light slanting through an open doorway on the opposite side of the vestibule.

Stepping diagonally across the hall, Henry paused before the open doorway and looked into a spacious room, three walls of which were lined with bookshelves, the fourth being occupied by French windows that opened from floor to ceiling. Directly beneath an ornate lighting fixture hanging from the center of the ceiling was a large, flat-topped desk. Behind the desk, seated with his back to the windows, a fat, bald-headed little man was shuffling a sheaf of legal-looking papers, a long black cigar slanting upward from his pursed lips, a heavy automatic pistol lying on the desk within easy reach of his right hand.

The man behind the desk coughed, removed the cigar from between his lips with his left hand and blinked the smoke away from his eyes. Suddenly aware of Henry's presence, he snatched up the automatic and swung it to cover the doorway.

"Now, now, meestaire," Henry admonished, "there ain't no needcessity fo' that. I jus' came to tell you about yo' dog."

The bald-headed man blinked in dubious recognition, his right hand shaking as he laid the gun on the desk.

"Dammit!" he snarled. "Didn't I tell that fool, Crane, to send you about your business? What the devil are you still hanging around here for?"

"That bottler," Henry explained patiently, "he puts me in a room and tells me to wait. He doesn't come back."

He paused, aware of a sudden dislike for this fat little blob of a man, whose bald head seemed to merge into his shoulders without benefit of neck.

Shipley waved the pudgy hand holding his cigar in a gesture of dismissal. "I knew all about the dog," he declared. "Just forget it."

Henry smiled and stroked his mustache, a suspicion arising in his mind that Shipley suspected his stepdaughter of having killed the dog and was, accordingly, seeking to have the matter dropped.

"Hokay, ma frien'!" Henry drawled. "If that's the way you feel about it—"

He broke off as a shot blasted the silence outside the house and a bullet pinged through the wire screen of the open French window, shattering a globe of the lighting fixture overhead.

WITH a yelp of fright, Shipley fell out of his chair, his pistol forgotten. Crawling under the well of his desk, he screamed:

"Get him—get the little rat. Crane! Oh, Crane! Where the devil are you?"

Henry's reaction was automatic. Shipley might be an arrogant little parvenu, but he was entitled to protection. Jerking his six-shooter from his belted holster, he ran from the room, plunged through the entrance and down the steps. Reaching the corner of the house, where he had seen the sedan parked at the time of his arrival, he peered through the darkness and saw a crouching figure before one of the basement windows.

"Hey, you!" he bellowed. "Stand up and let's see you."

The other's response came in the form of a bullet that whined past within an inch of Henry's left ear. Dropping to the ground, Henry took hasty aim and pressed the trigger of his revolver. The crouching man turned and scurried, bent almost double, around the far corner of the house, the patter of his running footfalls blending with the lingering echoes of the two pistol reports.

The swinging screens of one of the library windows slammed outward. Footfalls drummed on the gallery overhead. A volley of pistol shots lanced the darkness above the flickers of orange flame, and bullets peppered the turf within a yard of Henry's head.

"Hey!" Henry yelled protestingly. "Cain't you see it's me, you dam fool? Cut it out!"

Rolling hastily away from the barrage, he scrambled erect and glared up at the tubby figure of Shipley outlined against the lighted windows of the library.

Shipley ceased fire, leaned over the ornamental rail and peered down at Henry. "Oh, it's you!" he grunted contemptuously. "Well, why are you skulking down there? What the devil am I paying taxes for?"

Mastering an insane urge to take a shot at the little fat man, Henry ran on to the rear corner, paused there to look over the open space between the big house and the two small outbuildings, one of which was the kitchen, the other, the servants' quarters. There was no one in sight. But from the darkness beyond there came a crashing of undergrowth, as if someone were threshing blindly through the dense growth of scrub that covered the long-neglected grounds.

NOT daring to use his flashlight, Henry raced in pursuit. He stumbled over the orderly rows of a newly planted kitchen garden, floundered through shoulder-high brush and came up against the back fence. Then he stepped into a depression and landed face downward on the ground with a jar that shook the pistol from his hand.

Somewhere in the darkness beyond the fence a motor accelerated with a deafening roar, which was followed by the tinny clatter of a starting flivver. Scrambling out of the hole, Henry peered through the close steel mesh of the fence and caught a glimpse of a disreputable-looking car lunging down the road toward town, running without lights.

HENRY shrugged helplessly and stepped away from the fence. He had no hope of ever identifying the car. There were many such outmoded jalopies among St. Odile's three thousand-odd inhabitants, and probably as many more among the surrounding farming, fishing and trapping population of Papillon Parish. Unhooking the flashlight from his belt, he started to look for his pistol, then paused in thought, the weapon temporarily forgotten, when he saw the depression into which he had stumbled.

It was a shallow trench that passed under the fence just deep enough for anyone crawling through it to avoid getting his clothing snagged on the bottom strand of wire, which was heavily barbed to prevent wandering hogs from rooting beneath it. And that it had been used to provide an exit from the grounds was evident from the imprint of a man's hands in the moist loam, handprints whose fingers pointed toward the road.

A twig snapped loudly in the darkness behind him.

Instantly warned, Henry stepped quickly to the right, barely escaping the downward sweep of a clubbed pistol that missed his head and landed with numbing impact on his left shoulder.

Dropping his flashlight, Henry whirled and grappled with his assailant. Flinging up his right hand to parry a second blow, he felt his hand come in contact with the rough material of a coat sleeve. Hooking his fingers in a desperate grip on the sleeve, he butted with his head at the vaguely human shape that wavered before him in the subdued glow of the flashlight, which had rolled into the trench and now lay in the bottom of the depression with its lens pressed against the side.

Henry's left arm still tingled from the force of the blow on his shoulder. But it had sufficient strength to drive his fist with pile-driver force into the mid-section of the shadowy figure before him. He heard an explosive grunt, followed by the soft thud of the other's pistol as it slipped from his hand and landed on the moist ground. Suddenly, with a furious effort, the stranger jerked his coat sleeve free, slammed a mallet-like fist to Henry's jaw, then whirled and went crash-

ing away through the undergrowth like a frightened elephant.

Henry slumped on all fours, his head spinning, and stayed down for the count. When, finally, his brain cleared, he pushed himself erect and sagged dizzily against the bole of a young sweet gum.

"Sacre nom d'un poisson!" he mumbled. "That wan, he nearly tore ma haid off, by dam!"

Retrieving his flashlight, he resumed the search for his six-shooter. He saw a pistol lying almost at his feet and stooped to pick it up, but paused, his hand almost touching the weapon, when he realized that the gun wasn't his own, which was a .45.

"A thirty-eight Colt!" he exulted. "By dam! This is a break. Yes!"

He gathered the strange gun in the folds of his handkerchief, handling it carefully to avoid smudging any possible fingerprints, after which he formed a bag by tying the four corners of the handkerchief together. He then resumed the hunt for his own pistol, and found it lying under a bush on the farther side of the trench, over which was draped a man's coverall.

Henry slipped his gun into its scabbard and lifted the garment from the bush. It was caked with grease, and smelled strongly of engine oil. Wadded into one of the pockets was a tall-crowned denim cap of the type favored by railroad men and mechanics. On the back of the coverall, just below the right shoulder, was a six-inch rent. And at the lower end of the tear was a small, damp stain which he speedily identified as fresh blood.

"Cut himself on the bobwire while he was crawling under the fence," Henry mused. "Well, that might be a break, too."

HE PLAYED his flashlight over the ground, looking for footprints. The fellow who had tried to brain him with the .38 was, he presumed, still on the loose somewhere among the brush of the ten-acre grounds surrounding the old de Joinville mansion. Hunting the fellow in the darkness would be akin to seeking the proverbial needle in a haystack.

Henry found no footprints. After making a wide circle that brought him close to the mansion, he returned to the back fence, rolled the coverall and cap into a tight bundle and started back to the house, resolved to have a heart-to-heart talk with Shipley.

As he moved along the walk running along the north side of the building, he looked upward and saw that the drapes of the library windows had been drawn. But a subdued glow filtering through the material indicated that Shipley was again at his desk.

Henry's conversation with the girl, coupled with everything that had happened since then, convinced him that Shipley had ample cause for fear. Someone was after the oil man's scalp; the bullet through the window made that clear. It was equally clear to Henry that Shipley knew the identity of the would-be assassin. Otherwise, why had he referred to that person as "the little rat."

Henry decided that the man to whom the coverall and cap belonged was the one who had fled in the car. The tear on the right shoulder of the grimy garment indicated that the fellow had worn it while crawling through the trench under the fence. But why had he tossed it back over the barrier? That was a question to which Henry found no answer. Neither could he figure out any possible connection between the owner of the coverall and the man who had tried to brain him with the .38.

He went on down the exit drive to the police car, deciding to put his clues away before attempting to beard the oil man in his den. He saw before him a car standing at a slant across the drive, its front wheels on the grass. Even in the darkness, he identified it as the mud-spattered sedan he had noticed at the time of his arrival. Likewise, he recalled having heard it leave more than half an hour before. Now it stood there, silent and dark, approximately one hundred and fifty feet from where it had started.

Henry lifted his flashlight and played the beam over the sedan, his heartbeats accelerating a trifle when he saw someone behind the wheel—a short, spare man of middle age, who stared unblinkingly into the white glare of the flashlight.

Henry gasped. He had seen death before in many forms, but never in such form as this. For several minutes he stared wordlessly at the still figure lolling back against the upholstery. The dead man's wrinkled, thin-featured face was frozen in an expression of agony, and his swollen tongue protruded from between his contorted lips.

And buckled so tightly about his neck that it cut into the flesh, was the ornamental dog collar which Henry had surrendered to the butler nearly an hour and a half before.

JERKING open the door, Henry unbuckled the dog collar and then placed his hand over the man's heart, vainly seeking a heartbeat. He shrugged, backed away from the car for several feet and muttered:

"Daid as Bienville. Now I got me another headache to worry wit'!"

He turned to face the gateway as the headlights of another car swung a double beam across the tree-studded lawn, bringing the marble statues into startling relief. A small coupé turned in from the road and rolled to a stop in the middle of the right-hand curve.

Henry walked to the police car and thrust his bundle and the .38 under the driver's seat. He then started across the lawn, his feet falling noiselessly on the soft turf. Coming within six feet of the coupé, he switched on his flashlight and turned the beam squarely into the faces of the car's occupants.

"What the hell?" a man's voice exclaimed in angry protest. "Crane, you lousy bum, I warned you once before—"

"This is the law," Henry interrupted.

"It's Handlebar Hank!" The husky voice of Pauline Forster sounded from within the car. "What have I done now, Hank?"

Henry ignored her and stared questioningly at her companion, a tall, blond young man, whose face with liberally smeared with lipstick.

"Turn that light away from me!" the man growled. "Go on! Scram, Five-by-five!"

"You mak' wan mo' crack lak' that," Henry drawled, "and I drag you outa that car and stand you on yo' dam haid. Yes!"

"Yeah?" the other retorted. "You and who else?"

"Hush, Bert!" Pauline Forster warned She beamed at Henry and continued, "Don't mind him, Hank—I mean, Captain Pou. Meet Mr. Bert Ramey, who at present is engaged as charioteer to the Great I Am—otherwise, Mr. Orrin J. Shipley."

"Listen," Henry said, ignoring her banter, "tell me where you went when you left me back there in that little room."

"What's that to you, fella?" Ramey demanded. "Ain't it bad enough to have that bum, Crane, snoopin' on us every chance he gets—"

Henry barely suppressed an urge to land a bunch of knuckles on the out-thrust jaw of this brash, young man. He said:

"I ask a question. It is impo'tant. Yes!"

"Bert called me," the girl said, "and I went to meet him. We drove around for a while, stopped in town at Brossin's drug store and ate ice cream and then came on home."

"Which way did you go when you left the house?" Henry probed.

"I came down the right-hand drive," the girl told him. "Bert was waiting with the car about where we are now."

STUDYING her answer, Henry perceived that the route taken by the girl would have prevented her from seeing the sedan stalled in the exit driveway.

"Hokay!" he said. Turning to Ramey, he continued, "I want to show you something. Come on!"

Grumbling, Ramey climbed out of the coupé and followed Henry across the lawn. When they reached the sedan, Henry turned his light on the face of the occupant.

"You know that one, yes?" he asked.

"Gee!" Ramey half whispered. "It's old man Rhoaden!"

"What connection did he have wit' Shipley?"

"He was a sorta partner," the chauffeur explained. "He and the boss are the Shipley-Rhoaden Oil Corporation."

"Uh-huh!" Henry muttered. "This wan was the junior partner, yes?"

Ramey shrugged. "I wouldn't know. He was always comin' and goin' on one errand or another. The boss don't tell me their business. I'm just hired to drive Mr. Shipley's car. See?"

Henry turned to face him and swept him from foot to head with his flashlight. "How come a big feller lak' you ain't in uniform?" he inquired. "You don't look lak' no Four F to me."

Ramey groaned. "Gee! I have to explain that to every two-bit shamus I meet!" Thrusting his right hand into the glare of the flashlight, he continued, "See that mitt? Well, I left that thumb in North Africa. See? Now if you'll come up to my room, I'll show you some medals."

Henry glanced at the chauffeur's thumbless right hand and pursed his lips in sympathy. "That's tough," he said. "But I reckon, me, it mak's yo' status clear. Now tell me w'at you did befo' you called fo' the young lady."

Ramey stroked his tie with his maimed hand. "I hadda go over to Sellierville this afternoon to get the coupé outa the repair shop, where it's bin ever since Pauline ran into that lamp post in town a while back," he explained. "I went over on the bus, and drove back with the coupé and got here about a quarter to eight."

"How are you so sure about the time?" Henry quizzed.

"There's a clock on the dashboard of the coupé," Ramey said. "I looked at it as I came in the gate, because I wondered if it was too late to take Pauline for a little spin."

Pauline Forster came up behind them. She peered at the dead man in horrified silence for nearly a minute, then said:

"Mr. Rhoaden had a briefcase containing twenty thousand dollars."

Henry flashed his light over the interior of the car. "No briefcase," he declared. "That makes it robbery as well as murder." He lifted the dog collar from the floorboards and switched off his flashlight. "Come on up to the house. I gotta call the coroner."

He closed the door of the sedan and led the way toward the house. As he crossed the gallery, he saw the butler peering through the glass of the front door. Before Henry could reach the bell-pull, the servitor swung the door open and inquired with hostility:

"Well? What is it now?"

Henry brushed past him into the hall followed by Ramey and the girl. Henry said, "I want me a telephone."

THE door of the library jerked open and Shipley's bald head was projected beyond the casing. "What the devil is coming off now?" he snarled. Recognizing Henry, he stepped over the threshold. "Ha! It's you again! Did you get him?"

Henry drawled, "You mean that leetle feller, yes?"

Shipley rose for the bait. "Yes, yes!" he said with undisguised eagerness. "You killed him?"

Henry smiled and walked past him into the library. Lifting the telephone from the desk, he called the deputy coroner's number. When the connection was made, he continued:

"Henry Pou speaking, Doc. Got something fo' you here at the ol' de Joinville place. Yes, a daid man. Hokay!"

Replacing the telephone, he looked at Shipley and said, "That was the deputy coroner. He'll be here in a few minutes."

Shipley rubbed his pudgy hands together and beamed. "How did you get him?" he asked.

"I did not get anybody," Henry denied, adding, "Seems lak' you are thinking about wan man, while I am thinking about another. Yes!"

"What do you mean?" Shipley inquired.

"He means Mr. Rhoaden," the girl explained.

Shipley stared at his stepdaughter, his short, thick eyebrows twitching. "What about Rhoaden?" he wanted to know.

"He's dead—an' you're out twenty thousand dollars," the girl declared maliciously.

"Eh—what's that?" Shipley stared incredulously at the girl.

"Someone murdered him," Pauline told him. "Strangled him and stole his briefcase."

The effect of her statement on Shipley was startling. The oil man's face became purple. The flesh below his ears puffed out like the hood of an angry cobra, while his rotund body swelled until it seemed to Henry that he must burst like an overinflated balloon.

"Twenty thousand dollars!" Shipley released his pent-up emotion in a hysterical shout. "Twenty thousand dollars!" he repeated, and then followed through with a burst of profanity that would have shamed a circus roustabout. "You—you!" he screamed, shaking a pudgy fist under Henry's nose. "You sat here in my house, twiddling your thumbs, while I was being robbed. You false alarm!" He staggered around his desk and slumped into the swivel chair. "Twenty thousand dollars!"

Henry tugged at his mustache and regarded the hysterical little fat man with growing contempt. Actually, Shipley seemed more concerned over the loss of the money than he did over his partner's death. Turning to the butler, Henry said accusingly:

"You carried that Rhoaden to his car, no?"

"I did no such thing," the butler denied.

"I merely went with him to the top of the steps. I offered to carry his briefcase to the car.

"But he declined my offer. So I left him and walked around the veranda and entered the library by way of the window."

"That's right," Shipley supported him. "He came in to ask me about setting the burglar alarms."

Ignoring him, Henry asked the butler, "Why you didn't come back and tell me he wouldn't see me about that dog, hey?"

Crane flushed. "To tell the truth," he confessed, "I forgot all about you. You see, I was very busy waiting at table. And after dinner I had to get Mr. Rhoaden ready for his trip, so that I overlooked you entirely. Sorry!"

Henry displayed the dog collar and said, "Rhoaden was strangled wit' this. You take it from me, and I find it buckled about that wan's neck. How come?"

"Crane brought me the dog collar," Shipley declared angrily. "I was so angry at the clumsy fool for interrupting our conversation, that I snatched it from him and tossed it out the window."

OUTSIDE the house, an automobile horn honked insistently. Warning the others to remain in the library, Henry went to meet Dr. Couriere, who was waiting in his car in front of the mansion. After a few words of explanation, he led the deputy coroner down the exit drive to the sedan.

While Henry held his flashlight on the still figure behind the wheel, Dr. Couriere made hasty examination. Taking the dog collar from Henry, he fitted it to the groove in the flesh of the dead man's neck.

"Strangulation, all right," he confirmed. "But first, he was struck just below the right ear, probably from behind, with just enough force to stun him, after which the dog collar was fastened about his neck and he was left to strangle."

Henry clicked his tongue. "Pretty dam cold-blooded, that wan, whoever he was. Could this feller have saved himself from strangling if he had come to in time?"

Dr. Couriere shook his head. "I doubt it, Henry. Anyway, this man never recovered consciousness. If he had, he'd have struggled. The position of the body indicates that no struggle took place."

"Hokay!" Henry said. "Now let's go back to the house and ask a few questions."

As they walked back to the mansion, Henry told the deputy coroner of his adventures since arriving at the house more than an hour and a half previously. He made no mention, however, of the coverall and the .38-caliber revolver. As deputy coroner, Couriere was aligned with the parish courthouse gang. And Henry had no desire to have Arsene Vicou, the criminal sheriff of Papillon Parish, move in and take over. Election time was drawing near, and the murder would be made to order for the strengthening of Vicou's political fences. Henry was satisfied that he, himself, could solve the mystery surrounding Rhoaden's murder. But in no case was he willing that the case should be made the main attraction of a politicians' field day.

As they reached the foot of the steps, the lights of an automobile cut across the front of the building. Turning, Henry saw a car swing in off the road. Veering left, it bowled at a thirty-mile clip along the exit driveway and slammed squarely into the sedan.

"Why, the damned fool!" Dr. Couriere shouted. "Couldn't he see where he was going?"

The butler and Ramey rushed out on the gallery. Beckoning them to follow, Henry ran back to the scene of the wreck. The strange car, a tan convertible, was jammed into the side of the sedan, its driver slumped inertly over the steering wheel.

"He's just stunned," Couriere declared, after making a hasty examination. "Get him out and lay him on the grass. He'll be all right in a few minutes."

Henry and Ramey lifted the unconscious man from the convertible and laid him on the grass beside the driveway. The chauffeur said:

"It's Charley Dormel."

"Who's he?" Henry inquired.

"Sorta business manager," Ramey explained. "Runs the New Orleans office. He doesn't come down here very often."

At that instant the man on the ground grunted, then sat up with a jerk and looked dazedly about him. Henry's flashlight revealed him to be a tall, slender man of thirty-five, with ash-blond hair, regular features and quick-moving brown eyes. He was at

tired in a well-tailored suit of gray tropical weave. The right lapel of his coat was smeared with blood flowing from a cut on his forehead.

Suddenly he exploded. "What imbecile left his car standing there?" he shouted. "I might have been killed!"

"How come you took the left-hand drive, Charley?" Ramey asked.

Dormel glared up at him and snarled, "Because some other idiot left a car parked over in the right-hand curve. I took this side, never dreaming some ass would park squarely across it." He peered toward the sedan and added, "Isn't there someone—"

"It's Mr. Rhoaden, sir," the butler informed him. "He's dead, sir."

"Great heavens!" Dormel exclaimed, scrambling stiffly to his feet. "And I killed him—!"

"It wasn't the crash that killed him, Mr. Dormel," Dr. Couriere interrupted. "He was dead for more than an hour before that."

"Oh!" Dormel peered at the figure behind the wheel of the sedan. "What killed him, then?"

"He was strangled," the deputy coroner informed him.

Dormel stared incredulously at Couriere. "Strangled! Did you say strangled, sir?"

"That's w'at he said," Henry put in impatiently. "No use wasting a lotta time talking back and forth. Everybody back to the house!"

RAMEY assisted Dormel up the driveway. As the crowd trooped into the hall, Shipley greeted them with a snarled "Well? What now?"

When Dormel launched into an apologetic explanation of the collision, the deputy coroner beckoned Henry into the anteroom. Closing the door leading to the hall, he asked:

"Have you formed any opinion, Henry?"

Henry stalled. "Have you, Doc?"

The deputy coroner took off his glasses and polished them with his handkerchief. "It seems to me that this is a plain case of murder, with robbery as its motive. Some prowler happened to be on the grounds about the time this Rhoaden was preparing to leave. Seeing the briefcase in the unfortunate man's possession, the murderer suspected he was carrying money. So he knocks him out, buckles the dog collar around his neck and lights out with the briefcase."

"Reckon you've got it figured right, Doc," Henry conceded. "Except fo' one thing. Shipley, he knows who that killer is. Yes! And I'm going to make him tell."

HE PRECEDED Couriere back to the library. Halting before Shipley, he said accusingly: "You know the man who killed Rhoaden. Come clean!"

Shipley's start was visible. He sat down behind the desk and licked his lips. Finally, he asked, "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Because," Henry pointed out, "when the shot was fired through the window, you hollered fo' someone to get the leetle rat. Yes! 'Leetle rat' was exactly w'at you said. Now, jus' who is this leetle rat?"

Shipley's fat shoulders lifted in a shrug. He seemed to have recovered his composure, for he declared without emotion:

"That was just a manner of speaking. I really don't know whether the fellow was big or little."

"Listen," Henry pleaded, "don't you aim to cooperate with the law?"

"Not when the law is represented by a hick-town policeman," the oil man sneered. "Especially one who sat twiddling his thumbs while I was being robbed of twenty thousand dollars."

"And yo' partner murdered," Henry reminded him, aware now that the murder of Rhoaden was regarded by Shipley as being of less importance than the loss of the money. "Mebbe that wan will kill you next," he hinted.

"That'll be my worry, not yours," Shipley retorted.

"W'at you mean, it ain't ma worry?" Henry barked. "I am chief of po-lice in this ville, me, and it is ma job to worry. Yes! If you aim to get yo'self killed, why don't yo go somewhere else?"

"That's my affair," Shipley declared. "And the sooner you're out of my house, the better I'll like it—both of you!"

Dr. Couriere reddened. His watery blue eyes glinted angrily behind his glasses as he reached for the telephone and called the undertaker. When his call was ended, he turned to Shipley and said:

"The inquest will be held tomorrow at noon, in the Wilkes undertaking establish-

ment, on Main Street, near the city hall. I expect to see everyone here present. Good night!"

"That goes for all of you," Henry supported him. Then he turned and followed the deputy coroner from the house.

"That damned stuffed shirt!" Couriere growled, as he and Henry walked slowly down the driveway toward the sedan. "Practically ordered us out of his house. Insufferable little cad!"

Henry shrugged. "Some folks figure having a lot of money gives them the right to be insulting to folks wit' less money than they got. Yes!"

Couriere remained silent until they paused beside the sedan, to await the arrival of the undertaker's wagon. Then he said:

"I suppose you'll let Vicou handle this case?"

"How come?" Henry wanted to know.

"Well, for one thing," the deputy coroner pointed out, "you'd be well rid of something that promises to be a headache. You see, it isn't as if this dead man was a local person. These people are strangers—Yankees. Nobody around here will be interested in seeing the murderer apprehended."

Henry sat down on the running board of the sedan. "That's w'at you think, Doc," he drawled. "Now, this house and grounds are inside the corporate limits of St. Odile. W'atever happens outside those limits is Sheriff Vicou's beezness. But this is ma *ville,* and this is ma case. Vicou, he gets him no part in it. By dam, no!"

THE morning sunlight was struggling through the dusty panes of the basement room below the city hall, the door of which bore the sign, "Police Headquarters." Henry Pou was seated at a scarred desk, over which was strewn a collection of odds and ends found in the various pockets of the coverall that now hung over the back of a nearby chair.

Earlier that morning, he had carefully boxed the .38-caliber revolver and dispatched it by parcel post to the state bureau of identification, in hope that the prints of some known criminal might be found on the weapon.

The articles on the desk consisted of a small penknife, a cheap fountain pen, a nail file, a worn, but clean, billfold containing six one-dollar bills and a dozen new business cards. Added to the foregoing items was a letter addressed to "Percival A. Blessingham, General Delivery, Oklahoma City, Okla."

For the past hour Henry had strained his eyes, trying to discover a single fingerprint on any of the articles taken from the pockets of the coverall. But although he had used a powerful magnifying glass, he had been unable to detect even a smudge. Accordingly, he reasoned that the various items had been carefully wiped before being placed in the pockets of the grimy garment.

Each of the business cards read:

Percival A. Blessingham
Oil and Gas Leases
917 Bulwer Building—Phone 0857
Oklahoma City, Okla.

Henry shoved the cards aside and picked up the letter, the envelope of which bore in its upper left-hand corner the return address: "Shipley-Rhoaden Oil Development Company, 654-57 Cuvier Building, New Orleans, La."

Extracting the enclosure, he read for the fifth time that morning:

September 18, 194—

My Dear Blessingham:

I have just read yours of the 10th inst., and in reply must again assert that I owe you nothing, also that I cannot be held responsible for your hard luck.

As you well know, you went into the aforementioned deal with your eyes open, just like R. and myself. It was no fault of ours that the deal backfired, and you were burned.

In closing, let me assure you that I shall not bother reading any further communication from you.

(Signed) Orrin J. Shipley.

Henry refolded the letter and returned it to its envelope. Drawing the telephone to him, he called Western Union. When the connection was made, he continued, "Take a telegram, Miss Eloise. Here it is: "Chief of Police, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Request information on Percival A. Blessingham, nine-seventeen Bulwer Building, your

city. Henry Pou, Chief of Police, St. Odile, Louisiana.' Get that off right away, Miss Eloise."

He looked up as a tall young man with a police badge on his belt pushed open the door and entered.

"Hya, Chief?" the newcomer greeted.

Henry cradled the telephone and regarded the junior member of St. Odile's two-man police department with fatherly benevolence.

"How come you ain't home in bed, Jimmy?" he asked. "Or isn't a twelve-hour shift long enough for you?"

Jimmy Bourdelon advanced to the desk, walking with a slight limp caused by an enemy bullet on Guadalcanal. "I was helping Sue Lanier get her story off," he explained. "All the N'Yawlins papers are yelling for more on the dog-collar murder." He grinned. "That's what they're calling it."

"They would!" Henry grunted.

Bourdelon lifted the coverall from the chairback and regarded it with disfavor. "This looks as if it came off some city dump," he remarked. "What is it—Exhibit A?"

Henry ignored the question. "Supposing," he said, "you were aiming to put on overalls over yo' regular clothes, would you first transfer the contents of yo' pockets to the pockets of the overalls?"

The tall young ex-marine dropped the filthy garment to the floor and sat down in the chair. "Speaking for myself," he responded, "I don't believe I'd bother to make the change. That is, if I were about to put on overalls over my regular clothes."

"It's some question," Henry drawled. "Like which comes first, the chicken or the aig. Yes!" The telephone rang. Lifting the receiver, he said, "Chief of Police?"

"Sellierville calling Chief Pou," he heard the operator say. Then, "Your call is ready, Mr. Fontenette."

Henry swore as he recognized the name of the parish district attorney. He looked at Jimmy and whispered, "I smell something cooking, me!"

"Hello, Henry!" A man's voice rasped in the telephone with the peculiar, whistling buzz produced by people with badly fitting false teeth. "How's the old warrior?"

"Jus' so-so, Al," Henry replied without enthusiasm. "W'at's on yo' mind?"

"Mr. Shipley notified me by telephone just now that he is obliged to leave the parish for a business conference in New Orleans," Albert Fontenette said. I—er—just thought I'd warn you, so you won't—er—impose any —er objections."

"I see," Henry drawled. "You say jus' Shipley is leaving, yes?"

"Oh, I suppose he'll take his household help with him—that is, his butler, chauffeur and so-forth. His stepdaughter, also, I understand."

"In short," Henry pointed out, "everybody who might possibly have some connection with that murder is pulling out—with yo' permission."

Fontenette laughed. "Now really, Henry!" he chided, "you know very well you haven't anything that would justify my holding any of these people. According to your own report, the murderer got away. I have talked over the matter with Mr. Shipley, and can't for the life of me see what possible motive anyone in the house could have for killing Mr. Rhoaden."

"Twenty thousand dollars is wan pretty strong motive," Henry pointed out. "Listen, supposing Shipley and his folks cross the state line into Mississippi, or Texas—what'll you do then, hey?"

FONTENETTE chuckled. "You're seeing ghosts, Henry. Mr. Shipley has assured me that he will be back in Papillon Parish within five days. Er—have you made any further discoveries?"

"Not a wan, Al," Henry assured him.

"Well, Sheriff Vicou is considering sending to New Orleans for a private detective to work on the case," Fontenette declared. "But we'll expect you to cooperate, of course. 'Bye!"

Henry put back the receiver and pushed the telephone from him.

"Looks lak' the cou'thouse gang is fixing to move in on us, Jimmy," he growled.

"That means," Bourdelon said, "we've got to beat 'em to it."

Henry nodded, a far-away look in his eyes. He surmised that Shipley, because of his wide interests in the parish, had established himself in the good graces of the officials, particularly so with Fontenette and Vicou, who believed that money was always right—especially big money, as represented by the Shipley-Rhoaden Oil Company. Consequently, if the oil man wished the investigation dropped,

he had only to let fall a hint in the right quarter.

Between Sheriff Vicou and Henry there existed an intense rivalry, and Vicou had declared his intention of some day nailing Henry's political pelt to the front door of the parish courthouse.

Oddly enough, Henry had no ambition to be criminal sheriff of the parish. Sheriff Vicou, however, was unaware of this. He was likewise unaware that Henry was secretly grooming Jimmy Bourdelon for that office. Election time was only a few months away. Fontenette and Vicou, having back-slapped and glad-handed their way through three years of public office, would now be looking for something other than meaningless pleasantries to justify their political existence. Hence, the murder of Rhoaden was a blessing in disguise. Henry had no desire to hinder them if he could be certain that they would pursue an honest investigation. What he feared most was that, failing to apprehend the real murderer, they would seek a scapegoat in order to build themselves up for reelection.

Henry started out of his reverie. He glanced at the clock, swept the articles from the desk top into a drawer, which he locked. Then he rose and put on his hat.

"Time fo' the inquest, I reckon," he said.

WHEN Henry reached the undertaking establishment, he saw Shipley's big Packard had parked in front of the building. Beside it was the tan convertible that had crashed into the sedan the night before.

As he studied the smaller car's crumpled front fenders and radiator, Henry wondered if Dormel would be foolish enough to attempt the sixty-mile drive to New Orleans in such a wreck.

Henry found Shipley and his party seated in the chapel. The oil man was attired in a loose-fitting suit of brown gabardine, and carried in his right hand a sombrero that seemed only a trifle smaller than a beach umbrella. Dormel, a fashion plate in powder blue, had a strip of flesh-colored adhesive over the gash above his right eye. The butler, in a brown checked suit, and carrying a broad-brimmed panama with a colorful band, looked like a second-rate bookie. Ramey, in dark green livery, was stiff and unbending. The girl was nowhere in sight.

Henry found Dr. Couriere in the mortuary, explaining the nature of the dead man's injury to the jury. When the deputy coroner ended his monologue, Henry asked him about the girl. Couriere grinned and said:

"She's home in bed—drunk as a fiddler. Shipley called me about ten o'clock. I went out and found she's polished off a quart of whiskey and was yelling for more. So I gave her a sedative. She was sleeping when I left."

Henry clicked his tongue. *"Ma foi!"* he murmured. "A quart of whiskey! It does not seem right. No!"

Couriere shrugged. "Her room smelled like a distillery," he declared. "I'll admit a full quart is rather an unusual dose for so young a toper. But she'll be all right when she wakes up. One of the maids is staying to take care of her."

"The help is leaving, too, no?" Henry asked in surprise.

"Only for a few days," he doctor explained. "Until Mr. Shipley returns. "He looked at his watch. "Well, I guess we'd better get this business over with."

The inquest began. Henry was the first witness. In submitting his testimony, he made no reference to the attack upon himself, nor to his discovery of the .38-caliber revolver and the coverall. He concluded with an account of his discovery of the body, and exhibited the dog-collar as evidence.

Shipley came next and testified about throwing the dog collar out the window on the previous evening and that Rhoaden had left his house about eight o'clock, after which he, himself, had retired to his study to look over some lease contracts brought to him by the deceased. He told about the shot through the library window, but declared that he was completely ignorant of the identity of the person who had fired the shot. His first intimation of Rhoaden's death, he stated, was when the chief of police informed him of the murder, and offered the opinion that the sole motive for the killing was the twenty thousand dollars which he had entrusted to the deceased to pay off certain lease contracts.

Henry expected the deputy coroner to cross-question. But Couriere dismissed Shipley and called Albert Crane, who re-

peated, almost word for word, the story he had told Henry the night before. He, too, was dismissed without cross-examination. Ramey came next, submitted a rather sketchy account of his movements during the preceding afternoon and evening, and was excused.

Once, Henry thought of asking that he himself be recalled to the witness stand to add to his previous testimony an account of Shipley's frantic words following the firing of the shot through the library. But he realized that the oil man would deny having mentioned any "little rat," as he already had denied using the term. And, since it would mean his unsupported word against that of the oil man, Henry decided to hold his peace.

The inquest was concluded with the jury's verdict that Walter Everett Rhoaden had died from strangulation as the result of a dog collar being buckled tightly about his neck by some person or persons unknown.

Henry left the undertaking establishment, satisfied that Shipley didn't want the murderer of his partner brought to justice, because of some unsavory incident in his own past, which would be aired by the arrest of Rhoaden's killer.

At that moment, however, Shipley seemed to have everything under control—including the deputy coroner, who deliberately had soft-pedalled the inquest by refraining from cross-questioning any of the witnessed Couriere, no doubt, had received orders from above. And those above were friendly to the oil man. Now, as he watched them leave town, Shipley, Crane and Ramey in the big Packard, with Dormel driving his battered convertible, Henry realized that the case was slipping out of his hands. Nevertheless, he was determined not to give up.

HENRY went home to dinner. When he returned to the office at two o'clock, he found a telegram had been shoved under the door during his absence. Opening it, he read:

PERCIVAL AUGUSTUS BLESSINGHAM PAROLED APRIL NINETEEN FORTY THREE FROM OKLAHOMA STATE PENITENTIARY AFTER SERVING SIX OF TEN YEAR SENTENCE FOR FRAUD. PRESENT WHEREABOUTS NOT KNOWN TO US. SUGGEST YOU QUERY STATE PAROLE BOARD. SATTLEY CHIEF OF POLICE.

Henry's reaction was to send a telegram to the Oklahoma Parole Board, requesting full details of the crime for which Blessingham had been sentenced, also that a complete description of the man be included. This done, he lighted a stogie, elevated his feet on the desk and let his thoughts drift back over the happenings of the night before.

He recalled fragments of his conversation with Pauline Forster, during which the girl had freely expressed her dislike for her stepfather. Since there were certain facts he wished to know about Shipley's background, Henry wondered if the girl might not prove to be a prolific source of information. Even when dead sober, she had talked freely enough. Under the influence of liquor, she might tell him all he wanted to know about the oil man.

Thinking about the girl brought to mind Couriere's statement that she had drunk a quart of whiskey some time that morning. Somehow, that didn't sound convincing to Henry, and he suspected that Couriere either had lied about the girl's condition or had been cunningly deceived.

Henry decided to look into that. He left the office, got the police car out of the garage and drove out to the old de Joinville place. Nearing the gateway, he slowed down and glanced to his right, where a wooden pier projected into the bayou. Moored at the offshore end of the pier was a flat-bottomed skiff, with an outboard motor clamped to its stern transom.

"Somebody will steal that motor, sho's I live," he mused. "And that would make just wan mo' headache fo' me. Some folks don't deserve to have anything, by dam!"

He turned the car off the road and drove slowly along the right-hand curve toward the house. The shutters drawn over the tall windows of the main floor gave it a deserted appearance. The work of clearing the long-neglected grounds hadn't been resumed that day. If someone at that moment had assured Henry that Shipley had left for good, he wouldn't have been surprised.

PARKING in front of the house, Henry alighted and walked around the building toward the servants' quarters, pausing as he passed the garage to glance over a

neat blue coupé with silver striping. He smiled reminiscently as he went on. Only a week before he had seen the little car standing triumphantly astride a fallen lamp-post on Main Street, with the girl laughing hysterically behind the wheel.

In the servant house he found only one colored maid. And she was already dressed for departure. Henry inquired:

"Miss Pauline around?"

"Reckon she up in her room, Cap'n Henry, suh," the girl declared. "Ah wuz s'posed to stay wid her. But she tole me Ah could go. An' Ah's goin'—fast. Yassuh!"

"You mean you're leaving her alone in the house, yes?" Henry asked.

The girl shrugged. "Miss Pauline fixin' to go somewhere herse'f. She done had me he'p her wid her packin'."

"Ah!" Henry drawled. "She did, hey? Well, gal, s'pose you show me to her room?"

"Yassuh, Cap'n Henry!" the girl obeyed.

She led him through the door of the basement which, like all basements in lower Louisiana, was built above ground, up a narrow, wooden stairs to the main floor, then up the spiral staircase to the floor above. Pausing before a door, the girl knocked and announced:

"Miss Pauline! Heah Cap'n Henry wanter see you, miss."

Receiving no answer, she opened the door a few inches and peered into the room. Then she glanced over her shoulder at Henry and declared:

"She ain't here."

Henry stepped past her into the room, which smelled like a New Orleans speakeasy. His glance swung from the disordered bed to the two bulging suitcases on the floor in front of the dresser, the empty drawers of which hung open, and from there to the small table beside the bed. On the table was an empty whiskey bottle, and beside the bottle an upturned glass.

Lifting the glass, Henry saw beneath it two half-dissolved tablets. He felt the pillow, which still bore the imprint of the girl's head, and found it damp, with the peculiar, chill dampness of alcohol.

Henry stroked his mustache to hide a grin, realizing that the girl, for some reason, had played drunk and, to lend versimilitude to her act, had poured the contents of the bottle over her pillow. Couriere, completely taken in, had given her a couple of sedative tablets, which she had ejected the instant his back was turned.

Turning to the maid, Henry asked, "You see Miss Pauline leave, no?"

The girl shook her head. "Sho' didn't, Cap'n Henry, suh."

Henry sat down on the edge of the bed and frowned at the two suitcases. They, coupled with the presence of the coupé in the garage, suggested that Pauline was still on the premises. Her preparations for departure indicated that she had played drunk to keep from having to go with her stepfather to New Orleans, because she had planned to go somewhere else on her own.

"Reckon she's still around," Henry said. "I'll stay till she comes back here. If you want to leave, just go right ahaid."

With a delighted grin, the maid scampered off, leaving Henry alone. He rose and sauntered through the upper hall, looking into the various bedrooms for some sign of the missing Pauline. Finally he descended to the main floor and searched the rooms there without result. Standing in the middle of the great living room, he called aloud her name and got only the deep echo of his own voice for answer.

He went through the dark-paneled dining room and descended to the basement. Pausing at the foot of the stairs, he looked along the concrete-floored passage stretching from the front of the stairway to the basement entrance. Several doors opened on the passage. Henry moved along the passage, trying the doors. Only the last door opened to his touch, and he found himself looking into a windowless room, in the center of which was a big oil heater.

The only light in the furnace room came through the doorway in which he was standing, dimly revealing a smaller door in the opposite wall. A heavy layer of dust on the concrete floor indicated that the room was seldom used. But he perceived now that it had recently been entered, for in the film of dust on the floor were the imprints of a man's shoes, mingled confusedly with the smaller footprints of a woman.

Standing in the doorway, Henry surveyed the footprints. The man's tracks came and went between the smaller door and the one opening on the passage, diverging at one

point as if he had walked around behind the heater. But the woman's footprints pointed in only one direction—toward the small door on the opposite side of the furnace room.

Struck by the significance of the one-way footprints of the woman, Henry crossed the furnace room. As he halted in front of the smaller door, his hand reaching for the barrel bolt with which it was secured, his ears caught a faint rustle from the darkness to his left.

Turning his head, he caught a swift glimpse of a shapeless figure hurtling toward him from the shadows behind the heater an instant before the ceiling fell on his head.

WHEN Henry opened his eyes again, it seemed to him that not more than a minute could have passed since he had blacked out. He pushed himself to his knees and re-adjusted his hat, which had been smashed down over his eyes. Drawing his pistol, he looked over the furnace room, his eyes probing the shadows behind the heater, until he was satisfied that his assailant had fled.

He took off his hat and traversed his left hand carefully over the swelling on the top of his head while he stared fixedly at the closet door, which he noticed was still bolted. His pulse accelerated a trifle as he drew the bolt and jerked the door outward. He found himself looking into what seemed to be a sort of household catch-all, a small closet, with shelves laden with bundles of old newspapers and magazines, its corners littered with odds and ends of broken gardening tools. Opposite the door was a small window, its lower sash raised. And in the dust of the shelf beneath it were the imprints of a woman's shoes.

From somewhere outside the house, a motor accelerated with an explosive bellow. Henry galvanized into sudden action. Plunging headlong from the furnace room, he raced around to the garage, just in time to see the blue coupé clear the twin posts marking the entrance to the grounds and go tearing west along the bayou road toward town, with Pauline Forster hunched over the wheel.

Henry ran back into the house and bounded up the back stairs to the main floor. As he hurried toward the library, he surmised that the girl would head north over the highway. Halfway between St. Odile and Sellierville, the bayou swung eastward and was spanned by a drawbridge. Now Henry was praying that Herb Mathieu, the highway patrolman, would be enjoying his customary afternoon game of pinochle with the bridge tender.

Snatching the telephone from Shipley's desk, Henry called the St. Odile exchange and asked to be connected with the bridge. When the bridge tender answered, Henry inquired anxiously:

"Herb Mathieu there, Emile?" A second later, when the road patrolman's voice rasped in the receiver, he continued, "This is Henry Pou, Herb. A blue Chevvy coupe just left here, and I want it stopped and brought back. There's a girl driving"—he paused, grinning as he recalled Dr. Couriere's erroneous diagnosis—"and she's dronk. Doc Couriere had to give her some dope to quiet her this mo'ning. Bring her back, befo' she kills herself or someone else."

"Okay, Henry!" Mathieu promised. "I'll gather her in."

Henry cradled the telephone and sat down in Shipley's luxurious swivel chair. He was still a bit groggy from the blow that had felled him, and the swelling on the top of his head was growing to mountainous proportions. Moreover, he was puzzled to account for the girl's flight. And thinking, just now, made his head ache still more.

Selecting one of Shipley's choice cigars from the humidor on the desk, he lit up and enjoyed the aroma of the selected weed. He idly opened the top drawer at his right hand and saw that it contained, among other things, a bundle of letters. He glanced over the letters, undeterred by the ethics of the deed—or lack of them. Reading other people's mail might not be strictly according to Hoyle, he told himself. But, then, neither was murder. And he had a murder case to clear up before Sheriff Arsene Vicou came marching in with his private detective.

There was nothing in any of the letters that had the slightest bearing on the murder of Rhoaden. All of them were strictly business. But they suggested to Henry that there might be other letters lying about which would give him a lead. He searched the

remaining drawers, even browsed patiently through the contents of two letter files, but found only letters and documents pertaining to the legitimate workings of the Shipley-Rhoaden Oil Company.

HENRY rose and entered Shipley's bedroom, which adjoined the library. The room was furnished with an ancient four-poster bed, a dresser, armoire and a couple of chairs. Before the window stood a small rosewood desk, and beside the desk an iron filing cabinet. Trying the drawers of the cabinet, Henry discovered that they were locked. A search of the desk drawers brought to light a number of household bills, most of them marked "Paid." There were no letters.

Henry was about to leave the room when he noticed a smoking jacket hung carelessly over the back of a chair. He picked up the garment, rummaged through the pockets and brought forth a cheap-looking envelope addressed with lead pencil to "Mr. O. J. Shipley, St. Odile, La." There was no return address.

Extracting the enclosure, Henry saw that it, too, was written with lead pencil on cheap, ruled paper, evidently torn from a ten-cent writing tablet. There was no date, no salutation. The missive simply began:

> In my last communication, I directed you to have the money in your house, awaiting my further instructions. Since you have not taken my demand seriously, I warn you now that I am about to take steps to convince you that I meant every word of what I wrote you last week.
>
> You boasted in a former letter that the statute of limitations would protect you, if I should attempt to have the case reopened. But I am no longer relying on the law, but am, instead, resorting to direct action.
>
> If you are troubled with anything so inconvenient as a conscience, you must realize that I am asking only what rightfully is mine. You gave me your sacred promise that it would be banked for me, and that you would work for a parole. But you did neither. Now you must pay —or suffer the consequences.
>
> P. A. B.

Henry read the letter a second time. Here, he told himself, was something out of Shipley's past. And it was blackmail—definitely a matter for the FBI. But the oil man obviously was reluctant to bring it into the light of publicity by putting the case up to the Department of Justice.

The inference was clear to Henry. Shipley, Rhoaden and Blessingham had pulled some crooked deal. The first two had managed, somehow, to evade the consequences, leaving Blessingham to take the rap, which he had done, evidently, with the assurance that his share of the proceeds would be put aside for him in some bank, also that the others would seek a parole for him. Obviously, those promises hadn't been kept. Secure in the knowledge that their former associate would be out of circulation for a definite number of years, Shipley and Rhoaden had ignored Blessingham's existence. Now Blessingham was free—and on a rampage.

Henry carried the letter to the library, where he copied it on a blank sheet of paper. Returning to the bedroom, he replaced the original blackmail note in the pocket of Shipley's jacket. Then he left the house by way of the basement, climbed into his car and drove jubilantly back to headquarters.

When he entered the office, he found another yellow envelope that had been shoved under the door. This time it was a telegram from the state bureau of identification. It read:

> PRINTS ON THIRTY EIGHT CALIBER REVOLVER SUBMITTED BY YOU FOR EXAMINATION CHECK WITH THOSE OF JAKE DREW FORMER NEW ORLEANS PRIVATE DETECTIVE. DREWS LICENSE REVOKED NINETEEN FORTY ACCOUNT PERJURY CHARGE. NO FURTHER DETAILS AVAILABLE. DREW PRESUMED TO HAVE LEFT STATE. BENSON.

Henry sat on a corner of his desk and reread the message, the bewilderment growing.

"Ma foi!" he exclaimed, speaking in French, as he always did whenever he was preoccupied. "She becomes a problem the most formidable. Already, I have one suspect, perhaps two—yes, even three! Now, regard! There arrives one more in the person of this Monsieur Drew. *C'est incredible!"* He slid off his desk and added in English. "By dam, yes!"

He heard a car stop outside. Looking

through the open doorway, he saw Herb Mathieu handing Pauline Forster out of the blue coupé. Marching around behind his desk, Henry settled himself in his chair, then rose again and bowed ceremoniously as the road patrolman ushered the girl into the office.

"Good day, Miss Pauline!" Henry greeted her. "It is a gr-reat pleasure to see you. Yes!" He waved her to a chair. "Please be seated."

"The pleasure is all yours, Hank," the girl retorted, sinking languidly to a seat. "Would you mind telling me why I'm pinched?"

"First of all," Herb Mathieu said, "take a gander at this."

He was carrying a large paper shopping bag that bulged like an overstuffed sausage. His blue eyes glowed with a light of accomplishment as he upended the bag in front of Henry and let a veritable flood of paper money fall in a rustling cascade over the desk.

Henry glanced in swift comprehension from the money to the face of Pauline Foster, who returned his questioning stare with smiling nonchalance.

"Eh, bien!" he sighed. He lifted a packet of bills, saw that it was composed of twenties. He shuffled the others with a gesture of perplexity and murmured, *"Ma foi!* Looks lak' wan million dollars. Yes!"

"No, Hank," the girl corrected him. "There's only twenty thousand. I know, because I counted it."

HENRY assumed a judicial air and said, "According to w'at Mr. Shipley says, twenty thousand dollars was the amount taken from Mr. Rhoaden when he was murdered, no?"

The girl nodded. "That's right—at least, twenty thousand is the amount old Ship claims Rhoaden carried from the house."

Henry's dark eyes bored into hers as he drawled:

"Then you killed that wan, yes?"

"Don't be silly, Hank!" the girl pouted. "Why should I kill him?"

"Fo' twenty thousand dollars. Yes!"

"You're crazy!"

"Mebbe," Henry said. "But everybody is jus' a leetle crazy about something. Now, if you didn't kill that wan, how come you're running away wit' his money?"

She shrugged. "That's just one of those things. You probably won't believe me."

Henry leaned both elbows on the desk and regarded her with smiling benevolence. "Tell me, *cherie,*" he coaxed.

Pauline grinned. "Turn off the personality, Hank," she suggested. "You don't have to go fatherly on me. I found that money. But I didn't kill anyone. Definitely!"

She opened her handbag and produced a crumpled package of cigarettes. Accepting a light from Mathieu, she blew a puff of smoke ceilingward and then said:

"Bert Ramey and I plan to marry. But since I won't have the handling of my own money for another year, we'd put it off again and again, because we knew old Ship would have seventeen conniption fits, one right after another, if he knew there was anything between us. I knew for certain he'd tie a can to Bert. And I didn't want that to happen.

"Well, at breakfast this morning he told me to get ready to go to New Orleans with him. That was all right with me, seeing Bert would be along. So I went to my room to pack. I found I needed some paper to wrap several pairs of slippers, and remembered there was a lot of old newspapers in the basement. I went down to get the packing paper. But when I opened the door of the closet where it was stored I saw a briefcase lying on the floor, directly underneath the window, which was standing open.

"At once I recognized the briefcase as Rhoaden's. It was open, too, but the money seemed intact. At first I was scared, knowing that, although the money really belonged to old Ship, poor old Rhoaden had been killed for it. I made a hurried count of the money. Then I took it out of the briefcase, bundled it in newspaper and hid it in the firebox of the heater. Then I stuffed the briefcase with old newspapers, snapped the lock shut and left it lying on the floor of the closet, just as I'd found it.

"When I returned to my room I decided not to go to New Orleans, but to run up later, first recovering the money I'd hidden in the heater. In New Orleans I planned to contact Bert, marry him and then carry him on to Miami for a bang-up honeymoon."

"That was why you played dronk, yes?" Henry quizzed.

The girl nodded. "Yes, I had to find an excuse to keep from going to New Orleans with the others. You see, I couldn't have taken the money with me if I'd gone in the Packard with old Ship. So I sneaked down to the dining room and swiped a quart of whiskey. I put some in my mouth, just to give my breath the right tang. Then I poured the rest over the pillow, and proceeded to let the world know I was on top by yelling my head off." She grinned. "I completely fooled that old horse doctor."

Henry nodded. "He t'ought you drank that whole quart, Yes!"

"The old silly!" Pauline chuckled. "As a matter of fact, Hank, I haven't taken a drink since that time I knocked over all the lamp posts with my car. Bert doesn't drink, and won't stand for a wife who does. So I've sworn off."

"That wan," Henry drawled, "is a man of sense. Yes!"

"He is," the girl declared with conviction. "Anyway," she resumed her story, "when the others had been gone for about an hour, I told the maid she could leave for the day. I got up and finished packing. Then I got an old shopping bag from the pantry and went down to the basement after the money. When I entered the furnace room, I got to wondering if the briefcase was still on the floor of the closet. So I opened the door. And there was a man inside."

"Ha!" Henry ejaculated. "Now we get some place, by dam! W'at that wan look lak', hey?"

Pauline shrugged. I never got a clear look at him," she declared. "For the instant I opened the door, he let fly with his fist and caught me on the chin, and I went out like a busted light globe.

"When I came to, I was lying on the floor of the closet. I found the door was bolted on the outside. Also, the briefcase was gone.

"I started to climb out the window, when I saw my little playmate sneaking past the servant house, with the briefcase under his arm. I saw now that he was wearing a sort of one-piece overall, greenish-brown in color, I think. I waited until he was out of sight, and then climbed through the window. Knowing the front door was fastened, I started around to the basement door, scared stiff now, and wishing I'd gone to New Orleans with the others. Then, when I passed the furnace room, I looked inside and saw you lying on the floor, out cold.

"I took a look at you and saw that you weren't seriously hurt. Then I got to wondering if the money was still in the heater. I took a look—and there it was. The shopping bag was still lying on the floor, where I'd dropped it when the guy walloped me. So I scooped the money into it, ran from the basement to the garage, got in my car and scrammed, without bothering to return to my room for my baggage. But I got only as far as the drawbridge when this cutie pinched me." She looked at Mathieu, who grinned embarrassedly.

Henry stroked his mustache and stared thoughtfully at the money on the desk. In his mind he was picturing the murderer returning to the house to recover the briefcase, which he had thrust through the window of the furnace-room closet the night before. About to leave with his supposed loot, for he couldn't possibly have known then that the briefcase was stuffed with old newspapers, he had heard the girl coming down the back stairs. Hidden in the closet, he had knocked her unconscious the instant she opened the door.

Having reached that conclusion, it was easy for Henry to go on to another, to imagine the mysterious prowler, warned by the noise of Henry's footfalls on the back stairs, hiding behind the heater and then striking him down while in the act of opening the closet door.

Why, Henry wondered, had the killer disposed of the briefcase by thrusting it through the window of the furnace-room closet, instead of carrying it with him when he had fled in his rattletrap car? Why had he fired that shot through the library window, knowing that the angle of fire would prevent his hitting anything but the ceiling? To Henry, that seemed like simple bravado, to increase Shipley's evident fear. That explanation might suffice for the firing of the shot; but it failed to take into account the identity of the man who had tried to brain Henry with the .38-caliber revolver.

Experience had taught Henry that every case was relatively simple once the various parts were properly assembled. One made a discovery, which invariably, led to another. And so on. But in this particular case dis-

coveries which seemed to have no relation to one another were coming with a rapidity that was merely confusing.

HE LOOKED sternly at the girl and said, "You aimed to steal that money, yes? Didn't you know that was wrong—or did you care?"

Pauline grinned; apparently the moral aspect of her act hadn't occurred to her. She said, "Nobody would have been the wiser—except the fellow who ran off with the briefcase."

Henry sighed. "*Eh, bien!* Well, girlie, the prisons are filled wit' people who figure lak' that. Supposing you and that Ramey got away to Miami wit' all that money? You go on a spending spree. Shipley hears about that, knows you have not got any money of yo' own, and puts two and two together and gets himself fo'. Well, you and Ramey are arrested wit' all that money in yo' possession —*Ma foi!*"

Pauline blinked at him across the pile of bills and admitted, "I hadn't thought that far ahead."

Henry smiled. "Reckon you wouldn't have taken enough time out to think until you found yo'self in a nice, airy cell on the top flo' of Miami's skyscraper jail. Ces!"

"I guess you're right, Hank," she conceded. "But what a swell chance I missed to get even with old Ship!"

"Trying to get even wit' somebody else lands a lotta folks behind bars," Henry drawled. He groped in a desk drawer and came up with a long, black stogie. "How long has that bottler bin working fo' Mr. Shipley?"

"Bottler?" Pauline regarded him with a puzzled frown. "Oh, you mean the butler, Crane. Why, about eight months, I think."

Henry lighted his stogie and filled the office with the odor of burning brakebands. "He comes soon after Percival Augustus Blessingham gets turned loose, yes?"

The girl looked blank. "Blessingham? Who is he?"

"You don't know that wan, no?"

"I never heard of him," she declared.

Henry took another tack. "Looks lak' that Crane don't have much to do, jus' bottling fo' Mr. Shipley and yo'self, no?"

"Oh, he does other things," the girl admitted. "Like snooping around the grounds nights with a gun and a flashlight, and setting the burglar alarms. They're all over the place. Old Ship is scared of his own shadow. He kept that big Alsatian dog close to him at all times—even let it sleep in his bedroom. He's been completely jittery since the dog disappeared. That is, he has been until today. Now he doesn't seem so scared any more."

"That," Henry murmured, "is interesting. Yes!"

He now recognized another angle, one which he had overlooked, and wondered if the butchery of the dog had been a prelude to the murder of Rhoaden.

Pauline was saying, "What are you going to do with me?"

"Well," Henry drawled, "I reckon, me, I could hold you fo' murder—"

"But," Pauline interrupted, "you know very well I haven't killed anyone."

HENRY shook his head slowly. "It makes no never-mind w'at I know. W'at I want you to onderstand is that I'm holding you fo' yo own good. Yes!"

"You can't do it!" she flared. "If you're really worried about my safety, why not let me go on to New Orleans? Bert will take care of me."

"You, *cherie,*" Henry declared slowly, "ain't going no place. I'd lak' you to cooperate wit' me. Yes! Bot if you won't, there are two choices. The first is a charge of dronk driving, the second, suspicion of having murdered wan Rhoaden and robbing him of twenty thousand dollars, which sum is found in yo' possession."

"You mean you're really going to put me in a cell?"

Henry shrugged. "*Cherie,* wan murder in a month is all ma constitution will stand. Yes!"

"You're sure my life is in danger?"

"Look," Henry explained patiently, "that wan who ran off wit' the briefcase figures, him, he's got Rhoaden's money. When he opens it and finds it stoffed wit' old newspapers, he's going to be plenty sore, because he'll think you beat him to the dough. Now you just figure it from there on. Yes!"

Pauline looked at him helplessly, her thin veneer of sophistication shattered, revealing the badly frightened young girl beneath.

"Is it really that bad?" she quavered.

Henry nodded. "Sho' is! And it will get worse befo' it gets better, I think, me."

"All right," she surrendered, "go ahead and lock me up. I'd sooner be in jail than dead, any day."

"I'm not going to put you in a cell," Henry assured her. "That is, onless you break yo' promise to keep out of sight fo' the next few days. I'll keep you at ma house, and sto' yo' car in ma garage. When I put the finger on the wan w'at killed Rhoaden, I'll turn you loose. Now w'at you goin' to say?"

She shrugged. "I guess you've called the turn. I'd be satisfied, though, if I could let Bert know—"

"That," Henry interrupted, "is wan thing you cain't do. Nobody must know where you are, except us here. As fo' that Ramey, I may be asking the N'Yawlins cops to gather him in fo' me. Yes!"

He looked up as Jimmy Bourdelon entered, all ready to take over for the night.

"Howdy, everybody!" the ex-marine greeted. He looked questioningly at Pauline and asked, "What's cooking?"

Henry ignored the question. Turning to Pauline, he said, "That reminds me we're having *bouillabaise* fo' supper at ma house."

The girl brightened. "I don't know what that is, but it sounds good."

Here Mathieu brought forth his notebook. "I forgot I had a chore for you guys," he said, turning the pages of the notebook. "Um—here it is. Ford car, Nineteen twenty-eight model, license number four-one-six-one-eight-two, stolen from in front of Trianon movie house in Sellierville last night. Owner reports he parked car at seven-thirty in front of theater, came out after first show and found car gone. Car contained his work-outfit, consisting of one machinist's coverall, one cap, and one pair of leather gloves."

He closed the notebook and returned it to his shirt pocket. "Probably some smart kids swiped it and ran it till the gas gave out," he summed up. "With all the good cars that's just askin' to be stolen, that's the only reason I can figure for anybody swipin' Donnelly's jalopy."

Henry tugged at his mustache, a far-away look in his eyes. "Then the owner's name is not Blessingham, no?" he murmured. "Bot, nevertheless, it is mos' interesting. *Oui*—yes!"

He turned to the girl. "Now let us go to supper. Maman will have that *bouillabaise* waiting." He waved to Jimmy and Herb. "*Mon soir, messieurs!*"

HENRY bustled into headquarters on the following morning, refreshed by a full night's rest, and filled with the good cheer generated by a bountiful breakfast of pancakes and sausages washed down with several cups of coffee strong enough to float a marlinspike. Lighting a stogie, he glanced over Jimmy Bourdelon's report of the few events of the previous night, then elevated his feet on the desk, opened the morning paper and made ready for whatever the day might bring forth.

During a confidential chat with Pauline Forster the evening before, he had learned that, eight years previously, Shipley had married her mother, who had died four years later, leaving her entire fortune to her daughter, but appointing Shipley to manage the estate until one year after the girl's coming of age. In the interval, Pauline accused, Shipley had used her money in building up a comfortable fortune for himself. Beyond that, she claimed to know little concerning her stepfather's affairs, and nothing at all about his background, except that he had operated in Oklahoma and, later, in Texas, where he had met and married her mother.

Henry read his paper through, missing nothing, not even the "advice to the lovelorn." He was wading through the personal columns when Jimmy Bourdelon drifted in to enjoy a busman's holiday. Seating himself in the other chair, the former marine lighted a cigarette and remarked:

"Vicou called up last evening and wanted to know if we'd found out yet if anybody's missing hereabouts."

"How come he's so interest' in us, all of a sudden?" Henry wanted to know.

"It's about that guy they found in the Old Clay Hole a few weeks back," Jimmy explained. "Vicou's trying to get him identified."

"He should know by now," Henry drawled, "that the man was a stranger. W'at's he trying to do? Dump another headache in ma lap, yes?"

Bourdelon grinned. "Looks that way, all right. He traced the guy through the bus driver who carried him south from N'Yaw-

lins. But no one knows where the guy came from to the city. Reckon whoever bumped him off wanted him to remain incognito, seeing that his pockets were turned wrong side out, and the marks cut out of his clothes."

Henry nodded, his dark eyes suddenly thoughtful. Two weeks previously, when the body had been discovered, he had considered it strictly Vicou's affair. Now he wasn't so sure.

He stared absently at the toes of his shoes and let his mind wander back to the incident. Years before he was born, a clay deposit had been worked on the outskirts of the parish seat, had petered out and had been abandoned, leaving a hole about fifteen feet deep and about two hundred feet in diameter, filled with stagnant, brown water.

Two Negro boys had brought the body to the surface while dragging for old tires that had been dumped into the pool before the beginning of the war. The body was that of a short, slender man, with a few patches of sandy hair still adhering to the skull. The features had been destroyed by the crawdads, which also had striped the flesh from the hands. With the laundry marks and tailors' labels cut from the clothing, the only possible means of identification was a large, oval-shaped mole between the shoulder blades.

Because of the condition of the body, it had been impossible to determine the actual cause of death. But a cement building block attached by a few turns of clothesline to the body suggested that the unknown had been stunned before being thrown into the pool. Moreover, the building block was identified as one stolen about a month previously from a filling station in course of construction just inside the town limits.

Henry reached into a desk drawer and brought forth a card upon which he had written a sketchy description of the dead man. "Height, five-four," he read, "weight, about one-thirty; eyes blue, probably; hair, sandy; only distinguishing mark, oval-shaped mole on spine, between shoulder blades." He shrugged and returned the card to the drawer. "No face, no fingerprints," he mused. "Jus' that wan mole. Oh, well, I reckon, me, there ain't no needcessity for me worrying about it. I got me wan firs'-class murder of ma own. Yes!"

"Is it possible that it might tie in with this Rhoaden business?" Jimmy ventured.

Henry pursed his lips. "Anything is possible in this po-lice racket," he declared. "You'll learn never to overlook a bet. Yes!"

"By the way," Jimmy said, "Herb called me from Sellierville, just before he checked out last night. He found that jalopy he was telling us about.

"Ah!" Henry drawled, "The jalopy of Monsieur Donnelly, yes?"

"The same," the former marine confirmed. "You remember Herb saying Donnelly complained about losing his work clothes with his car. Well, when Herb found the old heap beside the highway, after he left here last night, there was a brand new coverall, also a brand new cap in the car. Also, the tank was full of gasoline, although the speedometer registered an additional one hundred and ten miles. At least, the owner claims it had been driven that far."

Henry picked up a pencil and made a rapid calculation on the blotter. He asked, "Any fingerprints?"

Jimmy grinned. "The steering wheel, as well as the door on the driving side, had been gone over with a rag dipped in gasoline. What d'you know about that?"

"I know, me," Henry drawled, "that the car thief was a mos' careful person. Yes! Anyway, that murder in Vicou's bailiwick will keep him busy, so he won't have time to butt in here until we get things cleand up."

"Are we beginning to get somewhere with that Rhoaden killing?"

Jimmy wanted to know.

"I know, me, the murderer's name," Henry declared, adding, "It is Percival Augustus Blessingham. Yes!" He unlocked a drawer, brought forth the telegram he had received from the Oklahoma City police department and offered it to the ex-marine. "Read that."

Bourdelon read the telegram and handed it back with a grin.

"Don't know as I'd blame that guy for getting himself jugged for fraud," he chuckled. "He'd need at least a million dollars to compensate for a moniker like that. Got any more on him?"

Henry told him of the telegram to the Oklahoma parole board.

"When I hear from them," he declared hopefully, "I'll know plenty about that wan.

Bot, even if I had all the info'mation I need, I cain't do anything about it ontil Shipley and his crowd gets back. Right now, I am long on theory and short on facts. Yes!"

He rose and put on his hat. "Reckon I'd better show maself on the street, jus' to convince the taxpayers they are getting their money's wort'. You get on home to bed. Scram!"

THE following day began for Henry with a session in the mayor's court. During the night, Jimmy Bourdelon had been called to quell a near riot in the colored quarter, which he had accomplished by knocking the two chief participants senseless and dragging them off to jail. By eleven o'clock the two culprits had been arraigned and sentenced, and Henry was free to return to his office.

With a stogie clamped between his teeth, he buried himself in the pages of the *Picayune*. He absorbed the daily news, noted that there was no reference to "the dog-collar murder," and turned to the comic page. His next interest was the "personal" column. He sat erect in his chair when the following announcement caught his eye:

> P. A. B. Have decided to meet your terms. Will have goods at my house Saturday. Awaiting your further instructions. O. J. S.

"To P. A. B. from O. J. S.—mos' interesting. Yes!" He looked up as a shadow darkened the doorway. *"Comment ca va?"*

An old colored man entered, doffed his uniform cap and produced from its interior a familiar yellow envelope.

"Mawnin', Cap'n Henry, suh," the ancient responded. "Ah has heah an impo'tant communication fo' yo', suh."

"Ah!" Henry murmured, eagerly seizing the telegram. "That is fine, Oncle Raymond. Jus' w'at I was looking fo'. Yes!"

He signed for the telegram and tore open the envelope. His face set in a frown of disappointment as he read:

> PERCIVAL AUGUSTUS BLESSINGHAM WANTED THIS STATE FOR PAROLE VIOLATION. IF IN YOUR CUSTODY PLEASE ADVISE.
>
> WOLMER CHIEF OKLAHOMA PAROLE BOARD.

"One requests information and receives only this!" Henry swore. Crumpling the telegram, he cast it angrily toward the waste basket and added, "Nots to you!"

He lighted another stogie and puffed agitatedly.

He was frankly disappointed, expecting that the Oklahoma parole board would have cooperated by furnishing a description of the mysterious P. A. Blessingham.

His flash of anger soon burned out before the realization that the various parts of the jig-saw puzzle were beginning to fit together to form a comprehensive picture. He knew now that the stolen jalopy had been used not only to carry the murderer to St. Odile on the night of the murder, but to carry him back again on the following day, when he had come to recover the briefcase, later abandoning the car outside Sellierville when he no longer needed it.

Even the identity of the man who had tried to brain him with the revolver was no longer a mystery to Henry. The only part of the picture still missing was the face of the man who had crawled under the fence on the night of the murder and driven away in the stolen car.

Drawing the telephone to him, Henry called Western Union. When the connection was made, he continued, "Miss Eloise, take this telegram, please: Warden, Oklahoma State Penitentiary, McAlester, Oklahoma. Please furnish description of Percival Augustus Blessingham paroled April nineteen forty-three. Information vital. Blessingham chief suspect local murder. Rush. Henry Pou, Chief of police, St. Odile, Louisiana. That's all, Miss Eloise. Get it off right away. Thanks!"

HE CRADLED the phone and muttered, "One hopes Miss Eloise will be discreet about that telegram. If that Vicou should learn I was inquiring about Blessingham, he would give me no rest until I told him everything I know."

The clatter of a motorcycle sounded outside. Herb Mathieu entered.

"Hiya, Henry, old cabbage?" he greeted. "I see you're workin' hard."

Henry shrugged. "Right now," he drawled, "you see me as idle as wan pickpocket in a nudist colony. Yes!"

The road patrolman perched himself on one end of the desk and lighted a cigarette. Henry waited in silence; usually, Herb was

good for at least one item of daily gossip from the parish courthouse.

"Remember that guy they found in the Old Clay Hole?" Herb asked. "Well, Vicou finally got a lead on him, accidental like. The lady who runs the lunch counter in the bus station remembers him."

Henry shrugged. "So does the bus driver who carried him from N'Yawlins."

"This is different," Mathieu explained. "She remembers one Sunday evening, about a month before he was found in the hole, he hung around the station for more than two hours. He had him a cup of coffee and a piece of coconut pie. She remembers he told her he was waitin' for a party to come for him in a car and carry him over to St. Odile. See?"

"Mos' interesting!" Henry murmured.

"Sure!" Herb continued. "Well, the lady says about ten o'clock that Sunday evening somebody called him outside. She didn't see him after that. But she recalls seein' him shakin' hands with whoever called him out."

"Did she describe that person?" Henry asked.

Herb shook his head. "No, she claimed it was dark outside. She just saw them start to shake hands. Then she turned to wait on a customer, and when she looked again, they were gone."

"W'at is Vicou doing about that?" Henry asked.

"He's checking with the bus drivers," Mathieu declared. "But only one driver remembers him—the one who carried him from N'Yawlins to Sellierville. Nobody seems to know where he come from to the city."

"No face, no fingerprints — only wan mole!" Henry murmured. "And nobody knows where he comes from. *Ma foi!* Vicou sho' got him a job all picked out fo' himself. Yes!"

"Well, there it is," Mathieu grinned, rising. He dropped his cigarette butt in the spittoon and added, "Vicou's runnin' around in circles. Thinks he's some detective. But if you ask me, I don't believe he could detect the odor of limburger, even if someone held it right under his nose."

He waved at Henry, went out and then climbed aboard his motorcycle.

Henry picked up the newspaper and resumed his reading. When the whistle of the shrimp cannery blew for twelve o'clock, he tore from the paper the page containing the personal columns, folded it and locked it in a drawer. Then he went home to dinner.

AFTER dinner he patrolled the streets, showing himself to the taxpayers. At four, he was back behind his desk. When Jimmy Bourdelon came in at six to take over, he found Henry apparently doodling with a pencil and a sheet of paper.

"What's that?" the ex-marine inquired.

"That," Henry declared, "is a diagram. It is thirty miles from here to Sellierville, and thirty miles back. Twice that moch is one hundred and twenty miles—which was the extra mileage registered on the speedometer of Mr. Donnelly's stolen car."

"I see," Bourdelon grinned. "Gee! I was afraid this murder business was getting you down."

"Not yet," Henry assured him. "Bot if things go on lak' they are now, I figure, me, I'll be cutting out paper dolls befo' long, by dam!" He looked up as Uncle Raymond shuffled through the doorway and produced a familiar-looking envelope from the interior of his uniform cap. "Here comes another headache, mebbe."

He signed for the message, thanked the ancient messenger and opened the envelope with eager fingers. The telegram read:

> PERCIVAL AUGUSTUS BLESSINGHAM WANTED PAROLE VIOLATION. HEIGHT FIVE THREE. WEIGHT ONE TWENTY SEVEN. EYES BLUE. COMPLEXION RUDDY. HAIR SANDY THIN IN FRONT. LARGE PROMINENT FRONT TEETH. SMALL CHIN. LARGE MOLE UPPER MIDDLE BACK. TRIANGULAR SCAR ON RIGHT WRIST. FINGER PRINT CLASSIFICATION EIGHTEEN ONE UTR TWENTY. ONE UTR NINETEEN. IF IN CUSTODY PLEASE NOTIFY US.
>
> MARNOCK WARDEN.

Henry passed the telegram to Bourdelon. After reading the message, the ex-marine exclaimed:

"Gee! That reads like the guy Vicou fished out of the clay hole."

"It is," Henry confirmed.

"But it can't be," Jimmy argued. "All that junk you found in the pockets of that old coverall, and those letters— Hell!

doesn't all that put the finger squarely on Blessingham?"

Henry shrugged. "No face, no fingerprints—only wan large mole. Ah, that mole!"

"Mole hell!" Jimmy snorted. "Lots of people got moles. What does just one mole prove, anyway?"

"It proves that someone has been trying to pull ma laig, by dam!" Henry declared.

WHEN Henry arrived at headquarters the next morning, after spending a sleepless night of turning over in his mind the various aspects of the case, he felt like the man who succeeded in climbing the greased pole almost to the top, only to slide back to earth again.

Reluctantly, he had reached the conclusion that the evidence he had so far collected was merely a succession of plants, designed to throw him off the scent. He realized now that the murderer of Rhoaden had tossed the coverall back over the fence for the express purpose of placing the crime upon the shoulders of a man who even then was lying in an unmarked grave.

Standing in the doorway, he looked down Main Street toward the bayou. St. Odile was immersed in the drowsy calm of Sunday morning. Except for a few people on the way to early mass, the thoroughfare was almost deserted. Gray clouds hung low in the sky, driving down toward the Gulf before a stiff northwester which filled the air with an unseasonal chill. From the colored section across the bayou there came the mournful tolling of a church bell. Contemplating a day of boresome quiet, Henry closed the door and seated himself behind his desk.

He sighed as he groped in the drawer for a stogie. In three days he had got exactly nowhere.

The man he had tagged as a murderer had, himself, been murdered. Consequently, all the evidence built up against him was worthless. Henry shook his head, aware now that he was faced with the task of climbing the greased pole all over again.

Nothing further had been heard of Shipley and his party. Gloomily, Henry considered the possibility of the oil man moving over into Mississippi, or Texas, of the case being passed to the files. No one, locally, at any rate, was interested in Rhoaden.

Henry opened the Sunday paper. He was halfway through the front page when the door was thrust violently inward and Bert Ramey strode across the threshold, a belligerent light in his frosty blue eyes.

Henry brought his feet to the floor. "So!" he drawled. "You're back, yes?"

"Listen, you," the chauffeur began without preamble, "I want to know what you've done with Miss Forster. See?"

Henry drew the butt of his stogie from between his teeth, examined it critically, decided there was no immediate danger of it singeing his mustache and put it back between his lips.

"When did you get back?" he asked conversationally.

"About eight, last night," Ramey said impatiently, adding, "You haven't answered my question."

"I don't answer questions—I ask them," Henry declared calmly. He nodded toward the other chair. "Sit down."

"If you've got her locked up in this louse corral," Ramey stormed, "I'll take the damned joint apart!"

"Sit down," Henry repeated without emotion.

Ramey obeyed, his face puckered in a scowl. "I want to know—" he began.

"Hold yo' hoss!" Henry interrupted. "Miss Forster ain't in jail. She's at ma house, as ma guest."

"I phoned the sheriff, and he told me you'd pinched her for drivin' while drunk," Ramey stormed. "That's a damned lie. The only time she ever took a drink in her life was the time, about a week or so back, when Charley Dormel got her to drink three Sazerac cocktails one after another. That was the time she got in her car and tried to uproot all the lamp posts in town. See?"

"So that was Mr. Dormel's doing, yes?" Henry drawled. "I didn't think a nice young girl would behave that way simply fo' the bang she got out of it. That Dormel, he ought to be stretched over a barrel. Yes!"

"Don't let that worry you," Ramey grinned. "He got told—plenty."

"Miss Forster will tell you everything when she see you," Henry said. "I had to keep her onder cover fo' a while. But you can go over to ma house and visit wit' her

as soon as I'm through wit' you. First of all, tell me if you know why Shipley went up to N'Yawlins."

"He went up to draw a hundred thousand bucks outa the bank," Ramey declared. "We brought it back here in a suitcase." He took a package of cigarettes from his pocket, selected a smoke and then added. "But somebody swiped it last night."

Henry straightened in his chair. "The hondred thousand dollars, yes?"

Ramey lit his cigarette, expelled a cloud of smoke and grinned.

"That's right," he confirmed. "Crane, the butler, was supposed to sit up and guard it. But he went asleep on the job. When he woke up, the suitcase was gone, and a note left in its place. Crane claims that he was doped. So does Charley Dormel and the boss."

"Doped?" Henry murmured. "*Ma foi!* Mos' interesting. Yes!"

"Just the same," Ramey resumed, "the old man raised hell with Crane. He quit."

Jimmy Bourdelon dropped in on his way home from mass. He nodded to Ramey, hunkered down with his back against the wall and lighted a cigarette. "What's cooking?" he inquired.

Henry chuckled. "Pot's boiling over, ma frien'." Turning back to Ramey, he asked, "Is that wan, Crane, still out there?"

"I brought him to town," the chauffeur declared. "He's over in the bus station, waiting for the ten o'clock bus north."

Henry looked at Jimmy and said, "Yo' job! Bring that wan in."

As Jimmy left, Ramey said, "What's all this gotta do with Pauline?"

"I don't know, fo' certain," Henry admitted. "I figured she was in danger, and took her onder ma protection ontil this beezness is settled." He tossed the butt of his stogie toward the cuspidor, selected another from the drawer and asked casually, "Who-all is out there wit' Shipley now?"

"Only Dormel and the colored help," Ramey told him.

Henry lighted his fresh stogie and puffed thoughtfully for several minutes, trying to figure out Crane's place in the chain of events that began with the killing of Shipley's dog and culminated in the theft of the suitcase full of money. He suspected now that the murder of Blessingham, the shooting of the dog and the strangling of Rhoaden were steps leading up to this major theft.

Jimmy Bourdelon pushed open the door and entered with Crane in tow.

"I say," the butler appealed angrily to Henry, "I want to know the meaning of this."

Henry grinned and said, "I don't know maself, me; bot I am trying hard to figure it out. "Yes." He looked at Ramey and added, "Let him set down, Bud. Age befo' beauty, you know."

Ramey surrendered the chair to Crane and joined Jimmy Bourdelon against the wall. The butler said, "It's a blawsted outrage, y'know. I shan't stand for it!"

Henry chuckled. "Please drop the act," he advised. "There ain't no needcessity fo' it now, Mr. Jake Drew."

The other's short, thick eyebrows jiggled like a pair of dancing beetles. Suddenly he laughed. "Oho!" he spoke in a sepulchral voice. "Me awful past is known! Wasn't it a good act, though?"

"Too good," Henry admitted. "It was so damn good, I spotted you fo' a phony the first time I saw you. Yes!"

"Okay, Chief!" Drew shrugged. "I'm glad it's over with. I got a bit tired playing the Limey butler, complete with accent, adenoids and inferiority complex. It'll feel good to be just plain, old Jake Drew again."

"It is to be feared," Henry drawled, "that plain, old Jake Drew is in wan hell of a tight spot, being liable to arrest fo' interfering wit' an officer and assault wit' a deadly weapon. Yes!"

"Oh, now!" Drew objected. "It can't be as bad as all that. Just forget the third degree stuff, and tell me what you want to know. Maybe we can trade."

"Don't kid yo'self about it not being bad," Henry warned. "I have the gon you tried to bat out ma brains wit'. It is lousy wit' yo fingerprints." He blew a puff of smoke ceilingward and grinned. "Now w'at you going to say?"

DREW jiggled his eyebrows. "Listen," he pleaded, "I mistook you for another party. That's straight. I was looking for a man about your height, but a bit on the skinny side. When I grappled with you, I realized my mistake and scrammed."

"Looking fo' a man—and wit' a gon!" Henry drawled. "Fonny work fo' a bottler. Yes!"

"That butler gag was just a stall," Drew admitted. "But nobody knew about that but the old man himself. You see, besides bodyguarding him, I was constantly on the lookout for a guy he claimed was trying to kill him. Fact is, he promised me a bonus if I should manage to bump off this party anywhere on the premises. That's why I was so ambitious the other night."

"You were just wan hired gonman, in other words, yes?" Henry quizzed.

Drew shrugged. "I suppose we could call it that. But I was keeping strictly inside the law. I wouldn't have raised a hand toward the guy unless I caught him inside the grounds. When all that shooting started the other night, I was lapping up a bottle of beer in the pantry. I unlimbered my gun and ran outside, followed up all that noise of threshing around in the brush and barged slap into you. Well, you know what happened. I was so upset that I took a tongue-lashing from the old man rather than admit I'd pulled a boner. Boy! Was my face red!"

"Who is this wan Shipley had you gonning fo'?"

"I don't know—honest!" Drew declared. "He never told me the party's name—just described him as a little skinny guy, with a rabbit chin. He admitted he was scared of the guy, who, he said, had threatened his life. I figured Shipley had done this party dirt at some time or other, and now the other was trying to get back at him. And Shipley couldn't afford to go to the law, for fear the other guy might spill something that wouldn't be to the old man's credit. That's the way I got it doped out."

"No," Henry said slowly, "Shipley couldn't take the matter to law. If he had, he'd have got himself all smelled up. Instead, he baited a trap wit' wan hondred thousand dollars, no?"

Drew nodded. "You've got it doped out right. Shipley got a letter from this guy the day after Rhoaden was killed. The party admitted killing Rhoaden, and threatened to serve Shipley the same way unless he kicked in with the jack. That decided him to play along with the killer and put out the money as bait."

"Wit' you waiting somewhere to knock off the guy when he came to collect, yes?" Henry murmured.

The other nodded. "Okay! That's about the size of it. But the guy was too foxy for us."

"How do you figure he stole that money," Henry quizzed, wit' you on guard?"

"He fed everybody a mickey finn," Drew declared.

Henry smiled. "You sho' are wan great little kidder. Yes!"

Drew frowned protestingly. "It's straight enough. All three of us woke up this morning feeling like we'd been on a protracted spree. Here's how I figure it: the guy must have been hiding in the house—you know, the place was empty for nearly three days. Well, when we got in last night, the boss ordered coffee all 'round. I fixed the java, but I'll swear I put nothing in it. After the boss and Dormel went to bed, I put the suitcase containing the money on a table in the living room, and then went behind a screen, gun in hand, to await the arrival of our expected visitor. But the next thing I knew it was morning. When I came out from behind the screen, I saw the suitcase was gone, and a note left in its place. And, boy, did I have a head on me!"

"You expect me to believe that?" Henry asked.

DREW took an envelope from the inside pocket of his coat and laid it on the desk. "I swiped that last blackmail letter Shipley received," he confessed. "I also took the note that was left in place of the suitcase. I happen to know something about law, and took these as a means of proving my own position, in case Shipley tried to hang that job on me. See?"

Henry opened the envelope and shook out two enclosures. One of these was a sheet of ruled paper, identical in appearance with the letter he had found in the pocket of Shipley's smoking jacket.

> "You will realize by now," it began, "that I am in deadly earnest. I have evened the score with Rhoaden, and am now concentrating on making you pay for the years I spent behind bars. Your assessment is still one hundred thousand dollars.

"If you decide to be sensible, draw the aforementioned sum from the bank. I'll be on hand to see you do it, although you won't see me. Take the money to your house in a receptacle convenient for carrying, such as a suitcase. Then have a notice inserted in the personal columns of all the New Orleans dailies. Begin the notice with my initials, P. A. B., in the body of the insertion you will refer to the money as 'goods,' and you will conclude with your own initials, O. J. S.

"When I see the notice, I shall forward further instructions. But don't try to doublecross me. Remember, I have you constantly under surveillance. Rhoaden tried to doublecross me last month—and see what happened to him!

"P. A. B."

"Nots!" Henry tossed the letter impatiently on the desk and picked up the note, which was written in pencil on a strip of crisp bond paper. It read:

"Your little scheme to remove me from this earthly sphere did not jell. Don't blame your hired torpedo for the failure, because he isn't responsible for the laudanum I put in the coffee dripper. In any case, you have nothing more to fear from me.

"P. A. B."

"By damn!" Henry swore. "Ma laig will stand just so moch pulling." He slapped the note on the desk and blew out his mustache in a snort of contempt. "This is as phony as you are. Yes!"

Drew smiled confidently. "Shipley doesn't think so. He recognized the guy's handwriting. Listen, if he figured I'd had a hand in that job, how long d'you suppose I'd stay outa jail?"

Henry ignored the question. "How could Shipley recognize this wan's handwriting—"

"Listen," Drew interrupted, "I went into that matter with him when he first hired me. He admitted he was being blackmailed, but hadn't as yet paid off. He claimed he'd know the guy's handwriting anywhere, because he had some of his old letters in his private file. I advised him to turn the threatening letters over to the F. B. I. And, boy! How he shied away from that suggestion. That was when I doped it that he couldn't afford to turn the guy in, for fear of getting in dutch himself."

"Ma frien'," Henry drawled, "most of w'at you are telling me is going in wan ear and out the other. Tell me, how could that wan write letters and steal all that money when he's daid?"

Drew gaped. "Dead hell!" he exploded. "Why, he trailed us all over New Orleans yesterday and the day before."

It was now Henry's turn to be surprised. To cover his amazement, he asked, "You saw that wan, yes?"

"No, I didn't," Drew admitted hesitantly. "Come to think about it, it mightn't have been the guy at all. Charley Dormel happened to mention that he'd noticed the same man bobbing up everywhere we went. The boss asked him to describe the guy, and Charley said he was a little fella, with sandy hair and not much chin. Boy! I thought the old man was about to throw a fit when he heard that. He ordered Ramey to drive back to the hotel at once. He spent the rest of the day in his room, doing business over the telephone, with me sitting by the door, gun in hand. Cripes! I never saw anybody so scared."

"That," Henry declared, "sounds like pure de malarkey to me. Yes!"

Drew flung out his hands in a gesture of resignation. "Take it, or leave it," he said.

Ramey spoke up. "He's giving it straight, Chief," he supported. "I heard Charley Dormel mention seeing the guy."

HENRY sat erect in his chair and stared fixedly at the wall above the door. In imagination, he was looking though a long, dark tunnel, at the other end of which was a light. Running back over Drew's statements, he imagined the light drawing steadily nearer. He smiled behind his voluminous mustache as he compared the case to a fishing line that had been badly snarled by an eel. Getting the line untangled from the eel looked, at first, like an impossibility. But it was easy enough once one discovered the right loop. And Henry believed that he had at last found the right loop.

"She becomes a leetle mo' clear," he drawled. He rose and put on his hat. "I must leave y'all fo' a leetle while. Yes!"

"Am I under arrest?" Drew asked anxiously.

Henry pondered the question and then shook his head. "Not right now. Bot I warn you not to leave town ontil the district attorney says you can go. I can still slap that assault charge on you."

"But my bags are checked with the bus people," Drew objected.

Henry shrugged. "Oncheck them, then. You can put up at Madame LaFarge's place, ontil Fontenette has had his talk wit' you. If he says then you can leave town, I won't have any objection. In any case, you're a material witness." He looked at Ramey and added, "That goes fo' you, also." To Jimmy, he said, "I'm going out, and I want them kept here till I get back."

HENRY went to the garage, climbed into the battered police car and drove out to the old de Joinville place. As he turned off the bayou road, he noticed the skiff with the outboard motor still moored at the end of the pier.

"Ma foi!" he mused, "folks hereabouts sho' must be getting honest. That motor ain't been stolen yet—*c'est incredible!"*

He stopped the car before the house, removed the ignition key and put it in his vest pocket. Alighting, he walked around to the rear of the mansion, glancing into the empty garage as he passed, and wondering at the absence of cars until he recalled that Ramey had used the big Packard to drive Drew to the bus station, while Dormel's smashed convertible must still be in the repair shop.

A colored maid was coming along the covered walk connecting the house with the outdoor kitchen. Henry followed her through the basement, up the stairs to the dining room and from there through the huge living room to the library. Shipley was sprawling languidly in the swivel chair behind the desk, looking like a Turkish pasha in a crimson dressing gown, worn over green pajamas, and with a towel wrapped like a turban about his head. A few feet away, Dormel sat in a straight chair, a stenographer's notebook on his right knee.

Shipley regarded Henry through puffy eyelids. "Well," he inquired wearily, "what the devil do you want?"

Henry waited until the maid deposited a tray containing a coffee pot and service for two on one end of Shipley's desk. As the girl withdrew, he drawled, "The first time I come here, I come to see you about a dog. Now I come to see you about wan hondred thousand dollars."

The oil man's fat shoulders lifted in a shrug of resignation. "You've seen me," he retorted. "Now get out. Scram!"

Henry seated himself in a chair and smiled complacently at Shipley.

"Let us talk about that Blessingham, yes?" he suggested.

The oil man's start was visible. "What the devil do you know about him?" he snapped.

Henry smiled and said, "Probably a lot mo' than you know about him. Yes!"

Shipley looked quickly at Dormel, who sat with pencil poised above his notebook, his eyes circumspectly downcast.

"Take your coffee in the dining room, Charley," the oil man directed brusquely. "I have a private matter to discuss with this —er—representative of law and order."

"Yes, Mr. Shipley," Dormel murmured. He filled his coffee cup, added sugar and cream and carried it from the library. To Henry, he looked and acted like a perfect example of the yes-man.

As the door closed behind the secretary, Henry chuckled. "That wan, now, he doesn't know anything about Blessingham, no?"

"I don't discuss my private affairs with my employees," Shipley retorted stiffly. "Now, then, what about Blessingham? Have you got him in jail?"

"Sho haven't," Henry confessed. He noticed that Shipley seemed actually relieved. "He's sho' got yo' goat, that wan. Yes!"

"I asked you a question," Shipley growled.

"I didn't come here to answer questions, but to ask them," Henry declared. "First question—how come you were afraid to prosecute Blessingham fo' blackmail?"

"That's my affair," Shipley declared angrily. "In fact, the whole damned business is a closed incident, so far as I'm concerned. Years ago, I did Blessingham an injustice. It's true, he blackmailed me. But I decided to right the wrong I'd done him. That's all there is to it."

"You fo'get you're shielding a murderer," Henry reminded him. "You hired Jake

Drew to kill that wan, because you knew if he ever spilled the beans about yo' past, there'd be a big stink. That's why you didn't dare prosecute him. And you're still trying to shield him from the law, scared he'll dig up old skeletons if he ever comes to trial. That's w'at the one who done all this killing figured. Yes!"

"You're talking away above me now," Shipley admitted, "with this reference to killings. What other killing was there beside Rhoaden's murder?"

"Blessingham's," Henry declared flatly.

"You're crazy!" the oil man bristled. "Charley—my secretary—saw him in New Orleans several times, trailing us around town."

"Nobody bot Dormel saw that wan, no?"

Shipley frowned. "That's true," he admitted.

"Hokay!" Henry nodded, rising. "Now I want a few words wit' that man who has bin pulling yo' laig fo' so many months." He opened the door and stepped into the living room. "Be seeing you later."

He walked into the dining room, where Dormel sat with his elbows on the table, alternately sipping from his coffee cup and scanning the columns of the morning paper. The secretary looked up as Henry made toward the door leading to the stairs, as if he were about to take his departure.

"Have you finished interviewing Mr. Shipley?" he asked.

"Yes," Henry said, halting behind the other's chair, "I'm through wit' Mr. Shipley, ontil the trial comes."

As he spoke, he laid a hand heavily on Dormel's right shoulder and pressed hard.

"Ouch!" the secretary screamed. He snapped to his feet, coffee cup in hand and whirled to face Henry. "Just what in hell is the idea, clown?" he snarled.

"The idea," Henry drawled, "is that you are onder arrest—fo' murder."

A GLIMMER of fear showed for an instant in Dormel's brown eyes, and the hand holding the coffee cup trembled. He laughed shakily and said, "Clowning, of course!"

"There's no clowning about that sore shoulder," Henry reminded him. "That's where you cut yo'self on the bobwire, when you crawled onder the fence, after killing that Rhoaden. And throwing that old coverall back over the fence, was the mos' foolish thing you did, because it showed you were trying to put the finger on Blessingham, whom you knew was daid."

Shipley appeared suddenly in the doorway of the dining room. He asked, "Here, what's all this? What's that you said just now about somebody pulling my leg?"

"Damn!" Dormel screamed. With a flip of the wrist, he dashed the contents of his coffee cup into Henry's eyes. Jerking a flat, little automatic from the side pocket of his coat, he backed toward the tall window opening like a glass door on the gallery. "Get back!" he snarled. Then he flung up his weapon and fired.

Henry was busily clawing coffee from his eyes, and saw Dormel's action through a brown mist. He stepped hastily to one side, as the other pressed the trigger of his little gun. The report sounded no louder than a dry stick being broken, and was followed by Shipley's yell of anguish and the thump of his body on the floor.

Henry got his eyes clear in time to see Dormel plunge through the now open window, bound across the gallery and vault lightly over the rail, to land in a flower bed ten feet below. Henry charged after him, reached the rail just as Dormel scrambled out of the flower bed and sprinted toward the front of the house.

Henry ran back to where Shipley was now sitting on the floor and bellowing like a calliope out of tune, a small wet patch showing on the left shoulder of his gorgeous dressing gown. Making a hasty examination, Henry found that Dormel's bullet had grazed the oil man's shoulder.

"Call Doc Couriere and he'll fix you up," Henry advised, ignoring Shipley's plea not to leave him alone.

Henry ran through the hall. When he opened the door, he saw Dormel sprinting across the lawn toward the road, running as if the devil were at his heels. Even before Henry reached the foot of the front steps, Dormel was dashing through the gateway and across the road toward the pier. His heart sank as he watched Dormel drop into the skiff moored at the offshore end of the structure, cast off the painter and send the light craft skimming out into the bayou with a savage push against the piling.

"Stop!" Henry bellowed. "You cain't get no place in that."

Dormel ignored him. Snatching at the starting lanyard, he jerked the motor into life. Then he grasped the tiller and headed the skiff down the bayou toward the Gulf.

Henry reached the inshore end of the pier, halted and looked helplessly about him, wishing now that someone *had* stolen the outboard motor off the skiff. He looked under the structure, hoping to find another boat. But the only other craft in sight was a tiny pirogue drifting a hundred yards below the pier, while its occupant, a small Negro boy, stared in open-mouthed wonder at the strange doings of the white folks.

"Come here, boy!" Henry beckoned. The youngster dipped his paddle and headed toward the pier. Henry looked anxiously after the skiff, now a mile downstream, running with its bow high in the air, like a dog dragging its tail.

HENRY fished a dollar bill from his pocket and offered it to the youngster. "I want to rent yo' peeuru fo' the rest of the day, boy," he declared. "W'at you going to say?"

"Yassuh!" The boy accepted the dollar, then tossed a gunnysack half filled with crabs out on the pier and followed. Handing the paddle to Henry, he shouldered his burden and hurried shoreward along the pier, as if fearful that Henry would renege on his bargain.

Henry eased himself carefully into the pirogue. Balancing himself expertly in the needle-like dugout, he wielded the paddle and sent the tiny craft speeding in pursuit of the fleeing motor skiff. It amused him to reflect that he was setting out in one of the most primitive craft known to mankind in pursuit of a boat equipped with a modern gasoline motor, a boat that could travel half a dozen miles to the pirogue's one. But he reasoned that the gasoline in the motor tank would last for only a few hours, at the most, while the pirogue, propelled by his own strong arms, could, if necessary, go on for days. It was the old story of the hare and the tortoise all over again.

The pursuit led past the deserted piers of the shrimp cannery. Henry had counted on borrowing a motorboat there, and continuing the chase without being under a handicap. But the shrimp season was at its height, and all available boats were now in the Gulf, thirty miles down stream. He realized that Dormel was heading toward the Gulf, probably believing that he could escape arrest by running east or west along the coast. But down there there was no definite coast line, only a maze of grass-covered mud banks, most of them only a few inches above high tide. Henry feared that the fugitive, unfamiliar with the marsh country, would become hopelessly lost. And he would not have wished such a fate on his worst enemy.

The first hour of the pursuit was passed by Henry in forcing the pirogue by main strength through a narrow, tortuous channel that wound through floating mats of water hyacinth. The bayou narrowed to about a hundred feet between banks, which were becoming less pronounced, rising only a few feet above the surface of the waterway. Great live oaks flung moss-festooned branches across the stream, forming a canopy from shore to shore. Presently, the bayou widened almost to the proportions of a lake, presenting a dead level of green and lavender formed by the floating islands of hyacinth. Henry could no longer see the skiff. But the faint putter of its motor drifted to his ears between lulls in the boisterous "norther," with its unseasonal chill.

Where the bayou narrowed again, there were no longer any banks, only mile after mile of dead trees whose moss-draped trunks gleamed like polished bones. Gray-blue herons rose from among the shallows and flapped lazily downstream ahead of the pirogue. An alligator, aroused by the rhythmic beat of Henry's paddle, projected knob-like eyes above the surface and quietly submerged again. Looking ahead toward where the line of dead trees ended, Henry saw the skiff zig-zagging to and fro across the bayou, like a frightened water bug.

Dormel's movements filled Henry with concern. He was surprised that his quarry had gained so little in the race, in spite of the motor. He suspected now that the motor was running out of gas, and that Dormel was seeking to escape through one of the side canals that wound like pale, blue ribbons through the tall grass. That, Henry realized, would be a mistake on Dormel's part, for only one experienced in the ways

of the *terre tremblant*, the shaking prairie of lower Louisiana, could hope to survive in that green hell.

THE bayou ran out of the cypress swamp. The line of trees fell behind. The waterway widened gradually and no longer was choked with hyacinths. Gulls and pelicans wheeling above schools of mullet indicated that tidewater had been reached. The vanished banks of the bayou were now replaced by walls of living green, tall grass that undulated like sea waves under the tearing pressure of the wind. From the bayou the sea of vegetation stretched toward the horizon, flat as a billiard table, an eye-wearing monotony of green that was broken only by an occasional cheniere thrusting its tree-crowned top above the sea of vegetation.

There was no sign of the motorboat. Henry surmised that Dormel had found a break in the green wall. The sound of the motor was no longer to be heard. Henry stopped paddling and strained his ears in a vain endeavor to catch the putter of the motor exhaust above the harsh rustle of the tall grass as it swayed before the "norther."

The silence of the motor warned him that Dormel had turned the skiff up some side canal to hide until nightfall, hoping to shake the pursuit off his tail. This, Henry decided, revealed the man's ignorance of the country. Sooner or later, Dormel would realize his mistake.

At last Henry found the spot where Dormel had turned away from the bayou, a narrow break in the wall of grass, with a shallow bar of mud across its mouth. Dormel had forced the skiff over the bar so recently that the water was still roiled by the boat's passage.

Henry paddled the pirogue through the gap and along a waterway that alternately widened and narrowed again as it twisted through the verdant maze like the path of a snake. The canal penetrated the marsh for several miles, then looped east again, hemmed in by tall grass that prevented him from seeing for more than a few yards ahead.

Suddenly, as the pirogue glided noiselessly around a sharp bend, Henry came upon the skiff, with Dormel standing erect in the stern, his little automatic gripped in his hand.

As the pirogue came into full view, Dormel took careful aim and fired. The slapping report of the light caliber weapon was blanketed by the boom of the wind, but Henry heard the vicious ping of the bullet as it cut through the air above his head. Dropping his paddle in the bottom of the pirogue, he jerked his six-shooter from its scabbard and sent a heavy slug droning past Dormel's right ear. Dormel recoiled, and wavered as the skiff listed beneath his weight. Then he lost his balance and went over backward into the canal.

Henry let the pirogue drift under its own momentum alongside the skiff. As the two craft came together, Dormel's head and shoulders broke through the surface of the canal. He clutched desperately at the gunwale of the pirogue, which rolled like a barrel and pitched Henry headforemost into the water alongside his quarry.

The canal was only five feet deep. That was no problem for Dormel, whose head and shoulders rose clear of the water. But to Henry it almost spelled disaster, for the water covered his nose and mouth. He lifted his feet from the sucking mud of the bottom and started to swim.

Then Dormel pounced upon him like a tiger. Clutching Henry's hair he forced his head beneath the surface. Instead of struggling to free himself, Henry allowed the other to shove him deeper. Then he drove a terrific right to Dormel's middle. Dormel's grip relaxed, he floundered to retain his footing, then went under a second time.

When he rose again, Henry was waiting for him. Treading water, Henry flung his right arm about Dormel's neck, while the knuckles of his left hand spatted viciously against the other's chin. Dormel collapsed like an empty sack. Alternately swimming and wading, Henry dragged him alongside the skiff.

GETTING the unconscious Dormel over the gunwale of the skiff was a stiff chore. Before it was accomplished, the flat-bottomed craft was almost swamped. Henry's teeth were chattering, for the chill wind cut through his sodden clothing like a knife. Stripping, he wrung the water from his garments and spread them over the thwarts to dry. Then he performed the same office for Dormel, after which he hand-

cuffed his prisoner's right wrist to the gunwale batten.

Turning Dormel over on his face, Henry lifted a sodden patch of gauze, fastened to the unconscious man's right shoulder with strips of adhesive tape. Beneath the dressing was a four-inch gash, its puffed sides an angry red that told of infection.

"Didn't dare go to a doctor to have that tear properly dressed, and tried to fix it up himself," Henry mused. "Well, it puts the finger on him as the wan who crawled onder the back fence the night Rhoaden was killed. He'll have wan hell of a time explaining it, by damn!"

He emptied his pockets and spread their contents out to dry. Then he slipped overboard, dived to the bottom of the canal and recovered his six-shooter, which he had dropped when Dormel tackled him in the water. Back in the boat, as he scraped the water from his squat, muscular body, he suddenly realized that the wind had fallen, that the norther had died.

"Ma foi!" he muttered in sudden concern, "now we have the leetle visitors. Yes!" He slapped at an enormous black mosquito on his shoulder and grunted, "I know they wouldn't wait fo' long after the wind goes down, by damn!"

He gauged the remaining gasoline in the motor tank and discovered that it held less than a pint, barely enough to carry them back to the bayou. To conserve this thimbleful of fuel, he set the oars between the tholepins and started rowing, with the pirogue trailing astern.

DORMEL sat up on the bottom boards, stared dazedly at Henry, noticed the handcuffs securing his right wrist to the gunwale batten. "Say," he protested, "you can't do this to me!"

Henry kept on rowing, his face expressionless. Aside from the cut on Dormel's shoulder, he had nothing on the man that a smart defense lawyer couldn't shoot full of holes. So far, he had only circumstantial evidence to go on. And Louisiana juries were notoriously loath to convict solely on such evidence. Consequently, he realized that Dormel must be forced to confess.

He smiled as he noticed a cloud of huge black mosquitoes swirling about Dormel's head. A burning feeling all over his own naked back told him that another swarm of the pests were having the time of their lives. The curse of the *terre tremblant* were out in force now that the wind had died, rising into the warm, still air from their hiding places in the tangled grass roots, from the burned-off stubs of the roseaux cane, from the undersides of the broad leaves of the latanier palm, coming in their millions. Henry's smile vanished as he recalled the local belief that a man, even fully clothed, couldn't survive for more than four hours under full attack by the stinging horde.

Dormel swore and brushed a patch of mosquitoes from his left shoulder. "Damn you!" he yelled. "Give me my clothes. These cursed things are eating me alive."

"Wet clothes," Henry declared, "give you the pneumonia in this climate. Mo' better you wait till they are dry. Yes!"

"Hell!" Dormel stormed. "I'd as soon risk pneumonia as to sit here stark naked and be eaten alive. What a country!"

"You're the wan w'at chose it, not me," Henry pointed out. "You were very foolish to ron away. Yes!"

Dormel shrugged. "You haven't got a damned thing on me, fella."

"You're jus' kidding yo'self, ma frien'," Henry smiled. "I know fo' example, that you have bin keeping old man Shipley scared half to death ever since Blessingham was paroled from the Oklahoma pen. You had access to Shipley's private files, and found some old letters from Blessingham. That gave you the idea of shaking down Shipley for a nice piece of change, using Blessingham as a combined threat and fall guy. Shipley couldn't complain to the law that he was being blackmailed, on account of the crooked game he played wit' Rhoaden and Blessingham back no'th in Oklahoma. You knew that, and decided to work it fo' all it was worth." He stopped rowing and let the oars trail.

"You're just guessing," Dormel sneered.

"You wrote Blessingham, posing as Shipley, and invited him to come down here. Blessingham came, you met him at the bus station in Sellierville, took him in yo' car to St. Odile and murdered him on the way." He paused, stroked his bedraggled mustache and concluded. "I know all about that, because the lady who rons the lunch counter in

the bus station described the man who met Blessingham. And the description fits you, ma frien'."

Dormel struggled to his feet, flopped back on the stern athwart and slapped futilely at the mosquitoes which covered his neck and shoulders like a furry, black collar. "Give me my clothes!" he shrieked. "You are driving me nuts!"

Henry ignored the other's frantic plea, aware that Dormel was fast approaching the breaking point. His own back and shoulders were a fiery torment from the thousands of insects that were feasting joyously on his naked hide. Still, he made no move to dislodge them, heeding the local belief that the mosquito which leaves a sting is the one that hasn't been allowed to get its fill.

"You threw Blessingham's body in the old clay hole, and later used the things you found in his pockets to frame him wit' the murder of Rhoaden—"

"I was on the road, driving down from New Orleans, at the time of Rhoaden's death," Dormel interrupted.

Henry smiled. "You had yo' alibi all figured out. You left N'Yawlins about six that evening, and drove the forty miles to Sellierville, where you parked yo' car on a side street, swiped an old jalopy from in front of the Trianon Theater, and came on to St. Odile, where you parked at the side of the road back of the old de Joinville property. You put on Donnelly's coverall and cap, crawled onder the fence through that trench. You were hanging around outside the house when Shipley threw the dog's collar out the window. You picked it up, hid in the back of Rhoaden's sedan and knocked him out when he started the car. After stopping the car, you put the dog's collar around his neck and left him to strangle, while you scrammed wit' the money, first stopping to fire that shot through the library window, figuring on scaring old man Shipley a little mo'." He nodded his head slowly and concluded:

"That Rhoaden killing is wan murder you cain't laugh off, ma frien'. No!"

"What in hell are you driving at?" Dormel demanded hysterically, slapping at the mosquitoes with his free hand.

"I mean that cut on yo' shoulder," Henry explained. "You got that crawling onder the fence, when you snagged yo'self on the bobwire. Throwing the old coverall back over the fence was yo' biggest mistake. Only fo' that, I'd still be chasing ma own tail."

"For God's sake!" Dormel pleaded. "Give me clothes before I go crazy."

"I never have bin able to figure exactly why you shoved that briefcase through the basement window," Henry remarked conversationally, although the pain of his back and shoulders made him want to yell, "but I reckon, me, you thought it would be safe there, if anyone examined yo' car too closely, and you could pick it up later. But you never know about a woman wanting to pack something. Anyway, you drove back to Sellierville in the jalopy and hid it in the brush alongside the highway, just outside the town limits. You walked the rest of the way, got yo' own car, and started back to St. Odile. Running into Rhoaden's sedan was also part of yo' alibi, because you figured folks would think you didn't know the other car would be parked where it was. But you cut that wan a leetle too fine, ma frien'. It never occurred to you that somebody might get to wondering later on why you'd entered the wrong driveway. Yes! It all adds up."

DORMEL stared, the mosquitoes apparently forgotten, although they lay like a dark fuzz over his arms, neck and shoulders. Henry went on:

"The following day, you left yo' damaged car in the repair shop in Sellierville. But, instead of going on by bus to N'Yawlins, lak' you were supposed to, you walked outa town to where you'd hidden Donnelly's car, first stopping at a dry goods store to buy a new coverall and cap. You drove back to St. Odile, entered the grounds by way of the trench onder the back fence. You were in the closet off the furnace room, looking fo' the briefcase, when Miss Forster opened the door. You knocked her cold befo' she had a chance to recognize you. Next, you heard me coming, hid back of the heater and laid me out when I started to open the closet door. Then you took the briefcase and scrammed back to the jalopy." He looked at Dormel and chuckled. "I reckon me, you were plenty sore when you found that briefcase stuffed wit' old newspapers. Yes!"

HE PAUSED doubtfully. So far, everything he had said was based on circumstances. Even the cut on Dormel's shoulder could be explained plausibly by a smart defense lawyer. If Dormel continued to hold out, the case would be dumped into the laps of District Attorney Fontenette and Sheriff Vicou, furnishing them with all the ingredients for a politicians' field day.

"Well?" Henry fingered his mustache. "W'at you going to say?"

"What is there for me to say?" Dormel yelled. "You seem to know all the answers."

"Where did you hide that suitcase full of money?" Henry quizzed.

"Under the floor of the garage," Dormed snapped. "Now, blast you, give me my clothes."

"You admit you murdered Blessingham and Rhoaden?" Henry persisted.

"Yes, yes!" Dormel screamed, flailing with his free arm at the cloud of mosquitoes swirling about his head. "I confess everything. Everything! Give me my clothes, damn you!"

Henry was so astonished at the other's sudden break that he just sat and stared. Then he murmured, "Jus' wan minute."

Lifting his pencil and notebook from the thwart beside him, he riffled the leaves of the book until he found a fairly dry page, on which he hurriedly wrote:

> I, the undersigned, confess that I murdered Percival Augustus Blessingham and threw his body into the old clay pit near Sellierville. I also confess having imitated the handwriting of the said Blessingham and forging his name to a series of blackmail letters as part of my secret campaign of intimidation against Orrin J. Shipley. The killing of Mr. Shipley's dog, Prince, was part of that campaign, and I accomplished the killing of the dog by decoying him into my car, driving him out on the highway north of St. Odile and there shooting him, afterward running over the body with my car. I further confess to the murder of Walter Everett Rhoaden by strangling him with a collar formerly worn by the dog, Prince, and also to disposing of certain belongings of P. A. Blessingham in such manner as to suggest that he was guilty of the crime. In conclusion, I admit that I stole the suitcase containing one hundred thousand dollars, the property of O. J. Shipley, and hid it under the floor of Mr. Shipley's garage.

"Hokay!" Henry offered Dormel the notebook and pencil. "Jus' sign this, and we'll be on our way."

With shaking hand, the prisoner scrawled across the bottom of the page "Charles Newton Dormel."

Henry put the notebook away and handed the prisoner his still damp garments. He unloosed the handcuffs and stood on guard until the other was fully dressed. Then he handcuffed Dormel's wrists together.

With a feeling of relief, Henry dressed. He should have been happy, for he had broken the case and clinched it with a confession. Still, he was far from comfortable, for his back and shoulders burned, and he contemplated the long, hard pull back up the bayou, towing the pirogue astern, with anything but complacency.

As he seated himself at the oars, he grunted: "*Ma foi!* I wonder, me, w'at fool firs' said that a copper don't have to work!"

What Really Annoyed the Third Engineer Was the Light Hearted Way the Other Officers Regarded an Attempt to Kill Him

THE WRONG JAW

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

Author of "The Black Hold," etc.

HALF asleep, young Neil MacClintock stumbled through dimly lighted passages up to the captain's office. The door of the empty room was hooked back. Probably the Old Man was off as usual wandering like a ghost around the black decks of the *Hezekiah B. Coggswell.*

Neil MacClintock wavered dreamily into the sacred precincts of command. He had a gummy look at the motionless fan on the desk. The trouble was no mystery. A wire had worked loose. Muttering somnabulistic cusswords he set up the screw with the blade of his knife, switched on and off and tottered wearily out into the chartroom.

The man he was looking for, Asa B. Coggswell, the plump second mate, came in unexpectedly through the wheelhouse.

"Look, gold baby," Neil MacClintock said to Asa B., "I'm third assistant engineer in this wagon. I'm on watch from eight to midnight. After that I'm in till eight a.m.—except when you send a guy hammering on my door at four a.m. to come and fix the Old Man's fan for him."

"I know, I know," Asa B. Coggswell said soothingly. "But I was in a spot, Mac. The Old Ghost came moaning around about his fan at seven bells. I whistled down to Ben Calder and he told me what I could do. Well, I had the bridge; if I'd sent a seaman in the Old Ghost would have ordered him out. I had to—"

Neil's yawn nearly snapped his face inside out.

"Sure," he said. "You had to. That's what third assistants are for—to scratch matches on an' fix fans during the gravy-eye. Huh! You practically own the damn ship, don't you? Well, why didn't you tell the Old Man—"

"I didn't want to presume on my position, Mac," Asa B. Coggswell said primly.

"Well, you did—with me," Neil said sourly. The MacClintock pride stiffened his indignation. "O' course a ship owner can presume a third out of his shut-eye. That's what third—"

Asa B. yawned right back at him. "Tell it to your pillow!" Over his shoulder, as he escaped headlong down the chartroom stairs he added, "I was off watch ten minutes ago."

"Blasted millionaire," Neil muttered. "If jobs weren't thick I'd probably have to be polite to that guy."

NEIL held onto the chart table and yawned again to convince himself that he was still sleepy enough to get back to his bunk without waking up. With some dim idea of mentioning the hardships of a junior engineer to Avery Todd, the chief mate, he rambled forward into the black wheelhouse. The helmsman was a vague black form above the binnacle. He didn't sense the mate's presence. He went out the leeward door onto the bridge.

The balmy breeze of the *Hezekiah's* progress up the South American coast, hitting him in the face, threatened to rouse him. He abandoned his search for the mate. He began going down the lee bridge ladder slowly, with a sleep-drugged man's care.

Strong fingers suddenly grabbed at him. They clutched both his legs. He fell forward. Desperately he snatched at the ladder handrails. He eased his sprawling fall onto the steel deck.

Jolted and groggy he started to crawl up off his face. The hands suddenly grabbed him by the shoulder and jerked him over onto his back. One hand held him there. He made out a head close above him. Something was raised above that head—something that was swinging swiftly down at his face.

Neil MacClintock yelled and thrust up his arms. He fended off the descending thing. It hit the deck close to his ear and the steel plates clanged. The weapon lifted. Neil yelled again and clutched at it.

The man hit him a solid sock on the jaw with his left fist. Dazed, Neil tried to climb to his knees. His enemy was gone. Somebody was thudding down the bridge ladder.

The new arrival was young Avery Todd, the chief mate. Neil answered quick questions slowly. Mr. Todd used his flashlight cautiously, but with speed. Its rays picked out on the deck the discarded weapon, a heavy flat piece of steel eighteen inches long. Neil stared. That thing would flatten a man's forehead exactly as a headlong fall from the ladder would flatten it.

Avery Todd screened his flashlight with a cupped hand. He played it on Neil's face as Neil talked.

"You better finish your nightmare in your bunk," Todd said severely and his hand slid up to touch his brown mustache.

"Not till this has been reported to the skipper," Neil said. "Somebody tried to kill me!"

Like the Old Ghost they called him, Captain Hendricks showed up just then in the breezy darkness. He tut-tutted. He wasn't impressed. But he promised an investigation.

THAT somewhat muddle-headed inquiry, conducted soon after daylight, revealed only that that hunk of steel had been lying around in the carpenter shop for three voyages.

The lack of light on the attempt to kill him didn't annoy Neil MacClintock half as much as the light-hearted manner in which the other officers took the incident.

On top of years of tough going they had had a long, dull voyage out of convoy up the west coast of South America. The prospect of sudden death—their own or anybody else's—came merely under the head of

entertainment. A nice break in the monotony. They got together about it in the officers' mess a little after noon. Above them the portrait of old Hezekiah B. Coggswell himself stuck out his peculiar, knobby jaw at them.

"If you're to be hounded by a black assassin of mysterious purpose why wait till we're two days from the Canal to get going?" Tom Gray, first assistant engineer, asked. "No public spirit, Mac."

"Motive!" Avery Todd said. "Just why would anybody scrag you, Mac? Are you secretly the heir to some throne?"

"Throne for a loss," Pete O'Reilly, the third mate, murmured brightly. Tom Gray waggled his scarred jaw and Mr. Todd twisted his trim mustache as they all stared at him.

"Maybe it's his face," Asa B. Coggswell said. "Looking at that long, horse-like countenance all these days might finally energize some lover of beauty."

With insulting thoroughness Neil examined first the face of Asa B., who had his grandfather's lumpy and characteristic jaw, and then old Hezekiah's portrait. He shook his head.

"I wouldn't be the first to gripe a beauty lover."

Everybody laughed. Nobody ever gave Asa B. a break for fear others might think it was making up to the gold baby.

PETE O'REILLY stuck his oar in again. Pete should have been up on the bridge relieving Asa B. for the duration of his dinner. But Captain Hendricks, wanting the bridge to think on, untroubled by verminlike third mates, had sent him away.

"Perhaps Mac's disposition has got him in wrong with somebody," O'Reilly said, pulling wisely at his stubby black beard.

"With everybody," Tom Gray said, working his jaw in judicial thought. "*Por Dios!* That widens the field too much."

"How about the publicity angle?" Asa B. suggested. "I mean, rigging it himself to become a prominent character?"

"Nobody's going around trying to kill off third assistant engineers," Mr. Todd said with the high authority of a chief mate. He pointed an impolite finger at Asa B. Coggswell. "There's the bird the killer was out to get."

All hands quit looking Neil MacClintock over for protruding motives.

"Me?" The grandson of old Hezekiah B. Coggswell was startled, "Why me?"

"You can't have all Hezekiah's cash without somebody wanting to take a crack at you," Mr. Todd said.

AUTOMATICALLY everybody looked at the luridly illustrated Sunday magazine story pasted on the messroom bulkhead.

"I haven't got all my grandfather's cash!" Asa said. "He isn't even dead yet and I won't have it when he is."

Neil MacClintock was getting restive. "You're forgetting that it was me that was attacked," he said.

"Well, all in favor of Mac being attacked signify by saying 'Aye'," Mr. Todd said. With solemn care he listened to the yells. "Unanimous," he pronounced. "We will now proceed—"

"You're a crazy bunch of croutons," Neil shouted. "I mean cretins! A gang of quarter-witted—"

"The Crouton Club will now come to order," the mate said impassively. "The question: do we croutons offer a reward for the capture of the murderer or just give the murderer a reward?"

Neil walked out on the macabre comedians.

He scowled at the bright sea and cresting waves broke into broad white grins at him. He went down to the engine-room to get Ben Calder's angle on it.

The angle was coldly scientific. The morose, hatchet-faced Scot shook his lean head over the would-be killer's methods.

"No efficiency," the second assistant said, with a hard eye on the pump he was listening to. "The correct way to rid yerself of a man on a blacked-out ship is to tap him once, d'ye see, lightly, and then heave him ower the side. All this ladder an' heavy iron bar stuff—foosh!"

Neil left. He made sure the Crouton Club had cleared out of the messroom before entering. He studied the lurid Sunday newspaper page pasted on the wall.

"I'm fair-minded," he told himself. "It could have been somebody laying for Asa B."

He skimmed over the article, entitled

"The Six Doomed Grandsons of the Shipping Tycoon." It was full of guff.

Old Hezekiah B. Coggswell had started out as a sea captain and wound up owning a network of small freight ship lines all over the world. The old boy got more interested in the good of the Coggswell lines than of the Coggswell family. He had married off a daughter to a shipowner in Britain and a son to a wealthy exporter in the Argentine. His own other son he had kept in Boston. He outlived all three. In his will he had divided the bulk of his estate equally among all grandsons who were "following the sea" when he died. He told them so.

But the old man hadn't anticipated war. Already two of his three British grandsons had got theirs from the subs and so had an American grandson. That left three grandsons at sea, Roderick B. Coggswell, the surviving Britisher, Manuel B. Coggswell of Buenos Aires and Asa B. Coggswell, the gold baby in this ship.

After Hezekiah had gone doddery in extreme old age legal efforts had been made to forget the cockeyed will and dish out the gravy. But the court said no soap. The will had long ago split the family into three groups of hostile strangers.

With the ghoulish glee of a man in financial difficulties himself, the writer prophesied that none of the three grandsons still at sea had a Chinaman's chance of surviving the war and the drifting mines, sunken obstructions and destroyed aids to navigation remaining after it. Therefore, old Hezekiah had doomed his own family to practical extinction. On this cheery note the article ended.

NEIL studied Hezekiah's narrow head, widening to the craggy, commanding jaw that had made all the trouble.

"Enough to make a man sorry for Asa B.," he decided. "Doomed to the sea!" He started. "Wait! I'm at sea myself!"

While he was trying to think, Pete O'Reilly stuck his whiskers back into the messroom. "I wanted a look, too," he said and came over to contemplate 'The Six Doomed Grandsons.' "You'd think Asa B. would tear this down pronto."

"Not Asa B.!" Neil MacClintock said violently. "He accused me of scragging myself for publicity reasons. Why? Because *he's* got publicity on the brain, if any."

"Oh, yeah?" It was Asa B. and he was sore. He stuck his finger against Neil's chest and hammered in his words, woodpecker style. "You sleepwalking prima donna, let me tell—"

You couldn't let this overloaded bag of money get away with that, not if you had the MacClintock pride. Neil knocked the forefinger away with a swing of his fist. Asa B. folded the finger. He jabbed at Neil's jaw. Neil was still too tottery from the night's fracas to dodge the punch. It landed hard. He started slugging.

"Here! Here!" roared Captain Hendricks, from the doorway. "What's this? Stop it, I say! Stop it!"

O'Reilly faded for the bridge the skipper had forsaken. The gray-faced Old Ghost came plowing in between Neil and Asa B.

"I didn't tear that rotten article down because I can stand up to a kidding with the next man," Asa B. said through his teeth. "Why don't you try it sometime, Mac?"

.He walked out.

That night while on watch below, Neil gave the appearance of writing a book in the engine-room log book. He wasn't. He was compiling a list. He headed it "Suspects of Assault." It went easily enough:

Captain Hendricks: Sort of wacky. Always ghosting. Was around. Dislikes engineers. Could get ideas.

Chief Mate Todd: Too, too funny about it. Got to scene suspiciously fast. Formed Crouton Club to ridicule the crime. Nervous. (Always tweaking mustache).

Second Mate Coggswell: Wacky grandfather. Enticed me out of my bunk. Doesn't seem to like me. Got violent.

Third Mate O'Reilly: Newcomer joining ship at Montevideo. Wears whiskers. Talks too much. Not so Irish. Hangs around.

Chief Engineer Jensen: Harsh, excitable. Unjust. Said engines would be better off without me. Dangerous engine complex? But probably too fat to pull that attack.

First Assistant Engineer Gray: Pretends to take attempted killing too

lightly. (They all do.) Aggressive. Got badly broken jaw, still scarred, somewhere. Uses Spanish cusswords.

Second Assistant Engineer Calder: Always suspiciously *not* around. Owes me twenty bucks. Loves money. Suggested throwing overboard was simpler. Criminal mind? Morose.

Third Assistant Engineer Mack Clintock: Me. I didn't make this up.

Lieut. (J. G.) U.S.N.R. of Armed Guard. Hates sea, all ships, officers and crew. Keeps to self.

Crew: Get along fine with 'em but could be anybody.

When he had whispered the list over to himself twice Neil MacClintock shook his head. "I might be bearing down too hard on these guys. After all, it's been a long voyage."

He ran over it a third time, without dawning enlightenment. Maybe the lust of composition had got away from him.

"Be sensible, you lug!" he muttered. "There's no motive for killing you there. And killing's what that thug was up to."

That last fact stuck in his craw. Killing! He could still hear the deck clang.

"It's got to be Asa B. he was after," he told himself. "Asa B. takes ladders fast. A man grabbing his legs could count on knocking him cold or killing him. And that's the ladder Asa B. would usually take when relieved."

He wondered if he ought to warn the gold baby. He and Asa B. had last parted while he was throwing left hooks at the knobby but celebrated Coggswell jaw. That made it difficult. He was still mulling over it at midnight when Ben Calder relieved him. His feet took command and led his sleepy person up the greasy ladders to his room aft in the bridgehouse. Asa B. would be up on the bridge starting in on his gravy-eye now.

"I'll tell him tomorrow, when he's cooled off," he decided. "Nobody will take a crack at him on the bridge with lookouts around."

Sketchily he washed the engine-room off him and turned in. Nice that no hard-muscled killer with a hunk of steel was prowling the ship to get *him*. He yawned luxuriantly.

A WHILE after he'd heard in his sleep the clumping of feet for the shift of watches at 4 a. m. he opened his eyes wide.

His gaze flicked to the open port. The usual circle of starlight night wasn't there. It was blotted out by a black moving head —an arm thrusting in. What— He saw the revolver in silhouette even as he slid out of the bunk.

The gun roared before he hit the deck. His ribs burned. The gun kept on roaring. Blam! Blam! The door was far away. Cover! He dived for the only spot that promised slight shelter—the floor just below the port. A man couldn't get a head in to see and an arm to shoot at the same time.

He writhed around and stuck up a hand to knock aside the gun above him. His hand touched the warm revolver. It came away in his fingers. He juggled, dropped it, snatched it up and turned it on the porthole.

The circle of starlit night was there again.

The man was gone. The ship was in convulsions around Neil. Doors were slamming, men shouting, feet thudding.

He jerked the blackout curtain over the port and switched on his light. He knocked aside the hook holding the door half open. A wave of men swept him back from the doorway. They swerved as they saw the gun clutched in his hand.

Ben Calder, from the next room, Chief Jensen, O'Reilly, Todd, all dressed, and, in the doorway, Asa B.

"Take a look at my side," Neil yelled at Mr. Todd. "It ought to amuse the Crouton Club! See! There's a bullet burn."

He stared at them and they stared at him. Fat Jensen was wiping his wet forehead and Pete O'Reilly slowly milked his bushy beard. Captain Hendricks came into the room.

"It's just luck he didn't burn bullets into my skull," Neil said.

"Who, Mac?"

"Who? Didn't anybody grab him outside? How could I know who? Maybe one of you. I got the gun, anyhow."

The captain listened in silence.

Mr. Todd, as officer of the watch, felt the need to do something. He walked over to the port Neil was pointing at. He

twitched the blackout curtain aside for a quick look.

"Huh!" he said, pointing. "What's this?"

A sizable scrap of cotton cloth was caught on a butterfly nut of the porthole. He pulled it away. Part of the torn sleeve of a pajama jacket. A striped one.

Neil scowled at it. Somewhere— He looked over his visitors.

"Yes, it's mine," Asa B. said suddenly. He shoved out the Coggswell jaw at them defiantly and laid a hand on the pajama pants he wore. They were the same material.

"It's mine," Asa B. repeated. His voice was thin. He faced Neil squarely. "I haven't worn the coat of these pajamas since we hit the tropics, but it's mine, all right."

"Is that your revolver, too?" Mr. Todd asked tautly.

Neil's tense grip on the gun loosened. He thought of fingerprints too late and let the gun hang with his finger through the trigger guard. He held it out toward Asa B.

Slowly Asa B. read off the numbers on the butt of the Smith and Wesson .38. He muttered them over to himself.

"I think, Mr. Coggswell," said the old man with surprising dignity, "that you had better go to your room until we have time to inquire into this matter."

An excited man of the watch came running. He brandished a pajama coat with sleeve torn off.

"It just blew down on the after well deck, sir," he said to Mr. Todd. "Windward side—this side. Maybe some guy tried to throw—" His eyes popped at Asa B.'s striped pants.

"Okay," Asa B. said wearily. "I'll go to my room and you can post a sentry at the door till we make port."

HE STARTED toward the door and Chief Jensen, Ben Calder and Pete O'Reilly quickly gave him gangway. Mr. Todd, catching the captain's eye, followed close at his heels.

Suddenly Asa B. stopped. He turned around and looked at Neil. "There's no use putting on an act about how innocent I am," he said. "But I'm telling you, Mac, watch yourself! The man who slugged you and shot you is still loose in this ship."

He went out, with Mr. Todd tailing him. Captain Hendricks went ghosting along behind him.

Everybody looked at Neil MacClintock. Their eyes showed a queer sort of respect. Asa B.—or somebody—thought him important enough to be murdered.

Neil spoke with authority. "How about you guys scramming out of here? I want to think. Nobody else seems to be able to."

Chief Jensen frowned thunderously and stalked out.

"What have you got to think about?" O'Reilly asked. "It's all over now, isn't it? The Old Man and I both saw how Asa B. felt about you in the messroom. Let the law handle him."

"Come, man," said Ben Calder with disdain. "Anytime a third starts using his head gi' him a good berth. It might spatter, do ye see."

Neil bolted his door on them. He screwed the deadlight down over the port and sat on his hard settee to listen vaguely to the low rumbling of the engines and the creaking of the ship. She couldn't be much over twenty-four hours from Panama.

They didn't leave him alone. Captain Hendricks returned to ask uninspired questions. Avery Todd dropped in. He said he had stationed a quartermaster at Asa B"s door. Mr. Todd wanted to know when Asa B. had first got sore at him.

Ben Calder brought him a stiff drink. "It'll put ye to sleep like a babe," he said.

He read aright Neil's look at the drink. His narrow hatchet face was ironic. "Tuesday is my day for poisoning people," he said. "On Thursdays ye're safe."

Neil swallowed down the drink. Ben Calder left. The room reflected the grumbling effort of the engines. At eight it would be his watch again. Regardless of murder, all hands had to sleep and keep the old *Hezekiah* romping toward the Canal. He got out his list of suspects and went over it intently.

As human sounds ceased Neil shook his head wearily. There was no real reason for anybody to take a shot at him.

Somebody tapped very lightly on the door. It was a while since anybody had come. And none had tapped lightly.

Frowning he looked at the door. He went to his clothes locker and groped for

his automatic. Where in—? It was gone. There was no doubt about it. His gun was gone.

Surprisingly his nose detected the fumes of liquor. Whiskey? Again he looked at the door. Under it on the carpet there was a dark stain. His nerves jumped. He crept toward it. No; not blood. Whiskey. Whiskey seeping in under his door.

He was suspicious as blazes but he felt he knew the humdrum answer. Some good guy had stood a bottle of whiskey outside his door. The motion of the ship had overturned it.

Gingerly he opened the door. The corridor was empty. There was no bottle. Just a stain. He looked both ways. A bottle was lying under the dull glow of a light forward. Toward the deck officers' quarters, past the messroom. Warily he tiptoed that way. Could the bottle have rolled that far?

Over the bottle he looked further forward. A quartermaster should be standing guard at Asa B.'s door. He wasn't. There was a dark shape close beside the door. Neil crept that way.

It was the quartermaster. Even in the dimness Neil could see the man had taken a hard crack on the back of the head. Probably he wouldn't know who'd hit him. Neil started. Overwhelmingly he felt he had been led here. He was in a trap. He stared at the door. Had Asa B. slipped out and slugged that guard?

In him rose the urge to escape this net of predetermined movement that had led him from his own room to this spot. He wanted to break the pattern. Perhaps he was supposed to be discovered here. Perhaps Asa B. lay dead now inside that room.

He wrenched at the door handle, flung open the door and thrust into the room.

Asa B. bounced up off his bed, startled and lively. Perhaps coming in here was part of the pattern, too.

"Easy!" Neil whispered.

Asa's face was twisted up by many emotions and he was shoving out the Coggswell jaw. But he made no hostile move.

"We may both be in some cockeyed trap," Neil whispered. "My gun's gone. I've been kidded—I think—into coming here. Your guard outside is slugged. Something's going to happen."

"Now?" Asa B. was trying to get it all in one gulp.

"Damn soon," Neil said. "He couldn't count on that quartermaster lying there unspotted very long."

He pressed his ear to the door, tried to exclude the noises of the ship and hear any sound in the corridor.

"Why all this?" Asa B. muttered. "Hell, he shot at you, not me! Why couldn't he have plugged you as you left your room?"

Neil knew the answer now.

"If he'd made a bull's eye on me through that porthole you'd have died, too, gold baby," he said. "Get this! *They execute guys who shoot their sleeping shipmates.* It's been you all the time! Don't you see it?"

Asa B. gasped. He saw it.

Neil half turned from the door. "Now maybe he's reversed his game again. He's out to kill you, straight, now. I'm planted here, framed as drunk and crazy for revenge, to take the rap. Maybe he's working us into a convincing murder and suicide act. Sure, that's it!"

He felt the door handle move gently, infinitesimally, under his fingers. His heart jumped. He stabbed a finger at the door and his eyes implored Asa B. to back him up.

He wrenched open the door. He charged through. Asa B. was climbing up his heels. They both let loose a wild yell.

Like one person they hit the man outside. He toppled over and they went with him. Their victim struck the deck hard. He didn't move.

"Rats!" said Asa B. hoarsely, clambering up. "It's only O'Reilly. And we've knocked him cold."

Only O'Reilly! On his knees Neil went rigid to stare at the unconscious third mate. O'Reilly would be wearing a bigger egg on his skull than the quartermaster. Through his mind went what he had written about O'Reilly:

> Third Mate O'Reilly: Newcomer joining ship Montevideo. Wears whiskers. Talks too much. Not so Irish. Hangs around.

The corridor was jamming up with men and all of them were asking questions. But Neil kept looking at O'Reilly.

"Get me your scissors," Neil said to Asa B. "Come on! Hustle!"

He did not move till Asa B. thrust scissors into his hands. Then he went to work on O'Reilly's bushy beard. He cut it off by the handful, not prettily, and nobody dared to stop him.

"Take a quick look at Asa B.'s chin, gentlemen," he said proudly as he worked on O'Reilly. "Then look at old Hezekiah's rocky jaw in that messroom portrait. Characteristic! If I don't unearth a typical Coggswell jaw under all these whiskers then—then this guy O'Reilly isn't Hezekiah's Buenos Aires grandson."

"What!"

The audience was impressed. Gratifying!

"He—he figured on inheriting a full half of grandfather's estate!" Asa B. muttered.

"Maybe more than that," Neil said curtly. He clipped on. "Heard anything about that last British grandson lately? Ships are handy places to kill people these days. No radio. No holding a ship in port a long time to investigate a crime. And besides, with refugees and fake refugees all over the globe, there's a big black business in phony seamen's passports and papers."

He was finishing his job. Abruptly, his stomach sank. He turned O'Reilly's limp head to the red light.

Somebody snickered. Somebody else laughed outright.

Characteristic Coggswell jaw? Neil stared, fascinated. This O'Reilly had no jaw. His face just dribbled off indecisively into his neck. Plenty of reason for a beard—but not a plot to win the Coggswell inheritance.

"O'Reilly found *the* quartermaster slugged and tried my doorhandle, like you did," Asa B. said in Neil's dulled ear.

"No," said Ben Calder quickly in Neil's other ear. His hatchet face was tense. "Ye could be right about O'Reilly, man. Stick to it! There's a pairceptible Coggswell family resemblance there in O'Reilly's face, though not in the two chins. And the man joined at Montevideo, dinna forget that."

Neil turned on Asa B. and laid a masking hand across the lower part of his face. With Asa B.'s imposing chin hidden all resemblance to old Hezekiah vanished. Asa B. lacked the old shipowner's high narrow forehead. But O'Reilly stayed only O'Reilly. Neil took his hand away. His brain was whirring. He closed his eyes to see people more clearly.

"I never quit!" he said to the derisive spectators. "Maybe I've been working on the wrong end of the face. And there's a British grandson, too. British!"

Abruptly he swung around and planted a quick hand over Ben Calder's narrow chin. Instantly there leaped into being on the hatchet face above a living resemblance to old Hezekiah. It was the distinctive likeness of two high, narrow foreheads, obscured till then by the overpowering prominence of the Coggswell jaw.

Somebody swore softly. The stamp of Hezekiah Coggswell was on Ben Calder in the instant before he knocked the hand away.

"You talk too much," Neil said to Calder hoarsely. He looked around at the other men. "Why is it," he asked them, that Americans don't often think of a Scotsman as a Britisher? As soon as Calder's forged papers are examin—"

Ben Calter was reading the verdict in many eyes. His own were hot points of hate. His furious shove sent Neil spinning away from him. "Neil bounced back; then, with a sudden yell of fright, accelerated in a terrific burst of adrenalin.

Calder's hand was flicking a gun from the left armpit of his pajama coat—Neil's own little missing automatic. He backed away to get gun room.

Neil dived in desperately. Calder's heel hooked in O'Reilly's stirring body as Neil hit. They crashed together with Neil's hands shoving aside the guns. It bucked and roared as they scrambled on the deck. Neil tore at Calder's hand with frenzied strength.

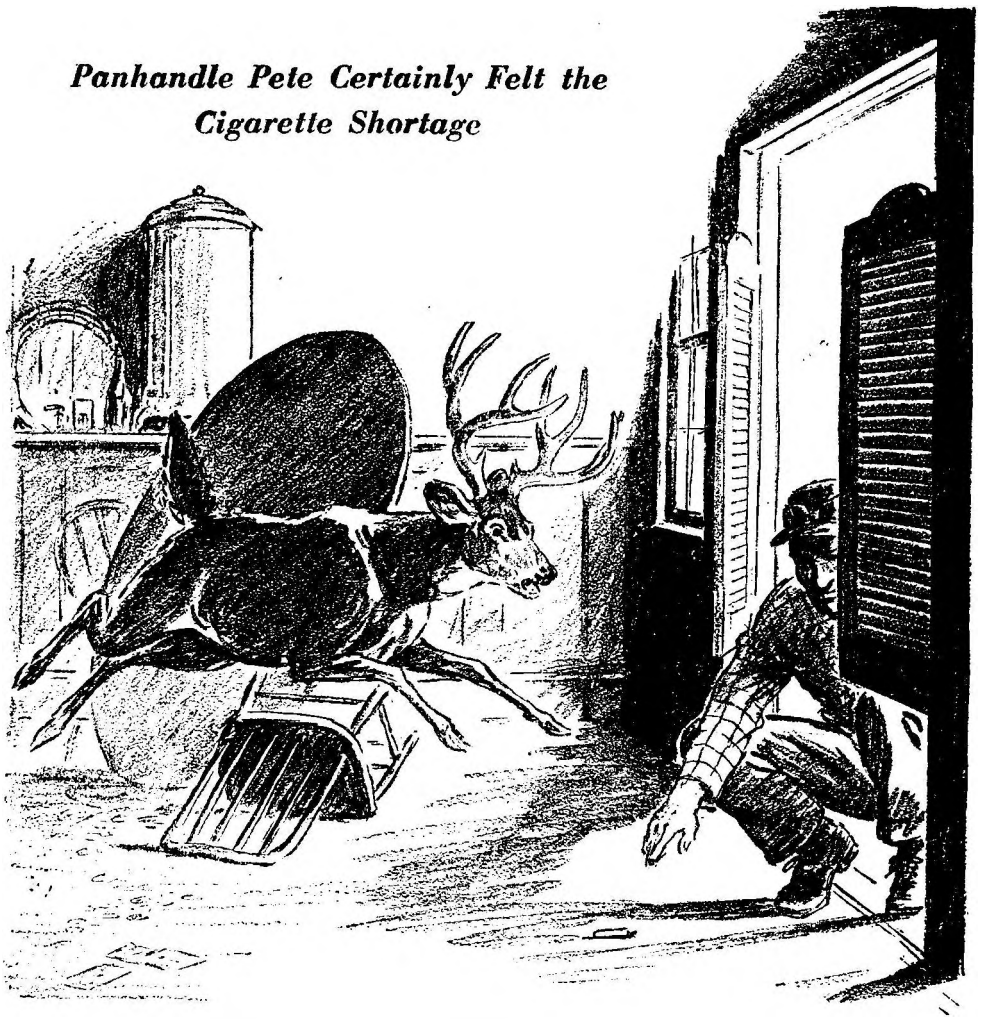
Next instant all hands piled on them, pressing the automatic between their flattened bodies.

Long hours dragged while Neil clung with crushed fingers to the gun. At last the men on top of him grabbed Calder's arms and pulled Neil to his feet.

"Close!" said Asa B. "He nearly got you—and that's your own gun, isn't it?"

Neil ignored him. "Ye'll kindly note," he said austerly to the others, "when a half Scot goes wrong for a fortune it takes a MacClintock to settle him."

Panhandle Pete Certainly Felt the Cigarette Shortage



BLACK MARKET

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

PANHANDLE PETE crossed the boundary that divided Rainier National Park and a logging company's holdings. He pushed his way through the brush and came to a dirt road over which logging trucks moved with their heavy loads. Experience had taught Pete that men who drive trucks smoke, and are in the habit of tossing cigarette butts onto the road.

Since the war, the big buck deer had been acutely conscious of the fact that something was wrong. The thousands of people who used to frequent the park, winter and summer, no longer came. As a result, Pete's appetite for cigarettes was never satisfied. When he was a spike buck he could find butts that were practically full-sized cigarettes. People had taken a couple of puffs and tossed them aside.

Then something had happened. The butts were but a third, or quarter of their original size, and now—well, this was the last straw. Not only were butts few and

far between, but he had pricked his nose twice because people had stuck pins in the butts and smoked them right down to the cork tips. Pete didn't know that this was the human way of getting all of the tobacco without burning the fingers.

There was little use of hanging around Ranger Buck Seaton's cabin, because Buck was leaving tobaccoless butts in his ash tray these days. Desperate, Pete was drifting along roads and highways looking for butts.

The timber thinned and he noticed a small town ahead. Some strange instinct had taught him that at certain seasons of the year a buck with his spread of antlers was safe from human beings with high powered rifles—even when beyond the park's protecting boundaries.

The backfiring of a truck warned him of a common danger and he leaped lightly into a thicket. A truck, carrying five huge logs, thundered past, leaving the odor of burned oil and gasoline, plus tobacco smoke. The latter was faint, elusive, but maddening.

Peter followed the truck into open country. The town, now, was a half mile distant. It was small, containing two general stores, poolrooms, beer taverns, a loggers' rooming house and a gasoline station with garage in the rear of the lot.

A dog saw Pete and began to bark, then attack. He nipped Pete's left hind leg before the buck whirled, lowered his head and charged. He caught the amazed dog on his horns and tossed him ten feet. The dog bounded from the scene, howling horribly. Pete acted as if he were thinking, "Howl, damn you. You have it coming. But—I didn't hurt you. I could have cut you to pieces with my hooves without half trying."

He followed a narrow road that ended up in an alley, and when the alley intersected the main street he thrust his head out and took observations. A logger with a crying jag saw him, stared and threw his bottle away, muttering, "When I see deer in alleys it's time to quit. Another pint, and I'll be trying to pet pink elephants."

He reeled up the street. As he wasn't smoking, Pete did not follow him. Angry voices came from a tavern window and Pete thrust his head through the window and looked inside. He resembled a head that some big game hunter had hung on a wall.

PETE noticed that the opposite wall was lined with the heads of mountain sheep, elk, moose, caribou, deer and goat—trophies of the tavern keeper's hunting prowess. The man was shouting and shaking his fist, "I can't prove it, Al, but I think that you stole my cigarette stock. You've been black marketing cigarettes for a long time now. I know that. And I know, too, that the OPA shut down your source of supply and——" He saw Pete's head and stared. "When did I ever kill a deer like that? Hey! He's framed by a window. He's—alive."

Al started to leave, but the tavern keeper grabbed him. "Oh no you don't, Mister, I'm not through with you yet. You hear me out." In his agitated condition, he lit a cigarette. "I'm warning you, Al, that if you and your black market don't get the hell out of here, I'll make you hard to find. I pay taxes, I keep within my ceiling price, I try to shoot square, partly because I was brought up that way, partly because I got a kid fighting the Japs."

"Listen, Joe, I never made a crooked dollar in my life," Al answered. "Do you think I'm crazy enough to want to get tangled up with the Gov'ment?"

"No, you think you're too smart for the Government," Joe retorted. A customer entered at that moment and Joe slipped behind the counter.

"Cigarettes, Joe?"

"Sorry," Joe answered, "but I haven't a pack in the place. I'll give you a smoke, though."

He pulled a pack from his pocket and the customer took one of the seven remaining cigarettes.

"You know me, Joe. I'm Red Hanson, and I've been—"

"I know, Red, you've been buying your cigarettes and beer from me for years."

"Right. Now here's the deal," Red continued, "we loggers are getting out noble fir. It's for plywood for troop carriers—gliders, you know. We don't get into town often, and when we do we find the last fags are sold, or there'll be a new shipment in tomorrow."

At this moment Al gave Red a knowing

wink, and inclined his head toward the alley.

Red instantly changed his attitude. "If you haven't got 'em, Joe, you haven't got 'em. S'long."

"Damn you, Al!" Joe bellowed. "You gave him a high sign. You're black marketing cigarettes." His fury was such that he pulled the cigarette from his mouth and dashed it to the floor. It struck, with a shower of sparks, three feet inside the batwing doors.

Panhandle Pete backed up, charged and leaped. This was the first worth-while butt that he had seen in months. His front legs, neck and shoulders cleared the window frame nicely. But one of his points caught the glass in the upper part of the window and shattered the pane.

He slipped on the polished floor, regained his balance and made for the cigarette. When he was ten feet distant, he saw a hand—from the street side of the doors—reach for the butt. Pete lowered his head, tossed a card table aside, filling the air with poker chips. He struck the man with his lowered head, knocking him into the gutter, then he whirled and picked up the cigarette.

He started up the sidewalk and a woman pushing a baby carriage screamed and shoved her carriage between two parked automobiles. An ex-Boy Scout, remembering his daily kind deed, waved his hands in an effort to turn the buck aside. He was successful—at no little cost to the town's super market. Pete whirled to escape what he thought might be capture, and found himself going through wide-open doors. To the right was a vegetable counter; to the left a meat counter. Beyond were shelves lined with canned goods; some counters containing various kinds of merchandise; and a small area filled with wire market baskets and rubber-tired carts that people push around while shopping. "Red points on the hoof," a butcher yelled.

Pete hooked an antler at a man trying to escape and caught only a basket half filled with goods. It dangled from his right horns in spite of his violent head-shaking. Someone was yelling, "Call the police!" A second someone bellowed, "Call the fire department!"

The town's fire department consisted of one combination pumper, hose-cart and hook and ladder wagon. A paid employee drove it, the remaining members of the crew being made up of volunteers who responded whenever the siren sounded. It was sounding now—filling the air with low moans that climbed to a high scream and died again to choking gasps.

Tobacco scent reached Pete's nostrils, calming a panic that was developing because of the market basket and the uproar. He thrust his head hard against a counter. The tobacco shelf was empty. He snorted and turned in time to notice a pile of lettuce heads. He picked off five—price fifteen cents, two for a quarter—and downed them.

The fire truck stopped and the volunteers put on their helmets and heavy, waterproof coats.

"It's a buck deer!" someone said. "Panhandle Pete—from the Park."

THE chain store manager yelled, "Don't turn the hose on him or you'll flood my stock."

"Bring the net!" a fireman shouted.

"What about them cigarettes, Al?" Red Hanson asked. "You give me the grand hailing sign of the black market. I got the pass word—folding money."

"Too much going on around here," Al replied. "Who'd ever expect a buck deer to come barging into town. It don't make sense. Wait until everything is quiet, then I'll fix up everything. It'll cost you a little extra dough, you know. My overhead is plenty high."

"We're pulling out of town in a half hour," Red Hanson argued. "We can't wait. Take a chance. Everybody will be watching the deer."

"For some reason I can't understand, the deer slows up every time he passes my cache," Al said. "People follow the deer to see what's going to happen next, so there's somebody always around the cache. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll bring all I've got out to the camp. On account of I have to pay plenty high price for my black market gasoline, I couldn't afford to make the trip for just the smokes. Suppose that I bring along a little hard liquor."

"What kind of liquor?"

"Don't ask me no questions," Al an-

swered with a knowing wink, "but it's just as good as any you can buy in the state liquor board stores."

RED HANSON paused long enough to tuck a wad of snooze under his lower lip. He remembered a liquor board store that had been robbed. It was just possible that he might find himself drinking stolen goods. "But what the hell," he thought, "I don't *know* that it's stolen liquor. And if Al doublecrosses me and sells me rotgut, it serves me right for dealing with such tripe."

His reflections were broken into suddenly when a fireman tossed a net at Pete and missed. People scattered as the deer emerged from the chain store, a basket still dangling from his antlers. He sped down an alley only to find it blocked by a car which had just entered from the other block.

The driver, having no wish to crash the deer and perhaps cause damage that could not be repaired in these days of spare parts, went into reverse. Pete turned in the nick of time, cleared a fence and tried to duck under a clothesline. His timing was off and a moment later a woman came screaming from the house. "Come back here with my wash! Come back here!"

A logger caught the end of the line and tried to stop the deer. He got a rope burn on his hands for this noble bit of endeavor, but he did turn Pete slightly, and a fireman hurled the net once more. It settled beautifully. "Everybody pile in," the chief yelled. "And don't anybody get cold feet and let go of anything he grabs or this buck will murder us!"

They pinned Pete to the ground, lashed him securely, and began removing the various items that he had collected. "Look at my wash!" the woman exclaimed. "All muddied up. I'll have to put it through again." The chain store man began straightening the wire basket, muttering, "Something new in customers!"

In time the crowd backed off and looked at Pete who glared at this indignity. "What're we going to do with him?" asked the mayor, who operated a logger's hash house. "It's again' the law to confine a wild animal without a game farm permit."

"I want no game farming of his kind," the chain store man said with feeling. "If we turn him loose, there's no telling what will happen next. I think he's having some kind of a *spell*. I read where elephants go nuts, kill people, smash houses and what not. This cuss couldn't smash a house—"

"He can ruin a week's wash," the woman snapped, "and he might injure women and children, or even grown men."

"I'd hate to have him nudge me with one of them horns," a logger said. "Them hoofs could cut a man to shreds. I'm again' turnin' him loose."

"I'm for eatin' him only it's again' the law," the rope burn man growled.

"Hey, Mr. Mayor," a wit said, "what'd we elect you for? This is your problem!"

THE mayor pondered. This was his first civic problem since election. He tried to look profound, but without much success. Pete seemed to be sneering at him, as if he were a half wit. "Hey, Red Hanson," the mayor shouted. "Come here!" Red was one of his customers who had a lot on the cuff.

Red approached. The lack of a cigarette was turning him into a nervous wreck. "What do you want?" he growled.

"Do me a favor," the mayor said. "I've done you a few," he added pointedly. "When your truck goes out to Camp Seven take this blasted deer along and turn him loose."

"It's a lot of trouble," Red grumbled, "and dangerous, too."

"I'll wipe the cuff clean," the mayor promised. "That ought to make it worth your while. You owe me five dollars and sixty cents plus tax. I'll pay the tax, too." The mayor was acting like a man who felt that he should acquit himself with credit.

"It's a deal," Red said, "but it's dangerous. Nobody knows what'll happen." He brought up his truck, and willing hands lifted Pete aboard. He was securely lashed.

"Hell will break loose when you cut them lashings," a logger said. "That buck ain't the kind to take this business layin' down. Brother, is he mad!"

"I'm worrying about that," Red said. "I don't want to hurt him, and you can bet your bottom dollar that I don't want to get hurt."

Red's helper, Ace McCoy, climbed aboard and Red started the truck. It rolled out

of the town and the citizens sighed with relief and turned to repair the damage.

"Get any cigarettes, Red?" Ace inquired.

"Naw. Black market's got hold of the supply, it seems like," Red answered. "A cuss named Al is coming out to camp. It'll cost us plenty."

"Joe was all out of smokes," Ace said. "Somebody robbed him. If Joe had 'em, he'd have sold 'em to us. He knows we don't get in so often."

"We're going in plenty of times next month," Red predicted. "They're just about finished bull-dozin' a road to that big stand of noble fir. It's wanted for troop carrying gliders. High priority stuff. We gotta get it in come hell or high water." He glanced over his shoulder at Pete who was eyeing him suspiciously.

They passed the spot where Pete had emerged from the forest, to go on this rampage and turned into a newly built road and entered country that Pete, for all of his wanderings, had never visited. There was a lot of low gear work at times, and Pete was jounced up and down as the big wheels struck roots concealed in the muck.

They passed a camp, which was mostly rows of houses on skids, a cook shack, and shop for minor repairs to equipment. The air was heavy with the smell of burning pitchwood and cooking. Pete sniffed but failed to detect cigarette smoke. The truck driver yelled something at the cook, and then climbed, in low gear, to a ridge. Here someone yelled, "Timber-r-r-r!" and a huge fir tree crashed to the forest floor.

Red stopped the truck and yelled, "Mart, give us a hand in unloading this buck."

Mart, the hooktender addressed, was all for lifting Pete to the ground and cutting his lashings—until he heard what had happened in town. "A tough guy, eh?" He looked at Pete's horns and hooves. "He could cut the hell out of man or prod him to death. Say, what's the matter of handlin' him like he was a log?"

"You don't mean stick hooks into him?" Red demanded in alarm. "He's a fighter and I admire the cuss. We don't want him hurt."

"I'll show you," Mart said. He signaled and a boom, with heavy hooks dangling from the gear, swung slowly over the truck. The hooks came down and Mart rigged a sling. He slipped the hooks through the sling, then signaled.

Pete was lifted slowly from the truck, swung clear and lowered until his hooves just missed the sod. Mart approached warily and made sure that everything was in order, then he climbed onto the truck. "Set him down," he yelled, and Pete's hooves touched the sod. There was ample slack so that the sling became loose and with a few squirms Pete was free. He snorted a couple of times, then stamped about restoring the circulation in his legs.

"Can you tie that?" Mart exclaimed. "I figgered he'd leave here like a bat out of hell, and what does he do? He stands there and gives us dirty looks. He's got more nerve than a gov'ment mule."

Pete started to leave the scene with befitting dignity, then he smelled tobacco. He walked over and sniffed at a coat. "Hey! Leave that coat alone!" Mart yelled. "What are you, a goat? Goin' around eatin' clothes? Go down to the cook shack and start in on the tin cans."

But Pete, attracted as he had been by the scent of tobacco that had sifted down into the pocket seams, now concluded there was nothing worth bothering with. He snorted several times, tossed his antlers then bounded toward the big timber, lightly clearing the big fir that had just fallen.

SEVERAL hours later he stepped onto the new road, a mile below camp. He had browsed and satisfied his appetite except in the matter of tobacco. As a car, bouncing along in second gear, approached, Pete stepped into a thicket. When it passed, he followed still hoping for a cigarette butt. The driver left a trail of tantalizing smoke, but he smoked the cigarette right down to the cork tip. A quarter mile from camp he stopped, walked over to the creek bordering the road, and sized up the situation.

Presently he found a spot to his liking. He pulled on hip boots, loaded cartons of cigarettes into a pack and carried them to two down trees. He cached them, returned to his car and loaded up with whiskey. This he cached with the cigarettes. He covered the cached stuff with a piece of pulp taken from the case in which the cigarettes were shipped.

He drove the car nearer the camp, then

parked it off the road. It was evident that he didn't want to be caught with a large quantity of incriminating cigarettes or whiskey in the parked car, but he loaded several dozen cartons of cigarettes and a half-dozen quarts of whiskey into the pack and walked up the road to the camp.

He shed his pack behind a building and waited until Red Hanson appeared. "Hey, Red!" he called. "I'm open for business. Is it okay?"

"Yeah. I'll tell the boys!" Red disappeared and presently the men began drifting, in ones and twos, behind the building. "What's your price, Al?"

"I sell only the best brands," Al answered. "Cigarettes fifty cents a pack. Whiskey, twelve to fifteen bucks a quart."

"You're practically giving it away," Red commented. "Your contribution to winning the war, eh?"

Al's face darkened, but he swallowed whatever it was that came to his tongue. He remembered that he was dealing, literally, with tough customers. "I take my chances, and overhead is high," he argued. "I can't do it for a cent less. I'm delivering the stuff to you. If you went to town you couldn't get it. Whiskey, maybe, but not the smokes. They're being rationed by the dealers, and even then you can't get 'em."

"No dice," Red said shortly. He glowered at several of the others who showed signs of weakening. "It's a hold-up!"

"You guys are making plenty dough," Al argued. "Lots of overtime. Pay is high. Time and a half—"

"Take home pay isn't so high," Red retorted. "We buy our share of bonds. Income tax hits us hard because we don't have exemptions. We're single men and—"

"So you don't have to support a woman," Al cut in. "You can lay it on the line if you want cigarettes bad enough."

"Speakin' of income tax," Red said. "How much do you pay? I'll bet you short change Mr. Whiskers—" He broke off. "Hell, I need a smoke, but not *that* bad. Come on, men, we'll leave Jesse James to his thoughts."

They walked away, but Al made no effort to leave. He sat down on a log, lighted a cigarette, and let the smoke drift lazily through the cabins. Mart sniffed and swore, and Red couldn't help but echo his "I'm ready to meet his price," Mart said. "We've been under one hell of a strain—"

"Shut up," Red savagely ordered, "or you'll have me weakening. Hey, what's that?" It was dark now and they strained their ears and eyes to learn the cause of a strange noise nearby. Red turned on a flashlight and twin pools of flame blazed from among the trees. "It's that deer back again. Say, are we going to have him on our necks along with our other troubles?"

He walked slowly toward the buck. Now the light revealed his shoulders and antlers. Then *something else*. Mart, taking a chance, reached out and grabbed the *something else*. "What do you know, Red," he said, "piece of pulp board from a cigarette shipping case. My fav'rite brand, too. I suppose the buck charged the case and put a horn into it. This was torn off. But what would a shipping case be doing up here. There ain't that many cigarettes— Damn it, Red, I'm talking to you and you ain't listening."

"I'm thinking," Red said. "A year ago I read about a buck deer in Rainier Park that was a sucker for cigarettes. His name was Pete—Pete the Moocher, or something. You don't suppose that this 'un's smelled out Al's cache."

"Could be," Mart agreed. "Guys like Al are wary. They might hold plenty of stuff back figgerin' if they showed too much we might help ourselves. When you're in the black market game you don't trust nobody."

"Come with me," Red invited. He turned the flashlight on Panhandle Pete's tracks and followed them. In the soft muck it was easy enough, and with a little patience he could detect them over the sod and drier spots. They crossed the road and ended in a thicket on the creek bank. Here the dirt around two logs was badly cut up. Pete had tried to stamp a hole in front of one log without success, then he had braced his hooves and attempted to insert his horns between the logs. It was a wonder points hadn't snapped off in the process.

"Hey, look at the cache," exclaimed Red. "The deer tried to get the cigarettes, and hooked onto that piece of pulp."

"We find a whiskey and cigarette cache in the timber," Mart argued, "why aren't finders keepers?"

"It won't work out that way," Red answered. "There could be dynamite in this. Stolen goods and all that. I ain't afraid of dynamite, and if a guy called me the soul of honor I'd bust him one on the whiskers. I'm as weak as the next one. I'm thinking of Joe down there in town. He always shot square with us and—"

"Okay boys, drift!" Al had them covered with a gun. "That's my cache. I don't know how you found it, but you aren't robbing it."

"Your cache," Red said softly. "Why didn't you say so? You can't blame a couple of guys for . . . lookout for that deer, Mart!"

Al turned his head for a split second and it seemed as if a ton of brick struck him. It wasn't Panhandle Pete, but Red Hanson's shoulder with his weight behind it, Red had come in low, because he didn't want to take a chance with a bullet. Now his right hand twisted the weapon from Al's grasp. He finished the man with a stomach punch, picked up the gun and said, "Things are getting more and more mixed up."

"You had nerve to tackle him," Mart said.

"I learned at my father's knee never to point a gun at anything you didn't want to kill, nor—stand for anybody pointing a gun at you," Red dryly explained. "I guess we'd better load everything into our shirts and hit the road for camp with Al ahead of us. Then we'll call Joe."

THEY made packs of their shirts and headed for camp—a strange procession. Al led, followed by the watchful Red who carried a tremendous load on his left shoulder, leaving the right shoulder and hand free to handle the gun in case Al got ideas. Next came Mart also with a staggering load. Panhandle Pete brought up the rear, as if to argue, "Cut me in on this, I put the finger on the cache."

The camp greeted their arrival with a cheer. This faded to a grumble when Red explained that the loot was not for general distribution. He called Joe on the telephone, then called the liquor store that had been robbed.

After that there was nothing to do but wait. Al began arguing after awhile. "You're hooked," Red said. "You admitted the stuff was yours. Now we're going to find out where you got it."

Joe was the first arrival. He examined the piece of pulp carefully and found a shipment number, and his own check mark. "That proves it," he said. "I'll swear out a warrant."

The sheriff and liquor store people showed up at ten o'clock. The latter checked on the bottles and declared them part of the stolen goods.

"We'd like to buy the cigarettes," Red said to Joe. "The sheriff will want a couple of cartons and the piece of pulp for evidence, but the rest of 'em . . . what's your price?"

"I offered a reward," Joe answered. "I'll pay it off in smokes at the going price. Fair enough. And the others—well, there are other logging camps that have been depending on me——"

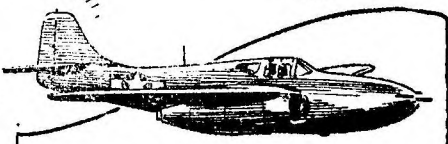
"Fair enough," Red said. It came hard, because he had visions of buying the entire cache. But he said it, and once the words were out he felt swell. Just swell—like a Boy Scout who has done a couple kind deeds. "I guess that takes care of everyone deserving a reward, Joe, except that buck deer. He didn't intend to, of course, but he showed us the way to the cache, so—what the hell."

"I'll give you a carton for him," Joe answered, "Down in town we sort of figured he was Panhandle Pete, the Rainier Park buck. We weren't sure, of course, but he acted like it. Didn't you know it?" He tossed Pete a pack which he chewed paper and all.

"Nope," Red answered. "I guess there was too much excitement at the time for me to hear much. Then, we thought he was just a damned bother and not any ace detective. Well s'long." He turned to the others. "You might as well light up. But leave long butts—for Panhandle Pete. I've gotta hunch he'll stick around as long as the cigarettes hold out. He's like people—that way."

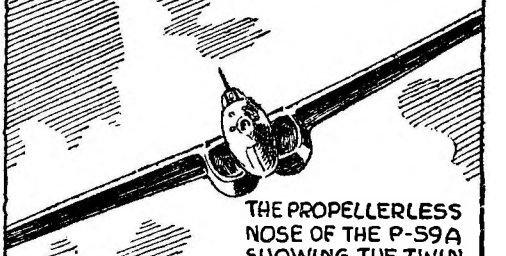
PLANE FACTS

BY Jim Kraig

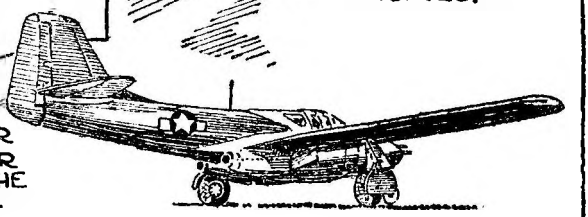


BELL P-59A *AIRACOMET*

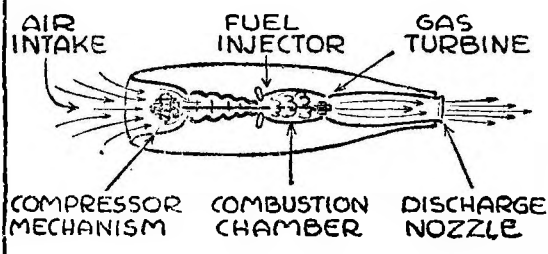
THE BELL P-59A *AIRACOMET* IS THE ARMY'S FIRST JET-POWERED FIGHTER. IT IS SWIFT, SILENT, AND VIBRATIONLESS. THE P-59A HAS NO PROPELLER. THE POWER TO PROPEL THE *AIRACOMET* IS FURNISHED BY GASES RUSHING FROM THE DISCHARGE NOZZLES OF THE JET UNITS. THE LACK OF VIBRATION OF THE P-59A REDUCES PILOT FATIGUE.



THE PROPELLERLESS NOSE OF THE P-59A SHOWING THE TWIN INTAKE VENTS OF THE JET PROPULSION ENGINES.

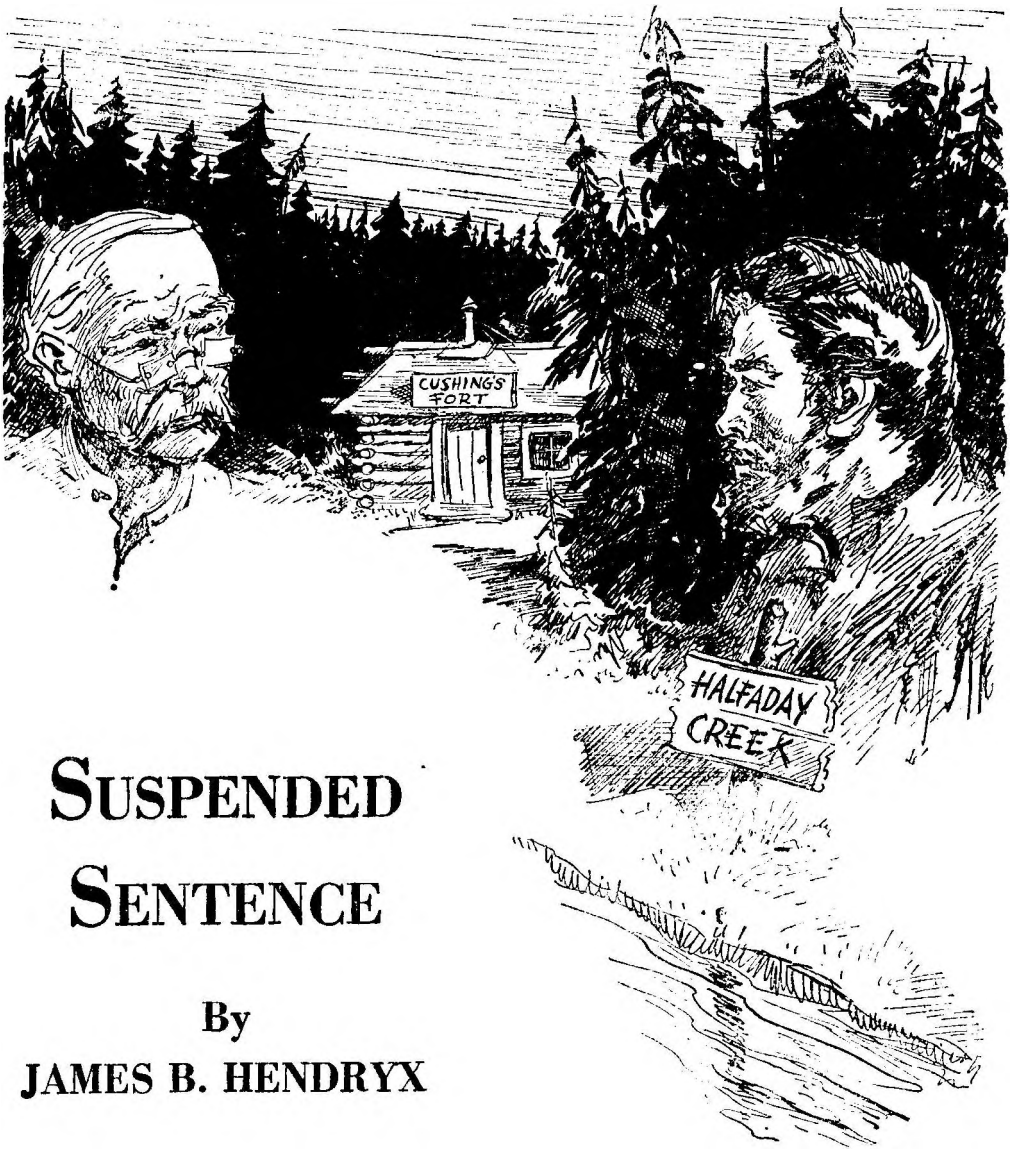


THE ABSENCE OF A PROPELLER PERMITS THE USE OF SHORTER LANDING GEAR ALLOWING THE PLANE TO HUG THE GROUND.



THIS SIMPLIFIED DRAWING SHOWS HOW JET PROPULSION WORKS. AIR DRAWN INTO THE UNIT IS COMPRESSED, MIXED WITH FUEL AND BURNED. THE BURNT GASES RUSHING THROUGH THE DISCHARGE NOZZLES PUSH THE AIRPLANE FORWARD. THE SPEED OF THE AIRPLANE IS REGULATED BY ADJUSTING THE SIZE OF THE OPENING IN THE DISCHARE NOZZLE.

"The Trouble With the Law," Said Black John, "Is That It Sticks to Evidence and Disregards Common Sense."



SUSPENDED SENTENCE

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

I

OLD CUSH, proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border, folded the month-old newspaper that had been spread before him on the bar, shoved the square-framed steel-rimmed spectacles from nose to forehead, and set out bottle, glasses, and the inevitable leather dice box as Black John Smith crossed the floor and elevated a foot to the battered brass rail.

"I see here by the paper where it says this here Admiral Dewey's goin' to run fer president. Beat them three fours in one."

Black John gathered the dice, returned

them to the box, and rolled out three fives. Again he shook and grinned as Cush scowled at the four aces that showed on the little white cubes. Failing to beat them, Cush returned the box to the back bar, filled his glass, and shoved the bottle across the bar.

Black John watched the tiny beads range themselves about the rim of his glass. "He is, eh? What party—Democrat, er Republican?"

"Democrat. The paper claims that a lot of Democrats don't like this here Bryan, which they claim he wants to give silver away free, an' besides which he's too mouthy, offerin' odds of sixteen to one that he'll be elected."

Black John's grin widened. "Yer grasp of politics is amazin'. But why would they think Dewey would make a good president?"

"Hell—he licked them Spanish, didn't he, over there in Manila Bay?"

"If all they want is a fightin' man why don't they run Bob Fitzsimmons—he licked Corbett, didn't he?"

"Yeah, but they wouldn't run no prize-fighter fer president, it don't seem like. Besides I s'pose they figger this here Dewey could git more votes than what Fitzsimmons would. Cripes, when Dewey landed in Noo York the hull town went wild. They made him some new kind of a admiral, an' give him a house an' lot in Worshin'ton, an' on top of that he up an' got married."

"That don't say he'd make a good president. Hell, you've be'n married four times an' no one's runnin' you fer president."

"Them politicians, they don't give a damn how good a president he'd make. It's jest if he kin git the votes. An' accordin' to what the paper claims, he's come out an' says he'll run."

"How are the mighty fallen," Black John quoted.

"What does that mean?"

"Meanin' there's two ways of distroyin' a toy balloon—one is to hit it a crack an' blow it up with a bang, the other is to prick it with a pin. By comin' out fer president Dewey has pricked his own balloon.

An' what'll prick Bryan's balloon ain't Dewey — it's two things that's happened outside the United States, an' which neither Bryan nor Dewey prob'ly ever took notice of. One is happenin' right here in the Yukon—our increasin' production of gold. The other jest now happened in South Africa where a couple of fellas invented the cyanide process fer gettin' the last ounce of gold out of a ton of ore. With the world's supply of gold on the increase, Bill Bryan's goose is cooked to a turn. His sixteen to one racket is dead as hell, right now—only he don't know it."

"You mean, he won't git elected?"

"He ain't got a chance."

Cush's brow drew into a frown. "I don't know what yer talkin' about, but seems like yer right more'n half the time. If yer so damn shore of it, let's me an' you git in on the short end of that there sixteen to one bet. Cripes, John—a thousan' ounces would git us sixteen thousan'!"

"That's right," the big man grinned. "If any Bryan men comes up here flauntin' them odds in yer face you take all you can get of it—an' count me in. Look—here comes someone."

CUSH peered through the open doorway. "Cripes, he's got a woman with him!" he scowled. "Ain't that hell? Seems like every time things is goin' nice an' peaceful on Halfaday, up pops some damn woman!"

"But look at her, Cush! She's by all odds the best lookin' woman that ever hit Halfaday—an' she don't look a day over twenty!"

"The better lookin' they be, the more hell they kin raise on a crick," Cush replied sombrely, "an' the younger they be, the longer they've got to raise it in."

The man paused in the doorway, his blue eyes sweeping the interior of the room, came to rest on the two at the bar. "Is this Cushing's Fort, on Halfaday Crick?" he asked.

Before either could reply, the girl slipped past him and stepped into the room. "Aren't you Black John Smith?" she asked, a note of anxiety in her voice.

The big man nodded reassuringly. "This is Cushing's, an' I'm Black John," he said. "That's Cush there behind the bar. Step right up. The house is buyin' one."

The two approached the bar as Cush shoved the bottle toward them and set out two glasses. The newcomers glanced at each other, and the man smiled. "We don't either of us drink," he said. "I hope you don't mind."

Black John grinned. "Not a bit. Fact is we don't see no harm in eschewin' liquor, if done in moderation." His glance shifted to the face of the girl. "You was inquirin' fer me, Miss. Might I ask what you wanted?"

The violet eyes met the glance of the steel gray ones squarely. "We—we're in terrible trouble," she said, in a voice that trembled slightly. "And—we—that is—I thought that maybe you'd help us."

"H-u-m. What put that notion in yer head?"

"I—I didn't know who else to go to. You see, I've heard them talking about you—my Dad, and Uncle Gordon, and Swiftwater Bill and Burr MacShane, and the other sourdoughs."

"Who's yer dad? An' who's this here Uncle Gordon?"

"I'm June Parsons. My Dad is Jack Parsons—"

"You mean Jack Parsons—Captain of the *Sarah*—the best damn steamboat captain that ever hit the Yukon—er any other river, fer as that goes."

"Yes. And Uncle Gordon is Old Bettles. I've called him Uncle Gordon ever since I was a wee little tot down at Forty Mile, and he used to put me in a packsack and carry me around on his back. We live in Dawson now, and I've seen you several times on the street. I've always wanted to go up and speak to you, but somehow I never could quite do it. You—you were so—so kind of fierce and stern looking—and I'd heard how you hang men up here on Halfaday."

THE big man scowled prodigiously. "Well, doggone yer dad an' them damn sourdoughs! You wait till I get holt of 'em—puttin' notions like that in yer head!"

"Oh, but they all say that those men needed hanging!" the girl interrupted. "That they were robbers and murderers that for some reason the law couldn't reach. They say you're hard as iron when you have to be, but underneath that you're kind-hearted, and smarter even than Corporal Downey. They say you'd do anything to help anyone that's in trouble. That's why we came here."

"H-u-m. Didn't they, perchanct, hint that I'm an outlaw?"

"Yes, but they always laugh about it, and wink at each other, and they tell of dozens of times you've turned over the dust that had been stolen from some prospector to Corporal Downey, when you could have kept it, and no one would have been the wiser."

"Didn't it occur to you that them old gravel hounds might be mistaken about my kind heartedness?"

The girl shook her head. "Not those men." She replied with conviction. "They don't make mistakes."

The girl caught the flash of white teeth behind the black beard as the big man smiled. "Well, havin' be'n convicted of kind-heartedness by a jury of my peers, I s'pose I'll have to play my string out. What is this here terrible trouble you're s'posed to be in? An' how is it you come to me with it instead of goin' to Downey? That's one of the things the police is for—to help folks that's in trouble."

"We can't go to the police. The police have accused Clayt of robbery—the police and that horrible Goose Bronson."

"Who's Clayt?"

"This is Clayt," the girl said, turning toward the young man who stood beside her. "Clayton James. He—I—we—"

The smile behind the black beard widened. "Yeah—go on," the big man said, glancing from the flushed face of the girl to the six-foot-two of brawn and muscle. "Offhand, I'd say a man couldn't blame neither one of you. I assume that the Goose accused Clayt, here, of robbin' him."

"That's right," James replied. "But I didn't rob him."

"Of course he didn't!" the girl cried. "Oh, Bla—er—Mr. Smith, if you knew Clayt, you'd *know* he'd never rob anyone!"

"You might try 'Uncle John'," the big man grinned. "Of course I never carried you around in no packsack when you was little. But otherwise, believe it er not, I've got yer 'Uncle Gordon' skinned a mile."

"All right—Uncle John. But can't you see—can't you tell by just looking at Clayt that he'd never commit a robbery?"

"W-e-e-l-l, offhand, I'd say he ain't got the earmarks of total depravity. But then agin, you've got to remember that robbery ain't like smallpox—it don't leave no marks on a man. That ring you've got there on

yer finger—real diamond, ain't it? Flashes like one. A diamond of that size must of set someone back a good many ounces."

"Clayt gave it to me," the girl said, her eyes resting proudly on the stone as she moved her finger to allow its facets to catch the light. "It's my engagement ring."

"Had it long?"

"No. Only a little over a month. But so much has happened in that month that it seems like a year."

"When was this here robbery s'posed to have come off?"

"It was just a week after the dance," the young man answered. "June turned down Goose Benson and went to the dance with me. And that night, after the dance, we—er—we got engaged. So the next morning I hit out for my claim to get the dust out of my cache to pay for the ring. My claim is on a feeder three days up the Klondike. So it took me six days to make the round trip.

"There was a full moon and I got into Dawson after midnight. It was too late to buy the ring, and too late to go and see June, so I sort of loafed around town a while. In the Tivoli I ran across Goose Benson, and he was awful drunk. At first he began cussing me out—claimed I'd stolen his girl."

"His girl!" June broke in, a note of disgust in her voice. "I loathe and despise him! He's nothing but a tin-horn gambler—a cheap, flashy sport. I have gone to one or two dances with him—but that was before I knew Clayt. And he keeps on trying to force his attentions on me."

"But," continued James, "he was so drunk that night that his anger at me sort of trailed off into pity for himself, and he began crying in his whiskey. I felt sorry for the poor devil, with others at the bar laughing and making fun of him, so I eased him out of the saloon, and took him home and laid him on the bed and pulled off his shoes and threw a blanket over him, and left him. Then I went to the hotel and went to bed. I slept late next morning, and after breakfast I went to the jewelry store and bought June's ring. While I was buying the ring I happened to glance toward the rear of the store and there was Goose Benson sitting beside Herb Fortin's desk talking to him. He didn't look much worse for his jag, and seemed to be engaged in earnest conversation with Herb. I don't think he even noticed me."

"You didn't buy the ring off'n Fortin', himself, then?"

"No. A young woman waited on me—his clerk."

"Where did you go from there?"

"I went right up to June's and gave her the ring. I stayed there for supper, and then about midnight I went back to my room in the hotel, and early next morning I hit back for my claim."

"Got a pretty good claim, have you?"

THE young man nodded. "Yes, it's a mighty good claim. I'm taking out from six to ten ounces a day, working alone."

"H-u-m. Anyone else on yer crick?"

"No. It's only a small feeder. Three of us located on the crick to start with. But the top gravel didn't amount to much and we had to work like the devil to make wages. Then the other two quit, but I stayed on, hoping the stuff would get better as I went down."

"Was these other two pardners of yours?"

"No. They were strangers. We just happened to locate on the same feeder. But they didn't have any faith in the crick, so they pulled out and abandoned their claims."

"But after you got to goin' good it's a wonder someone else didn't relocate their abandoned claims." Black John persisted.

The younger man smiled. "Nobody knew I was going good. I let everyone think I was plugging along just about making wages. I didn't want anyone else horning in on that feeder. Then, a couple of months ago when the time ran out on those abandoned claims, I took June and Captain Parsons up there and they filed on them."

"Made it a kind of family affair, eh?"

"That's right. Only I didn't know it was 'family,' then. I only hoped it would be. June and I weren't engaged till nearly a month after they filed the claims."

"An' Goose Benson claimed you robbed him the night you took him home, eh?"

"That's right. He told the police he had two thousand ounces cached under a loose board in his floor, and when he woke up the morning after I took him home, his cache was empty. Several men told the police that he was very drunk that night in

the Tivoli, and they saw me take him out of there."

"And that's not the worst of it," June cut in. "When Goose and the policeman went up to Clayt's claim and accused him of the robbery, Clayt took them to his cache and showed them his dust, and it just happened that Clayt had nineteen hundred ounces, which is within a hundred ounces of the amount Goose claimed he lost—and worst of all, Goose told the policeman that he kept his luck piece in his cache, and that it had disappeared along with his dust. And when they took Clayt's dust out of the cache, there down under the dust in the bottom of the box was the luck piece!"

"Yer shore it was the same luck piece Goose claimed he lost?"

The young man shrugged. "I guess it's his luck piece, all right. It's a five-ounce nugg . the shape of a seven-pointed star. He always laid it among his chips when he played cards. Even the policeman that came up with Goose and arrested me recognized it, and he said that dozens of men could swear that they'd seen it."

"How come it in your cache?"

"I haven't the least idea in the world how it could have got there. I certainly never put it there—I know that."

"Anyone else know where yer cache was?"

"No. That is, I don't think so. I never took anyone there. And I was always careful to look all around before I went to it. And to top the whole thing off they searched around and, in a spruce thicket near the cache they found the twenty-five little moosehide sacks that Goose claimed he kept his dust in. He said he could prove they were his sacks—that the klooch that made them for him would recognize her own sewing."

"Who found the sacks—Goose, er the cop?"

"Goose found them. The policeman handcuffed me, and then they began looking around and in a few minutes Goose let a yell out of him and called the policeman into the thicket, and there were the sacks lying on the ground where someone had shoved them under some low-hung branches."

"This policeman that arrested you—was it Downey?"

"No. His name was Stark. He's a young fellow. I never saw him before."

"How long was it after you got back to yer claim before Goose an' the cop got there?"

"It was a couple of weeks—maybe a little longer."

"You say Stark arrested you an' handcuffed you. Someone bail you out?"

"No. We started back to Dawson and made good time until just on the edge of dark the policeman decided to camp for the night. He said they might as well let the prisoner do the work, so he took off the handcuffs and told me to get to work and rustle some firewood. He sat there with his revolver in his hand while I chopped the wood from a dead spruce. I was tired, and mad. They'd made me pack that dust all day—my own dust out of my own cache —and handcuffed as I was, believe me, it was no picnic.

"He started the fire and Goose went to the river after water and when the policeman leaned close to put on some more wood I hauled off and kicked the fire right plumb into his face, and while he was clawing the coals off his neck, I kicked the revolver out of his hand, and lit out. You see, I'd been doing a lot of thinking while I was slogging along the trail, and I knew that with the evidence they had against me, I wouldn't have a chance in the world of beating the case. I knew I was bound to be convicted if I was brought to trial — and I'll be damned if I was going to do time for a crime I never committed. So when I saw my chance, I grabbed it. I hit straight for Dawson got there after dark, and told June the whole story."

"How about yer dust? Did you fetch it with you?"

"No. I'd slipped the packsack off. When I lit out you bet I didn't want to be loaded down with any hundred pounds and more of dust. I was in a hurry."

"I knew he was telling the truth," the girl said. "I knew that somehow that horrible Goose Benson had managed to frame Clayt. And oh, I didn't know what to do! I knew it wouldn't be long before Goose and that policeman would get back, and I knew that they'd come and question me Dad was away. The *Sarah* wasn't due in Dawson for a week. Then I happened to

think of you—of what the sourdoughs all said of you, and I knew that if anyone could help us, you could. So we threw a trail outfit together, and slipped away in my canoe. I knew you lived on Halfaday Crick, and that it was somewhere up the White River, so we headed upriver and then up the White, and a couple of days ago we came across some Siwashes who told us how to get here." The girl paused and sudden tears welled into her eyes—tears she tried bravely to conceal. "Oh, you will help us—won't you?" she pleaded, in a voice that faltered slightly.

"Why, shore. I'll do what I can."

"But I don't think there's anything anyone can do," James said, disconsolately. "Look at the evidence against me."

"Yeah. The law sets a heap of store by evidence," Black John said, and grinned broadly. "I'd shore like to be'n there an' heard what Downey said when that there Stark got back without nothin' but the dust an' a blistered neck to show fer his trip. I'll bet that wasn't nothin' to the blisterin' Downey give him."

"He'll probably send him right out after us," the girl said, glancing fearfully toward the doorway. "From what the sourdoughs say, most everyone that's on the run hits for Halfaday Crick."

"Yeah, quite a few of 'em does. But Downey won't send Stark up here. He might come himself—but he won't send Stark. He'd figger Stark wouldn't have even as much luck as he had on the other trip. Fact is, them rookies does their best work sweepin' out the barracks, an' keepin' things lookin' tidy around detachment."

"But—suppose Corporal Downey should come?" the girl persisted.

"W-e-e-l-l, that would be somethin' else agin. It would prob'ly be best if he wasn't to locate you till I've had time to sort of think things over. You two better hole up over to the Alasky Country Club till things sort of breaks, one way er another."

"Country Club!" James exclaimed.

"Well, it ain't exactly a club, in the more comprehensive sense of the word. It's a buildin' we put up over acrost the line in Alaska where it's outside the jurisdiction of the Mounted. There's times when we've found it a distinct convenience. You'll find it all stocked up with grub an' blankets, magazines, playin' cards, liquor, an' whatnot. Jest foller the trail up that draw back of the fort, here. It's only a couple of miles. You can't miss it."

"But—er—that is——"

The girl, her face flushed a deep red, broke in on the young man's stumbling speech. "We—we aren't married," she said.

"Gosh, that's so!" Black John exclaimed. "Well, we'll have to figure out somethin' else."

"Father Cassatt pulled out this mornin' on his way to Sebastian's Village," Cush said. "I told him about Red John bein' laid up with some kind of a misery in his guts, an' said he'd stop in an' see if he could fix him up. Father, he's a sort of a doctor along with his preachin'. Chances is, he's still down there. Here comes One Armed John. We kin send him down to fetch him back."

As the one-armed one appeared in the doorway, Black John pointed down the creek. "Get down to Red John's as fast as you can leg it an' fetch Father Cassatt back here! If he's pulled out fer Sebastian's Village keep after him till you get him. Tell him there's a couple of young folks here that wants to get married—an' I say it's all right. There'll be an ounce of dust an' a couple of drinks in it fer you when you get back." As One Armed John disappeared, the big man turned to the others with a smile. "An' bein' as Jack Parsons ain't here, it devolves upon me, as next of kin, to give the bride away."

WITH the simple ceremony over, and the priest departed, the girl turned to Black John. "Oh, I knew you'd help us!" she cried, her violet eyes shining. "I think you're just wonderful!"

"You two better be hittin' out," the big man said gruffly. "If Downey should happen along an' find you here, he'd take Clavt back to Dawson shore as hell, an' with what they've got on him he wouldn't have a chance. Like I said—the law sets a lot of store by evidence. Stay up there till you hear from me. There's a damn sight worse places than the Country Club to spend a honeymoon."

When the two had departed, Cush turned a somber eye on Black John. "Jack Par-

sons ain't goin' to think yer so damn wonderful—gittin' his darter hitched to a damn cache robber."

"So you figure Clayt's guilty, eh?"

"Guilty! Cripes sake, I never heard of no one no guiltier! He robs this here Goose Benson when he's soused, an' buys that there big diamon' an' give it to the girl, then hits back to his claim an' rips the sacks off'n the rest of Benson's dust an' dumps it in his cache. Them hundred ounces they didn't find in his cache was what he blow'd in fer the diamon'. An' what with them findin' the dust, an' Benson's luck piece in his cache, an' them empty sacks layin' there in the bresh, it looks like they had him dead to rights. Don't you figger he's guilty?"

"No, I figure he ain't. Cripes, Cush, didn't he stand right there an' admit he didn't rob Benson?"

"Well, who the hell wouldn't!"

"Then, there's the girl. She went a step further an' claimed he wouldn't rob no one. That's corroborative evidence, ain't it?"

Cush shook his head in resignation. "Sometimes, John, you talk like a damn fool, an' act like one, too—s'pecially if there's a woman in it. Yes, sir—let some good lookin' woman show up on the crick an' wall her eyes at you an' claim yer wonderful, er start bawlin'—an' by God, she kin git anything she wants out of you! What you goin' to do, now?"

"Well, I guess I'll sort of drift down Dawson way."

"How about that there crick me an' you was goin' to prospect—the one that Siwash told us about? I thought we was goin' to hit out fer there today."

"Hell, we've got from now on to locate that crick. There ain't no one goin' to steal it, is there?"

"With this here Clayt loose in the hills I ain't so shore. But if yer hell-bent on goin' there ain't nothin' I kin say that'll stop yer. You never would listen to reason."

II

CORPORAL DOWNEY looked up from his desk at police detachment and greeted the big man who paused in the doorway. "Hello, John! Come in an' draw up a chair. You're a little early for yer regular session of stud, ain't you? Didn't expect to see you for a month yet."

Black John crossed the room, drew up a chair, filled his pipe, and elevated his heels to the desk top. "Well, I found myself with a little spare time on my hands so I sort of drifted down. How's things along the river? Have the sinful be'n middlin' active?"

"More than middlin'. I've be'n busy as the devil all summer."

The big man shook his head slowly. "Don't it beat hell the trouble them damn crooks'll go to to turn a dishonest dollar? If they'd spend the same amount of time an' brains on some honest venture there's no tellin' what might happen."

Downey grinned. "How-come all this spare time you find yourself with? Cush lose his dice box?"

"No. But a man can't keep his nose to the grindstone all the time. He'd get in a rut."

"Any newcomers showed up on Halfaday lately?"

"W-e-el-l, there might have be'n one er two. Any specific parties you had in mind? Er was you jest shootin' at random?"

"Well—there's a fella name of Bill Blunt, he's a chechako that's s'posed to have murdered his pardner on Coal Crick. They found the man dead in his bunk with a bullet through his head, an' Blunt ain't be'n seen since. The man had be'n dead quite a while before they found him, so the chances are Blunt got away down the river. He's about forty, five-foot-eight, red hair an' whiskers."

Black John shook his head. "No. There's one miscreant we ain't be'n afflicted with."

"How about June Parsons, an' a young fella name of Clayt James? Seen anything of them?"

"Yeah, they showed up about ten days ago. Didn't stay long—jest long enough to get married."

"Married! Who married 'em?"

"Father Cassatt."

"Jack Parsons is shore goin' to be madder than hell when he finds out his daughter's married to that damn thief!"

"You figure this Clayt's a thief, eh?"

"Sure he's a thief!"

"Who says so?"

"I say so. And the evidence says so."

Black John grinned. "The law's hell fer evidence, ain't it, Downey. Did someone see him commit this felony? Er is yer evidence all circumstantial?"

"It's circumstantial. You know as well as I do that a witness can get up there on the stand an' lie like hell, but a good strong chain of circumstances can't lie."

"Seems like I rec'lect an old sayin' about a chain not bein' no stronger than it's weakest link."

"There's no weak link in this chain."

"Forged it yerself, eh?"

"Partly. Constable Stark did most of the field work, but I checked the evidence."

"This here Constable Stark—I ain't never run acrost him. Is he a pretty good man."

"Well—of course, he's a rookie. But he's a mighty promisin' one."

BLACK JOHN grinned. "What's so damn promisin' about a rookie that hits out, with another fella to help him fetch in his man, an' winds up with a blistered neck, an' no prisoner?"

Downey frowned. "All rookies have got a lot to learn. I was thinkin' of the evidence he gathered. Look at it reasonable, John. Those young folks evidently hit for Halfaday an' told you their side of the case an' I don't blame you for believin' 'em. I don't know this Clayt James. But I've known June Parsons ever sence she was a kid, an' she's a mighty fine girl. She prob'ly believes what this James told her. I don't know what their story is—but here's what we found out: in the first place, both Goose Benson an' James was courtin' June, so naturally there wouldn't be no love lost between them. One night a little over a month ago James shows up in the Tivoli 'long about midnight an' finds the Goose in there with a cryin' jag, so pretendin' to feel sorry for him, he takes him home. We've got witnesses that saw him ease the Goose out of the saloon.

"The next mornin' James goes into Herb Fortin's an' buys a twelve-hundred-dollar diamond ring, payin' for it in dust, an' give it to June Parsons. That might be all right except fer the fact that his claim is way up the Klondike on a feeder that ain't no good. Couple of other fellas abandoned claims above an' below him because they couldn't do no better'n wages—an' James told plenty of people around Dawson that that's all he was doin'.

"Now, you know damn well, John, that if a man ain't takin' out no better'n wages, with prices what they are, he ain't goin' to have no twelve hundred dollars to blow in on a diamond ring.

"A couple of weeks later the Goose come in her an' filed a complaint, claimin' that Clayt James had robbed him of two thousan' ounces of dust which was cached under a loose board in his floor. Inquiry, here an' there, showed that the Goose had be'n ridin' a winnin' streak, an' must have had considerable dust on hand. He claimed Clayt robbed his cache the night he took him home from the Tivoli an' put him to bed. He claimed he was so drunk he don't remember nothin' after his head hit the pillow till the next mornin'."

"Did he say why he waited two weeks before filin' the complaint?" Black John asked.

"Yes, he said that his winnin' streak petered down to jest about even play so that during them two weeks he never opened his cache, either to put in dust, or take it out until the mornin' he made the complaint, when he opened it to put some more dust in an' found it empty."

"Then how did he know that someone else hadn't got in an' stole the dust sometime durin' them two weeks?"

"He claims he kept his cabin locked every minute he was out of it, an' barred when he was in it. I examined his lock, an' it's a damn good one, an' it hadn't never be'n tampered with. On top of that, the Goose lives alone, an' he claimed that nobody whatever had be'n with him in the

cabin sence the night James took him home.

"So I sent Stark up to James's claim to see what he could find. The Goose went along—an', believe me, what they found was plenty. Not only they found nineteen hundred ounces of dust, which is only lackin' a hundred ounces of what the Goose lost—an' that ring cost seventy-five ounces—but they found the Goose's luck piece, a five-ounce, star-shaped nugget that fifty men could swear they'd seen him have. An' on top of that they found the moose-hide sacks that the Goose kept his dust in. An' there's no question about them bein' the Goose's sacks, because when Stark showed up with 'em I mixed 'em up with a lot more sacks right here on the desk, an' when Stark fetched in the klooch that made 'em, she picked out every one of the twenty-five sacks."

Downey paused and Black John nodded slowly. "So that's yer case, eh?"

"That's it. An' believe me—on that evidence, it ain't goin' to take a jury long to know what to do with Clayt James."

"Guess that's right," the big man admitted. "I never seen a jury yet that had any brains."

Downey flushed slightly. "What do you mean? I tell you we've got an iron-clad case here."

Black John grinned. "Didn't you ever see no iron with a crack in it?"

"Not with a crack wide enough for Clayt James to crawl through."

"We-e-el-l, mebbe yer right, Downey—mebbe yer right."

"Sure I'm right. But no matter how good a case we've got, we can't get nowheres without the prisoner. You said that James an' June didn't stay long on Halfaday. Where did they go?"

"Cripes, Downey—if I tried to remember where everyone went that ever hit Halfaday I wouldn't have time fer nothin' else."

"They may not be right on the crick," Downey said, "but I'm bettin' they ain't far from there. Jack Parsons said June didn't take any money with her, an' we know James didn't have any dust. We're holdin' about sixty ounces that Stark found in James's cabin, an' he didn't have none in his pockets."

"Yer holdin' the dust that was found in his cache, too, I s'pose?"

"Of course. We're holdin' it fer evidence."

"Goose claims it's his dust—s'pose he demands that you turn it over to him?"

"It wouldn't do him any good to demand it. We're holdin' it for evidence until the trial—or until we're satisfied that James has got clean away to the outside where we couldn't hope to pick him up."

Black John grinned. "Don't give up hope, Downey—don't give up hope. It might be that them two young folks is somewhere in the vicinity of Halfaday. I could not say. Anyway, like you p'inted out, it ain't likely they could get outside without no funds."

"An' about day after tomorrow I'll turn this Coal Crick job over to Peters an' hit out for Halfaday."

"Yer always welcome, Downey. We always work hand in glove with the police—you know that."

The officer grinned. "Get to hell out of here! I'm a busy man. I s'pose you still believe that James didn't rob the Goose's cache?"

"Oh, shore. I ain't heard nothin' to the contrary. Lookin' the two men over, I'm kinda glad I've got my money on Clayt James."

"I don't hold no brief for the Goose," Downey said. "I know he's nothin' but a tin-horn. But at that, he's got a right not to be robbed. Where you goin'—back to Halfaday?"

"Yeah. I'll be hittin' back. Guess I'll sort of fool around Dawson fer a day er so first—just sort of look them links in yer chain of evidence over. It might be I'll find a weak one."

"It won't be the first time you've gone to a lot of trouble to help someone out. But this time I'm afraid yer goin' to have yer trouble fer nothin'. But—good luck to you. If James is innocent I'll be jest as glad as you are to find it out. I sure hate to think of June Parsons married to a cache robber."

III

BLACK JOHN strolled down Front Street and stepped into the jeweler's to be greeted by the proprietor. "Hello, John! Come down for a session of stud? If I re-

member right, we took you for a few hundred ounces the last time you were down."

"Yer mem'ry does you credit. My luck shore run porely that time. Tonight it might be different."

"Something I can do for you? How's that chronometer I sold you last year?"

The big man drew the instrument from his pocket, glanced at it, and pointed to the clock on the wall. "Is that clock s'posed to be right?"

"You bet it's right."

"Then this chronometer ain't nothin' to brag about—it's lost a second an' a half—an' I ain't only had it nine months. But say, Herb, seein' yer mem'ry's so damn good, do you rec'lect a young fella name of Clayt James buyin' a diamond ring in here a little better'n a month back?"

"Sure I do."

"Sell it to him yerself?"

"No, my clerk sold it to him. But what's all the noise about that sale? Constable Stark was asking about it not long ago. James bought the ring, paid for it in dust—and that's all there is to it, far as I know."

"Was you here in the store at the time?"

"Yes—sat right back there at the desk talking with Goose Benson."

"H-u-m, the Goose, eh?" Black John grinned. "I s'pose you an' him was riggin' up some kind of a play to trim us pore suckers in a stud game, eh?"

Fortin laughed. "It's all right—as long as you smiled when you said it. Fact is, what the Goose wanted was an appraisal on a stone. Some chechako went broke the night before over in the Klondike Palace, and offered to sell the Goose the stone."

"Was it a phony?"

"No—little off color, but not so bad."

"You wouldn't know, I s'pose whether the Goose took notice of young James buyin' that ring?"

"Sure he noticed it. There don't much get by the Goose. You see, I happened to know that this lad was beating his time with Cap Parson's girl, June. Not that I think June Parsons ever gave a damn for the Goose, though she did go to a dance with him, now and then. But I noticed the Goose's eyes narrow and his face sort of flush when he saw James buying that ring. He probably made his own good guess what the lad was going to do with it. But what's the low-down on this ring business, John? First Stark asks about it, and then you."

"There's a damn dirty deal be'n pulled off, an' the police are barkin' up the wrong tree."

"I heard that June Parsons had skipped out with young James. But I didn't know it was a police matter."

"Well, it is. An' by the way, Herb—if you should hear some loud honks floatin' down through the hills, one of these days, it might be the Goose hollerin' fer help."

LEAVING the jeweler's, Black John made a round of the saloons, winding up at the Tivoli, where he found Goose Benson standing at the bar, drinking alone. "Hi, Goose!" he greeted. "Throw that one into you an' have one with me. How they comin' these days?" You takin' the boys fer what they've got?"

The gambler filled his glass from the bottle the bartender set before them, and shook his head dejectedly. "No. Fact is, they've taken me for about everything *I've* got—except the dust the police are holding."

"What's the police got to do with it?"

"Didn't you hear about me getting robbed?"

"Robbed?"

"Sure—robbed of two thousand ounces I had cached under my floor."

"Tough luck. Any idea who got it?"

"Sure I know! A young guy named Clayt James. I was soused one night in here and James took me home and put me to bed. I was dead to the world, and he somehow found my cache and made off with the dust. Constable Stark and I went to his claim on a feeder up the Klondike and got the goods on him—got the dust and my luck piece out of his cache—all but about a hundred ounces he'd blown in for a ring for June Parsons. We even found the sacks I kept my dust in where he'd hid 'em in the brush. When we were bringing him in, he got away, and before we got back here he'd skipped out with June."

"How'd you an' Stark locate his cache?"

"We didn't have to. When Stark told him he wanted to look his dust over, he took us to his cache."

"Kind of a dumb thing to do, wasn't it?

He ort to have known that plenty of folks could identify that luck piece."

"I don't think he knew the luck piece was in there. The way I figure it, he probably waited till dark to dump the dust in his cache, and when he poured it out of the sacks into his box, he didn't notice the luck piece."

Black John nodded. "That's prob'ly the way of it. But how-come you had yer luck piece in yer cache? I thought you always carried it in yer pocket."

"Well, sir, I'll tell you about that. You know gamblers are s'posed to be superstitious, and I guess most of us are, one way or another. I won that star-shaped nugget in a game in Whitehorse, one night. A fellow tossed it into a pot that had been raised back and forth before the draw—and me with a pair of kings. One of the raisers drew two cards, and I got a hunch that he was riding three aces, so I busted my kings and drew to an inside straight, and, by God, I hooked the jack—right in the middle—and won the pot! It turned out my hunch was right. The guy in front of me didn't help his three aces, and the one behind me drew two cards to three queens, and caught a king an' a seven. If I'd drawn three cards to my pair, I'd of caught that third king and lost my shirt.

"So I kept the nugget fer a luck piece. I'd pull it out and lay it among my chips in a game till it got to be a kind of a habit, like washing your face in the morning. But I never really believed it brought me luck, one way er another.

"Then, a while back, I was talking with a fellow over in the Klondike Palace and happened to mention that I was riding a winning streak, and he made the crack that if it wasn't for my luck piece I'd be in a hell of a fix. I told him he was nuts—and he offered to bet me a thousand that if I'd quit carrying it fer a month, I wouldn't have any luck during that time. I took him up, and shoved the luck piece in one of the sacks in my cache—and by God, my winning streak busted right then. I haven't made any losing to speak of—but I haven't been winning, either. And I'm sure as hell going to lose that bet.

"When I get it back, you can bet yer last blue one I'll carry it from then on! There can't anyone tell me there's nothing in a luck piece, when a man wins when he's got it with him, and quits winning when he leaves it home—and on top of that look at the luck it brought me by being in Clayt James' cache. Cripes, if it hadn't been there Stark couldn't have told it was my dust! Of course he had just what I'd lost, lacking a hundred ounces, which he'd held out to buy a diamond ring for June Parsons—but that couldn't of proved anything. Anyone might have that amount of dust in their cache—except everyone knew that James wouldn't have that much, being as his claim is only paying just about wages."

"Guess that's right," Black John agreed. "An' this dust of yours that the police are holdin'—is that the dust they found in James' cache?"

"Sure—and my luck piece along with it! And they won't turn it back to me till they pick James up and have his trial. They're holding it for evidence."

"An' you're about broke without it, eh?"

"That's right. I haven't got enough to sit in any game, except the damn limit games the chechakos play down at the Palace. I wish to God the police would locate James and git his trial over with. No one's seen hide nor hair of him since that night he kicked the campfire in Stark's face and lit out with June Parsons."

BLACK JOHN winked, knowingly. "An' I'll slip you the word that the police ain't goin' to find him very quick, neither."

"What do you mean? Do you know where he is?"

"Shore, I do."

"Then, by God, he must be up on Halfaday, and I'm going right over and slip Downey the word!"

"Keep yer shirt on, Goose. You ain't goin' to do no sech a damn thing."

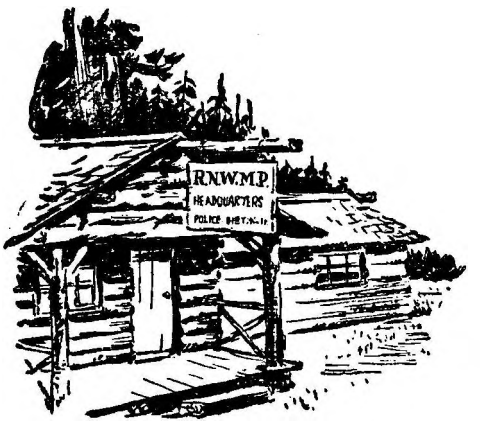
"I want my dust!"

"Shore you do. An' we don't want no damn cache robbers on Halfaday. But we don't want no police snoopin' around there, neither."

A man who, for the past five minutes, had been seated at one of the card tables across the room impatiently rattling a newspaper, now caught Benson's eye and beckoned to him with the jerk of a finger. Black John recognized him as one, Dog Face Bleeker, a shady character who hung about

Cuter Malone's notorious Klondike Palace, eking out a precarious living by frisking the pockets of drunken chechakos.

The Goose frowned and turned to Black John. "Hold on a minute till I see what that coot wants." Crossing to the table he scowled and shook his head as the man whispered into his ear. But the man persisted, and finally the Goose drew a roll from his pocket, stripped off a couple of bills and passed them to the other who accepted them under evident protest after much whispering on the part of the Goose, who returned to the bar as the man slunk from the room.



"Trouble with my business," he confided to Black John, with a wry grin, "every damn bum in camp tries to borrow money off me. They figure a gambler's money comes easy, and they're always making a touch."

Black John grinned. "You don't have to loan it to 'em jest because they ask for it. I never figured that big-heartedness was one of your failin's."

"Oh, the damn bums are here, and they have got to live, somehow. Take Bleeker, there—he's a pretty good man in the bush, if you get him away from the hooch. I had him along on a trip I made, one time, and he did all right. I'm not worth a damn in the bush, myself.

"But getting back to Clayt James—like I said, I need that dust the police are holding out on me, and I can't get it till after James' trial. But if he's up on Halfaday, and you don't want the police to go up there, how will I ever get the dust?"

"It makes it mean for quite a lot of the boys to have the police snoopin' around on the crick, so we don't encourage 'em to come up there. But there ain't nothin' to hinder you comin' up there an' fetchin' James back."

"Me!"

"Shore. You claim it's your dust he stole. An' you claim you can't get it back till James stands trial. You bet, if it was my dust, I'd go get him no matter where he was at!"

Benson frowned. "I'm not worth a damn in the bush. I probably couldn't find Halfaday Crick. And after I got there I'd have a hell of a time bringing him back. S'pose he'd tip over the canoe er something?"

"There ain't nothin' to hinder you fetchin' someone else along to help you take him back—someone that's pretty good in the bush. Shorely you must know someone that would help you if you'd make it worth his while—someone that mebbe you have done a favor—like loanin' him money, er somethin'. Like I said, we don't want no damn cache robbers on Halfaday. Likewise, we don't want no women there, neither. If someone would come along an' take 'em off our hands he'd be doin' us a favor."

The Goose's eyes lighted and he banged the bar with his fist. "By God, I'll do it! Bleeker, the guy that was just in here—he'll go along. And—what you said about women—is June up there with James?"

"Shore she is. You claimed they skipped out together, didn't you? Sort of seems like, from somethin' she let drop, that she's sorry she ever had anything to do with a damn cache robber."

"She is, eh? Well, she ought to be. Now maybe she'll listen to reason. She won't hold her head so high after this." The man paused and winked. "By the time she gets back to Dawson, she won't—by a damn sight. I've got to rustle around and get holt of a canoe and some grub, and a tent, and tell that damn Bleeker he's got to stay sober, and—"

"Mebbe Bleeker won't go," Black John suggested.

"Oh, he'll go, all right! Yer damn right he'll go when I have a talk with him. But, like I was going on to say—it might take me a couple of days to get organized, and

if you'd be ready to pull out by then, we could all go up together."

Black John shook his head. "Can't do it, Goose. Fact is, there's some matters on the crick that needs my attention. I'm pullin' out fer Halfaday, right now. But you come along quick as you can make it. I'll be lookin' for you at Cushing's Fort."

IV

EARLY one afternoon, some ten days later, Black John stepped into Cushing's saloon to be greeted by the somber-faced proprietor, who set out bottle and glasses. "So you come back, eh? I'll bet Downey never told you this here Clayt James ain't guilty."

"No, he claims he is."

"Any damn fool would know that, jest hearin' him talk. If you'd listened to me you'd got saved the trip. Did you tell Downey he was up here?"

"Hell, no! It's jest barely possible he might of gathered from somethin' I let slip, that Clayt might be in the vicinity. Anyways he claimed he was comin' up an' look around in a couple of days."

"It would be all right if we could git Clayt back this side of the line about the time Downey gits here. We don't want no damn cache robber on Halfaday. Er mebbe we'd ort to call a miner's meetin' an' hang him."

"You forget, Cush, that his crime, if any, was committed on the Klondike, an' not on Halfaday, an' is therefore outside our jurisdiction. You seen One Armed John today?"

"Yeah, he's out back guttin' a string of fish I bought off him."

Black John downed his drink and turned toward the door. "Leave the bottle out. I'll be back directly," he said, and stepped from the room.

"Hello, John," the one armed one greeted as he wiped the blade of his knife on a handful of leaves. "Thought you was down to Dawson."

"Jest got back. I've got a job for you. If you do it right there's an ounce a day in it—if you don't, you'll wish to God you had."

"What kind of a job is it?"

"It's one that don't require no manual labor, an' damn few brains. All you got to do is to throw yer blankets an' three four days grub into yer packsack an' go down to Olson's old shack an' camp there till Goose Benson an' a fella name of Bleeker come along. They'll likely stop an' ask you if this is Halfaday Crick, an' how to get to Cushs'. You invite 'em to stop off fer a b'ilin' of tea, er some sech excuse. Here's a bunch of five-dollar bills—ten of 'em, an' you'll notice if you look clost that each one of 'em's marked with a dot of ink right on the bottom of Abe Lincoln's ear. Now I want you should have them bills in yer jacket pocket in sech a way that the ends of 'em'll show. When Bleeker an' the Goose get all out you pull of yer jacket an' toss it down, then go after an armful of wood, er a pail of water, an'—"

"Do you mean Dog Face Bleeker—him that hangs around Cuter Malone's?"

"The very same."

"By cripes, if he sees them bills he'll have 'em 'for' I could git back! Dog Face he's the damndest thief in Dawson!"

"That's a chanct we've got to take. If he should so far ferget himself as to commit a theft on Halfaday, he'll jest have to stand the consequences, that's all. But mind you—if he does steal them bills, don't say nothin' to 'em. Pretend you don't even notice they're gone. When they pull out fer here, you hit up by the foot trail, an' lay there in the brush till they come in the saloon, here. Then five, ten minutes later, you come bustin' in all out of breath an' accuse them two parties of robbin' you of them bills. That's all. A miner's meetin' will take over at that p'int. You got it, have you?"

"Shore I've got it! An' I'm tellin' you a damn good hangin' won't hurt Dog Face none—all the drunk chechakos he's robbed!"

WHEN Black John reentered the saloon Cush regarded him with a frown. "This here jewishdiction yer allus talkin' about—I've saw you stretch it before now to take in other cricks besides Halfaday."

"W-e-e-l-l, I'll admit that in some cases where the locus of the crime was in contiguous territory, an' there didn't seem to be no mitigatin' circumstances—"

"Listen here—locusts, an' all them kind of territories, an' mitigatin' circumstances,

an' all the other big words you kin think up don't mean a damn thing except that you'll call a miner's meetin' on someone if you want to—an' you won't if you don't! What I claim—stealin's stealin', no matter if it's on this crick er the Klondike er wherever it is, an' what's more we don't want no damn cache robbers on Halfaday!"

The big man nodded. "I guess yer right, Cush. Tell you what you do, when the boys drop in this evenin', you tell 'em to pass the word up an' down the crick that there'll be a miner's meetin' day after tomorrow afternoon. Like you say, we don't want no cache robbers on Halfaday."

V

TOWARD the middle of the afternoon of the second day thereafter two men stepped into the saloon where a dozen or more of the residents of Halfaday stood drinking at the bar. One of them addressed Black John. "Well, we got here, all right."

"Damn if you didn't," the big man replied, and turned to the others. "Boys, meet Goose Benson, an' Dog Face Bleeker, from down Dawson way." The introduction having been acknowledged, he made room for the two. "Fill up," he invited. "The house is buyin' one."

After the glasses were filled Benson's glance swept the room. "Nice place you've got up here," he said, addressing Cush. "Always figured on drifting up and looking it over sometime. Must do a rushing business, with a crowd like this right in the middle of the day."

"Mostly they come in nights," Cush replied. "Fact is, we're aimin' to hold a miner's meetin'."

"Miner's meeting! By God, I've heard how you hang folks, up here! Who you going to hang?"

"Oh, a damn cache-robber!"

"Cache robber!" exclaimed Goose, and turned to Black John. "Hey, John—you can't do that! If you hang him, how the hell could I take him back?"

"It ain't who yer thinkin' about, Goose," the big man replied. "It's another."

"Oh. Well, then I'm glad I got here in time. I'd sure like to take in one of these hangings I've been hearing about."

"You will," replied Black John. "But don't blame no one but yourself, if yer disapp'inted in the results."

Before the other could reply, One Armed John burst into the room. "Hey—I be'n robbed!" he cried, panting for breath, as he pointed toward the two newcomers. "An' there's the damn cusses that done it!"

"Robbed?" Black John asked. "Robbed of what?"

"Fifty dollars—that's what! Yessir—ten five-dollar bills I had in my jacket pocket down to Olson's old shack. Them two come along an' wanted to know is this here's Halfaday Crick, an' where's Cush's at, an' I told 'em to stop off fer a b'ilin' of tea, an' I throw'd off my jacket to fetch a buckit of water, an' I made the tea, an' we drunk it, an' they shoved off, an' after they was gone I seen where them bills was gone, too!"

Benson turned to Black John. "I hope you don't think I'd pick a guy's pocket for a lousy fifty dollars!"

"No, Goose, I don't believe you'd stoop to no sech pifflin' theft. But how about Dog Face?"

"It's a damn lie!" Bleeker cried.

'H-u-m. You got any bills on you—five-dollar bills?"

"Shore I have! I fetched 'em along with me. That don't prove nothin'. One bill is jest like another."

"How about it, On Arm?" the big man asked. "Could you tell them bills you claim you lost from any other five-dollar bills?"

"Yer damn right I kin! Every one of them bills has got a dot of ink right in under Abe Lincoln's right ear!"

Black John smiled. "Okay, the case seems simple enough. If you two men are innocent, you won't object to bein' searched. I might add that if them marked bills is found on one of you, he will be tried fer robbery, right here an' now, an' in case of conviction, he'll be hung, forthwith."

There was a sudden commotion as Dog Face Bleeker made a dive for the door, but was overtaken in midfloor and dragged back to the bar.

WITH the attention of the others focused on Bleeker, Benson caught Black John's eye and with a wink and a jerk of his head sought to draw him aside. Ignoring the signal the big man thumped the bar with his fist. "You all heard One Arm

John claim he was robbed, an' you heard Dog Face admit he had some five-dollar bills on him, an' you saw him make a break fer the door. This act would tend to cast suspicion on him, nevertheless, bein' as both him an' the Goose, here, had an equal chanct to steal them bills, it ain't no more than right that both of them should be held ontil one is proven guilty." He turned to Benson. "You've got no objection I s'pose, to bein' detained, pendin' Dog Face's trial? Of course, if he should be found guilty, that would clear you of any suspicion of guilt in this case."

"I've got no objection," Benson said.

"Okay. Then you come with me, an' I'll slip you into the hole until this case is disposed of."

"What's the hole?"

"It's a small room we've got under the storeroom floor fer the convenience of sech parties as we deem it advisable to detain, fer one reason or another. Come on, I'll show you."

In the storeroom, as Black John raised the trapdoor, Benson whispered in his ear. "Dog Face got those bills, all right. I saw him slip 'em out of the one armed guy's pocket when he threw down his jacket to fetch that water. I'd rather not testify against him, though. It would look like a dirty trick. But you won't make any mistake if you hang him."

The big man nodded. "Hell, anyone could tell that jest by lookin' at him. Here you are—slip down in there. I'll let you out after we dispose of Dog Face."

The man reached into his pocket and handed the other a roll of bills. "Here's every damn cent I've got on me—just to show you I'm clean. They're all big bills—thirty thousands, and twenty hundreds—not a five in the roll."

Black John regarded the money in his hand. "Thirty-two thousan', eh? That's quite a roll, fer anyone that claimed he was practically broke the day I left Dawson—an' you must of left a couple of days later to get here today."

"Yeah, but that same night you left, I got in a game and my luck turned."

"In one of them chechako limit games, down to the Palace? That's the only kind of a game you claimed you could get into till Downey turned over that dust."

"No—that is, I started in on a limit game and ran my roll up to enough to go over to the Tivoli and sit in a real game. My luck was still running an' I cleaned up on the boys. Mebbe you better hang onto that roll fer me while I'm here on Halfaday, John. There's talk about most of the boys up here being outlaws, an' I'd hate like hell to lose it."

"Okay," the big man replied, shoving the roll into his pocket, and as Benson disappeared into the hole, he lowered the trap, and rolled a barrel of pork onto it.

Returning to the saloon, he rapped on the bar for order. "Miner's meetin' called to try alias Dog Face Bleeker fer robbin' One Armed John of fifty dollars in bills. You all heard what One Arm said, so it won't be necessary to hear it agin. I app'int Red John an' Short John to search the said Dog Face, an' if them marked bills is found on his person, we'll take a vote on his guilt. In the meantime, Pot Gutted John can cut a len'th of rope, an' be tyin' the knot."

The bills were found, and duly inspected, each man satisfying himself as to the existence of a distinct dot of ink under Lincoln's ear. The vote was unanimous for conviction. The condemned man's face was chalk white, and his knees trembled so violently that those nearest had to support him as Pot Gutted John advanced to place the noose about his neck.

Again Black John rapped on the bar for attention, as he addressed the trembling prisoner. "Dog Face, you've jest be'n convicted of the low-down, ornery, petty crime of pocket-pickin'. On Halfaday the penalty fer sech crime is hangin'. The findin' of them marked bills in yer possession is evidence enough so I didn't deem it necessary to call Goose Benson to testify what he told me there in the storeroom—that he saw you slip them bills out of One Armed John's jacket while he was gone for the water."

Sudden rage flared in the man's eyes, and two bright spots of color showed on his cheeks. "He did, did he? The damn two-timer!" The man's voice was shrill with fury as he continued. "He wanted to git me hung! He wanted me out of the way so he wouldn't have to split them nineteen hundred ounces Downey's holdin' out on him!"

As Pot Gutted John was about to slip the

noose over the man's head, Black John waved him back. "In view of what Dog Face jest uttered, I deem it advisable to suspend sentence on him."

"Suspend sentence!" Cush exclaimed. "He's guilty as hell, ain't he?"

"Oh, shore. There's no doubt of his guilt, whatever. But it just occurs to me that in baggin' a rabbit, we might be overlookin' a moose. It's like this—we've all of us shot a rabbit, now an' then, when we needed some meat—an' we got a rabbit's worth of meat when we done it. But there ain't none of us would shoot a rabbit, when we was stalkin' a moose. No more'n we'd shoot a jacksnipe when we was slippin' up on a goose. We'd git the snipe, but the goose would git away—an' that wouldn't be common sense."

Cush frowned. "What the hell's all this talk about mooses an' gooses, an' rabbits an' snipes got to do with hangin' a damn thief?"

"It's got plenty to do with it," Black John replied, and turned to face the prisoner. "You jest mentioned a matter of nineteen hundred ounces that the Goose was obligated to split with you. Could they be the ounces that young Clayt James stole out of the Goose's cache?"

"The kid never stole no ounces out of the Goose's cache! The Goose lied like hell. Them's the kid's own ounces. It's a frame-up."

"How do you know?"

"By God, I'd ort to know! I was in on it. An' now the damn double-crosser would git me hung so he won't have to give me my cut."

"You don't want him to get away with it, do you?"

"Hell, no! But what kin I do? You boys has got me dead to rights. I h'isted them bills, all right. The one armed guy was gone after water, an' them bills stuck out of his pocket—why the hell wouldn't I h'ist 'em? I never figgered the Goose would squawk. I never figgered he'd dast to!"

"Well, he did. An' he further added that we wouldn't be makin' no mistake in hangin' you—which is ondoubtless the truth. However, I'm makin' you a proposition. If you'll come clean—tell us all you know about the framin' of young Clayt James, an' repeat the information to Downey, we'll refrain from carryin' out the sentence of this meetin'. It's up to you, you've got yer choice—squawk er hang. It's all the same to us."

"By God, I'll squawk! He tried to git me hung—why the hell wouldn't I? It's like this—the Goose come to me one day, an' he says how he seen some chechako pay twelve hundred dollars in dust fer a diamond ring, an' how if he could afford to do that he must have plenty of dust in his cache. He claimed he wornt worth a damn in the bush, but if I'd throw in with him we could foller this chechako to his claim an' lay around till we located his cache, then we could knock it off—an' go fifty-fifty on the dust.

"So I rustle an outfit, an' next mornin' we foller this guy to his claim which it's three days up the Klondike on a feeder.

"He's prob'ly took more dust to town than what he needed, 'cause he went straight to his cache an' dumped some dust out of his poke in it. We waited till he got busy cookin' his supper an' slipped around to his cache, an' the Goose lifted out the dust, which there was better'n a hundred pound of it loose in a chawin' terbacker box. The Goose he squats there lookin' down at the dust, an' I jerks out a heavy canvas sack I'd fetched along an' tells him to dump the dust in an' we'd git to hell outa there.

"But the Goose jest squats there lookin' at the dust. Then, all to once, he sets the box back in the cache an' lays the rock cover back on. 'I got a better idee,' he says, 'come back here in the bresh an' I'll tell you.' 'What the hell kind of an idee is better'n grabbin' off more'n a hundred pound of dust?' I says—figgerin' he's mebbe gone nuts, er somethin'. 'Shet up, you fool!' he says, 'an' slip back here a ways an' I'll tell you.'

"So we goes back in the bresh a ways an' he says 'it's like this—this guy has beat my time with a skirt down in Dawson,' he says. 'I figgered if I could rob his cache of every damn ounce he had, she'd mebbe throw him over, not wantin' to marry no pauper. But I jest got to thinkin' that she might marry him anyhow, specially as he'd still have the claim, which must be a damn good one er he wouldn't of had that much dust in his

cache. But she's the kind of a dame which if she thought he's a crook she'd give him the air so quick it would make his head swim. We'll go back to Dawson,' he says, 'an' I'll cash in my dust fer bills, an' we'll fetch the sacks my dust's in up here an' hide 'em near his cache so it'll look like he hid 'em there, an' to make the play good, I'll stick my luck piece in under the dust in his cache. Then we'll slip back to Dawson an' I'll put up a holler that he robbed my cache of a couple of thousan' ounces. The play'll look good, because he had the chanct to jest the night before I seen him buyin' that ring. I was kind of soused in the Tivoli, that night, an' this guy come in, an' seein' I had a cryin' jag, he eases me out of the Tivoli an' takes me home. I kin claim I had two thousan' ounces cached in under my floor along with my luck piece, an' he must of got it.

" 'Then I'll come up here with the police, an' when they find them sacks an' my luck piece in the cache, he won't have a chanct in the world of beatin' the rap. Besides that, we ain't got nothin' to worry about. If we'd take the dust now, he'd put up a hell of a squawk when he found his cache had be'n robbed—an' the police might hook us up with the job. But this way, all we've got to do is set tight, an' the police theirselves'il hand the dust over to us. God,' he grinned, 'that'll be good—the police handin' us the guys dust—an' him doin' time fer stealin' mine!'

"I seen where it was a good idee, all right, but I told him I was broke an' didn't want to wait till after the trial to git holt of the dust. But he claimed he'd stake me to what I needed until the police handed over the dust.

"So we hit back to Dawson an' got them sacks an' went back to the guy's claim an' the Goose slipped the luck piece in the cache an' hid the sacks clost by. Then we hit fer Dawson an' he made his squawk about gittin' robbed, an' him an' a rookie constable went back up to the guy's claim an' found the Goose's luck piece where he'd planted it in the cache, an' found them sacks where he'd planted 'em. So the constable arrests the guy an' fetches the dust along.

"Then, comin' back, between the two of 'em the damn fools let him git away, an' I've shore had a hell of a time gittin' any money out of the Goose—like he promised to stake me to. Cripes, every time I hit him fer some so's I kin set in a game over to the Palace, he augers, an' squinches around like I was pullin' his teeth, an' then shucks out about half what I hit him fer. You'd think it was charity I was beggin' fer, instead of my own dough that I'd earnt fair an' square.

"Then that same day I seen him an' you there in the Tivoli, he come to me an' says how you slipped him the word that this here guy that got away was up on Halfaday Crick, an' you'd turn him over to us if we come up here an' get him. I wanted he should send the police after him, but the Goose claimed you fellas up here didn't want no police nosin' around the crick, an' if one come up here after him, you'd hide him out on him, an' we wouldn't never git holt of the dust they're holdin'. So I

come along—an'," he added disconsolately, "I guess you boys knows the rest."

"An' will you repeat this story to Corporal Downey, the same as you've told it to us—so he'll have a clear case agin the Goose?" Black John asked.

THE man fidgeted and glanced about him uneasily. "But, hell—if I do that, Downey'll prob'ly pinch me. He might figger I was mixed up in it somehow."

"He might, at that," Black John replied. "So we might as well go ahead with the hangin' an' git it over with." He turned to Pot Gutted John. "Slip the noose on, John, an' toss the rope over the rafter."

"Hey—hold on!" the man's voice was shrill with terror. "Git away with that

rope! I'll squawk. I'll tell Downey. All he kin do is stick me in jail!"

"Okay," Black John said, and allowed his glance to travel over the faces of the others. "Owin' to the fact that this prisoner, to wit, alias Dog Face Bleeker, has of his own free will offered to give information to the police that will ondoubtless convict Goose Benson of a low-down piece of skullduggery, it would seem the height of folly to hang a fifty-dollar thief an' let a thirty-thousan' dollar thief go free. Therefore it is the will an' sense of this meetin' that the verdict rendered a few minutes ago, be changed to not guilty. All in favor signify in the usual manner—an' anyone votin' 'no,' will be dealt with accordin'ly."

The reversal having carried, Black John continued. "I'll app'int Red John an' alias Jeff Lincoln to conduct the said Dog Face Bleeker from this room an' hold him in readiness jest outside the door, to be produced instantly, when called fer.

Stepping into the storeroom, the big man raised the trap door, and called to Benson who ascended the ladder with alacrity.

"Is the hanging over with?" he asked, his eyes blinking as they accustomed themselves to the light.

"There wasn't no possible doubt about his guilt. The verdict of the miner's meetin' was carried out in a satisfactory manner."

"Like I said, John, you didn't make any mistake in hanging Dog Face. Not only he's a damn low-lived sneak thief—but he's the damndest liar that ever lived. Did he—er—have anything to say? Before you hung him, I mean? I got to thinking in there that he might make up some damn lie about me—might figure he'd sort of get even with me for getting him up here—er something."

"Oh, he didn't say no hell of a lot. What he did say was to the p'int, though. Let's step into the saloon. You look like you need a drink."

AS THE two approached the bar Benson's eyes fixed on the noosed rope that Pot Gutted John still held in his hand. "Is that the rope you hung him with?" he asked. "Can't say as I'd enjoyed seein' Dog Face hung, much as he needed it. When you know a fellow that way, you somehow wouldn't like to see him hung. But you claimed you were going to hang some cache robber, John—I'd sure like to get in on that hanging."

"You'll get in on it, all right," Black John replied. "But don't blame us if that one's got a personal angle to it, too."

"You mean Clayt James? Hey, John, you can't hang him. By God, if he don't get back to Dawson, I'll never get that dust!"

"He'll get back to Dawson, all right. Don't you worry about Clayt. The fact is, Goose, puttin' it blunt—Dog Face claimed that this yarn you told the police, an' told me down in Dawson, about Clayt James robbin' your cache is a lot of hooey. Accordin' to him, your cache never was robbed—an' on top of that you an' him follored Clayt up to his claim fer the purpose of robbin' his cache, an' then you changed yer mind, made a trip back to Dawson, traded yer dust fer bills, an' took the empty sacks back to Clayt's claim an' hid 'em in the brush near his cache. Then you planted yer luck piece in the cache, an' went back to Dawson an' reported to the police that you'd be'n robbed, figgerin' that by makin' Clayt out a thief, you'd have plain sailin' with June Parsons, an' get Clayt's dust to boot."

"I told you Dog Face was the damndest liar that ever lived," Benson cried. "But," he added, glancing about him, "even if it had been true—what would you care? According to the talk, you boys up here claim that whatever a man did before he come to Halfaday is none of your business, just so he don't try to pull anything here on the crick."

"Yer information is correct, Goose. But if Dog Face had gone to Downey with what he told us a few minutes ago, you'd be in a hell of a fix."

"That might be. But the way things are, he didn't tell him. And now he never can tell him."

"That's too bad, in a way," Black John said. "While the framin' of James *per se*, ain't none of our business, the fact that you come up here to take him back under false pretenses gives the play a local angle. If Dog Face had wanted to squawk he wouldn't have had long to wait. We jest got word that Downey's headed up this way—comin' up huntin' Clayt James, most

likely. Chances is if he'd heard Dog Face's story, he'd have taken you an' him back instead of James. An' I don't mind tellin' you, Goose, that if he had, it would have be'n all right with us. Because if Dog Face's story is true, we don't want no sech a damn skulldug as you on Halfaday."

Benson flushed. "It don't make any difference now, whether it's true, or not," he said truculently. "With Dog Face out of the way, Clayt James is bound to be convicted on the evidence. And it won't do you boys any good to tell Downey what Dog Face said, either. It would only be hearsay evidence."

Black John nodded. "That's right, Goose. That's the trouble with the law. It disregards common sense an' sticks to evidence, no matter how faulty that evidence might be—like Stark's findin' yer luck piece in James' cache. Up here on Halfaday we don't think much of a damn skunk that would frame an innocent man. So, owin' to the fact that Downey's liable to show up very shortly, we deviated slightly from our routine procedure in sech matters, an' reconsidered Dog Face's case."

"You mean—you didn't hang him!"

"That's right. We deemed that he could better serve society alive than dead." Black John raised his voice. "Fetch the prisoner in, boys! The Goose would like to have a word with him."

THE crowd parted as Bleeker approached the bar, a man on either side of him. At sight of him Benson's face went livid with rage. "You damn fool!" he screamed. "What did you spill your guts for? You're in this as deep as I am. Whatever'll happen to me will happen to you, too!"

The other answered with a sneer, "Yeah? Well, after all, a hangin' didn't happen to me—like you wanted it should—tellin' Black John you seen me h'ist them bills so's they'd hang me an' you wouldn't have to split them ounces when the police turned 'em over. Shore I spilt my guts! An' when Downey gits here I'll spill 'em agin!"

A hand flashed from Benson's pocket and as Bleeker threw himself violently to one side a gun roared—a short murderous Derringer—and the man known as Jeff Lincoln stood for a moment staring stupidly before him.

Then his knees suddenly buckled and he crashed face foremost to the floor, as Black John wrenched the gun from the gambler's hand, and rapped the bar with it.

"Miner's meetin' called to try one, to wit, alias Goose Benson fer the murder of alias Jeff Lincoln. You all saw the play, so we don't need to call no witnesses. An' givin' the murderer a chanct to lie out of it, would be futile. All them in favor of conviction signify by sayin' 'Aye'." A chorus of "Ayes" filled the room, and at a nod from the big man, Pot Gutted John stepped forward, rope in hand.

Benson drew back against the bar. The color had drained from his face, and his staring eyes were fixed on the noose. "You can't hang me fer killin' that man!" he shrilled. "I was shootin' at Dog Face!"

"Shootin' at one man an' killin' another is no defense. Yer p'int ain't well taken. An' don't ferget that I warned you that the hangin' you was so anxious to get in on was liable to have a personal angle."

AFTER the sentence had been duly carried out Cush set out bottles and glasses. "This un's on the house," he said.

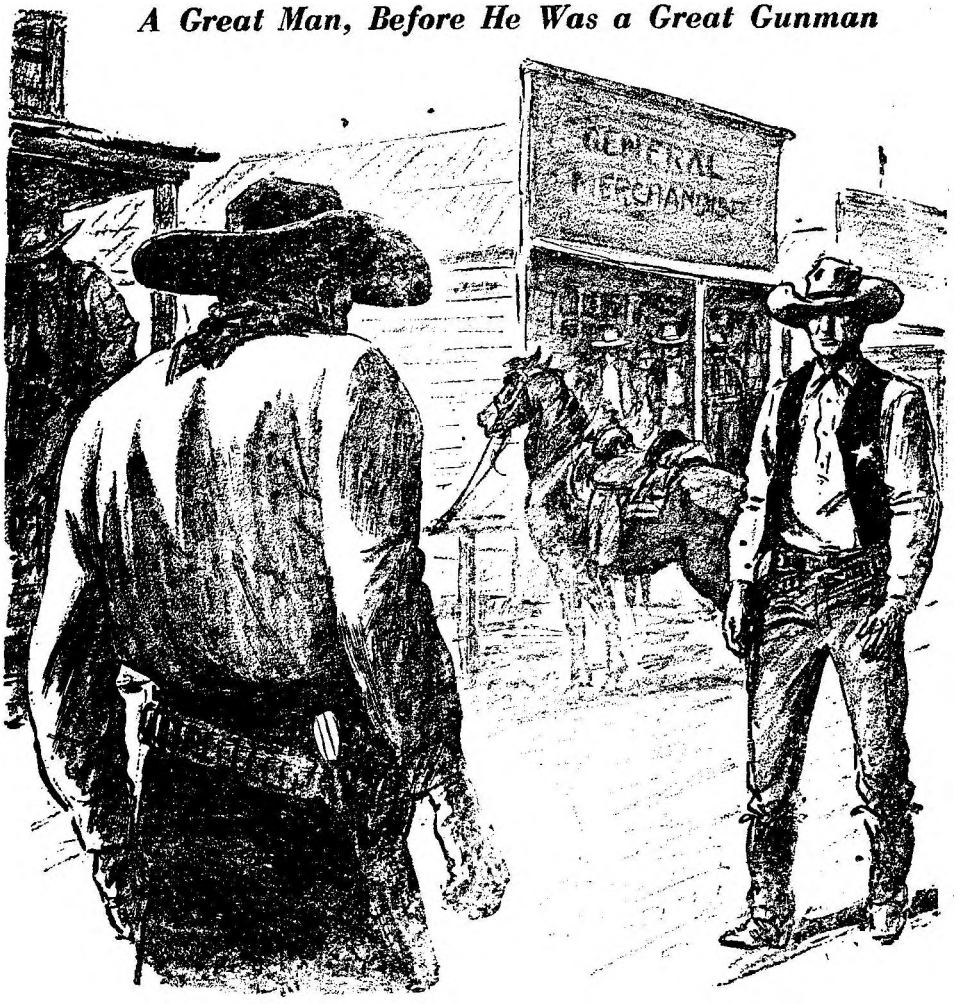
"Jeff wasn't no hell of a loss, at that," One Armed John opined, as the glasses were filled.

"N-o-o," Black John admitted. "He ain't much of a loss—but he was a damn good provocation."

A voice boomed loudly from the doorway, and the men turned to see Corporal Downey standing there, his eyes taking in the grim scene before him. "What the hell come off here?"

"A murder—an' an execution," Black John replied. "Come on in, Downey, an' wet yer whistle. Everything is lovely—an' the Goose hangs high."

A Great Man, Before He Was a Great Gunman



REPUTATION

By JIM KJELGAARD

A COLD wind sighed up the canyon, and whirled bursts of snow before it. Satterlee, the city sport up here for an elk hunt, gathered his mackinaw a little tighter about his throat and shivered in the lee of a huge boulder.

Louis Tremaine, Satterlee's guide, knelt beside the boulder and with great patience built up a small pile of sticks. He struck a match, shielded it with his hands, and touched it to the sticks. Fire crawled slowly through them, and then leaped. Louis arose to blow on his hands, and his Gallic smile flashed.

"It is very cold," he said.

"It is that," Satterlee agreed. "Can you rustle enough wood to last the night, Louis?"

"*Oui.* We shall pass a comfortable night. You are to be complimented on securing so fine an elk, *M'sieu.*"

Satterlee nodded, half in regret. "He was a game old cuss. I didn't think anything had

the courage to go as far as he did with a 220 grain slug through his lungs."

The night shadow deepened. The leaping fire cast its ruddy glow against the rock, and into the pines on the other side. Satterlee dug a whiskey flask from his mackinaw, and drank. He passed it to Louis. The wind howled up the canyon, and snow flew thickly. Again Satterlee took the flask from his pocket, and offered it to Louis.

The swarthy little guide sat beside the fire, poking it with a stick. Presently the deep thoughts that occupied his mind found an outlet in words:

"You spoke of courage, *M'sieu.* Would you like to hear a tale of courage?"

Satterlee nodded.

"Did you ever hear of Doc Morton?"

"The gunman?"

"The man," Louis corrected. "The great man first and the great gunman second. I will tell you of him.

"HE WAS my friend," Louis went on, "my bosom friend when friendship meant much. Of cold steel he was fashioned, and sheer nerve. Yet, within him beat a great heart, as I myself know and as he proved in the last gun fight he ever had.

"I have seen him, *M'sieu,* draw his gun from the back of a rearing horse and shoot the head from a rattlesnake that lay in his path. You know that before he attained the age of thirty he had killed thirty-one men in gun fights? I witnessed several of those fights. I have seen Doc Morton approach one who meant to kill him, warn his adversary to draw and shoot, and actually wait until the other had his gun in hand before he himself drew. He was not merely swift. He was miraculous, with an almost perfect co-ordination of mind and muscle. I might add that all those he killed were bad men who themselves would have killed others if he had not killed them. He had a great talent, and always it was arrayed on the side of law and justice.

"The last man he killed was a Mexican named Pablo Gonzales, himself a very streak of lightning with a gun. I witnessed that fight, and know about it what no one else does. But wait.

"You can perceive, *M'sieu,* how a man of such stature could not help but gather unto himself great fame and renown. But you must also appreciate something else. The West then was not tame and secure, as it is now. It was full of adventurers of every type, and most of them had no principles or scruples whatever. The only law was that of the gun, and he who used a gun most effectively was most powerful. Thus you may understand why many gunmen envied Doc Morton, and longed to try conclusions with him. Do I make myself evident? The man who bested Doc Morton in a gun fight would inherit all his laurels, become known and feared far and wide as the man who had killed Doc Morton.

"But of all those who longed to pit themselves against him, there was only one who dared.

"HIS name was Curley Jacks, and in his own right he was a very famous killer. There were fourteen notches on the handle of his gun, and Curley Jacks had not fought with farmers or homesteaders. No, he had gone against men who themselves lived by the gun, and he had triumphed. It was the sixth of June when Curley Jacks rode into Steerhead, entered the saloon, and announced that he was going to kill Doc Morton.

"I was in that saloon, *M'sieu,* and when I heard Curley Jacks boast in such a fashion I knew abject fear and terror. Doc Morton was my friend, and this Curley Jacks was as cold as a snake. He *was* a snake, though more deadly. And I knew that nothing could swerve him from his announced purpose of meeting Doc Morton.

"So, as soon as it was feasible, I fled from that saloon. I went to Doc Morton's office, he was then the marshal of Steerhead, and entreated him to flee. He had not had a gun fight or drawn a gun in two years, since he had killed Pablo Gonzales, and this Curley Jacks must have practiced intensely before coming in to fight Doc Morton. When I had finished my pleas, and as eloquently as I could, had beseeched Doc Morton to take himself to a place of safety, he laughed at me! That he did, laughed!

"'Louis,' he said, 'when this rip-snorter comes down the street I'll be waiting for him.'

"There was nothing more I could do, though I thought of taking a rifle, lying in ambush, and myself shooting Curley Jacks

when he came for Doc Morton. But to do that would have been to heap eternal shame upon the greatest man I had ever known. No, he must meet this man himself, and do the best he could when the time came to do something. I tried then to force myself to leave so that I would not be a witness. But it was as though I was rooted to the spot and could not leave. All I could do was crouch behind a freight wagon and wait.

"I saw Curley Jacks leave the saloon. He was walking very loosely, but very slowly, his eyes darting into every window and cranny as he came to it. He saw me behind the freight wagon, but I turned my head away and he gave me no further notice. There was only one quarry he wanted.

"Then I saw Doc Morton emerge from his office and, ah, *M'sieu,* he was magnificent! He stood very tall and very straight, both hands at his side and his gun in its holster. He seemed to be smiling as he stood there, and a great calmness sat upon him as he walked down the three steps that led from his office to the street.

"He walked slowly toward Curley Jacks. A hundred yards separated them, and that became fifty. But even in that moment, in spite of my great terror, I had reason to be intensely proud. There was no jot of fear in Doc Morton, no hesitation. Like a knight of old he walked, going forward to he knew not what, but going. And I swear that something not humanity or of earth went with him. It was an aura, *M'sieu,* a glow. As he unhesitatingly advanced, invincibility seemed to advance with him. Here, everything about him proclaimed, was a man who never had been and never would be defeated.

"I looked at Curley Jacks, and my heart seemed to cease beating. *M'sieu,* he had stopped in the road and was sweating! Yes sweating! I began to hope then because I knew that at last Curley Jacks was afraid. He had not been afraid when he came out of the saloon, or while the hundred yards that had separated them narrowed to forty feet. But now he was afraid, and it is like that with some men. For the first time he seemed to realize that he was facing Doc Morton, the greatest gunman of all. Doc Morton stopped before this frightened man, and his voice was very calm:

"'Are you looking for something, Curley?'

"It was then, *M'sieu,* that Curley Jacks broke completely. He began to tremble, sweat poured in rivulets from his face, and he tried to speak. But he could not speak. Doc Morton said:

"'You've got ten minutes to get out of town, Curley.'

"Then he deliberately turned his back on his man who had come to kill him and walked back to his office."

THE fire died a little, and Louis Tremaine threw a handful of sticks on it. He sat moodily staring into the leaping flame, his chin resting in his hands. Satterlee moved uncomfortably.

"I don't get the point," he said finally. "Wasn't this Jacks just a fundamentally yellow pup, backed down by Doc Morton's reputation?"

"Oui," Louis Tremaine said dreamily. "But that is only part of it."

"Why?"

"Pablo Gonzales," the guide said. "He was a mighty gunman in his own right. What only Doc Morton and I knew when he faced Curley Jacks was that he could not have shot if he had wanted to. Two years before Pablo Gonzales' bullet had paralyzed his right arm, and he hadn't moved it since."

ONE END CAVERN

By CLAY PERRY

Who Has Done a Vast Amount of Cave-Exploring Himself

THE beautiful Shenandoah Valley in Virginia and adjacent mountain country is a land of many caves, some of them famous, others as yet not fully explored. They offer to the cave crawler, ordinary, some thrilling pioneering sport and to the speleologist or "spelunker" as some call them, opportunities of rare scientific discoveries.

But this story starts over yonder at the foot of Black Rock Range where coal and limestone meet in the southern Appalachians. Here, in Sand Wash Run Hollow, lived a character known as Jumpin' Jim Jessup, a hardy mountain man. He was known personally to a few, but by reputation to many throughout the coal mining camps and towns down the Branch, because he was the inventor and manufacturer of a potent backwoods likker called Old Acorn Corn.

Jumpin' Jim Jessup had discovered a way of distilling moonshine from a mash made most of mast, which previously had been

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Jumpin' Jim Jessup Came Up Over the Range with His Squirrel Rifle Because He Heard There Was a War On. The Mystery Was How He Got Back

considered fit only for hawg feed, and which was extremely cheap because the raw—very raw—materials, or most of them could be scraped up off the ground from beneath the oak trees that grew abundantly in the neighborhood. Just what else Jim mixed and mingled with the fuming, bubbling concoction in his tubs, no one knew, but the directions that went with the distilled product called for draining it through a large hunk of corn pone before swallowing it, and then taking swift chasers of branch water to put the fire out.

This Old Acorn Corn likker seemed to circulate by the grapevine circuit which was the sole means of communication between the mountain men and the coal camps, and there were those who believed that Jumpin' Jim had a real grapevine pipeline from his still-house, in a secret place in the woods, through the hollow stems of which he let the likker trickle down to market.

This is probably an apocrhyphal tale, but somehow Jim managed to sell it, and no revenoors ever bothered him. He aimed a mean squirrel gun, and it was said that he could pick out the right or left eye of a chipmunk or starling at forty paces and call his shots. That beautiful gun was an heirloom from 'way back. It had shot a British general in the back during the Revolutionary War, and taught him severely not to try to run away from the mountain men.

NONE of Jumpin' Jim's folks in generations had ever come up over the Range into the eastern valleys, with their towns and cities and highways. They stayed home in Sand Wash Run Hollow, built them stills in the hills and let the rest of the world go by. Jumpin' Jim followed family tradition, and never came out but this one time. Somehow he heard that there was a war on and he up and clambered over the Black Rock Range with his squirrel rifle, to see about shooting some of the damnyankes that were said to have invaded the country from up Washington way. This was in '42 and Jumpin' Jim was only restrained from his self-appointed guerrilla raid by a sheriff and posse of six deputies, backed up by the State Guard.

Jumpin' Jim Jessup was an interesting sight to see when he was quieted down on parole and made to understand that the war was being fought, not here, but abroad.

JIM was paroled in custody of a former hill billy who had become civilized, and he told Jim the war was "all over Europe, Irope, Orope, Asia and the Cannibal Islands," and they could do practically nothing about it.

Jumpin' Jim wore a shag-bark hickory shirt, a one-gallus pair of pants that reached some distance below his knees, and well-seasoned, thick callouses on his feet. He also wore a shock of graying hair, and a beard that he had somewhat shortened for his journey by hacking off a foot of it with a sickle because it got in his way in the high winds along the Range. Now, when Jumpin' Jim found himself within the purlieus of civilization, so to speak, with no fighting to do, he looked about for a project worthy of his master mind and mettle, something to do that would be fit to tell about when he went home. The tales of Sand Wash Run Hollow had worn rather thin throughout the years. Such as the one about how Jumpin' Jim fed his wild, razor-back hawgs with the corn bread through which his likker had been dreened, and they would immediately rush off on a two-mile run to the Branch for a chaser. And they got such sharp razor-backs on this diet and exercise that they ruined whole groves of trees, leaning against them to rest and scratch their spines.

And the one about old Zip, Jim's 'possum hound, which got hold of some of the drenched corn pone that had been used as a sieve to remove some of the fusel oil and other unvalued ingredients of the Old Acorn Corn. That dog, they tell, started baying one night after chewing on the dunked pone, and bayed so loud he set up a new, big echo that bounced back and forth across Sand Wash Run Hollow with sound vibrations that started a loose rock rolling down the side of Stamp Steep Mountain, and which became an avalanche. Jim Jessup had clambered up the side of Stamp Steep, seeking to locate that new echo and had to turn tail and run and he kept just one jump ahead of it until it stopped, and turned around and found it had made a big dam across the Run, forming a new lake that never had been there before.

That was how he got his mountain monicker of Jumpin' Jim. He was retelling these tales to the oldish man to whom he had been paroled for a spell, and they discovered they

were relatives, only about ten times removed, and they begun to get real confidential. Jim's relative told some tales of the cave country. It seems he was a spelunker, that is, a cave hunter and crawler, or had been, but now he was retired.

HE TOLD Jim the hoary old story of a spelunker named Lloyd Cawlons, who had gone down in a crack in a standstone cliff one afternoon, leaving word with his family that he was hunting for a cave that he suspected might be at the bottom of the cleft. He never came back alive, and they went and cemented up the cleft solid, after getting his body out.

"And that was a lesson to other spelunkers which we never forgot," said Jim's aged relative, "and that is why nobody has ever found the other end of One End Cavern."

"Which is that and where is it?" inquired Jumpin' Jim, who was more or less of an amateur spelunker, himself, having his moonshine establishment just inside of a cave over in the Sand Wash Run Hollow country.

The aged relative told Jumpin' Jim that One End Cavern started right at the foot of the Black Rock Range in a thicket among some loose rocks, and that a party of scientific fellows from up Washington way had once gone into it. They had discovered that it had once been inhabited by a race of people that were not Indians, but pre-Indians, historically speaking, people who cultivated the soil and stored their crops in the dry cave, wove themselves moccasins or slippers and such out of stout reeds, the like of which could not be found anywhere in the country today, heated up their food by putting red-hot rocks into kettles and pans made out of big gourds or squashes.

"What become of them people?" asked Jim, his ears beginning to prickle and his nose to itch. "And where does the other end of that One End Cave be supposed to be?"

"Them people just seems to have vanished, leaving no trace except one little old skeligan of a girl that them science fellows found, all curled up on a straw bed as if she'd died in her sleep, all alone. The rest of them people is supposed to of found their way over into the back country, on 'tother side of Black Rock Range, where they was wiped out by the Indians."

"Hum!" commented Jumpin' Jim, his stiff beard bristling out like the straws in an old broom. "Then the 'tother end of One End Cavern, it mought be over in or near to Sand Wash Run Hollow. It could be. It's a-gettin' to be cold weather up in the mountains. Be purty tough travelin' overland in my summer clothes. My parole term is run out, an' I yearn to git home, much as I appreciate your hospitality. It mought be I could get back home by way of that there cavern. It'd be a sheltered short-cut, right under the Range. Show me to it."

JUMPIN' JIM'S aged relative demurred some, but Jim was a stubborn sort of fellow, afraid of nothing at all, on top of or under the earth. The story of Lloyd Cawlons and his tragic end, buried under a slide of loose rock hadn't scared him one whit. Besides, he had a powerful motive, other than what he said about taking a sheltered short-cut home. He had a sneaking suspicion that the other end of One End Cavern might be right where he had his Old Acorn Corn still works in the entrance to a cave in the side of Stamp Steep.

If this proved so and he pioneered a route under the Range in One End Cavern, he would have a new and very secret outlet for his potent product. He had discovered that the poor, benighted people that lived in the valley cave country on the east side of the Range were very, very dry. He was very dry, himself, after his long visit with his aged relative.

And so, to make a short story shorter, Jumpin' Jim Jessup got his relative to guide him to the known end of One End Cavern, and to lend him a miner's lamp, a spare supply of oil, some water in a canteen and some food in a sack. Besides which he had his squirrel rifle and some ball bullets and powder.

Some of the rest of the story was known and told only by the aged relative, who is now dead and gone. That is, such remainder of the true story as he could remember and piece together, for his mind failed towards the last. But it seems that he went in a little ways into One End Cavern with Jumpin' Jim Jessup, maybe, he estimated, fifteen or sixteen miles and the misery he had in one of his legs begun to bother him pretty bad. So far they had been able to walk right

along, standing up, over dry, almost smooth rock floors and the temperature was steady and moderate, though wintry winds blew cold outside. It was a real big cavern, once they got well into it. Unlike some of the better known ones with their decorations and drapings of stalactites and stalagmites and flowstone and dripstone and such, this One End Cavern was more of a sort of plain, walled tunnel. But here and there grew some fancy things like flowers, pushing right out of some cracks in the walls.

But they were not flowers of the vegetable kingdom, as Jumpin' Jim discovered, when he picked one or two in his hand and smelled and tasted them. They were mineral flowers; in fact they were pure epsom salts, and the aged relative said that Jim must have eaten a bit too many of them, for he had some trouble with his innards pretty soon, and he complained he was getting terribly thirsty, and not just for Branch water, either. He was more determined than ever now to continue his underground short-cut towards Sand Wash Run Hollow.

THEY got finally in as far as there were any marks of human beings having got to before them. The last marker was at about the seventeen-mile mark, a sort of natural stone monument on which some man had carved his name and date, and the date was forty years earlier.

They studied this marker for a long time and cast about in the great high chamber where it stood, for more sign, but found none, and decided the earlier spelunker had turned back after setting up the monument to himself. And then they came to a sort of maze of low, difficult passages where they would have to crawl flat on their bellies, and the aged relative didn't feel quite equal to that sort of thing and he decided he had better go back, else he might never get back, at his advanced age.

He left Jumpin' Jim, saying he would send a searching party into One End Cavern if he didn't get some sort of message from him within a week or so, but he died before the week was up after telling his story, which wasn't very well put together and was hardly believed by those who watched at his death-bed.

However, some word of it trickled out to some spelunkers over in Richmond, and they sent word to Washington about the fabulous, big One End Cavern which the aged relative had declared he thought might be big enough, altogether, to take in the Mammoth Cave and Carlsbad Cavern and have lots of room left over. The result was that a party of spelunkers and scientists came down the valley about a month later and found the known end of One End Cavern and went into it. They were all equipped with the most modern kind of lights, such as acetylene or carbine head-lamps, electric flashlights, and for extra safety, some old-fashioned kerosene lanterns, and of course, plenty of food, water, blankets and scientific instruments to measure the temperature, the altitude, the humidity, and to keep their course without wandering off into some side adit and getting lost.

It was a well-planned expedition, with its chief purpose to explore the big tunnel of a cave and find the other end of One End Cavern, not so much in the expectation of finding Jumpin' Jim Jessup, because the aged relative's death-bed story was more or less regarded as a fable or legend or something.

This party was in One End Cavern for three days and nights, traveling two-thirds of the time, at intervals, sleeping, or trying to, on the dry but very hard stone floor, listening in a silence so profound that it fairly beat into their ears, but hearing not a single sound save what they made themselves. Not even a bat-wing in motion disturbed the utter, dark stillness of the stygian spaces, not even an insect peeped or squeaked, not a snail or a lizard crawled, not a living, breathing, growing thing was to be found save the mineral flowers that grew out of the cracks in the walls.

At about the middle of the second day they had got in far, far past the stone monument, which they found all right, and so confirmed the aged relative's story to that point. But no footprints, fingerprints, scratches, scraps of discarded equipment or any mark of human passage could be discovered beyond that marker. Of course, they did not realize that a mountain man like Jumpin' Jim Jessup could worm his way through a canebrake or across a sand beach without leaving a trace, to say nothing of solid rock floors.

The leader of the party, a veteran spe-

lunker who claimed to have traveled five thousand miles underground in the course of twenty years of spelunking, made the decision to turn back. They had come over thirty miles, according to his and another man's pedometers not counting the several hundred yards of belly-crawling and squirming through tight places. Their food and water was running low, their light couldn't last much longer, they were very tired from some forty or more hours of rough travel and not very comfortable slumber, and still the other end of One End Cavern was not in sight.

They never did find it.

They got out all right, but it was a close squeak, because they got some seven or eight miles off the main route, into some mazes of side adits, and had to retrace their steps to pick up their own trail and backtrack it in a hurry to daylight.

As a result of the report of this spelunking party, which was duly filed in Washington, the Government sent down some officials and they made a brief survey and then they fenced off the known entrance and blocked it up, and the One End Cavern was taken over as a part of a Cave National Park, but not open to the public or anyone until after the war, if then. There was nothing in the official report about Jumpin' Jim Jessup, and nobody on the east side of the Range ever heard any more about him. But down in the coal mining camps and towns, along towards the end of winter, there began to appear again, after a long drouth, a little trickle of Old Acorn Corn likker from somewhere. Nobody but Jumpin' Jim Jessup ever had been able to make that potion out of acorn mash. Also, now and then some razorbacks would be seen by some hunter up near Stamp Steep, racing madly down towards the Branch and guzzling up water as if they had a fire inside of them.

Maybe, after all, Jumpin' Jim did find the other end of One End Cavern.

"The Silver Tombstone"

"You and your stars!" said **Johnny Fletcher** disgustedly to **Sam Cragg**—for the stars had told Sam they should head for California.

And here they were flat broke and flat-tired in the desert.

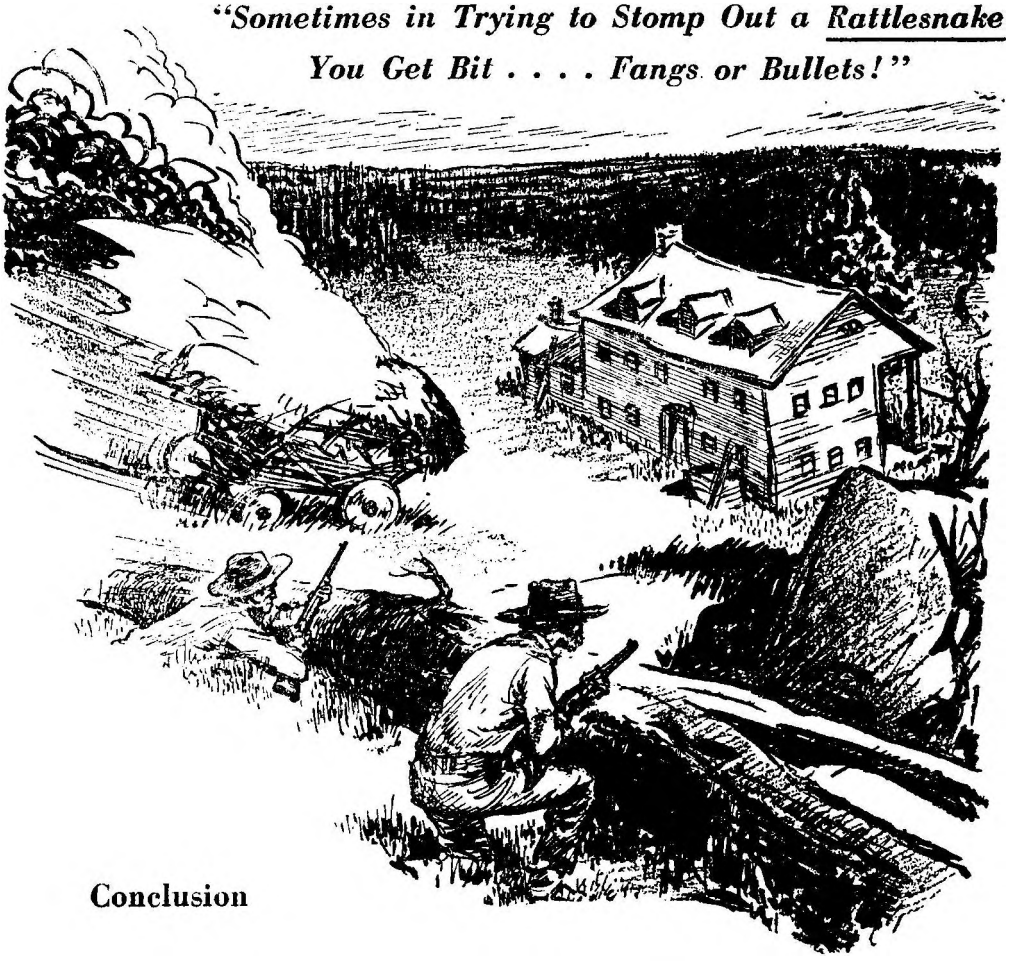
Then they were conscious of the fact that there was a dead man in the tonneau of their car.

And all that was before they even heard of the fabulous Silver Tombstone mine; the number of claimants for it induced Johnny to think maybe after all they'd come to the right climate.

by FRANK GRUBER

PART I IN THE NEXT SHORT STORIES

"Sometimes in Trying to Stomp Out a Rattlesnake You Get Bit . . . . Fangs or Bullets!"



Conclusion

PLANTATION GUNS

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN THE HOUSE OF HIS ENEMY

ANDY came down to the breakfast table with news. "Larry is not in his room. He must have gone out."

"Queer," Tom said, buttering a hot biscuit. "My six-shooter has disappeared."

Their father was startled. It flashed into his mind that the blow on the boy's head might have been more severe than Dr. Watkins had thought. It might have disturbed his thought processes.

"Did any of you hear him get up?" the colonel asked.

None of them had. This was a little odd. They were country people, and they rose at dawn. The youngest brother, used to more urban habits, was always the last to appear in the morning.

"Did he say anything about going hunting?" the planter inquired.

Tom shook his head. An idea struck him. "Tell you what. Hs doesn't know anything about shooting with a revolver

I was showing him a couple of days ago how to hold and aim one. He's out practicing. When Larry came here he was what out West they call a sure enough tenderfoot, but I'll say for him he learns fast."

Maxwell Harville was not quite satisfied with this explanation, but he went on with his breakfast. Five minutes later Mandy appeared with another plate of hot biscuits and the information that Mr. Hal Logan and Jes' Tolable were outside and wanted to see the colonel. The planter put down his napkin and walked out to the porch.

"I have come to tell you, sir, that yore son Larry is at Hillcrest," Hal said.

"What is he doing there?" the colonel asked, astonished. "And why didn't he come himself?"

"He's runnin' a fever, but Dr. Watkins says he'll be all right in a day or two. Right now he is in bed."

"Sick in bed? I don't understand. Why at Hillcrest? Why not at home, if he's going to be sick anywhere? He isn't out of his head, is he?"

"No, sir." Hal's eyes warmed. His impulsive enthusiasm broke through the calm with which he had set himself to tell the news. "Fact is, Larry Harville is the gamest man in Arkansas today—and about the best. That boy went into the Cache slough last night, right spang into the Labreu camp, and brought my father home alive."

The colonel was astounded. This was beyond belief. "But—how could he? First thing, he didn't know where the camp is. Second—"

Maxwell Harville's words failed him. There were so many other impossibilities flooding to his mind, barriers to an acceptance of this story.

"Jes' Tolable guessed where the camp would be," Hal explained. "And he sure is a wonder. They took me along on account of it being my father who was a prisoner."

Andy and Tom had come to the porch and were listening.

"You're tellin' us that the three of you went in and brought back Major Logan," Tom cried.

"That's what," Tolt said, grinning. He was very proud of what they had done and did not object to sunning himself in the general applause.

"Larry was wounded," his father said quickly.

"No, sir. He's all right, except for chillin' from wading in the slough so much." On Hal's face there was a thin momentary smile. "The Labreus are toting all the bullets that hit their mark. Jes' Tolable killed one fellow, and another was wounded."

"How in time did you do it?" Andy asked.

"We slipped up on them while they were asleep. Jes' Tolable and I covered Larry while he crawled into the camp and cut loose my father. Hell broke loose when my father stumbled and fell. One fellow heard him and jumped up shooting. Jes' Tolable drilled him. The others panicked and lit out. Then we came home. Larry was all in, so he stayed at Hillcrest. If he feels thataway, he'll be welcome all the rest of his life as a guest."

The Harvilles had never heard anything as amazing as this. They asked questions until the whole history of the night was before them. Tom and Andy felt defrauded that they had not shared in the adventure, but they realized that it would have been unwise to take a larger group to the camp. It would have greatly lessened the chance of a surprise.

A few minutes later word reached Rosemont from Cantrell that the Labreau gang had been seen by a farmer riding south between two and three o'clock in the morning. The man had been looking after a cow that had just calfed when he recognized the Gobbler in the moonlight at the head of the party.

COLONEL HARVILLE deputed his two sons and Tolt to go to Spook Point and bring out the dead man. Maxwell himself joined Hal and rode with him to Hillcrest. It was a strange sensation to be riding up the avenue to the house of his enemy beside the young man who had emptied his revolver at Andy on the courthouse square at Brandon. Yet in spite of his embarrassment he knew that the feud was forever dead and was deeply glad of it. His son Larry had killed it.

Mrs. Logan met him in the parlor and showed no evidence in her manner that the situation was awkward. She was pleas-

antly friendly, and when she spoke of what Larry had done there were tears in her eyes. She led him upstairs to the room where his son was lying.

"We have quite a hospital," Mrs. Logan said happily. She felt it was a small price to pay for having all her worries swept away at once. "But Rod is hobbling around already. Dr. Watkins says Larry will be well in a few days. And all my husband needs is a long rest and good nursing. These terrible men treated him very badly." She went into no particulars of what they had done.

Harville said that he hoped to see the major as soon as he felt well enough. After all that had occurred it would not be possible to harbor any more ill feeling. He was willing to be a good neighbor on any terms that her husband proposed.

When his father came into the room alone Larry was finishing breakfast in bed. Maxwell Harville could not keep out of his face the emotion that flooded up in him.

"You might have got killed, you crazy boy," he said reproachfully. "I never heard of a madder business than that of last night."

"Or of one that came out better," Larry added, smiling at him.

"Thanks to the good Lord." The colonel knew that he owed his son an apology for the thoughts he had harbored as to his pluck. But he was not going to make it. Some things were better unsaid. The boy had come through fine. Which was all that mattered. Larry would understand without a lot of words.

"You'll be glad to know that we are shet of the Labreus," he said. "The whole caboodle of them—all that are left—rode south last night. Headed for Texas, I reckon. One of these days the rangers there will clean them up." He looked down at his son, a gleam of mirth in his eyes. "They're paid to run down scalawags. You cain't do it all, boy—you and Hal and Jes' Tolable. Unless you want to traipse to Texas for another fling at them."

Larry laughed. "Not I. Not ever again. I've had enough—too much, in fact. I won't complain if I never see a gun any more."

"That's fine." His father looked around the pleasant bedroom with approval. "Any complaint with the way the Logans are treating you?"

"Not yet. Are you taking me home now?"

"Mrs. Logan says no. You're to stay here till you are well. I gather you are their wounded hero."

Larry raised an imploring hand. "Please. I can get along fine without that kind of talk."

MAXWELL had been sure his boy would take it that way. A right-thinking man could be happy because in time of peril he had shown valor, but unless he was a coxcomb any reference to what he had done must embarrass him. He could not help knowing that in the background shadowing all bravery there is fear, without which there cannot be courage, and that in the case of an imaginative man the borderline between the two may be very close.

Downstairs the colonel met on the porch the two Logan women and Rod. The latter had just limped out, supported by a colored man, and was resting on two pillowed chairs.

He said, "I hope you won't mind my not rising, Colonel Harville, account of this doggoned shoulder that still troubles me some."

"I hope it's doing well," Harville said.

"Fine." Rod laughed, taking the bull by the horns. "Looks like I won't have any Harvilles using me for a target either from now on. That boy of yores is a sure enough feud buster."

"Your brother Hal did his full share," the colonel mentioned. He added, in a burst of confession. "Fact is, I never did have my heart in it."

Rod was amused. He was a blunt man who usually said what he thought. "For a man whose heart wasn't in it you were shootin' mighty straight on the courthouse square that day," he said.

His mother was shocked. "Rod!" she reproved.

Maxwell Harville was smiling broadly. "That's all right, Mrs. Logan. We'll never get anywhere if we hush-hush this. Best way is to speak right out. I'm not positive about this any longer. I did wrong. Your son Hal and my boy Larry, with the help of these confounded Labreus, have brought

me to my senses. Looking back on it now, I cain't see why I ever was such a fool."

Diane said, in her low throaty voice, "I think we're all very happy that it is over."

"All will now be quiet along the Potomac," Rod said. "We won't even have the Labreus to practice on."

Mrs. Logan shuddered. "I hope I never hear of them again."

"You'll hear of them, Mother," Rod predicted. "Gobbler Lige will be news until he has been rubbed out." He added, vindictively, "I'd like another crack at him, for what he did to father."

"He and his gang will probably reach Texas, by lying up days and traveling nights," Harville hazarded. "But I don't think they will last long there. Like you, Mrs. Logan, I don't want to have any more truck with them."

Hal came out of the house, with a message from his father. If he was surprised to see Colonel Harville he gave no sign of it. He walked up to the visitor and shook hands with him.

"I read the other day that there is nothing new in life," Hal said. "The fellow that wrote it is daffy. When you and I shake hands that is new, Colonel."

"All one happy family," Rod murmured sardonically.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Colonel," Mrs. Logan said. "He is just as pleased as the rest of us but doesn't like to admit it."

"That's right," Rod said. "I'll be joining the church at the next revival."

"I wish you meant it," Sallie Logan told him.

Hal gave his message. "Father isn't very fit just now, Colonel, but he asked me to tell you that with yore permission he will call on you in a few days.

Maxwell Harville's face lit. He said there was nothing he would like more.

CHAPTER XXIX

MOSE HEARS A HOOT OWL

MOSE DULL was sleeping the placid sleep of the righteous when he was awakened by the sound of a hoot owl. He did not come to full consciousness but remained in that nebulous land where one floats pleasantly on dreamy currents. The owl was persistent, and Mose reluctantly became aware that he was being signaled. This depressed him, for he knew who must be outside. He had thought he was through with the Labreus, and here they were back again. Whatever brought them, he knew that their return was bad news for Mose Dull.

He rose quietly from bed and pulled on the trousers lying beside it. For a moment he considered taking a pistol with him, but he gave up the idea. It would not do him any good. If the outlaws meant him any harm, which they probably did not, he would never get a chance to use it.

As he opened the door and slipped out, the hoot of the owl came again. It was from a clump of scaly bark hickory trees in front of the cabin about fifty yards distant. Mose walked forward barefooted, his trousers held up by one suspender. He did not enjoy that walk. In the moonlight he was too easy a mark. When he reached the grove he breathed more freely.

Lige Labreu's voice was harsh and bitter. "What the hell kept you so long?" it demanded.

"I was asleep—woke up kinda slow," Mose explained. "What's wrong, Lige? Thought you would be sixty miles from here."

"Don't ask questions!" the Gobbler snarled. "We want grub—plenty of it—quick."

"Sure," wheedled Mose. "Whatever you say, Lige. You want me to bring it out? Or will you come in? Sue will fix you-all something hot if you want it thataway."

"Bring us first off what you have cooked. We're starved. And don't tell her who we are. Understand?"

Mose understood, too well, though as yet he had no information as to what had occurred. Lige was in a vile temper, and when in that bilious mood he was always dangerous. As Mose shuffled back to the house, his mind was busy trying to figure out what had brought the outlaws back. He had heard that Craw was wounded, but that left two still missing. Of course they might be somewhere in the brush.

While Mose was packing into a basket cold biscuits, a slab of salt side meat, some corn bread and sweet potatoes, his wife's

querulous voice inquired what was the matter. He shushed her.

"Don't wake the kids, old woman, and don't ask no questions. Git up and find that sack of peaches the young uns picked yesterday."

"Hit's them Labreus again," she charged, her heart heavy with dread. "I thought we were shet of them for good."

His harsh whisper warned her. "You don't know nothing. You ain't seen 'em or heerd of 'em. No matter who asks you."

Mose had made of her a household drudge, but he was her husband, the father of her children. Though she knew he was worthless, he was her man and she still clung to him. Fearfully, she watched him go out with the laden basket. Except the peaches, there was nothing in it but leftovers. Lige was so unpredictable. At sight of the food remnants he might fly into a passion and . . .

Even to herself she did not complete the thought. Ever since the return of the Labreus after their escape from prison she had been badly worried. She knew her husband was trafficking with the outlaws. One day she had nailed down a loose plank in the floor. Next time she swept, the plank was loose again. Moved by curiosity and suspicion, she had investigated and found in the recess below a small sack filled with gold pieces. When she had tried to discuss this with Mose he had roughly told her to mind her own business.

But she could tell that he was disturbed in mind. He did not sleep well and was unusually irritable. She had lived with him too long not to know that he was afraid, both of Lige and of the men hunting him.

Mose explained hurriedly to the fugitives that these scraps were all they happened to have cooked, but his old woman would fix them up with hot coffee, fresh biscuits, and ham and eggs if Lige would say the word. Brad thought that would be a good idea, but his father vetoed it. He did not want anybody except Mose to know of their return. In the morning Mose could buy supplies for them at the store and after dark deliver them at the old Peters clearing. They would take with them now a Dutch oven, a fry pan and a coffee pot. He must make up some story for his wife about their disappearance. For one day, Lige said, he and the others could make out on squirrels they shot in the woods. He warned Mose not to act so as to stir up suspicion when he was buying the stuff and to make sure nobody was following him when he crossed the ford to reach the Peters cabin. He was to come on horseback and not with a wagon.

He would be mighty careful, Mose promised.

"You'd better," Lige threatened. "I'd hate to have to gobble over you, Mose. Nobody has seen us yit, so we'll know if any posse comes a-huntin' us that you must of talked."

As soon as the fugitives had ridden away, Sue Dull drew her husband out of the house for a talk. They sat on a bench, lowering their voices almost to a whisper.

"I'm skeered, Mose," she said. "So air you. Do we have to do what Lige Labreu says? One o' these days they'll git him, and if we're mixed up with him they'll git you too." Bitterly, she added: "An' like as not Lige will git scared you're betrayin' him and shoot you daown fust."

Mose was tired of carrying the burden alone. He threw up his hands and admitted he was just as much afraid as she. But what could he do?"

He could skip out and go visit his brother at Pine Bluff for a couple of weeks, she said.

"An' if I did I wouldn't put it past Lige to burn this house daown with you an' the young uns in it," he answered hopelessly.

She murmured, her fear-haunted eyes on his, "You could tell Colonel Harville where at Lige is roostin'."

"I cain't tell what I don't know."

"You've fixed to meet up with him somewheres."

He retorted irritably. "Lige ain't nobody's fool. I couldn't git to him lessen I came alone. Soon as he found I was being followed I would be the fust one killed."

"Still, if you was to go to Colonel Harville and tell him—"

"Git that outa yore haid," he told her roughly. "Fust off, Harville has got no use for me. He told me that plain. Anyhow, what could he do? He hasn't had a

hell of a lot of luck tryin' to hunt Lige daown. Would you expect him to put a regiment round our place to keep Lige from doing us a meanness?"

He rode over her suggestion more harshly because he had himself been dallying with the same thought. He had discarded it because the danger was too great. Lige was as wary as a fox. He was not going to let himself be trapped by Mose as a decoy. If his suspicious mind found any basis for the belief that his cousin was betraying him he would rub out his spy at once. Moreover, Mose had no confidence that Colonel Harville would put himself out to protect him. He would use him, if he could, to get the Labreus, but it probably would not worry him much if in the process Mose Dull came to grief.

CHAPTER XXX

TOM HARVILLE STRIKES A LEAD

AS TOM HARVILLE walked into the store he passed Mrs. Dull going out with a basket of groceries. Jud Holcomb beckoned him into his office.

"Something kinda queer," he said. "Mose was in an hour ago and bought quite a bill of goods. He got both coffee and sugar. Now Mrs. Dull gets another pound of Arbuckle and some sugar."

"Maybe Mose didn't go straight home and his wife doesn't know what he bought," Tom suggested.

"He headed for home," the storekeeper objected.

"Is it important?" Harville asked.

"I dunno. Probably not." Jud fired an apparently irrelevant question at the young man. "Where at is the Labreu gang?"

"I can tell you about some of them," Tom replied. "Hal Logan killed one and Jes' Tolable another. Craw's body was fished out of the ford this mo'ning with a bullet hole in the back of the head. Another of them was shot yesterday down on the White River and Sim Labreu was captured. That answer yore question?"

"I'm talkin' about the others."

"My guess is that Lige and what's left of his gang are holed up like foxes hoping to make a break to get away at night."

"Sure enough. But where?"

"You think they are near here and that Mose was buying for them?"

"I dunno. Might be. What else would explain the Dulls buying coffee and sugar twice the same day?"

Jud might be right, Harville thought. The outlaws had been surprised on the White River and those who had reached their horses had lit out fast. They had headed toward Big Hollow but had left the road at some unknown point. There was a chance that they might have slipped back to it during the night. But would not that be madness after having lost five of the gang already on account of having come to the Cache? Still, Lige did not have much choice. Posses were closing in on him from all sides. He might figure on taking refuge in the bottom lands for a day or two and then cutting across country to the Mississippi in the hope of getting a boat down to New Orleans.

"I'd better look into this, Jud," Tom decided.

He walked out of the store and glanced down the street. Mrs. Dull was still in sight several hundred yards distant. Tom untied his horse and swung to the saddle. Presently he drew up beside her and dismounted.

"Like to talk with you, Mrs. Dull," he said.

She looked at him sharply without stopping. "What you want to talk about?"

He walked beside her, leading his horse. "Let me carry the basket," he suggested.

"I'll carry it." She guessed what he had in mind and was both suspicious and frightened.

"It's very dangerous to have anything to do with the Labreus," he said, his voice gentle and friendly.

"Then you had better let them alone," she said stiffly.

"I mean it is dangerous to befriend them," he explained. "They are desperate criminals and are going to be destroyed. It would be a pity if any harm came to decent people on account of them."

"Are we decent folks?" she asked bitterly. "That ain't what Colonel Harville told Mose when he talked of settin' yore dogs on him."

"Father was annoyed because of the insulting proposal Lige Labreu sent him by

Mose. This is too serious for us to hold grudges now. If Mose is taking food to these men he is likely to get into a lot of trouble."

"Who said he was taking food to them?" she demanded.

"I hope he isn't." Tom felt he could not let this drop without making her understand how serious the consequences might be. "It has struck twelve for the Labreus, Mrs. Dull. They are a bad murderous lot. If it had not been for Hal Logan they would have tortured and killed my brother Larry. If it had not been for Larry, Major Logan would have been dead before now. Gobbler Lige is a terrible man."

"You don't need to tell me how bad he is," she cried, with weak violence. "I know. I'm skeered to death of him."

Tom's eyes rested on the gaunt, poorly nourished woman. A faint flush had beaten up into her sallow cheeks. He had never given her a second look before, but he realized now with surprise that she must have been pretty once. Maybe she had not always worn draggled clothes that hung on her like a sack.

UNTIL this moment he had not considered her point of view. It would not have been important to him, since one has to contact unhappiness closely to sympathize with it. He saw she was living in fear. Dread was riding her thin shoulders heavily. She knew her husband was involved in helping the outlaws and that a sword was hanging over his red head. Tom guessed she was less afraid of the law than of Lige. The man was forcing Mose to help him just as he had compelled Mack Gillis, by holding a pistol at his heart. She knew of the sudden rages that swept the Gobbler. When Mose ceased to be of use, or if he fell under suspicion, he might be rubbed out ruthlessly. Just as Labreu's own son Craw had been. She did not have any proof any more than Tom did that Lige had fired the shot that killed Craw. But some one of the gang had done it, and surely not without orders from his father.

"If you are afraid of Lige hadn't you better join us, Mrs. Dull?" Tom said. "We'll look after you."

She shook her head. "You cain't. No use talkin', Mr. Tom. I'd ru'her you left me. If he heerd of us being alone here he would git mad."

There was no use saying any more. The fear of Labreu was too deeply grounded in her. He had found out what he had come to learn. The outlaws were back in the Cache swamp.

"If you change your mind, come to us," he told her. "We'll do anything we can to help you. And if you give us information that will trap him, we'll remember it afterward."

"I got nothing to tell you," she answered. "I dunno where Lige is. Neither does Mose."

Her voice sounded stubborn, as if she felt she had talked too much.

Tom swung to the saddle and rode back to the store. Hal Logan was tying his horse to a post.

"Heard about the Labreu gang?" Hal asked. "About how they got jumped on the White River and one of them was killed?"

Tom nodded. "I've got later news even than that. Lige and what's left of the band are back in the Cache bottom."

Hal stared at him. "What makes you think so? Why would they come back again after the bad luck they had here?"

"Where could they go and be less looked for?" Tom added briefly his reasons for thinking they were in the swamp.

"Looks like you and I are going to get another crack at them," Hal said, accepting Harville's reasoning.

"What we have to do first is check up on Mose Dull. If this food is for the Gobbler he will have to deliver it somewhere."

They agreed that Mose would not move until after dark. He might have the wagon at home now or it might be hidden in the brush. The immediate job was to find him, then follow the wagon. Both of which had to be done without arousing his suspicion.

Tom reported to his father what he had learned and the deductions he had made. The colonel neither accepted nor rejected his conclusion, but he agreed that they should be tested. At work of this sort he did not know anybody likely to do better than Shep Tolt. A messenger found him down by the bridge attending to his trot line and brought him to Rosemont.

CHAPTER XXXI

MOSS DULL CHANGES FRONT

COLONEL HARVILLE puffed at his pipe thoughtfully. He was not satisfied with the plan Tom had outlined.

"It's too simple, son," he objected. "I know Lige. He's as much fox as wolf. The old devil has his back to the wall. You can be sure he doesn't trust Mose any farther than he could throw a two year old by the tail. He has got to use him, but he is worrying for fear Mose will lead us to him. So he'll have a man watching the bayou to make sure nobody is following him."

Andy had an inspiration. "We don't need to follow Mose. What's the matter with us lying down in the wagon until we get to the meeting place?"

"There isn't going to be any wagon," Maxwell Harville said. "If Lige is in the swamp—and I'm inclined to think he is—his orders to Mose were to bring the food on horseback. I'd bet a bale of cotton against two bits that the old scoundrel thought of that before you did, Andy, and checked against it."

"Then what are we to do?" Tom wanted to know.

"Do like the Yanks did in the war. They cut us off from our supplies. We were starving. We had no horses to haul our cannon and mighty little ammunition. That whipped us."

"Lige has guns and horses. If Mose takes him in food—"

The colonel interrupted Tom. "You've put yore finger on the nub of it, son. Mose must not take him food. It's up to us to see he doesn't. Get him and bring him here."

"Mrs. Dull may have scared him, so that he has gone into hiding," Andy suggested. "After hearing about her talk with Tom he would know we would do something about it."

"Our job is to find him," his father said. "Before it gets dark. If we don't we must have men stationed at all the points where he could cross the bayou. I'll attend to that. You boys and Jes' Tolable run him down before he starts if you can."

"We'd better get going," Andy said. "It will be dark in another hour and a half."

Tom did not quite like this Fabian policy. He was afraid the outlaws would slip away from them. He hung back to ask another question. "Say we do starve them out. What's to hinder them from leaving by the other side of the swamp and not this way?"

"They would have to cross the whole state. Lige learned his lesson on the White River. He'll try to cut northwest through the unsettled country to the Tennessee line and from there to the river. If they can reach the Mississippi they will probably separate."

Shep Tolt agreed with the colonel. If they could break clear for thirty or forty miles the outlaws would have a good chance to reach the river and escape. Once out of Arkansas they would not be likely to run into a posse any direction they turned.

Hal joined the riders at Big Hollow. Nobody in the village had seen anything of Mose since he had left with the provisions. When the four horsemen reached the Dull clearing the children told them that their father had left an hour earlier. They did not know where he had gone. The wagon was in the yard, but the food had been removed from it.

Mrs. Dull offered no more information than the children. "Oh, it's you again," she said to Tom, and set her mouth obstinately.

That she was worried the hunters could see, but she had evidently been told to say nothing.

"I see he took with him the food that he bought," Tom said.

"What food?" she said sullenly. "If you-

all had all these hungry mouths to fill you would know why he has to buy grub."

Shep rested his weight on the right stirrup and offered friendly advice in a slow drawl. "Now you got to be reasonable, Sue. Mose is in a tight. He cain't git that stuff to Lige. The bayou is being watched at all the crossings. If he hain't careful he'll be killed off. We got the dead wood on what's left of the Labreus. This yere country is gonna stamp them out like they were rattlesnakes. You kin still save Mose. Mebbe tomorrow hit will be too late."

Her face worked piteously. She did not need to be convinced of what Shep had just said. She knew it to be true.

"Lige will do us a turrible meanness if Mose don't—don't—"

"He won't git the chance. We'll move you-all up to that empty cabin on the colonel's plantation ontil we have got the Labreus. Lige won't know you are there, an' if he did he wouldn't dass come near."

She broke down and between her sobs told them that Mose might be in the hickory slash below the Gillis place, if they hurried and reached him before he started.

Andy promised to send two colored boys with a wagon to move her and the children this evening. She could start packing up the beds, cooking utensils, and food.

It was already twilight. Soon darkness would cover the land. They rode at a canter, to reach Mose while he was still in the slash.

"He will prob'ly be waitin' daown in the gully under the chinquapin tree," Tolt said. "We'll tie back a ways and slip forward, coming at him from both sides of the gully."

"Fine, if one of the Labreus isn't there with him," Hal said dryly.

"I don't reckon any of them will be on this side of the bayou in the daytime," Tolt was of opinion. "That wouldn't be smart, 'count of someone mebbe seeing him."

After tying their horses the party divided, Tolt and Andy approaching the gully from the far side and the others from the near.

MOSE was taken completely by surprise. He was lying on a grassy spot fifteen or twenty yards from the tree when Shep Tolt's drawling advice startled him.

"Take hit easy, Mose. We got the dead wood on you. Reach for yore gun, an' you'll be toting half a pint of lead, by gravy."

Mose leaped to his feet. He made a gesture to draw and thought better of it. His dismayed glance jumped from one bank to the other. He knew he was caught.

"That ain't no way for to talk, Jes' Tolable," he protested, a whine already creeping into his voice. "Hit ain't friendly."

Andy moved down to join the man and disarmed him. "Don't try to pull any guff on us, Mose," he warned. "Yore game is up. We know who was to get the grub on that loaded horse."

The trapped man did not waste an instant changing fronts. "Lordy, boys, I'm shore glad you got here in time. I been sweatin' blood on account of Lige. He done told me he 'lowed to gobble over me if I didn't holp him. I would of come to you-all, but I knowed he would take hit out on the woman an' young uns."

"I don't suppose he paid you two bits," Hal jeered.

Again Mose made a swift decision. There was no use denying what they could prove. "Yes, sir, he did. Fact is, if I hadn't tooken the money he would of suspected me right off. Every time I see him I'm skeered he'll kill me."

"Where do you meet him?" Hal demanded.

"Daown at the old Peters deadenin'. I hain't seen him but three times."

"At what hour were you to show up with the food tonight?"

"Soon as it got real dark."

"One of the gang will be watching the bayou at the place where you were to cross," Tom said.

"Tha's right, Mr. Tom. Lige don't leave no loop holes."

"Why don't we go and comb the scoundrels out?" Hal asked impatiently. "There are only three of them."

"They wouldn't be there, no matter how careful you-all crept up on them," Mose said. "Lige won't be at the cabin but back in the cane brake somewheres. Soon as he suspicioned everything wasn't right they would skedaddle."

Jes' Tolable agreed. They would be wasting their time on a wild goose chase.

They took Mose with them to Hillcrest and locked him up in a cabin that had formerly been in the slave quarters. The major thought it best to have him guarded until the Labreus had been captured. Perry Logan was sitting on the porch with the other two convalescents Rod and Larry. Tom and Andy did not stay more than a few minutes. They had to make arrangements for bringing the Dull family to Rosemont.

Larry asked the major a question. "The Labreus will have to get food, sir. What will they do?"

"I'm wondering about that," Logan answered. "They will raid some place of course. But where?"

"They have to get out of the swamp at once, before posses cover every outlet," Larry said. "Tonight they will make a try, don't you think, sir?"

"Probably."

"Lige will want food for several days, since it won't do for him to be seen at any farmhouse between here and the line. The best place to be sure of getting plenty is at Holcomb's store. Nobody sleeps there at night. It would be easy to break in and take all we need."

The major looked at him with sharp approval. "Young man, you have a head on you. Of course that is what he will do—and soon."

"If you think so, we had better be ready for them," Hal said. "Colonel Harville has guards all along the bayou. There aren't many available men left."

Larry said, "Count me one."

Mrs. Logan had just come out to the porch. "You're not well enough to go."

"I'm all right," Larry said. "Thanks to your kind care of me."

"I'm going," Rod mentioned. "I can ride a horse well as anybody."

"Now Rod," his mother chided, and knew protest was of no use. Her sons were like that. Perhaps all men were. When it came to action they went their own way. She suspected that even Larry, gentle and considerate though he was, would do as he thought best, once his mind was made up.

SALLIE LOGAN had become very good friends with the young man. Her sharp eyes had discovered that her daughter was in love with him and that he was not indifferent to Diane. She was pleased. It was her opinion that Larry would make an excellent husband. From the viewpoint of a rather poverty-stricken South he was quite well off. He had the pleasant manners of the English, had traveled widely, and was well educated. What was of more importance, he had character. All the Harvilles had that, but in this youngest son it expressed itself with charming modesty. With a girl like Diane his consideration for others and his generosity of mind would count greatly. She realized that Major Logan—and probably Colonel Harville too—would feel such a marriage unsuitable in view of the past. There would be initial embarrassments. But both of them, she felt sure, would accommodate themselves to it in time. Her sons liked Larry, though they had not ever thought of him as a possible brother-in-law.

She had watched their opinion of him change. At first they had been scornful of his timidity. He had no zest for danger and was all for peace. But they had come to respect him because when the pressure was on he would take any chance necessary.

When they went into the house Diane was at the piano. Hal helped the major take the stairs to his room and Sallie Logan followed. Rod went to the stable to order his horse saddled. Larry walked into the parlor.

Diane was singing the song "County Guy" from Scott's "Quentin Durward" and she did not notice the entrance of the young man. Her voice had not been given much training, but she sang with sweetness and feeling.

"Ah, County Guy, the hour is nigh,
The Sun has left the lea,
The orange flower perfumes the bower,
The breeze is on the sea."

Larry knew she was more romantic than he. It was in the blood of Southern girls brought up in the semi-feudal tradition of plantation life, and it had been encouraged by the attitude of the men, who put their women in a rarefied atmosphere apart from the realities of life. Though Larry was no poser and had very little in him of the By-

ronic hero or the cavalier of Scott, he was not above dramatizing himself to suit her fancies. He moved forward on tip-toe.

"The lark, his lay who trill'd all day,
Sits hushed, his partner nigh,
Breeze, bird, and flower, confess the hour,
But where is County Guy?"

Her voice died away. She sat still, her fingers on the keys, her eyes fixed on some imaginary scene far away. Larry put an arm around her shoulders and she looked up, startled at his presence.

This was the time and the place he thought. The song, a very popular one just then, was familiar to him. He sang the last stanza, revised to suit the occasion.

"The star of Love, all stars above,
Now reigns o'er earth and sky;
For high and low the influence know—
And here is County Guy."

Color flooded her cheeks. She felt very shy, self-conscious, and at the same time tremulously happy.

Larry lifted her from the piano stool and took her in his arms.

CHAPTER XXXII

LIGE BURGLARIZES A STORE

LIGE LABREU and Cad Miller lay in the cane brake back of the Peters clearing. Mose ought to have shown up hours ago. They needed food, and their tempers were on edge.

"Looks like Mose has done thrown us down," Cad complained. "I'm so doggoned hungry my belly button and my backbone ain't more than three inches apart." He added, irritably, "You don't reckon they could of got Brad."

"Brad is all right," his father said, slapping a mosquito that had lit on his cheek. "He's hidden daown clost to the ford. Long as there is a chanct Mose will come Brad has to stay there to check up."

"I always did think Mose was a slippery cuss," Cad said.

The steel-trap mouth of Lige tightened. A redhot devil of malice burned in his eyes. "If he's sold us daown the river I'll shore pump lead into him."

"I ce'tainly made a hell of a mistake when I threw in with you-all at Fort Smith. If I'd stayed in jail old Judge Parker couldn't of give me more than five years. But I had to bust out with you like a dawggoned fool." Cad spoke with bitter hopelessness. He believed he was near the end of his trail. Everything had gone wrong with them ever since they had reached the Cache bottom.

It was well past midnight when Brad joined them. He had seen nothing of Mose or of anybody else.

"We cain't stay here and starve," Lige decided. "It's neck meat or nothing with us. We'll make a break right now to get away."

"How about grub?" Brad asked.

"We'll hold up Holcomb's store on the way and pick up enough food to last us till we reach the river," his father said. "If we're lucky we'll make it fine."

"And if we're not we'll turn up our toes to the daisies," Cad grumbled.

The hunted men struck the bayou first at what was known as the lower ford. Before the horses had waded in twenty yards a bullet flung up a spurt of water just ahead of Lige. A second rifle joined the attack. Lige swung his horse round and made for the sand spit he had just left. The other two splashed back after him hurriedly while the guns roared again from the opposite bank. The outlaws found shelter in the cane brake.

"If it hadn't been dark they would of got one of us shorely," Brad said angrily. "They act like we're a bunch of wolves."

Lige knew that all the fords and the bridge were guarded, but his hunters could not have gathered men enough to line the bayou. The scudding clouds above were heavy. They would have to pick a place where they would be least expected and swim across.

They rode up along the bayou and then stopped at a deep wide stretch with a steep bank on the farther side. The horses would have to swim almost the entire distance. If there were guards stationed at this point they had not a chance to get over alive. Even if it were not protected they would have some trouble getting the horses up the bluff.

Lige waited till the moon was completely obscured. Large gum trees lined both banks and threw shadows over the water.

"Let's go," Lige growled, and put his mount to the sloping bank.

"To hell, I reckon," Miller said, with an uneasy laugh.

Unmolested, the horses swam across. They fumbled along the shore to find a spot where the bank was not too steep to climb. Lige's mule clambered up. The others joined him.

Cad and Brad tore down a fence, and they moved down the rows of a corn field to the woods beyond. They crossed a road into the brush and cut over rough prairie and hickory slashes till they reached the outskirts of the village. By way of a pasture they came to a lane leading to the business street.

The outlaws saw no sign of life when they rode into Big Hollow. They did not know that a pair of eyes were watching them intently around the corner of a house across the street from Holcomb's store. Not a light showed in the village. To make as little noise as possible the fugitives walked their horses down the dusty street. They dismounted and tied at a hitch rack back of the store.

Lige peered through a window into the dark interior. Apparently the place was deserted as he had expected. Jud Holcomb lived in a frame house two hundred yards distant. With the butt of his revolver Lige tapped gently on a pane and broke the glass. He reached in and undid the latch. Very quietly he raised the frame and eased himself over the sill. His son followed him. The Gobbler struck a match and looked around. It was a general store in which everything was sold from molasses to horse collars. For many years he had not been in the building. The match flickered out.

"Stay where you are at?" he told his son. "I'll unbolt the back door fust off. We may have to light out in a hurry."

He softfooted through the darkness to the door and opened it. "Everything all right?" he asked Miller.

"So far," Cad answered. "But I'm sure goosey. Sooner we git outa here the better pleased I'll be."

"We won't be long," Lige promised.

He moved back between the counters trying to locate the food he wanted.

"Grub is over here," Brad said in a whisper.

Miller tiptoed into the building. "There's a lamp on the wall here. How about lightin' it?"

"Someone might see it and git to wonderin'," Brad said. He struck a match. "Cut off a slab of that cheese, Cad."

"And then git back to the horses," Lige ordered.

Miller sawed off a hunk of cheese in the darkness from a whole one resting on a wooden support. He had not finished when Brad stumbled over a keg of eight-penny nails and overturned it. The contents poured over the floor in a noisy stream.

"Goddlemighty, what's the matter?" Miller cried, his nerves jumpy.

Lige ripped out a savage oath. "You trying to wake the dead, Brad?" he snarled.

"I cain't see in the dark," Brad flung back at him angrily. He had barked his shins and they hurt.

APPARENTLY he had awakened somebody. They heard sounds from the floor above and presently footsteps. Holcomb appeared at the head of the stairway running to the second story. He was in his nightgown and barefooted, but he held a revolver in his hand.

"Get out of my store," he ordered.

Brad fired and Holcomb clutched at the railing to steady himself. The sound of his weapon came almost like an echo of the first shot. Young Labreu staggered against the counter. A bullet had plowed through his jaw.

Holcomb's knees buckled and he pitched forward. He half-slid, half-rolled down the treads. Supported by the counter, Brad fired at the body of the storekeeper as it bounced down.

"Stop shooting, you dawggoned idjit," Lige growled. "You'll have the whole coun-

try here." He lit a small wall lamp. "Bring that gunny-sack, Brad. We got to git a move on."

Staring at Brad, Miller cried, "Lawdy, he plugged you."

Lige was reaching for a sack of coffee. He swung round and saw blood streaming from his son's face.

"Git grub into the sack, Cad," he ordered. "I'll look after Brad."

He took the bandanna from his neck and tied up the broken jaw while Miller stuffed into the sack coffee, flour, beans, and a ham. From a show case near the front of the store Cad took several sacks of smoking and plugs of chewing tobacco.

"Let's go," Lige snapped.

They hurried from the building, to face a staggering surprise. Their horses were gone.

Lige ran to the front of the store. At the end of the street, two hundred yards away, Lige caught a glimpse of them just turning off the road. They were out of sight before he could even fire a shot.

"Go git 'em, Cad," Lige cried. "Without 'em we're gone."

Miller started on the run.

A light came on in a house set back of the main street. Excited voices reached the outlaws. A bullet whistled past them and buried itself in the log wall of the store. They drew back along the shadowed wall to the rear of the building.

"What's keepin' Cad?" Brad asked fretfully. "If he don't git here soon—"

Two shots, one just after the other, boomed down the street cañon. They heard the slap of running feet. Cad's anxious voice cried, "Where at are you-all?"

Lige answered, not too loudly, and Miller joined them.

"Didn't even see the horses," he gasped. "Fellows with them must of lit out on the run. This town is on the shoot. We gotta git out quick."

Already Lige was wading across an empty lot covered with dog fennel. The others followed. They climbed a stake and rider worm fence into a cotton field and ran crouching between two rows. On the yonder side of it was a small stream on the banks of which pecan trees were growing. Already Brad found traveling difficult. He began to lag.

His father dropped back to hearten him. "We're gonna hole up at the Flynn place," he said. "Nobody ever goes there. Hit's supposed to be haunted. We kin lie up there till you're strong enough to travel. We'll rustle up some horses."

Brad said "Fine," but the word came from a man empty of hope. They were afoot, and the whole country was roused against them. He recalled with a shudder what his father had done to Craw.

They had escaped without pursuit. Nobody had seen which way they had gone. Lige held the party at the brook long enough to wash and dress as best he could the wound.

"They trapped us," Miller said morosely. "They must of figured we would try to git food at the store. If I had my sights on yore cousin Mose I shore would drill him."

Lige promised that they would be all right at the Flynn place. Nobody would think of looking for them there.

CHAPTER XXXIII

GUNS IN THE NIGHT

AS LARRY rode beside the Logan boys to Big Hollow his mind was full of the girl he had left behind. She had promised to marry him if he could get her father's consent. Just now he was filled with the faith that would move mountains, but he did not feel too sure that Perry Logan would see this his way. He was a stiff-necked old fellow, and he might take a lot of persuading.

Nearly all the men of the village had been drafted into service by Colonel Harville and were guarding the crossings of the bayou. The three young men found Holcomb at home. He was glad to learn from them that they intended to spend the night at Big Hollow. While he did not really expect a visit from the Labreus, it was possible they might slip past the cordon of watchers and come this way.

The idea of Larry that Lige might burglarize his store to get food came to the merchant with a shock. But when he considered it this seemed reasonable, providing the outlaws could get this far. He decided to spend the night on a cot he sometimes

used when he worked late figuring accounts. It was upstairs, on the second floor. If the Gobbler tried to break in he could fire down at the bandits from one of the windows.

Larry advised him very strongly to do nothing of the kind. The outlaws were desperate men, with their backs to the wall. Holcomb had better stay out of it and let younger men do the job. But the merchant was stubborn. It was his store. He was not going to let a bunch of scurvy cutthroats rob it without lifting a hand. Under persuasion he promised to keep from sight until those outside could take a hand.

"We're taking a long shot anyhow," Hal said, dismissing the matter. "Chances are that Lige won't ever show up in Big Hollow."

The young men made the office of Doctor Watkins their headquarters for the night. The doctor himself was out helping guard the ford.

They scouted the village and the roads leading into it, sometimes in a group and again individually. Rod found that he had over-estimated his strength and retired to the darkness of the office until such time as he might be needed. Occasionally the others returned to him and reported no enemy activity as yet. The hours dragged monotonously and the heat of their enthusiasm died. What had at first appealed to them as a promising adventure was turning into a bore. But none of them suggested giving up the watch.

When the two younger men wandered down the main street for the twentieth time Larry's watch told him it was two o'clock. He was pretty well fagged and he sat down to rest on a bench in front of a cobbler's shop opposite the Holcomb store.

Hal grinned at him. "Take it easy, boy," he said. "Looks like I won't need any help to tackle all the Labreus that show up tonight."

"Too bad my poor guessing has robbed us all of a night's sleep," Larry replied.

"You didn't rob me of any," Hal answered. "If I weren't here I would be covering the bayou with the others. Anyhow, a fellow can't be right all the time. You hit a pretty good average." He waved a hand and wandered down the road.

Left to himself, Larry leaned back and let his thoughts drift to his sweetheart. Presently he fell into a light doze. From this he came awake with a jerk. The sound of horses' hoofs reached him. Jumping up, he slipped back of the shop and peered around the corner. Three horsemen emerged from the darkness. There was not light enough for recognition. They might be some of his father's men on patrol, or they might be the outlaws. The riders left the road and passed back of the Holcomb store. From the faint sounds that drifted to him he judged they were tying their mounts at the rack.

He waited, uncertain what was best to do. A voice might tell him who they were. Intently, he listened. He heard something like the tinkle of falling glass.

Larry decided to find Hal. With that in mind he softfooted down the alley. After covering fifty yards he stopped. Why not cross the street, slip back in the shadow of the buildings, and see what he could find out before reporting to young Logan? Very likely these men were not desperadoes but friends.

The moon was under a cloud as he tiptoed through the dust to the opposite pavement. He passed two buildings and came into the open lots back of them. While he was edging toward the store close to the walls, he thought, "I'm being a fool again." His throat was as dry as if coated with lime. Tiny cold feet were racing up and down his back. His hands were clammy.

From the shadow of the nearest store he looked across a vacant lot to Holcomb's. Three horses were hitched at a rack. No, one of them was a mule. Lige Labreu rode a mule. A window in the side of the building was broken. Through it he saw a match flicker. It lit for a second the face of a man—a crafty evil face. An icy rope tied the watcher's stomach into a knot. Those inside were the Labreu gang.

At precisely that instant a horrible suggestion flitted through his mind. If he could steal their mounts the bandits would be afoot and helpless. He rejected it violently. What he must do was escape and tell the Logan boys of his discovery. If he fooled around here he would be trapped.

Larry drew back — and stopped. The whisper was in his brain again. The hitch rack was not more than twenty yards. The animals would be tied by slip knots to in-

sure haste in leaving. In five seconds he could gather the reins, mount, and be off. *If he were not instead lying dead in the dust.*

HE TOLD himself he was crazy. If he tried it he would need both hands and would have to leave his rifle here. He put the gun down very gently and found his legs were too shaky to carry him forward. He drew a deep breath. Power flowed back into his body. A second later he was tugging at the nearest rein. He ducked under the animal's head and freed the mule. The third knot stuck. With the other two reins in his left hand he had to work the knot out of the leather.

His feet were just settling into the stirrup when there came a crash from inside the building that almost unnerved him. He thought at first that he had been shot. The horse he was riding went into the air. The other reins were straining his wrist and arm socket. Fortunately the animals plunged forward together.

Two guns sounded, almost at the same time. Another roared. He looked back, and was amazed to see nobody. They were not shooting at him.

Gradually he gained some control over the animals. He guided them across an empty lot and into the road. Somebody called to him to stop. It was Hal. He shouted an answer but could not check the led horses. Over his shoulder he cried to Logan to look out for the Labreus.

Larry swung off the road to the left into a lane. The galloping horses slowed to a canter and then to a trot. The thought was urgent in the boy's mind that he must get back to help the Logans. The brothers were cut off from each other, with the outlaws between them. To him came the whine of a rifle shot, and a few moments later two more.

His friends might be in desperate need of him. He must get rid of the animals and return to them.

The lane ran into a road on the other side of which was an enclosed space. He caught a glimpse of white markers and knew this was the Big Hollow graveyard. The gate was open. He passed through it, dismounted, and freed the mule and one horse. After closing the gate he pulled himself to the saddle of the third mount and headed for the village.

He had reached the first scattered houses before he remembered that he was not armed. Abruptly he jerked the horse to a halt and left it in the nearest yard. Cautiously he cut across a vacant lot toward the Holcomb store. No doubt his rifle would still be lying where he had left it. There had been no shooting since he had left the graveyard.

Very likely the Labreus were already getting away as fast as they could. But he could not tell in what direction and he might run into them.

By way of the cobbler's shop he arrived at the main street. There were lights in the store. He heard Rod's troubled voice and made out the words.

"We'll have to send for Doctor Watkins. Anybody know where he is posted?"

An old man's voice answered. "I reckon you'll find him at the ford. I heerd him an' Colonel Harville talkin'."

Larry walked into the store.

Hal cried, "Golly, I'm glad to see you. I thought maybe—" He did not finish the sentence.

"What did you do with their horses?" Rod asked, looking up from the wounded man whose thigh he was bandaging.

"Left two of them in the graveyard, the other at Pappy Lemon's place," Larry told him. "What about the Labreus? They got away, I suppose."

"Without their horses," Rod said. "Boy, you've done a good night's work. We'll soon run them down."

"They shot Jud Holcomb." Larry's gaze fastened on the unconscious man. "Is he—will he—?"

"They hit him in the leg. He ought to make it, but we've got to get the doctor in a hurry."

"I'll go," Hal said. Grimly he pointed out to Larry bloodstains on the counter and drops on the floor. "Jud must have hit one of them."

The store was filling up with old men, women, and boys. Larry reclaimed his rifle and Rod posted him in the street. Logan gave his own rifle to a seventeen-year-old boy and stationed him back of the store. There was one chance in a thousand the outlaws might return.

CHAPTER XXXIV

CAD MILLER ARRANGES TRANSPORTATION

THE outlaws reached the haunted house weary, depressed, and angry at one another. Lige Labreu was bitter at Cad Miller for not having guarded the horses better. He blamed Brad for stumbling over the nail keg and waking the storekeeper. Both of the younger men felt the Gobbler had brought the party to disaster by directing the flight to the Cache bottom instead of straight to Texas.

Brad was too ill and exhausted from loss of blood to have much energy left for recrimination, but the tempers of his father and Miller were worn to a razor edge ready to cut loose at a word. Neither trusted the other at all.

It was while they were wolfing down a hastily prepared breakfast that Lige let slip the explosive word. He snarled an order to Miller to pass the coffee, tacking on an insulting phrase.

Cad shoved the pot at Labreu so suddenly that the hot liquid splashed over on the older man's hand. In a fury Lige jumped to his feet, but before he could draw a revolver from its holster Miller's .45 had him covered. They glared at each other, their cold hard eyes clashing. Neither of them

spoke. The Gobbler knew that in all his turbulent treacherous life he had never been nearer death. Miller had given plenty of proof that he was a ruthless killer. A crook of his finger would be enough.

Brad flung out a biting protest. "Harville will like it fine if you fools do his job for him," he cried.

Lige talked for his life, suavely, in a wheedling voice. "Brad is right, Cad. I reckon I'm a bit jumpy, what with him being wounded and all. We been always good friends, you an' me. No sense in us fussin', jest on account of being in a kinda jam. We got to hang together, no two ways about that."

It was running through his mind that he would have to deal with Miller soon, but not now. In a day or two he would shoot him in the back when he was not looking.

Cad knew that Brad was right. They might have to fight their way out of this, and two men were better than one. He laughed sourly, his mind seizing on a word Lige had used.

"They ain't a-going to give us a chance to hang together. What they aim to do is shoot us down like a pair of painters soon as they find us. Onless you use a heap more sense than you been showing. Far as gettin' sore at you goes, I don't 'low to take orders from you or anybody else. Lay off'n me, if you know what's good for you."

The gargoyle grin on the face of Lige was false as Satan. "After all we been through together, Cad, you an' me don't want to have any trouble. It wouldn't make sense. We got to be reasonable. Fust thing is to rustle some horses before it gits too light. Then we'll lie holed up here till night and burn the wind outa this neck of the woods. That's how it shapes up to me."

Miller grumbled that he was not looking for any more trouble. He had plenty on his lap right now. It was jim dandy to talk about getting horses, but he would like to know where.

He pushed the revolver back into the holster but kept his icy agate eyes on Labreu.

"There's a fellow named Bronson raises a li'l cotton and corn on a clearing about a mile from here," Lige said. "He's got to have horses or mules. Course they will be work stock, but we cain't be choosy right now. What say we mosey daown and borrow what he has got?"

Light was beginning to break in the eastern sky when they started. Their way lead them close to the walnut tree where Lige twenty years before had hanged Flynn and left his body dangling in the air. Labreau was a thickskinned ruffian with little imagination, but he felt a cold shiver run down his spine. For a moment he thought he actually saw there the twitching body of the carpetbeggar, a triumphant grin on the sly sardonic face. Flynn was getting his revenge at last on the Labreu gang, even if it was too late to do him any good. Except Lige all of those who had tortured him were dead, and the race of the Gobbler was running out. One of his sons were dead, an-

other lying wounded in the haunted house, and the third on the way back to Fort Smith to be hanged. A score of hunters were closing in on Lige himself for the kill.

He pushed the dread to the back of his mind and began to talk of the good times they would all have with the girls of New Orleans. Miller looked at him, contempt and hatred in the smoky eyes. He guessed that Labreu was whistling over his own grave to keep up his courage.

In the corral back of the Bronson barn they found a sway-backed mare and a bony white mule of uncertain age. After a swift glance sizing them both up Miller said bluntly that he would take the mule.

"Anything you say, Cad," Lige agreed. When the time of final decision came he was not going to do his arguing with words. "We'll git another horse somewheres tonight after we have started."

IN ONE of the stalls of the barn a cow was tied. The outlaws found only one saddle, one with a broken stirrup-leather tied together by a string. Cad put it on the mule. His companion's narrowed eyes glittered, but he made no objection.

"I kin fix some gunny sacks into a saddle for Brad," he said, and picked up three to take with them.

A boy's voice sounded. He was coming to the barn from the house through the dog fennel, a milking pail in his hand, and he sang a ballad that just then was having a great vogue in the South.

"Jesse had a wife. She's a lady all her life,
And the children they were brave;
But the dirty little cowards who shot Johnny Howard,
They have laid Jesse James in his grave."

Lige drew his .45 and crouched. From his throat came a snarling sound that was a threat. Miller stood at his right, a half a step behind him.

"Put back that gun," the younger man ordered. "You ain't a-going to kill the boy!"

The Gobbler choked back his fury. He had no choice but to obey. In swinging round to fire at Miller he would lose a half a second or more, and during that short space of time the other could pump two bullets into his heart.

"If we leave him here he'll rouse his pappy an' they'll guess where we're at," Lige whispered angrily.

"We'll take him with us and turn him loose later," Miller snapped. "Shet yore mouth. Here he is."

The boy's song stopped abruptly. He stared, open-mouthed, at the two men in the shadows of the stalls.

"Take it easy, bub," warned Miller. "We don't 'low to hurt you none, if you keep quiet. The idee is that we're borrowin' these here two sacks of bone till we kin find something better to ride."

The youngster still goggled at them, startled eyes big as walnuts. He was a barefoot freckle-faced lad of about fourteen, thin and sallow. The Adam's apple in his throat jerked up and down in alarm.

"But—you—you—"

"You done guessed it right, son," Miller nodded. "This yere friendly gent with me is Lige Labreu. We got to take you with us for a spell, but you act nice an' everything will be jest fine."

The boy began to cry.

"I'd better pistol-whip him," Lige murmured.

"You won't touch him," Miller retorted roughly. "The boy is my rabbit foot."

"If you take the mule pappy cain't cultivate the corn," whimpered the boy.

"Don't worry none about that," Miller comforted. "He kin do it tomorrow after you have brought the mule back to him."

"Shore enough," Lige added, with his evil grin.

Miller had lived too long with Labreu not to know that this feigned submissive agreement was dangerous. The man was waiting for an opportunity. Until the moment when they separated forever Miller did not stop watching him for a single second. The younger man meant to see the boy was released safely. Though he was never to know it, that care for the lad's life saved his own.

The boy sat behind him as they rode back to the haunted house. His teeth were chattering with fear, but he had a queer sense of comfort in Miller's presence. The man had not let Labreu hit him with the pistol. He had promised that he would not be harmed. Bobby Bronson, riding with his arms around the thick body of the outlaw,

felt sure of his good will. Of the man astride the swaybacked mare he was desperately afraid. All his life the name of Lige Labreu had been a word to terrify naughty children. Nothing stood between him and the Gobbler's violence except the friendliness of the sturdy scoundrel who was protecting him.

They rode single-file through a grove of saplings, Labreu leading the way. He would rather have been in the rear, but he was building up a pretense of restored amity. Miller drew up to him when they emerged into a few acres of prairie ground. Lige pulled up the mare and turned to speak. The sky fell in on him. He found himself sinking through space.

"You—killed him," the boy gasped.

"Not Lige," Miller said, looking down at the lax body his rifle barrel had knocked from the mare. "But he'll be dead long enough for us to git away. He was 'lowing to kill us both off, boy. Only I was fustest to cut loose."

He headed into the brush and rode steadily for a half an hour before he stopped.

"Git off," he told the boy.

Bobby slid to the ground. He began to cry. "Don't shoot me, Mister," he pleaded.

"Stop bawlin'," the bandit ordered impatiently. "Didn't I done tell you that I wouldn't hurt you? Git this right, kid. I saved yore life. Lige was bound and determined to finish you off."

"Yes, sir," the boy agreed. "I'm a heap obliged."

"Mebbe you are. I dunno." Cad Miller looked at him, face hard and set. "You kin run on home to yore folks. Turn about is fair play, ain't it? If you want to holp me escape you got a chance. Don't tell about me. Jes' say you slipped away from Lige when he wasn't lookin'. Course you know now he's holed up at the haunted house. You must of guessed that. Act like all three of us are there. By the time they have got Lige I'll be a long way on my road."

Bobby promised. He wanted to say something about the mule but the outlaw forestalled him.

"I'll turn this critter loose soon as I git a remount," he said. "About tomorrow hit will be home again."

"Yes, sir." Bobby could not find words to express what he wanted to say. He repeated himself. "I'm a heap obliged. I—I hope you git away all right."

"I hope so, too." Miller laughed grimly without mirth. "Mebbe I'm a fool for letting you go, but—"

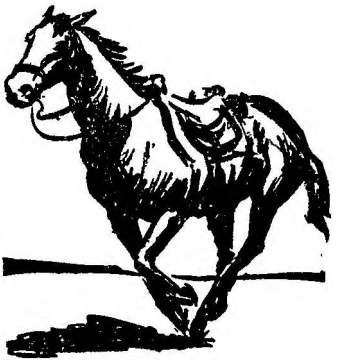
He waved a hand quickly. "On yore way, boy."

The outlaw rode into the brush. Bobby never saw him again. Neither did anybody else in that district. He must have reached the river safely. Probably he boarded a boat going down to New Orleans and from that town pushed westward to some small town in Texas.

Years later a man who had been a witness against Miller at his preliminary hearing in Judge Parker's court met a cowboy in a saloon at Lampasas. They came face to face and stood staring at each other.

"'Lo, Cad," the witness said. "Glad to meet you. Hope you don't hold any grudge because—"

The cowboy interrupted him sharply.



"My name's Ed Hunter. I never saw you before."

Abruptly the man in chaps wheeled from the bar, strode out of the building, and walked to the hitch rack outside. A moment later he was galloping out of town.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE END OF LIGE

WHEN Bill Bronson caught sight of his son on the path leading to the house his anxiety flashed to anger.

"Where in billy-be-damn you been?" he demanded. "I'm gonna wear you to a frazzle for this monkey trick."

The boy began to cry. "I been with—with Lige Labreu," he sobbed. "They come here to git the stock an' took me with them."

The father's face was a picture of amazement. Of his son's story the most astonishing feature was that Bobby had escaped while Lige and one of his men were having a fight.

Inside of an hour armed men began to converge toward the haunted house. They did not go too near. Shots from inside warned them that the bandits were on the alert.

Colonel Harville took charge of the attackers. His sons Andy and Tom were with him. As more men kept reaching the scene he put a tight cordon around the house. Larry and the Logan boys did not share in the fight. They were all sound asleep at Hillcrest making up for the wakeful night at Big Hollow. Larry never regretted this, but when Rod and Hal learned they had missed the wind up they were considerably annoyed.

Harville knew he could storm the Flynn house by sheer numbers, but he wanted to avoid casualties on his side. The house was on a wooded knoll, the timber on one side running down to the lower land to the left. Sharpshooters worked their way up through the grove to within seventy-five yards of the house. From here they made a dash to the dilapidated barn. By means of crevices in the logs they could see through the empty oblongs where the windows had once been. Jes' Tolable's muzzle-loader commanded the stairway leading to the second story.

Desultory firing continued all morning. At times the crackle of rifles was close as that of a bunch of firecrackers; again there were periods when there would be only one or two explosions in a quarter of an hour. It was in mid-afternoon that Shep Tolt's long rifle sent a bullet tearing through the body of a man trying to slip down from the upper story. The fellow plunged over the railing into the stair well like a swimmer diving into a pool. Brad hit the floor already dead.

Occasionally a shot from the house gave warning that at least one defender was in action.

Tom proposed to his father that they charge the house. "There cain't be more than one or two alive after the way we've peppered the house," he said. "An' if he can stall us off till dark he may slip away. Or both of them, if there are still two."

"Not yet," his father said. "I've got another plan for smoking him out."

He had sent for a wagonload of hay. When it came the horses were unhitched and men pushed the wagon up to the summit of the knoll. Screened by the hay, they moved it down a slope through the grove toward the house. As a diversion four or five riflemen poured a furious fire into the building from the other sides.

Andy set fire to the hay. Those back of the wagon set it rolling down the incline. When it bumped into the wall the hay was already a mass of flames. The men ran for the cover of the nearest trees.

The flames licked at the dry walls and crept up to the roof. The roar of them increased as the fire leaped forward along the walls and the roof.

From the back door of the house a dip led to a gully which ran down into a deserted field. Tom guessed that it was here any of the gang still living would make the try to escape. Back of some blackberry bushes he and Mack Gillis crouched, their eyes fixed on the blazing house. If anybody was to come out of it alive he would have to move soon.

A man, bent low, ran out of the back door and made for the gully.

"Hit's the Gobbler," Gillis cried.

At least half a dozen rifles must have been turned on him as he crossed the yard into the ditch, but none of them scored a hit. It was a dogleg gully, and for a minute the men behind the blackberry bushes lost sight of him. He came into view at the apex of the angle, still running hard.

Tom shouted to him. "Hands up, Labreu. You're through."

The hunted man stopped. Harville was standing up, waist high above the bushes. Still panting deeply, Lige threw his gun into position and fired. The bullet from Tom's Winchester ripped into his heart. They found the outlaw lying face down, the fingers of one hand clutching at the red soil of the eroded gully.

Shep Tolt was among the first to reach Harville and Gillis. He looked grimly down at the lax, prone body.

"He'll never gobble again," Shep said. "No regrets, I reckon."

Days later, in the cold ashes of the burnt house, only one body was found. There had been three of the bandits. One of them must have escaped. What had become of him remained a mystery until Bobby Bronson broke down and told his father the true story of his escape.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE JOURNEY'S END

SALLIE LOGAN said to her husband, "I think you are going to have a caller this evening."

Major Logan was in the garden with his wife. He was carrying a basket for her while she clipped roses for the house. Her manner suggested to him that this news was more important than it sounded.

"You don't mean Colonel Harville," he said.

"I mean his son Larry."

"He went home only two days ago," the major said.

"Two days are a long time at his age sometimes," she answered, smiling.

"What are you trying to tell me?" he asked.

"Something I think you already know, that he is in love with our daughter."

"I was afraid of that and I don't like it," he replied, after a silence. "How does Diane feel?"

"She is head over heels in love with him. There is nothing we can do about it, Perry. We may as well accept it."

Logan explained that he had nothing against the young man as an individual. On the contrary he thought him a fine young fellow. But—he was a Harville. After more than a generation of bad feeling between the families so close a tie would be unnatural. He was afraid it would bring only unhappiness. Personally he was under very great obligations to the boy, both on Diane's account and on his own. He must acknowledge that, even though he opposed his suit.

He was surprised at the firmness of his wife's stand. Usually she took her lead from him, but he could see she had not the least intention of doing so now. She had always been against the feud, she told him in a torrent of words. It was wrong and it was silly. Larry had come from England and proved it to them. All the younger generation were ready to forget the enmity. Indeed, they had already done so. If any unhappiness arose on account of it, this would arise from the stiff foolish pride of their elders. She for one would not join in this.

Major Logan knew when he was beaten, and at bottom he realized his wife was right.

"Is this young man going to ask me tonight for our daughter's hand?" he asked.

"I think so. I had to prepare you."

There flashed to his mind a picture of the moment when in the outlaws' camp, lying there bound with torture and death ahead of him, he had caught sight of Larry's face. It swept away the frozen resentment of all the years.

"If you and Diane wish it that way I shall give my consent," he promised. "The truth is that I like him and approve of him. What Maxwell Harville's attitude will be I don't know."

She laughed happily. "Leave the colonel to me and Diane. We'll manage him."

When Larry came, the major was sitting on the porch. Fireflies in the garden lit the darkness of the velvet night. Diane was in the parlor playing the piano.

Larry said what he had come to say diffidently but firmly. To his surprise Major Logan was friendly and cordial.

"I think you must have told Diane of your feeling toward her," he said with one of his rare smiles. "She is in the parlor. Perhaps you had better tell her again."

Larry walked into the parlor — into a world that for the moment at least was flooded with music.

THE END

Lilies Are Big Business Now on the West Coast

BLOOD ON THE LILY

By LYNDON RIPLEY

"THAT little red-headed guy there, giving orders," Uncle Tod Rushing said, nodding, kicking a stone across Eureka's railroad crossing, "is worth a hundred thousand smackers. Four years ago he came out from Detroit, broke."

"He made all that money in raising lily bulbs?" Evan Carroll gasped, unbelieving. "You wouldn't kid me, would you?"

"Certainly not, son, not when I'm ready to back you with my own money." The older man, tall, tanned, clad in khaki, wearing a soft felt hat and leather jacket, looked down affectionately at his short, stocky nephew.

"Ev," he said, pointing with a long, knuckly finger, "look there on the loading platform siding. There's two carloads of Croft Easter lily bulbs going to Chicago. Only three Southern Oregon growers beside myself, here in Northern California, contributed to the shipment. It's insured for $250,000, its true value. Just one year's harvest."

"Holy cow!" Carroll's hazel eyes narrowed as he watched the crates being loaded. "Those fellows," he exclaimed, "handle them like eggs!"

"Sure, they're precious. That's why I want you and Jean to raise lilies," Uncle Tod went on. "The dry dock will close shortly and you'll be through. Make yourself a stake. You've done your bit on the freighters, you know, long before you ever touched welding."

Carroll thoughtfully stuck his hands in dungaree pockets. "Yes," he said, nodding, "that's true."

"All right then, son. You're looking at something that happens once in a lifetime, could happen only in America. Few people know about the amazing profits because the business isn't advertised. You don't need much ground, not much help. You can be independently wealthy in three years time."

"Sounds impossible!" Ev Carroll shook his head, tilted back the tweed cap. "Anyway, I don't know a thing about lilies."

"If four hundred tyros in Humboldt County and over two hundred in Del Norte, who never heard of lilies until recently, can start in the game, why not you?" Uncle Tod drew out his wallet, found a newspaper clipping, unfolded it. "Here, you doubting Thomas. Brace your timidity with a few facts."

Carroll took the piece of newsprint, and scanned it:

PRODIGIOUS PROFITS BEING MADE ON OREGON'S "GOLD COAST"

Crescent City, Cal., Oct. 15—Fifty dollars a day on an acre of land . . . $1,500 a month . . . $18,000 a year . . . raising Croft and Kenyon-Davis Easter lily bulbs!

It's a dream come true to a few hundred growers in Southern Oregon, the Pacific Northwest. Some get still larger checks, some smaller. It's a tall tale from Paul Bunyan's giant primer but, contrarily, a 1944 story based on facts.

Folks formerly on relief or on WPA work, in the Brookings-Harbor, Oregon area, are now highly prosperous. There are no houses, apartments, cabins or rooms for rent, between the Chetco and Winchuck Rivers, 100 miles from a railroad.

Land, even north and south of this mildly temperature district, is priced mostly at $1,000 dollars an acre, and hard to get even at that price. Lily bulbs are still more difficult to secure because, for the most part, they are contracted for a year ahead. Ritzy florists from coast to coast are fighting for sufficient stock, paying 35 cents to a dollar a bulb.

"Any Hollywood press agent," said a successful lily grower in Harbor recently, "would call our business 'Colossal.' Maybe it is. We can't fill half our orders now."

In a little over three years this unassuming flori-cultural protegé has boomed into an industry approaching a yearly million dollar volume. Next year it will double. There is no competition from Holland or Japan, from where formerly 25,000,000 lily bulbs were imported. Present volume of production is less than ten per cent of the national demand.

Even now some of the well-established growers pinch themselves, wondering if they are dreaming—

"Ye Gods!" Ev Carroll cried. "How long has this been going on? So this's how you've made your moola so fast!"

"Exactly, son." Tod Rushing took the clipping, replaced it in his wallet, put it in his pocket. "I want to share my good fortune with you. You're like your mother, industrious and sensible. You can't miss."

"Well then, how do I go about it? Jean and I haven't much saved up, you know."

"Leave it to me, Ev. I've got a little gas left. We'll run up to Cove, just across the line. Old Sven Olsen has a couple of acres to rent and he's indebted to me, which should help some. I'll get you some of the best Croft bulblets or give you some of my own. If Olsen's ground is broken, as I think it is, you can get in say 40,000 possibly this year. Next year they'll be yearlings, two years from now 'commercials,' worth almost their weight in gold."

Ev Carroll shrugged, started limping towards the car. "What's there to lose, with a pot of gold on the end of the rainbow? Let's go!"

EVERYTHING went splendidly in the year that followed. Plowed land was secured from Sven Olsen, conditioned and fertilized. Precious lily bulblets were purchased and planted under his direction. He was a kindly old codger and most obliging.

Ev and Jean Carroll settled in a snug little cottage. They waited, watched their Easter lilies like fond parents. It was a glorious feeling to see growing things thrive, to see promises of financial independence begin to come true.

It was seven o'clock on a Monday when Carroll emerged from the kitchen door to do a little weeding. As usual, he looked across at the nearby plants. Then he jumped, his mouth dropped open. "Holy cow!" he gasped, and stared. Row after row of Croft bulbs, the aristocrats of lilies, had been dug up and stolen!

Low fog of the early September morning failed to check sudden perspiration. He threw his wheel hoe aside and ran, a stocky, hobbling figure, toward the wire fence. His booted feet sank into trampled Oregon soil. Twenty rows, he figured, tears coming into hazel eyes. Twenty rows across the two acres. Six thousand dollars' worth, at least.

IT WAS impossible, yet the dark brown, fertile ground bore mute evidence. He turned at the new fence which bordered his small plot, rented from Sven Olsen. Yes, his entire planting, except for a few rows along the bordering pine trees, was gone.

Gone was Jean's and his nest egg. Gone was the two thousand dollar loan from Uncle Tod. Gone was the opportunity of sharing, next September, in the lily bonanza.

He fought for control and reason. Leaning over, he examined the usually well-kept ground more carefully. Tanned fingers kept pushing unruly auburn hair out of his weathered, square-jawed face.

The field looked as if a dozen dogs had been digging for gophers. There were scales here and there from the bulbs, for only five days ago the cream of the crop had been planted. He recollected bitterly how eager he had been three weeks past, to dig up his beautiful Crofts that bloomed in July, the first Jean and he had ever raised. And how enthusiastic the Clackamas greenhouse man had been!

Then tell-tale prints told him more. The footmarks were definitely not the kind that he half expected. They were prints of women's shoes, with high heels!

This observation almost floored him. Why and how could a woman—? Jean wore moccasins or boots. No one, hereabouts, that he knew of, ever wore Cuban heels in the field.

He whirled and hurried to the fence and climbed over. In his frenzy he tore his new cords, which revealed the tail of his clean tan shirt. Unmindful now of the limp, caused by a Merchant Marine explosion during active duty, he reached Olsen's gray cottage.

"Hey, Sven!" he called in his clear tenor voice. "Hey!"

"Yah, yah sur-ure," came gruffly from the woodshed.

"Sven—Sven!" Carroll shouted. He collided with his landlord coming out with an armful of wood. "I've been robbed!"

The big, raw-boned Swede put down the kindling. He hitched up suspendered serge pants and searched for snoose in the pocket of his denim shirt. Small blue eyes glittered above the high cheekbones. For a moment he gave the impression of a suspicious albino monkey.

"Yah, Ay tank you yust go easy, Evie," he warned. "You yoking? Nobody in Cove or Riverdale coom steal lilies!"

"But—holy cow—they're gone, Sven!" Carroll gasped. "Clean as—as your packing shed floor. And some woman left a lot of footprints!"

"Ve go make su-ure," Olsen decided in his stolid manner, without undue loss of words. "Ay take in kindling to Hilda."

NEWS of the loss traveled fast in the community bordering the Pacific near the Oregon-California line. Later that morning, when Ev Carroll and Sven Olsen got out of the latter's pickup in Cove, their trading point, four miles south of Brookings, several residents shook their heads. Old man McLaughlin said sympathetically, "Sorry to hear about—"

But Olsen, striding ahead of Carroll, gave no notice. Ev didn't stop either, for they were heading for the Lily Growers' Association Grange. They stamped into the run-down building. Little brown-skinned Secretary Everts, in green gabardine slacks and shirt, was writing in a ledger. He jumped at the loud, abrupt entrance, tried to cover up his black-eyed alarm.

"Why—why, hello fellows," he greeted, in his cracked, womanish voice. "Come right in and have a seat."

"T'ank yu," Olsen said, remaining standing. "Yu tell him, Evie. He ban goot feller."

EV CARROLL was about to describe his loss when a short, beefy man, wearing a smart tan jacket and jodhpur combination, the kind seen at race tracks, sauntered in. His bulbous bulk momentarily filled the lower doorway. Behind him was a tall, dark woman on the exotic side. She looked Spanish and stylish in a tailored red dress, with white belt, "city" shoes and a chic white snood.

"Gud day, boys," greeted the man cordially, pushing the floppy panama hat back on parted, sandy hair. "Don't let me interrupt you. I just vanted to get a circular aboudt dis bunchy top disease."

"Okay, Ernest—help yourself," said Everts, grinning like a pleased weasel. "This is Mister Shorn, Evie, Sven, and Mrs. Shorn. Ev Carroll here was about to tell me something." He lowered his thin nose and looked over pince-nez bifocals expectantly.

"Somebody stole my lily bulbs," Carroll said in a tight voice. "All of them, that is, the largest and best."

"Hunh—vot's dot?" Ernest Shorn snorted, swinging back from the aisle table. His freckled jowls quivered. "Dat has never happened here!"

"It has now!" Carroll said recklessly. "All my bulbs, all but some under the trees, were dug up and carted away."

"How could anybody do a thing like that?" Mrs. Shorn exclaimed prettily, arching her penciled brows.

"How many rows?" squeaked Everts nervously.

"Twenty rows across two acres." Ev Carroll explained it all. He told about the footprints, about imprints of packing cases, where they had been set down in the soft, upheaved loam.

"It just can't be!" protested the small secretary, dropping his fountain pen.

"Idt's, idt's terrible, dot's vot idt iss!" exploded Shorn, crumpling the circular in his pudgy hand, glancing up at his wife. "Idt's imbossible, such a t'eft. You lose —hmm—adt least eight tousan' dollars, if true."

"Six, I figure," corrected Carroll sadly. "The worst of it is, I can't prove what bulbs were mine. They all look alike."

"All Crofts, yah su-ure." Olson nodded jerkily.

"Isn't there some way," Mrs. Shorn asked helpfully, "of getting them back?"

Everts shook his black head, then nodded. "We must at least warn the growers," he said decisively, gazing button-eyed at Shorn for agreement.

"Well, dond't let's just standt here!" shouted Shorn. "Do somet'ing, Everts. You're in chargt. Examine Carroll's fieldt, once, wire a report to stadt's pathologist. Tell da sheriff." Ve can't allow dis to happen!"

"Sure—sure, you're right, Ernest." Everts came out from behind his desk as if a released spring had raised him clear of the seat. "We'll get action, fellows," he shrilled, and zoomed like a spread-eagled moth, out of the door.

Ev Carroll looked at Shorn. It came to him then that he had heard the name roundabout. Ernest Shorn, who had four acres of fine lilies and a model home down on the river bench. His equipment was of the best. He was a leader in Association affairs. He had the biggest sales from Crescent City to Aberdeen, working with a dozen men on shares. No wonder Everts leaped out the door and snapped into it.

FOUR days went by, days of heartache for Evan Carroll. People had come and gone. Sheriff Dad Rafter was busy with clues, but only clues in the earth. Little titian-haired Jean tried to comfort her husband.

"We'll get by, Ev," she said sympathetically one afternoon, smiling bravely, putting a small tanned arm around his neck. "It's tough to lose our stake when we'd hoped for so much. But we're still young."

"And I've still got you and Judy Ann," Carroll said seriously, taking the baby up from her cot. "This lily business could be a real moneymaker. Look at Uncle Tod. Look what Charley Mayhew made last year."

"And Sven Olsen too," agreed Jean. "Twenty-seven thousand off his acre and a half."

Ev Carroll tried to smile. "Taxes, though, took a hunk out of that."

"Of course," said Jean. "We're paying

for the war now, not afterward. They say this county of lily growers buys per capita the most war bonds on the coast."

"Maybe so, but we didn't help." Carroll handed the gurgling infant to his wife and kissed her. "I'm going down to the river field and talk to Sven. He said he was working it over to plant in cover crop or vetch or something like that. I'll be back by six."

"Dinner will be ready, dear."

Ev Carroll wanted to get away by himself for a while. Disappointment was gnawing at his heart and he wished to cheer Jean up, not to burden her.

He took his green bicycle from the back shed and started down the highway toward Cove. The high fog clung to the back country wooded section, but along the coast, a mile away, the sky was clear and blue. Here and there were sheep and milk cows, but the farmers, for the most part, now raised lilies, and at a greater profit.

AS HE reached the south fork and turned east, he called to mind the recent feverish activity. All the growers, from backyard beginners to acreage planters, had cleaned up. Commercial bulbs had sold from sixty-five to ninety cents each, depending on the circumference size, leaving scales and bulblet offspring to be re-planted for next year's crop.

And how the Croft and Kenyon-Davis, another variety, were in demand! Nurseries, dealers and florists from coast to coast were crying for Easter lily bulbs more than ever before. After September delivery they kept them in cold storage, then forced them, in hothouse pots, into blooming plants, timed for the April trade.

Carrol drew up at the river gate but Olson was not in sight. He turned back, disconsolate, having little to do now. He had planned to ask Sven if he would let him go shares, but now, considering it, that was asking for charity. And he didn't want charity.

He could hire out, of course, but now even a helper, hereabouts, was of little need. Crops of commercial bulbs had been dug up, packed in peat moss, crated and sold. Alternate fields would soon be fertilized and planted. Then, for the next few weeks, it was a matter of holding thumbs, of sitting through the fall and winter rains. Or go to Portland and work in a shipyard.

It looked like the latter necessity, Carroll thought glumly, as he pedaled back home. Whoever had swiped his bulblets had done a good job. They'd taken five years of his savings and part of his heart along with the plantings. Why hadn't the thief selected an established planter who could have stood the strain?

EV CARROLL tossed that night and couldn't sleep. He was up with a headache at four o'clock in the dark, and decided to walk it off if he could. Inactivity was getting him down.

He dressed and slipped into a leather jacket. He took his .22-caliber target automatic and a box of shells out of the dresser drawer. Possibly he could pot a few destructive gophers, when it grew light, on the way home. Advising Jean of his departure he left their small cottage and headed for the road.

Jean had said Olsen was cleaning up a small planted tract on the ocean bluff, instead of the river bench. Mildly curious to see what the Swede had been doing, Carroll crossed the highway and entered Patri's pasture to cut across. He met none of the eighty Holsteins that were usually there. Likely they were near the barn, waiting for the morning milking.

His feet were wet by the time he had reached the rocky coastline. The east was a gray black when he turned south to Olsen's land, with the intention of taking an easier path to the beach later on.

Sven Olsen thought the most of this field, Carroll recalled, as he paced along the old zig-zag fence, a relic of sixty years ago. He kicked over a pile of straw for dryness and started to sit down, to rest the injured leg that bothered him at times. Then he froze in a half-crouched position. Sounds had come to his alert ears from the lower end of the planting.

He listened, doubtful that anyone would be here in the darkness so early. Cautiously he eased across the old fence and, bending over, crept along on the ocean side of the mossy barrier. A darker bulk loomed in the field and two figures, one short, one tall, were busy in the earth, filling crates, then loading.

He was about to call Sven Olsen's name, then thought better of it. The small coupe changed his mind. Olsen had nothing like it. Besides, it had a two-wheeled trailer behind it. Straining his eyes, Carroll decided the small outline was a girl, the other a woman.

So here were the thieves in the night that had stripped his field. They knew the finest bulbs when they singled out this tract. Here Olson had put in his prize Crofts, fifteen thousand yearlings. And Portland and San Francisco dealers considered Sven Olsen's stock just about the best on the coast, along with Uncle Tod's. Even his own bulblets had been coaxed and purchased from the exacting oldtimer.

Ev Carroll's cheeks were burning and his heart was pounding as he pulled the long-barreled automatic out of his shirt and snapped down the safety. He started toward the indistinct bulk of the car, keeping it between himself and the nocturnal visitors. He drew up near the radiator, then edged along the trailer's side. He waited until the taller individual brought a crate heaped high with bulbs.

"Drop it!" he snapped. "Up with your hands—you're covered!"

The crate banged down. Carroll winced as tender bulbs spilled like clustered garlic. The skirted figure whirled. A right hand whipped down.

The crack of the automatic blended with the kick in Carroll's hand. "I said up with your hands or I *will* bore you!" He stepped closer, then caught his breath. "Well, I'll be dog-goned! Al Pinochi, the truck driver!"

"So what?" Pinochi started to lower his arms, but Carroll's gun motioned them back. A quick frisk brought a small nickel-plated revolver from under the dirty green and yellow figured skirt.

"All right, kid," Ev Carroll called, "come here with your hands—"

Pow-e-e-e! A bullet ricocheted off car metal to his left. Carroll stepped back, crouched, fired at the kneeling form fifty feet away. The boy screeched and swore. Gangling Pinochi cursed and leaped. Carroll swung. A fast bony fist caught the side of his neck. He whirled, side-stepped, fired high and to one side. Pinochi grunted, cursed and grabbed his left shoulder.

"I warned you!" exploded Carroll. "Now get over there by your fool helper."

It was lighter now. The east was gray cottony mist in the upland tree tops. Pinochi's red jacket contrasted strangely with the gaudy skirt. Greasy dark hair drooped over a long saturnine face. His eyes were black buttons, the thin mouth tightly drawn. He turned awkwardly and started walking.

Ev Carroll limped through the churned-up soil behind him. The skinny, tow-headed youngster, wearing a girl's wash dress over his clothes, was holding a bare gouged leg with both hands. "You shot me!" he gasped in a surprised tone.

"Only creased," Carroll said disgustedly, "by the looks of it." He kicked the .22 rifle to one side, then picked it up. At that moment he noticed their feet. The back of his neck prickled. Women's high-heeled pumps were strapped to the soles of their work shoes. The patent leather uppers were split to allow for width.

"So," Carroll said grimly, "you did get my bulbs. Clever idea, those feet of yours. What have I or Olsen ever done to you?"

Pinochi cleared his throat and spat. "Nuthin'," he snarled.

"Then where's my lily plantings."

"I didn't take 'em."

Whang! The automatic in Carroll's hand jumped. The hem of the skirt perked. "Then who did?"

The tall, dark trucker shifted and winced. He eased the hold on his shoulder. "I was told to pick 'em up," he admitted sullenly. "They're all condemned diebacks an' bunchy tops, anyway. Why such a fuss?"

"Diebacks? Holy cow!" Carroll's pink face went scarlet. "They're the best stock that—"

"I ain't never done this afore, mister!" the boy broke in shrilly. "My leg hurts awful. I wanta go home. Don't shoot him!"

"Ever helped Pinochi before?"

"No, sir, I never—"

Pinochi groaned and slumped forward. He started wilting at the knees. Then he straightened, lightning swift. Carroll caught the left hook square on the chin, and lights went out.

THE morning sun had cleared the pines by the time Ev Carroll rolled and staggered up. His jaw felt like a piece of gar-

den hose. A bleeding gash on his head told another story. Somewhere inside there was an anvil chorus.

Dazedly he looked around. A few bulblets were scattered nearby, obviously spilled from filled crates. But the crates themselves, the trailer, coupe, Pinochi and the boy were gone.

Thoroughly discouraged, Carroll made his uncertain way out of the field, trying to follow the tire marks. Disgust at his playing the sap mounted as he neared the highway.

Sven Olsen was driving out of his yard. He saw Carroll fall over Patri's pasture gate, then struggle to get up. He stared blankly, braked suddenly. Then he thumped to the ground and ran clumping across the highway.

"Vat you ban doin', Evie?" His big, calloused hands pawed his young neighbor and brushed him off.

Carroll stood unsteadily. Bleakly he related the facts.

Olsen's high-cheekboned face took on the color of chalk. "Ay vant to be su-ure. My prize Crofts?" Blue eyes were marbles of ice as he added, "So, Pinochi, py yiminy. Kid's Eastbury's brat—von yoongest. Now ve know, Evie, var your lily go too, no yoking. You goot boy."

"I'm a dope!" Carroll exclaimed miserably. "I had them cornered, nearly forced to—oh, what's the use!"

"Ay tank you go home, Evie," Olsen urged, "and fix your head. I just go like ha'al to see Sheriff Rafter."

"O-okay. But when I meet up with that Pinochi—"

EV CARROLL spent the next fortnight fighting discontent and frustration. Sven Olsen accomplished nothing and Rafter seemed no more capable. Al Pinochi had vanished into thin air. Even the boy was nowhere to be found.

As the days passed, Carroll realized that disaster had struck permanently and bitterly. Bulbs wouldn't last, ordinarily, this long out of the ground.

Their superior qualities would be superior no longer.

One chilly, foggy Tuesday morning he cycled in to Cove to see about work. The few dollars that Jean and he had saved for emergencies were gone. He leaned his bicycle against the limestone drinking fountain in the plaza and went to the post office for mail. He came back with bills and a pained expression.

Young Ham Yates stood admiring the bike, a vacuous grin on his pimply face.

"Hello, Ham," Carroll said glumly, took his wheel and started off.

"Ugh-ugh—hey Evie, come 'ere."

Ham Yates was laboring with something special on his mind. It wasn't as big a mind as the size of his tousled, yellow head seemed to indicate.

Some folks just said he was simple, and let it go at that.

But to Ev Carroll the tall, rusty-colored, bean-pole kid, with overalls too short and skinny neck too long, was understandable. Ham was shy, afraid of people, a wild thing out of the woods. That was why he had given him that plastic handled hunting knife a year ago. Ham, with his long beagle nose, always knew where to find fish and clam and oysters—even deer.

"What's bothering you?"

YATES beckoned with a long, dirty finger. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Over by the creek, Evie," he said in his high flat voice. "Too many people watchin' here."

Carroll understood. Ham Yates couldn't stand people looking at him. Together they went across the narrow park and through the willows. On the bank Yates held out his hand. "Here," he said, as if offering a pearl.

Ev Carroll took the small, cream-white bulblet and fingered it gently. "Yeah, a lily bulb. But why—"

Yates glanced around. His big ears listened up and down the stream. "It's your'n or that Swede's," he said softly, finally. "I was thinking where I'd go if'n I was a stolen lily bulb. I went."

"The lilies are surely all dried up by now, Ham. But where did you go?"

"To a small cover 'bout two miles north o' here, inside a kinda reef. It's a low boathouse. Big rocks at both sides. Dock ain't used much no more an' broke down. That boat don't bring in no fish. It takes somepin else out."

Carroll eyed the tall boy narrowly. "Go

ahead, Ham. You may have something there."

Yates' bare toe followed a caterpillar for a moment, then dug the grass. "I reasoned it some," he went on. "They go south Satiday nights but load up afore that. Crescent City is tha ony place they can land next a'here."

"Show me, Ham. Show me the cove."

Ham Yates trembled. Objects in his bulging pockets tinkled. "I—I cain't," he said, teeth chattering. "They'd whup me like Grandpap Dalt always whupped me an—" His voice cracked off.

"Okay, Ham, just skip it. But why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Jest found out last night," Yates said, more composed. "I was smeltin' a little in the new moon."

"Well, thanks a lot. I'll see what I can find out. Keep this under your hat—I mean, don't tell anybody else. You'll get a really fine present this time if everything works out. You've got old Rafter beat a mile!"

HAM YATES had been right. Something fishy was going on in the small, old cove. Ev Carroll spent several nights watching from the top of the north rocks. Friday night, before the late moon came up, a small strange truck approached stealthily down a back road and coasted, motor dead, down to the dock near the ramshackle boathouse.

Three men, shadowy in the starlight and partial fog, unloaded crates and carried them into the shed. Then they locked the place and drove quietly away.

Carroll waited an hour before investigating.

The boat shelter was heavily boarded and locked and belied its decrepit appearance. Finally he stripped and tried diving under the long front doors. Iron rods, with woven barbed wire, stopped him. And it wouldn't do to break in.

Saturday night Carroll saw the same truck come creeping down the road. This time two men got out, entered and locked the building. The truck turned and went away. In a few minutes a small white fishing boat emerged. The front doors of the boathouse closed and snapped. The marine motor barked, started a metallic purring. Then the craft headed out along the small, rocky jetty and turned south.

Later that night—it was really early Sunday morning—Carroll and Sven Olsen started south for Crescent City. Olsen had brought two flashlights, a .22 rifle and an old but highly efficient .45 automatic.

Olsen had been in favor of seizing the boat in the cove, but Carroll felt his idea was better. We'll find out where they're delivering whatever they're handling, Sven," he counseled. "We've both got an idea what it is. After all, we need evidence. Then maybe Rafter will do something."

The fog was thick and cold when they reached the California town. The place was quiet, almost dead, except for an occasional Coast Guardsman or fisherman going home after a card session or a date.

They parked near the point and waited. Both were shivering when, around four in the morning, they heard the soft exhaust that had a peculiar ping. It was approaching shore to the west. They got out, taking their flashlights and guns. Cautiously they scrambled through vines and around rocks. Then they almost tumbled out on the deck of the boat itself. A curving swath had been cut through overhanging Himalaya brambles along what had once been a sewage canal.

They drew up, breathing hard, straining their ears. The motor was dead now, the craft coasting in. It was a miracle they hadn't been discovered.

An owl hooted softly inshore and a double hoot answered. An amber light winked twice. Carefully they pushed through the matted undergrowth to a cleared space near a low, sloping roof. It was the boat shelter, lower than the vines themselves.

Carroll found it difficult to distinguish much in the softly luminous fog, but he made out the craft as it glided into the shed. He stepped around to the rear. Something hard smacked him on the side of the head.

"Py yiminy, no you don't—" There was sudden scuffling behind him. Two burly shapes grappled, grunted, fell, rolled on the boathouse floor. There was a flash and roar, the sound of blows on flesh.

Ev Carroll swayed, his head reeling. He popped on his flashlight. Olsen was rising, getting to his knees. His own light lay

shattered near Vic Junior, one of Shorn's workmen.

Then two figures came out of the darkness. A gun exploded in Carroll's face. Burning powder peppered his cheek. Olsen went down again under a squatty form but he went down swinging.

In one of those instants when time seems to stand still, Carroll saw his assailants. Shorn was trying to brain Olsen with a wrench. Pinochi swung like a panther and shot at the flashlight in Carroll's left hand.

The searing pain in his forearm brought a chewed oath to his lips and cleared his head. The automatic in his fist roared and chugged flame. Pinochi whirled as if struck by a crowbar, went to his knees. Then Carroll sprang, bore him backwards. Twice he struck with the flashlight. It bent, cracked in his hand. In the quick darkness he felt a vise-like arm go around his throat. He rolled, struck out savagely to the midriff, tried to get the gun hand, to avoid steely fingers searching for his eyes.

HE WAS gasping for breath when he heaved with remnants of his strength. His gun came up under Pinochi's chin with the metallic solidity of a knuckle duster. Pinochi's hold went limp just as spotlights popped on.

"Yore puttin' blood on the lily, son," said Sheriff Dad Rafter's voice from the shadows. "Any tyro who can handle a gat an' his dukes like you, can be my assistant any day."

"How—how'd you get here?" Carroll gasped. "We did—didn't think you—"

"I've jest been sittin' tight. My two dep'ties outside can vouch fer that." Rafter's flashlight beam roamed over the boathouse floor. He stood spraddle-legged like a booted, big old bear. Sven Olsen was out cold, but breathing. Pinochi, too, was temporarily out of circulation.

Ernest Shorn heaved like a porpoise and got heavily to his feet. "You—you dumbhead you!" he sputtered. His close-set eyes were murderous. Freckled jowls shook. "Pinochi should have kilt—"

"You small-time, lily chiseling skunk!" Carroll jumped before Rafter could restrain him. His right hook came up with body weight behind it. Shorn stepped into it. Carroll felt the shock to his shoulder, despite the cushioning double chins. False teeth cracked and spilled out. Shorn sat down again, a mound of jiggling, overalled flesh.

Then he rolled, amazingly swift for so fat a man. A Luger bristled in his hamlike fist. The exploding orange cone coincided with a thunderous report behind Carroll. Shorn spun on one thigh and sprawled on his face. Carroll's left side felt branded with red-hot steel.

"Come on, bub," Rafter said, casually shooting tobacco juice into a dark corner, holstering his big pearl-handled gun. "Looks like Olsen got clipped, but ye've shore found yore lily bulbs. They's a old fish ice house down tha road a spell. Crates packed ta tha roof, waitin' fer a shipment, I reckon. Tha coupe an' trailer's thar too. Found some o' Mrs. Shorn's highfalutin' old shoes under that seat. Found this, too." He held out a .22 target pistol.

"Holy cow!" Carroll exclaimed weakly. "That. I thought I'd never—but we caught them red-handed—" He slumped, nodding, at the big official's feet.

IT DIDN'T take long to get to the bottom of the tricky lily business. Two days later Ev Carroll was called on Olsen's phone. He answered, nervous and expectant. He shoved up the bandage so he could hear. It was an attorney from Portland.

"Come to Cove, Mr. Carroll," said the crisp, polished voice. "And bring a truck for your lily bulbs. They are still well protected in packed peat moss."

Sven Olsen, his head also swathed in bandages, took his young renters, Evan, Jean and Judy Ann to town. It was a field day for the lily growers. Even Mr. Winthrop of Clackamas, one of the biggest greenhouse men on the Coast, was on Main Street, smiling.

On the way to the Grange, Carroll was slapped on the back and people called to him. Even young girls looked admiringly and pointed. Jean drew closer to her husband and laughed. "You hero!" she whispered near his battered ear.

Ev Carroll was blushing when they reached Secretary Evarts' office. The place was jammed. A sleek, dark young man in tweeds held out his hand when introduced.

"Yes, I'm Pollock. Called you on the telephone. Sit down, please."

Carroll sat, Jean next to him with gurgling Judy Ann.

"It is a little unusual," began Pollock, "to speed things along like this, but everybody seems in high gear and in your favor, Mr. Carroll. The bulbs belonging to you and Mr. Olsen are in back of this building, on a Pacific Transit truck. They were brought back from Crescent City with Mr. Tipton's, who owned that last boat's shipment."

"But why—"

"Coming to that, Mr. Carroll." The young lawyer seemed to be enjoying his part. "I have been retained by the Lily Association for this district. Mr. Everts here has been suspicious for some time. A Minneapolis syndicate has been trying to muscle in."

"Yes! Yes!" Everts waved his small, short arms. "Trying to buy in volume at one low price. Trying to intimidate all the small growers. When they couldn't buy, they just recently started to hijack."

"But what about Shorn?" Ev Carroll asked, puzzled. "Wasn't he—"

"He was the goat, here in your community," explained Pollock pleasantly. "The syndicate financed him four years ago to get a foothold here. Perhaps you didn't know that both he and Pinochi have prison records. Those Easterners held a club over Shorn's head, keeping his true identity a secret. His name, by the way, was really Ernst Scharninghausen."

"Ay tank Ay was right," Sven Olsen muttered, tenderly adjusting his bandage.

"Not such a bad hombre though, in a way," Sheriff Rafter broke in gruffly. "Grew fat on lilies, doin' nothin', then wouldn't let 'im an' Pinochi, fer some reason, held a grudge, kep' him riled. This lily raisin' promised too much moola."

"And how is Shorn?" Carroll asked. "And Pinochi? They were both shot—"

"In the hospital, doin' good enough, under guard," said Rafter. He elbowed the crowd aside, took out a plug of tobacco. "The worst off is the kid what was still helpin' Pinochi," he explained, carving a chew. "He hightailed out the boathouse that night smack into Townsend's bull in the nex' beach pasture. Last report he was runnin' yet."

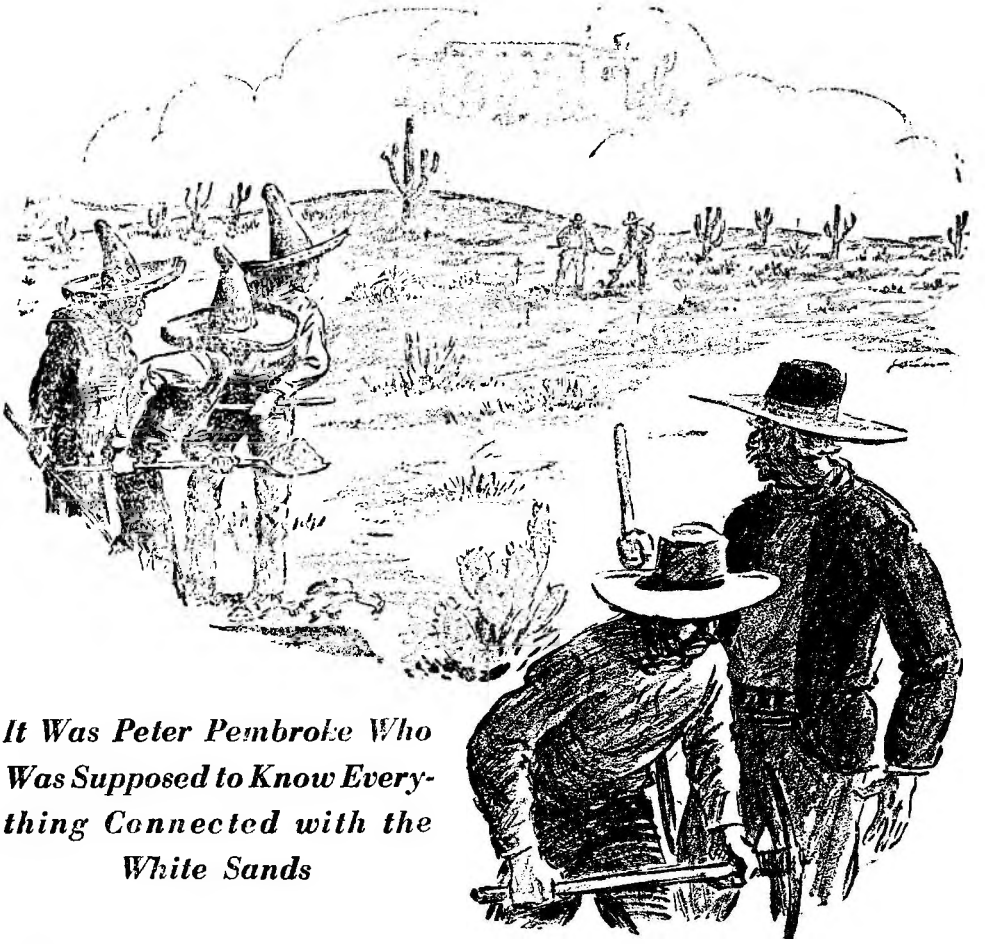
Laughter echoed in the dusty, cobwebbed room. Young Pollock held up a well-manicured hand, smiling. "Let us get back to Carroll, folks. You all owe him a great deal. Here is my idea. His bulbs have been packed and jammed and may be bruised, even injured from exposure. I am putting in a claim for Shorn's planted four acres. Two acres for the young man here, an acre to Olsen and an acre to Tipton—for damages."

"Correct," agreed Everts briskly, nodding, glancing through the room. "I'm sure the committee will be favorable." The crowd stirred. The murmur of approval was unanimous.

"They are," Pollock went on, "the Kenyon-Davis variety and yearlings, six inch bulbs. You prefer Crofts, Mr. Carroll, I understand. Would you mind replanting this other strain?"

"Mind? Holy cow!" blurted Evan Carroll, turning to Jean. Then he winced, favoring his bandaged ribs and arm. "We only want our own—"

Jean Carroll nudged his good side. "Let the law take its own course, dear," she whispered wisely.



It Was Peter Pembroke Who Was Supposed to Know Everything Connected with the White Sands

THE HOUSE THAT VANISHED

By ANDREW W. HEPBURN

PETER got off the Alamogordo bus, his arms loaded with bundles of groceries. He went through the park gate toward the sun-baked wilderness of shimmering sands beyond the caretaker's lodge.

As he passed the lodge someone shouted, "Hey!"

Peter stopped. In the doorway of the adobe lodge appeared a short and rolly poly man. He had a big bald head. He wore round glasses perched on a large nose, but they did not obscure extremely bright blue eyes. The nose led to a gray walrus mustache of splendid proportions.

The man wore a disreputable seersucker suit. He was fanning himself with a sloppy, battered straw hat.

"You Peter Pembroke?" The voice was deep and hoarse, resembling a bellow.

"I am," said Peter.

"Been waiting for you," he advanced into the sunlight. "The man here says you know all about these sands."

"Maybe," said Peter. "I've lived in 'em for twenty-five years. What's your trouble?"

"Who said anything about trouble?"

"Look, stranger, I'm in a hurry and these bundles are heavy. Let's don't argue. What can I do for you?"

There was a flicker of amusement in the blue eyes.

"Sorry, Mr. Pembroke. I'm hot and tired and perplexed. Put your bundles down over here in the shade, and give me ten minutes. Just ten minutes. Here I'll help you."

He snatched at one of the bundles, immediately dropped it. The bag burst and oranges rolled about in the sand. Peter sighed, deposited the rest of the bundles on a shaded bench and began to pick up the oranges. The fat man squatted clumsily, picked up one, bit off the end and began to peel it.

"Sour," he said, retiring to the bench.

"Now," said Peter, his temper growing shorter as he walked to the bench where the fat little man was sitting, "what is it?"

In reply the fat man flicked a hand inside his coat. It came out with a letter. He stuck it toward Peter.

"Read this," he said.

The envelope was plain, addressed on a typewriter to Mrs. David Hendricks, Madison, Wisconsin. It bore a Mexican stamp and a smudged cancellation which appeared to say Tampico.

"Open it; go on it's all right," said the fat man.

The inside sheet was typewritten. It said:

Dear Madame:

It is my unpleasant duty to convey to you the sad news of the death of your husband, Captain David Hendricks. He died yesterday as the result of injuries sustained during a fight among the members of the crew of the vessel, the schooner *Sand Witch,* which he owned.

As a priest of the Church I was summoned to Captain Hendricks' side a few hours before he died. I was with him when he died. It was his particular request that I convey to you a message. I will endeavor to give it to you as he gave it to me, though I am not certain I understand its meaning or that you will do so.

He said, and these are his words: "Tell Sarah there is treasure in gold in the house in the white sands near Alamogordo." I hope you will know what your husband meant. I do not know the meaning of the strange name, but your husband spelled it out for me, a letter at a time.

He also asked that I express to you his deep regret that he had been so faithless a husband.

I regret, on my own account, not to be able to give you more information about your husband. Though I have known him for several years I have seldom had occasion to talk to him. He had little use for my work, I am sorry to say, and lived almost entirely on his boat. I believe he was regarded as a successful trader along this coast.

Please accept my sympathy.

Sincerely,

Father Alfredo Lopez.

Peter looked up puzzled. The fat man perched on the bench swinging his stubby legs and sucking on the orange, was watching Peter through bright, inquisitive eyes. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Peter. "What am I supposed to make of it?"

"That business about the house. I want to find it."

"There isn't any house, not in these sands. I ought to know," Peter answered.

"There must be, the letter says so, treasure in gold in it. Don't care about the house, really, but I could do with the gold; aim to find it, too."

"Look—" said Peter patiently. He felt as though he were dealing with a spoiled child. "I tell you there isn't any house, not in these sands. Maybe it's somewhere else."

"You live in a house?" asked the little man.

"Kind of a house, a shack."

"And it's in the sands, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, then there is one, yours. How do you know it doesn't mean your house?"

Peter decided his inquisitor was mildly lunatic. The best way to deal with nuts was to humor them. Patiently he said, "It couldn't mean my house. I built it myself, ten years ago. If anyone tucked a treasure away in it he'd have been a magician."

"Still, could be there, somewhere. Mind if we look?"

Peter's patience was slowly ebbing.

"What's this all about," he said, "this

letter? Who are you? Where you from? What's this treasure business?"

The flicker of amusement returned to the bright blue eyes.

"So sorry, Mr. Pembroke. Manner gets a little curt sometimes. Comes from dealing with bugs I guess."

"Bugs?"

"Insects. I'm an entomologist, Names Hendricks. Professor Jonathan Hendricks, from Madison, Wisconsin."

"You teach at the University there?"

"Right, natural sciences. But specialty is bugs. Did a doctorate on the cockroach. Definitive study."

"Then this fellow Hendricks in the letter?"

"My late, but unesteemed father. 'Fraid the old boy was a full-fledged scallawag."

"And the lady to whom the letter is addressed?"

"My mother, God rest her. She lives with me in Madison."

"Wait a minute," said Peter. "I'm getting confused. Let's start at the beginning."

THE professor did. He said:

"It was this way. Better than fifty years ago, my father, Captain Hendricks, only he wasn't captain then, just plain Dave Hendricks, brought my mother out here as a bride. Rough, wild country then, still is, I guess. Anyway, mother couldn't stand it. When she knew I was scheduled she went home to her folks. My father promised to come back later. He never did. She never saw him again, nor heard from him. Then this letter came about two weeks ago."

"And he's dead?" Peter asked.

"So it would appear. Mother figured he'd been dead quite a long time. Kind of a shock, this letter. But this treasure business whetted my curiosity. If the old rascal buried any gold round here before legging it off to South America, I'm going to have a try at finding it. Least I can do for my mother," the professor said.

"Look, Professor," Peter said. "You're wasting your time. Maybe there was a house here fifty years ago, and maybe someone did bury some treasure in it. But it's not here now. I know that. But if you want to prowl around and satisfy yourself, it's all right with me, and just to start why not come out to my shack with me now and see for yourself that I've got no pot of gold tucked under the mattress."

Ten minutes later they were in the heart of the dunes. The professor, to keep up with Peter had to trot, yet he fired a barrage of questions and comments. His curiosity was insatiable; what was the origin of the sands? What plants were found in them, what animals, what insects? Occasionally he would spy some malformed bit of vegetation, dart off to examine it.

At last Peter said, "Just a little more, just over the next dune."

The professor grunted. Perspiring and puffing he floundered up the steep dune, and together they attained the summit.

"There," said Peter. The descending sun threw a long arc of shadow out over the sand. In a little cove made between the angle of high dunes, well within the protecting shadow stood Peter's shack. Fanning himself violently the professor peered down at it.

"You left the door open," he said.

It *was* open a few inches, Peter noticed. He was sure he had left it shut. Annoyed he plunged down the lee side of the dune, the professor shuffling and sliding behind him. Peter pushed the door wide.

"What the blazing hell!" he shouted. The cabin was a shambles. Spluttering with astonishment and dismay Peter kicked at a loose board. It had once been part of the floor. Other boards, splintered and broken lay about. Peter picked his way among them, skirting a gaping, ragged pit dug in the hard sand under his cabin. He slammed the door of his big electric refrigerator, but not before noticing that the contents were a jumbled mess of broken and overturned containers. Near the alcove which enclosed his comfortable bunk he stumbled over a blanket, half buried under a pile of loose sand. The bunk was a mass of bedding, sand, books tipped from a nearby shelf, odds and ends of broken ornaments. Peter ran a trembling and speculative finger into a great slash in the protruding end of the mattress.

From behind came the voice of Professor Hendricks. "Really, Mr. Pembroke, you ought to get married. Of course wives are sometimes troublesome creatures, but if this is the way you keep house, it looks as though you need one."

Rage welled up within Peter and exploded. Whirling he shouted at the professor, "You, you fat bug hunter. You did this."

The professor upended an overturned chair, placed it carefully on a patch of still undamaged floor, and sat down, fanning himself.

"Now then, Mr. Pembroke, is that fair? I may be a trifle queer, and my manners are not too good, but I'm no vandal. No, I didn't do it. But you know, I'm mighty curious about who did."

Peter squatted on the edge of the bunk and glared into the pit of sand in the middle of the floor.

"If I could catch him I'd bury him alive in that hole," he muttered.

"Maybe, you'll take that letter I showed you seriously," the professor said. "Acting on it, I asked permission to explore your house, and invited your help. Looks as though someone else wasn't so courteous."

Peter did not reply. He looked about helplessly. His attention was diverted by the sound of the professor's chair being overturned. The professor appeared to have left it suddenly and was lying prone on the floor his battered hat clutched in front of him.

"Bless my soul," he said. "Missed him. I guess. Never did I see anything like that before."

"What?" demanded Peter.

"An insect, a snow white insect. Looked like a roach. What a pity to have missed him. Ran down in the sand there, into the hole."

LYING with his face just at the edge of the pit in the sand the professor peered intently. Then, without bothering to change his position he said, "You may be interested to know, my friend, that your destructive visitor was a big man, probably tall, certainly heavy. That he has one leg shorter than the other and doubtless walks with a limp."

"What the devil are you talking about?" Peter demanded.

"Look," the professor pointed a stubby finger at the bottom of the hole. Near the back were two clearly marked footprints pressed deep into the hard, slightly moist sub sand. Apparently the digger stood there to heave out the sand. Peter got down to look.

"As a scientist," said the professor smugly, "I'm accustomed to observing significant detail. You will note that while the print of the right foot is that of a normal shoe, somewhat oversized, the left is different."

"I don't get it," Peter said.

"You surprise me, Mr. Pembroke. You seem an observant man. Note the thickness of sole indicated on the left foot, and the heavy built up heel. The usual device used to offset a leg shortened by accident. Therefore the probable limp," the professor expounded.

"By golly, Professor, I think you're right," said Peter. "A big guy with a gimp leg. But what the devil was he shoveling sand for. Did he think I needed a basement?"

"We need more complete evidence than footprints in the sand for that, I'm afraid," said the professor, rearing up on his knees and dusting off his hands.

"The devil with it," exploded Peter. "I can't stay here tonight. Wait till I pack some things and I'll go back to town with you."

AFTER a bath and dinner at the hotel in Alamogordo Peter felt better. He and the professor retired to Peter's room to talk.

"No doubt you consider this a hopeless, needle in the haystack, affair," the professor was saying.

"Haven't even got a haystack," Peter grunted.

"Sorry to disagree with you, my friend. But we have. Our haystack is the white sands. The problem of finding the needle in this case, as I see it, is to fix within as close limits as possible the former location of the house, shack, hut, shanty or whatever it was occupied by my irresponsible parent."

Peter thought a minute. "Yep, I see what you mean," he said. "That means someone who might remember him. There wouldn't be many about still, yet there might be a few. I've thought of something."

The professor beamed. "I thought you would," he said.

"It's Jose Hernandez," said Peter.

"Who's he?"

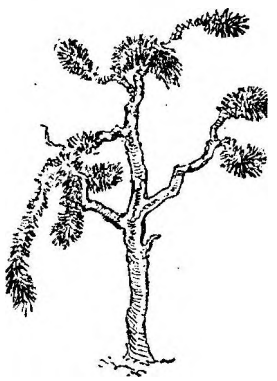
"An old Spaniard, friend of mine. Lived here all his life. His father was once a sort of local big-shot with a huge ranch and a lot of money. Jose's all that's left. Ranch and money went a long time ago."

They started out to find Jose after breakfast the next morning. As they left the town behind them on the El Paso road Peter pointed out a clump of cottonwood trees off the right of the road.

"House is in there," he explained.

When they came into the shade of the grove the professor saw a tiny adobe structure. It was thick-walled, with small, square windows. An ancient vine, bright with crimson flowers climbed over one end. The single door in the wall facing the road was painted bright blue.

"You'd better wait out here," suggested Peter. "Jose doesn't speak English, and besides he's shy of strangers."



The professor propped himself against one of the cottonwoods. Peter knocked on the blue door, waited a moment and then in response to a muffled voice from the inside went in.

Inside was gloom. Such light as there was had a greenish cast, filtering through the small windows obscured by vines. The windows were all shut and the air was dank. Peter had difficulty seeing anything. Then a shrill, cracked voice from a corner of the room said in Spanish:

"Greetings, Senor Pembroke."

Peter saw the old man. He sat in a high-backed chair in a corner. He seemed shrunken. There was a bright serape over his knees as though his legs were cold. His eyes were black and shone like glass marbles.

Peter began in Spanish with the usual courtly amenities. He trusted that Don Jose's health was improved; that he was standing the summer heat; that his cow and chickens were in good health; that the weather would improve in the near future. Then Peter said:

"Once there was a man who lived near here, an American. It was many years ago. But perhaps you, who have so fine a memory for old things will remember him. His name was David Hendricks."

THE old man didn't say anything at first, but his eyes narrowed and seemed to glow with a hidden fire. His gnarled hands on the arms of his chair gripped more tightly. Then he spoke. His voice was sharper, shriller.

"I knew him," said Jose.

"Splendid," said Peter. "Perhaps you will tell me about him."

"He was a murderer and a thief," the old man spat the words out as though they burned his mouth.

"What?" demanded Peter startled.

"He was a murderer and a thief. He killed my father and stole his money, my money. For many years I have sought word of him."

"I have word of him. He is dead," replied Peter.

"And the money he stole, where is that?" asked Jose.

"I know nothing of any money, nothing at all," fenced Peter. "But why do you say he is a murderer and a thief?"

"It must be so," Jose replied. "He could be the only one."

"Tell me about it," said Peter gently.

Jose did, at length, with all the florid detail of Castillian speech. He told of his father, the great Don Hernandez; of his tremendous *hacienda* which stretched almost to the Rio Grande; of its great herds of cattle. Once came a young man, an American, with his young bride from the east. He was David Hendricks. He won the confidence of Don Hernandez who gave him a position of trust on his *hacienda*. There came a time when the cattle were herded for the market. The cattle were driven north toward Kansas. Don Hernandez went along, and so did the young Hendricks.

"His wife, was she here then?"

"No," Jose said. "She had returned to her home in the east to have a child."

"What happened?" asked Peter.

"The cattle were sold in Wichita, for a great price. The money was paid to Don Hernandez in gold. That I know. Don Hernandez and the young Hendricks left Wichita together. But they never returned."

"But you say he killed your father?" demanded Peter.

"How do you know? What is your proof?"

"I have no proof, only a certain knowledge because it could not be otherwise. The young Hendricks killed Don Hernandez for the great weight of gold. I am certain of it. We have searched the world for him, but I have found no trace," the old man said.

"Where did this Hendricks live?" asked Peter, watching the old man's eyes. A shutter seemed to close in them. His voice changed. There was guile and caution in it now.

"Live? You mean the house where he lived? That I do not remember. It was so long ago. My father had many houses in the desert, many houses that are not here now."

PETER found the professor lying on his stomach in the shade. He had a jeweler's glass screwed into one eye and was intently studying something on the ground.

"What the devil are you doing?" Peter asked.

"Hello," said the professor pleasantly. "A most fascinating insect here, a species of spider I've never seen before. Did the old gent know anything?"

"Plenty," said Peter dryly.

"Remember my unlamented father?"

"He did. Says he's a murderer and a thief," said Peter abruptly.

The professor appeared quite unconcerned.

"That so?" he said. "Well, maybe he's right. Who did he murder and what did he steal?"

"Jose thinks he murdered old Don Hernandez, Jose's father, and stole a fortune in gold paid the old Spaniard for cattle."

The professor sat up. His blue eyes sparkled.

"Well, well," he said. "A fortune in gold, you say. And the letter says gold in a house in the sands. We're getting on."

"Are we?" asked Peter. "Where are we getting?"

"We're proving the existence of the needle, by inferential evidence, I admit, but still it is a sort of proof. Now we are warranted in searching the haystack. Did you find out where my father was supposed to have lived?"

"Sorry, muffed that one," Peter admitted. "But I think Jose knows, or thinks he knows. He went crafty on me when I asked."

"Perhaps, if we watch Jose it would help," the professor suggested. Then suddenly added, "Bless my soul, that must be he." Peter saw the professor was intently regarding the house. He turned quickly in time to see the blue door closing slowly.

"Did he see you?" Peter asked.

"I'm sure he did," the professor answered. "In fact he gave me the most murderous glare. Your friend Jose looks like a very vindictive citizen."

Before they reached the hotel Peter had an inspiration. Since their search would be in the sands they would make headquarters there, but since the cabin was not fit for habitation, they would pitch a tent nearby, Peter could go to work repairing the damage and the professor could prowl the sands to his heart's content. The Professor agreed with alacrity! While Peter went off to acquire a tent and arrange for supplies, the professor decided to get a shave.

BOTH chairs in the little barber shop were empty. The professor gave precise instructions, climbed into a chair, stretched himself out and presently under the hypnosis of lather and hot towels went gently asleep. Abandoning a pleasant dream in which he was receiving the plaudits of a graceful nation for his discovery of a snow-white cockroach, the professor opened his eyes to gaze drowsily at the ceiling. He realized the shave he had ordered had been delivered and that the barber was engaged with another customer in the next chair.

The professor could see one long leg protruding from under a white cloth. The foot at the end of the leg seemed unusually

large. He turned his head to inspect his fellow customer, but the body of the barber between the two chairs intervened. Just then the barber swung the other chair slightly and he saw the second foot. The shoe was huge, had a great heavy sole and a very high, heavy heel. At that instant the chair was levered by the barber to a sitting position.

"Okay, mister," the barber said.

Tense and excited the professor saw the occupant stand up. He was very tall. Snow-white hair stood in a cropped bush above a deeply lined, swarthy face, on which white, bushy eyebrows and a white mustache stood boldly.

"*Gracias, señor,*" said the man. The voice was guttural. He handed the barber a bill and turned to a hat rack. He put on a coat, and a broad-brimmed hat, flat on top. He started toward the door, limping.

"Hey," shouted the professor. "Get me out of here."

"Just a minute," said the barber.

"Quick," bellowed the professor.

The barber levered the chair down. The professor jumped out just as the stranger left the shop and turned right on the street. The professor started after him, reached the door and turned back to get his hat and coat and pay the barber.

"Who was that man?" demanded the professor, fumbling with change.

"I do not know, sir," said the barber. "I have never seen him before."

"You're sure?"

"Of course."

"Then he doesn't live here?"

"I don't think so."

The street outside was empty and very hot under the full glare of the noonday sun. The professor turned right and hurried along, looking in every shop, up every street and alley. There was no sign of the stranger.

IT WAS late in the afternoon when Peter returned to the hotel where the professor had been sitting in the lobby for hours, hoping that the stranger would come in. Peter explained that all arrangements were made and that early the next morning they would return to the sands. The professor reported the incident of the barber shop. Peter shook his head, doubtfully.

"Could be the same fellow," Peter admitted, "probably is. But I never knew anyone like that. Must be a stranger."

"And a foreigner," the professor added. "He spoke Spanish."

In Peter's room, after dinner, they were taking stock of the situation. Peter grudgingly admitted that somewhere in the wild wilderness of white sands a treasure might lie buried, but pointed out how impossible it would be to find it without more precise knowledge of the location of the house.

"Your mother might help," he suggested. "She's the one person alive who would be likely to remember."

The professor shook his head doubtfully.

"We talked about it," he said. "It was a long time ago and she was very young, and most unhappy. She remembers the cabin as a crude shack. She says it stood in the white sands."

"Among the dunes?"

"I'm not sure about that, didn't know about the dunes when we talked."

"If you could talk to her again, now that you know the lay of the land, maybe you'd get something. Any little thing that would help fix the location would help."

"By George, you're right," agreed the professor, "I'll talk to her." He reached for the telephone. In ten minutes the call was through. Peter sat back and grinned as the conversation progressed, occasionally suggesting a question to ask. At last the professor hung up the receiver.

"Get anything?" asked Peter.

"Maybe," replied the professor. "Mother's a sharp old lady, but stubborn. Had a time keeping her on the track. Seemed more interested in my rheumatism."

"But about the house?" Peter asked.

"It wasn't in the dunes, just on the edge of the white sands. She remembers seeing the dunes from the door, off to the west."

"That helps a little," Peter admitted.

"She seems to recall that the sands stopped a little way behind the house. But there was one thing she does remember clearly."

"What?"

"Funny about memory, how little things hang on after years," the professor continued. "It was Christmas Day, about a month before she left. She was very un-

happy. She remembers standing in the door of the shack just at sunset. She saw the sun sink down into a narrow notch in the mountains far to the west. She watched it set and still remembered how lonely it made her feel."

"A notch in the mountains?" Peter asked. "Wait a minute, I'm beginning to get an idea. Want to sort of mull it over. Maybe it's something useful."

After breakfast the next morning they started for the sands in a borrowed truck loaded with supplies and material. They left the town and headed west. After a few miles the tawny, broken area of desert set with sage and cactus began to give way to stretches of white sand. Presently the desert had gone entirely and only the white sand, an undulating gleaming silver sea remained, stretching west toward the dunes.

Suddenly Peter called to the driver to stop the truck. "Look," he said, pointing to the north. Some distance north of the highway the flat sand area was spotted with human figures. Each one appeared to have a stick or pole with which they were poking and prodding into the sand.

"But what are they doing?" asked the professor.

"Not sure," said Peter. "Yep, there he is. Thought maybe it was his doing."

"Who?" demanded the professor.

"Jose—see, there he is," Peter pointed. Somewhat closer to the road than most of the men was a solitary figure. He stood with his back to the highway, watching the others. He wore a huge, peaked Mexican hat and over his shoulders a bright serape.

"Jose is the only one hereabouts who wears the traditional serape," Peter explained.

"But what in the world is he up to?" the professor asked.

"Same thing we are, looking for your father's shack, or the place where the shack was," Peter said.

"Then he does remember it," wailed the professor.

"No," said Peter. "He thinks he remembers it. But he won't find it, at least not there. I'll tell you why."

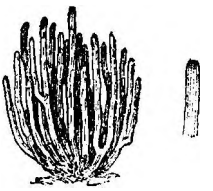
HE EXPLAINED as they drove on. "Remember, last night when you talked to your mother she recalled that the house stood on the edge of the white sand area, but not in the dunes. That would be a strip about half a mile wide on the eastern edge of the dunes, as you can see."

"Sure I see," admitted the professor, "and that's just where Jose is looking."

"Right," admitted Peter. "But the point is this—the edge of the white sands now isn't the same as the edge of the white sands fifty years ago."

"Why not?"

"Because the sands move. You can't see them move, but every day they inch along toward the east. It's the winds that blow most of the time from the west. They keep pushing the dunes along. When we get there, I'll show you."



A great light dawned for the professor.

"Peter, my friend, you're a smart man," he declared, chuckling to himself. "And you think old Jose and his gang out there don't know about the shifting sands?"

"I'm sure he doesn't," Peter said. "Most people don't. He's gone out and found a spot that looks like the place he remembers. But I know now the place is way to the west, probably within the dunes area itself. And I've got an idea we can just about figure where, if you're smart at figures, Professor."

It was the magic hour in the desert just after sundown when a bright golden twilight spread over the sands. They were sitting in camp chairs close by the shack. The tent was a few yards away, its flaps pinned back to let the cooling night air blow through.

Peter had already repaired a good part of the damage done to his property. The refrigerator and stove were working again, the floor replaced.

Peter lay back smoking. The professor lay with chubby hands clasped over his round fat stomach.

"Tomorrow," said Peter, "I'll show you what I meant when I told you about the moving sands, and then if you're right

smart at figures, we may know something definite."

"Right now," sighed the professor contentedly, "digging up the desert doesn't seem very important, but lying here watching the sky and soaking up your desert air does. Now I understand why you're content to live like a hermit. I envy you, Peter, my friend."

"I wasn't always a hermit," Peter grunted. "Believe it or not, Professor, but once I had a big office in New York, and scrambled for a living there. Really got out here by accident long time back."

"That so?" the professor didn't appear too interested. His chair lay facing the west, so that he could watch the fading gold of the sky. Suddenly he clutched Peter's arm and held up a warning finger. Then he pointed to the crest of the dune, just behind the shack.

"It's him," whispered the professor hoarsely.

"Who?" whispered back Peter.

"Our limping friend. Fellow in the barber shop. Recognized his hat, or one like it," the professor said softly.

They both reared up and watched the top of the dune, standing sharp against the bright sky. In a moment Peter saw it too. A flat-topped, broad-brimmed hat whose wearer was apparently lying against the opposite face of the dune, just at the top.

By gestures Peter indicated that they should proceed in opposite directions around the end of the dune and come upon their visitor from the rear.

Peter came around the end of the dune first. The eavesdropping stranger was no longer eavesdropping. He was boldly standing at the crest of the dune, gazing down upon the shack, the tent and the empty camp chairs. Without a doubt he was the stranger of the barber shop. He was very tall and lean. He wore a black coat and a broad-brimmed, low-crowned hat, from beneath which appeared a fringe of silver hair. Peter could not see his face.

The professor appeared at the opposite end of the dune, thirty yards away. Peter signalled silently and they both began to creep up the dune. But the professor stumbled in the soft sand, almost lost his balance and grunted violently.

The man at the crest of the dune whirled toward the sound. His right hand moved like lightning. Peter knew what the movement meant.

"Look out, Professor," she shouted. The professor, startled, looked up and involuntarily threw up his arms to shield his face. He was almost too late. The hand flicked and a shining missile went flashing toward the professor. Peter saw it strike his upraised left arm. The professor stumbled and fell, rolling over and over toward the bottom of the dune. With long strides Peter went charging toward him. At the same time the stranger jumped over the top of the dune and disappeared on the opposite side. Peter helped the professor back to the shack, brought bandages.

"There," he said, slapping another long strip of adhesive down the inside of the injured arm. "Don't believe it will bother you too much. Lucky your arm was there. Think the devil had a bead on your throat."

"What do you think he was up to, Peter?"

"Listening, trying to get a line on the treasure. Thought we might mention it, maybe. I figure he knows about that letter, at least he knows there's supposed to be a treasure around here somewhere. Next time, he won't get away. From now on I'll carry a gun, and so will you, my friend. Know how to handle one, Professor?"

"Generally," grimaced the professor as a twinge of pain shot up his shoulder. "I shut my eyes and pull the trigger. I could probably hit a barn at ten feet."

THE next morning they set off across the dunes for Peter's demonstration. After about ten minutes they reached an irregularly shaped dune higher than the others. Down the lee side of it, in a neat row marched a series of slender stakes. Tied at the top of each stake was a card.

"My invention," Peter indicated with a wave of a hand. "Call it a sand gauge, I guess. Been keeping it for years. Read the cards, you'll get the idea."

Starting at the bottom the professor slowly climbed the dune, reading each card. As he progressed up the slope the look of puzzlement on his face slowly changed to understanding. At the crest he turned, beaming with satisfaction.

"I get it, Peter."

"Do you?"

"Yep, at least I think I do. Each stake indicated a horizontal point at the bottom of the dune, and the date is the date at which the moving edge of the dune reached that point. Right?"

"Right."

"And from the fact that the horizontal distance between the stakes is fairly constant I assume that the progressioin of the sand is reasonably uniform," he continued pedantically.

"Right again," said Peter.

"And what you want me to figure out is where the flat area at the eastern side of the dunes was fifty years ago, assuming a steady progression at a uniform rate?"

"That's the idea."

"Can do," said the professor.

HE DID, very quickly. While he figured, Peter cut a lot of sharp stakes. The professor finished first.

"I figure," he said proudly, "that in fifty years the dune area would move east approximately 4,000 feet. And though my disposition is erratic and unstable, you can bank on my figures. They're solid stuff."

"Just at three quarters of a mile, then," Peter said. "So if we start from the flat area of white sands now and measure west three quarters of a mile, we'll probably have the area where the house stood fifty years ago."

They paced it off, finding themselves well within the section of high dunes, just outside the official park limits. They drove a series of stakes, each tipped with a bright red card, running in a zone about a quarter of a mile wide and a little more than two miles from north to south. By the time they were through the day was done. Tired, but pleased with their progress, they returned to the shack and the tent.

"It's something," Peter admitted over dinner. "But it's not enough."

"What we need," said the professor, "is some sort of a lateral bearing, something to fix an east-west line."

"That's it," Peter said suddenly, "the sun setting in the notch in the mountains."

The professor looked bewildered.

"Don't you remember," Peter went on, "about your mother's recollection of seeing the sun set smack in the middle of a notch in the mountains on Christmas day?"

"Of course," admitted the professor. "But I still don't see—"

"Look," said Peter. "I know those mountains to the west. They're mostly sheer rock peaks and cliffs. But there is a notch in them. It's a cleft between the cliffs about a half mile long. It's the only pass through and it carries the road to Las Cruces. The pass runs almost due east and west."

The professor's eyes began to sparkle. "Peter," he said, "you're a genius. I see what you're driving at."

"Do you?"

"Sure. On Christmas day the sun, any year, is in a known position. We determine that position, then locate it with reference to the pass and presto, we've established an east and west bearing, only it probably won't be really east west, more likely a little northeast."

"Exactly," said Peter. "But what I can't figure is how to get the sun's exact position."

"That's easy," said the professor. "Is there a weather bureau office near here?"

"Sure, at El Paso."

"We'll phone 'em. They'll know it to a fraction of a degree. You leave it to me. I talk their lingo."

THE professor emerged from the telephone booth in the hotel at Alamogordo the next morning, beaming with satisfaction.

"Got it," he said. "Now we need a good compass."

"I have one," Peter said.

Two hours later they were back in the sands, had picked up Peter's compass at the shack and were plowing through the dunes toward their staked out zone of probability. From the first dune crest Peter had pointed out the notch in the mountains to the west. A little maneuvering and they found a position which brought them roughly into line with a line extending through the pass. The professor went to work with the compass and the notes made from his talk with the weather bureau. They moved up and down the crests of the dunes for a time. At last the professor said, "Here."

Peter drove a stake. They moved to the next dune crest to the west and repeated the maneuver.

"Now," said the professor. "We've got a line. We simply line up the two stakes to get a third line and keep moving west, with our stakes on the tops of the dunes lined up till we come to our zone, and that will be it."

He appeared highly excited. The fourth stake on the east west line brought them to the edge of the north south zone they had staked out the day before.

"What the devil," said Peter looking about. The stakes, each capped with a red signal tag, planted the day before, were gone. But it was easy to see where they had been. Instead of stakes were gaping holes dug in the sand, and all about each hole the tramplings of many feet.

"Lord love us," exclaimed the professor. "These sands must be beset with gremlins. Who could have done it?"

Peter examined one of the pits. It was dug on the western slope of a dune. A full cubic yard of sand had been heaved out of it.

"Of course," Peter said. "It might have been our club-footed friend, but I doubt it. He's a lone wolf. This job took people. Lots of people. I favor Jose and his gang that we saw rooting round in the desert. I figure they somehow watched us set those stakes yesterday. Didn't know what the stakes meant, and all they could think of was to dig down at each stake. Probably they're still watching us."

He stood still, looking sharply about. Suddenly he held up a warning hand. Then he pointed behind them at the crest of the dune. A drift of blue smoke rose above it. Peter bent down and whispered in the professor's ear:

"Someone smoking a cigarette there, listening. You keep talking in a loud voice as though I were right here. I'll fetch him."

The professor nodded and began to chatter some complex scientific jargon that would have puzzled Einstein. Peter pulled his revolver and stooping began creeping along just below the crest of the dune. Suddenly he jumped up and fired the gun into the air. A startled yap came from behind the dune.

"Come on, Professor," shouted Peter.

Pumping up to the crest the professor looked over to find Peter near the bottom. He was holding a slender hatless figure by the coat collar and shaking it violently. The captive was making whimpering, frightened sounds. The professor plowed down the dune to Peter's side.

"Scared the daylights out of him when I fired that shot," explained Peter. "He rolled all the way to the bottom. Now, then Alfredo, spit it out. What are you doing here?"

"You know him?" asked the professor.

"Sure," said Peter. "It's Alfredo, Mexican lad from town. One of Jose's friends just as I thought."

The boy couldn't have been over sixteen and appeared thoroughly frightened.

"Do not kill me, Senor Peter," he whispered.

"Tell us what you are doing or I will," shouted Peter flourishing the revolver. He let go the boy's collar and pointed the gun at him.

"I'll tell, Senor Peter. *Sacre dios,* do not shoot."

"Talk fast," growled Peter.

"It was Don Jose," the boy said. "I watch for him, and listen."

"Watch for what?" demanded Peter.

"For what you and the funny man do," said the boy. Peter repressed a grin.

"Then I tell what I see and hear," the boy went on.

"Are there others watching?" asked Peter.

"I do not think so," the boy said.

"Those holes in the sand. Did you help dig them?" Peter demanded.

"*Si,* senor," said the boy. "I and many others. Jose himself was here, last night and this morning. He made us dig, at each little stick in the sand."

"Why?" Peter barked.

"I do not know, he did not say. He said he would pay if we found what he was looking for."

"Baah," said Peter. "You go back to my friend Jose. Tell him that we nearly killed you. Tell him that it will be dangerous to interfere. Tell him that when he wants to talk as one Senor to another, I will be glad to talk. But for spies, there is this." Peter brandished the gun. "Now go, fast." He gave the boy a push.

"*Gracias,* Senor Peter," said the boy.

PETER sat down on the slope of the dune and scratched his head reflectively.

"It won't do any good," he said. "The

boy was scared, but Jose won't be. He'll spy on our every move, and if we ever do find this treasure, he'll steal it right out from under our noses. We've got to figure something that will throw him off."

"Ever heard of salting?" asked the professor after a moment's cogitation.

"Salting?"

"Sure, mining term, baiting a claim for a sucker. Remember once reading about how it is done. Sort of a salting operation might work here."

"Professor," exclaimed Peter, "for a crochety, book-bound old codger you're a wonder. That's it. We'll stake a false claim and let Jose and his friends dig to their hearts content."

They spent the afternoon perfecting their plan. The professor suggested the map and made it. It was a wonderful map when finished, a huge sheet of paper covered with cartographic gibberish, various colored lines, cabalistic figures, an assortment of signs.

Yet it had the subtle appearance of being something genuine. Peter complimented the professor on his handiwork and they planned the next step in their strategy, to make certain that their trap, once set, would be sprung.

That night they had dinner in town. They selected a table in the dining room where they could be watched from all sides and heard with ease. Then, during dinner, loudly, but in terms of mystery they discussed a discovery they expected to make on the following day. Occasionally the professor would pull out his map and pore over it.

"The waiter seems interested," said the professor softly, after a time.

"Not only the waiter," replied Peter. "There's a gang of Jose's friends right behind us. It will work, don't worry."

Back in the sands they left the map, folded but in plain view on the table of Peter's shack, and left the door of the shack unlocked. They went to bed, just as a vast yellow moon pushed up over the mountains.

An hour later the professor awoke. Some faint sound had aroused him. The moonlight bathed the tent wall, turning it to luminous copper.

As the professor lay watching the tent wall above him a black shadow appeared on it and began to move across it. It was a grotesque, wavering shadow. The professor nudged Peter.

"He's after the map," he whispered. The shadow left the tent. In about five minutes it reappeared, going in the opposite direction.

EARLY the next morning they began to prepare their elaborate hoax. At the scene they selected an area of sands immediately east of the dunes proper and some distance south of their camp. The dunes to the west of the area were low and rolling, an ideal vantage point for both concealment and watching.

Apparently consulting notes and directions they began to set stakes. They set a wide circle first, marking little arrows on each stake point toward the center. Then within the wider circle they set a smaller one, so that the stakes of the second circle would enclose about an acre of desert sand. The task required the better part of the day.

Twice Peter noticed and mentioned to the professor seeing furtive figures among the dunes, heads cautiously poked up. Once, on the highway to the south, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, he saw a car stop. A man got out and disappeared into the sands.

The following morning they made their way behind the dunes to a point opposite the salted area, and crept up the last range of dunes cautiously. Peter had brought a pair of binoculars along. Peter poked up his head for a quick look.

"It worked," he said. "About six of them there, digging like mad."

"See anyone with the map?" asked the professor.

Peter looked again. "Yep," he said. "Tall fellow off on one side. Seems to be giving instructions. Got a big paper, and it's probably the map."

He brought up the binoculars for a better look.

"Whoa," he shouted softly. "Something wrong. It's not Jose's gang at all. It's our club-footed villain."

The professor had a look. "It's the same fellow, all right," he said. "But what about Jose? And who are the others?"

Peter took the binoculars again and in turn looked at each of the six men digging diligently within the center circle of stakes.

"Strangers," he said at last. "Never saw any of them before."

He swung the glasses for a look at the road to the south.

"There's a car there," he said. "Wait a minute, another one coming, a truck, and it's full of men." He watched intently.

"They're piling out," he reported. "They have got poles and shovels, and there's Jose. There must be twenty of them. This is going to be good, Professor, better than we hoped."

From their concealment behind the dunes they watched the drama fast developing on the sands before them. Presently there were shrill voices. Then the two groups surged together. There were cries, a confused melee of thrashing men, sticks and shovels rising and falling. Two shots rang out. Then men went streaming over the sand toward the highway, some in hot pursuit of others. The pursuers were obviously Jose's men, the pursued the strange gang directed by the club-footed stranger.

"He's running ahead of the others," shouted Peter, "heading for the car. He's made the car, he's got it going, left his friends behind, the skunk."

Jose's men were in full possession of the field. Presently they were digging industriously within the center circle of stakes.

The professor dropped wearily upon the sand. His face was burnt to a brick red. He groaned and pulled his battered hat down to shield his eyes.

"In the vernacular of the undergraduate, I'm pooed out," he said.

Peter sprawled beside him and stoked up his pipe. For six hours they had been working like mad under the blazing sun.

Assured by the battle in the sands that they had at least the rest of the day for unmolested prospecting, they had returned to their line of lateral stakes, checked them to make sure that none had been moved and extended them into the area previously set out as a possible north and south zone of location.

They then set to work to probe the dunes indicated with scientific thoroughness.

The method was simple enough. Chief tool was a strong slender pole. They drove it into the sand. If no obstruction was met they tried again a few feet away. Whenever the pole struck, they dug. Six times during the day they had dug and exhumed six small boulders.

For a base of operations they had selected a flat-topped dune just east of the area they were working. Its top offered a level place to leave extra shovels, a pick, canteens of water and a basket of sandwiches. They rested there now.

"Peter," said the professor wearily, "I'm about ready to call it quits. If we found the treasure now I'm too far gone to enjoy it. One more boulder and I'd let you bury me in the hole."

"We got a lot of prospecting to do yet," Peter pointed out. "I figure we've covered only about a fifth of the area."

"That's just it," the professor said. "That trap we baited was good for just about one day's respite. Tomorrow Jose will be back, and, maybe Club Foot. It's no use Peter, I vote to quit."

He peered out from under the shelter of his hat brim.

"Funny about this particular dune," he said.

"Yeah," Peter said, puffing at his pipe. "It's an oddity. Always called it mesa dune. Sort of a landmark in this section of the sands."

"It's not only flat topped," the professor pointed out, "it's sort of saucer shaped, sort of sunken in the middle, just noticed it, lying here."

Peter glanced about him. "Guess it is, now that you point it out. Funny I never noticed it before."

Then as though prodded violently from behind he leaped up. He seized his pole and at the edge of the top of the dune drove it violently into the sand at an angle.

"What the devil?" demanded the professor, astonished.

Peter was pushing hard on the pole. "Don't you see, Professor? It could be—

the place—shape of this dune—a house, a flat-topped house, buried underneath."

The pole had gone in about eight feet. It stuck hard. Peter put all his weight on it. The pole refused to budge. Peter seized a shovel. The professor struggled up wearily and grabbed another. Some minutes later the blade of Peter's shovel grated against something. They dug furiously and presently uncovered what appeared to be the top of a wall.

"'Dobe," said Peter. "Professor, this is it. Square 'dobe house, like Jose's."

"And tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, we'll dig and dig, and maybe for a week. Take at least that long to dig this dune away," the professor wailed, "and Jose's boys and Club Foot's gang will sit around on the dunes like hungry vultures. And when we get down to the bottom, they will walk in and take over."

They sat and gazed at the little strip of mud wall they had uncovered. Finally Peter said, "You interested in half a loaf, maybe a third?" he asked.

"Meaning what?" demanded the professor.

"Meaning I have an idea. We need a little working capital, you might say, and I think I know where we can get it."

It had been dark for more than an hour when they trudged down the road toward Jose's house.

They reached the clump of cottonwoods.

"Someone's home," Peter said, pointing to a vague orange glow which filtered through one of the vine-shrouded windows. Peter pounded on the door. A muffled voice shouted the equivalent of "come in" in Spanish.

Following Peter into the house the professor had to peer hard to make out anything. The only light came from a big candle set in a battered holder on a table against a wall. Beside the table sat an old man, in a high-backed chair, his serape over his knees. He craned forward watching the door and in a twisted hand that trembled violently he had an ancient, long-barreled revolver.

"Put the gun down, Jose," said Peter in Spanish. "We have come to help, not to hurt you."

The old man brought the pistol down to his lap but still kept a grip on it.

"You seek to discover the lost wealth of my father," Jose's voice was shrill with tension. "You were my friend, Senor Peter, but no longer. We know what you are looking for, you and the fat gringo, and the evil one with the lameness. But if you find it, it will do you no good, for we are many and you are few."

"Wait a minute," said Peter. "The lame one is no friend of ours. He is our enemy and he is yours. But here," Peter put his hand on the shoulder of the professor, "here is one who is your friend and mine. He is a learned man, wise with the wisdom of science. He knows where the treasure may be buried, and how it may be discovered. He has come to offer you his help."

THE professor felt Jose's eyes bore into him. He had not understood a word which had been said. He thought it a good idea to smile and did so, only to regret it instantly. The effort seemed to crack his badly sunburned face.

"This learned one, who has come tonight as your friend," Peter went on, "is Professor Jonathan Hendricks." At the sound of his name the professor bobbed his head in salutation, and Jose suddenly gripped the arms of his chair and half rose, so that the pistol slid off the folded serape and clattered to the floor.

"He is then—" Jose began.

"Yes," Peter interrupted. "He is the son of David Hendricks. He has never seen his father, but from a far place he has received a letter about him and knows now where the treasure may be."

"Where is it, you must tell me," the old Spaniard was almost screaming.

"Gently, gently, my friend," warned Peter. "We came not to haggle but to help. The professor here has come in search of the truth. Though he has come a long way and had much expense, he asks nothing for himself except the chance to prove that his father was not a murderer and a thief."

Jose sank back in his chair. He glared first at Peter, then at the professor.

"He does not ask for a part of the gold?" he said at last.

"No, he does not ask," Peter explained. "He knows that the gold is yours."

"What do you want then?" asked Jose.

"Men to help dig," Peter said. "If the

gold is where we think it is it will take many men to help dig away the sand."

"And if it is found, it is mine?" Jose demanded, the animosity beginning to fade from his eyes.

"It is yours," Peter said. "But your honor must decide whether you keep it all."

Jose seemed to draw within himself. He was thinking hard. At last he said, "I will agree to this. My friends will help dig. If the gold is found it is mine. But if it is proven that this man's father is not guilty of my father's death, then I will divide the gold with him."

IT WAS mid morning before Jose, followed by his gang of laborers, led by Peter and the professor reached the flat-topped dune.

The digging started at once. A camp-chair had been brought along for Jose. He sat hunched in it under his huge Mexican hat, his bright serape over his shoulders, watching with darting eyes as Peter and the professor ordered the activity of the shovel crew. There were a dozen diggers. Within two hours they had taken the entire top off the flat-topped dune and fully uncovered the top of the wall, which had once been the sides of a small adobe house.

In another two hours they had excavated within the wall to a point where they began to unearth fragments of the beams which had once supported the roof. From this point Peter directed that they proceed with care.

Not wanting to dig, but still anxious to be useful, the professor had elected himself as supply department for the expedition, and made trips back and forth to Peter's shack with canteens of water, and such additional refreshments as were available.

Under what had been the roof of the house they began to find an assortment of things. A chair came up almost intact. There was a rusty tin can half full of coffee. With the uncovering of each new item the excitement mounted. Suddenly one of the diggers shouted and held up something in his hand.

The professor, just returning with a batch of freshly filled canteens, gaped with astonishment. The man held up a long bone, bleached clean and white from the corrosive action of the sand.

"What is it, Professor?" asked Peter. After a minute's study the professor said, "Appears to be a thigh bone of a fair sized man."

Peter interpreted for Jose. The old man's eyes shown fiercely. He muttered something under his breath and gave shrill orders to his helpers who threw down their shovels. They began to scoop out the sand by handfuls.

Thus they disinterred a complete skeleton lying on what must have been a couch or bed. The bones were white and clean. There was no evidence of clothing. It had long since rotted away and been washed out in the caustic sands. But among and under the bones were bits of metal and small metal objects. From these, shown to Jose, he stated with mounting assurance and increasing excitement that the skeleton had been that of his father Don Hernandez.

There was, for example, an old silver watch. There was a huge brass belt buckle. There was a small cross of gold on a golden chain. But the most curious of all was a knife, or what was left of a knife. It had been a sheath knife with a long blade and a wooden handle. The wood of the handle was gone entirely but around the steel core which the wood had encased were clutched the bones of the right hand of the skeleton. When old Don Hernandez had died he had been gripping the knife.

The sun was low in the west when the space within the walls of the old house had been cleared. No treasure had been found. They had dug out an assorted collection of corroded and broken relics of housekeeping. There were the rotted fragments of a broken chair, pieces of dishes, the rusted round lid from a stove and the fat bellied body of the stove itself heavy with sand and ash.

As all these things were discovered they

were heaved up to mounting piles of sand which grew around the square frame of the mud walls, so that at last the little house stood cleanly empty. Only a rotted and broken floor remained.

"Well," Peter said wearily. "Maybe it's under the floor, but I have my doubts. Guess we might as well rip it up, though."

He looked toward the sun, hanging just above the western mountains.

"We'll need light," he said. "I got a couple of lanterns back at the shack, Professor, if you don't mind getting them."

The professor agreed. Peter gave him a boost to the loosely piled sand. He began picking his way among the scattered junk which had been heaved up from the excavation.

He stepped over the fat iron belly of the old stove lying on its side. His foot pushed against the stove. It began to roll clumsily down the slope.

"Look out," shouted the professor fearing that it might fall among the laborers who were stripping up the flooring. The stove careened slowly to the edge of the wall, teetered there a minute and then it crashed down inside the house.

"Anyone hurt?" called the professor anxiously peering down among the workers.

"Nope," Peter called up. "But the old stove's busted wide open. Iron was rotten, I guess." He kicked the rusted shards of broken iron that had fallen away from a solid core of ash and sand. Then Peter bent down suddenly gazing intently. He poked it with his foot. He reached down and began pawing with his hands. Then he stood up, threw back his head and gave the shrill rallying call of the desert, the cowboy's whoop. "Yip-p-e-e-e-e!" shouted Peter.

THE professor peered down from above with astonishment. The workmen ripping up the planks of the floor stopped to gape, and Jose, seated in his campchair high on a mound of sand, half lifted himself from the chair, so that the pitiful relics of his father slid from his lap into the sand.

"The gold," shouted Peter. "Here it is, in the old stove."

And so it was. At the very bottom of the belly of the stove, under a heavy mass of ash and sand was a quantity of big golden coins. Most of them were intact, a few had been partially fused together. Peter began picking the mass apart with a knife blade. Jose scuttled down and stood with excited eyes.

"We really need those lanterns now, Professor, if you don't mind," Peter suggested.

The professor was scarcely gone before Peter began to break the gold away from the slag of sand and ash. Jose gave such help as he could, picking and poking with the rusted knife blade which had been clutched in his father's hand.

In the fading twilight they had to peer closely. Slowly a pile of gold coins grew beside them. After about twenty minutes Peter stopped.

"We'll have to wait for those lanterns, Jose," he said. He stood up wearily, stretching his hands above his head to get the kinks out of his shoulders.

"Keep the hands up high, Senor Pembroke," called a deep, rasping voice.

Pete whirled. Standing at the crest of a pile of sand on the north side of the excavation was a tall figure, silhouetted against the fading sky. It was too dark to see the face, but there was no doubt that it was the stranger with the short leg. Peter could see the glint of a pistol pointing toward the group in the excavation.

Peter looked sideways at Jose. The old Spaniard had his hands up and one of them clutched the rusted knife of Don Hernandez.

"It was so good of you to dig all the sand and discover the gold for me." There was a mocking note in the guttural voice, "and will you now be so kind as to place it in a bucket," the stranger ordered.

Peter started to lower his hands.

"Keep the hands high, my tall friend," the deep voice had menace in it and Peter saw the pistol arm stiffen.

"Look, pardner," Peter said. "Shall I put the gold in the bucket with my feet?"

"I know you are armed, Senor Pembroke, so it will be safer with your hands up. But you will direct that one of those who dig for you fill the bucket with gold."

The men who had been digging were huddled against the opposite wall. Peter called to one of them. The man crept forward fearfully and began dropping the gold coins slowly into an empty bucket. Each one made a hollow clink as it fell.

Peter's arms above his head were growing numb. With each dull clink of a gold coin in the tin bucket his heart sank lower and lower. Peter considered whether it was dark enough to risk a quick draw and a shot from the hip, and twiddled his trigger finger in preparation.

The last coin fell in the bucket. The voice from the shadowy figure atop the sand heap came mockingly, ordering that the bucket be placed on top the wall. Peter decided that it was now or never, but before he could lower his right hand there was a metallic crash. Jose had kicked the bucket over and sent it rolling across the sand, spilling gold coins in all directions.

Peter saw the yellow flash of the pistol as he heard the sound of it. "Look out, Jose," he shouted. He snatched at his own gun, but before he could draw it something sailed through the sky above him with a gleam of metal and a flash of glass and lit with a crash beside them. It was a lantern. Peter stole a quick look at Jose. The old Spaniard was leaning back against the wall of the house. His arms were down. The right hand still clutched the rusted knife, the left arm hung limp.

Peter's gun was out and he swung for a shot but before he could bring up the barrel he saw the shadowed figure of their assailant fall forward and disappear behind the ridge of sand.

"Hang on, Professor," shouted Peter and crossed the enclosure within the walls in two tremendous strides. He sprang at the wall.

A great heave brought him to his knees on top the wall. From behind the hummock of sand before him came a confused swishing and thumping, punctuated with grunts.

Then the sounds stopped. Above the ridge of sand appeared a shadow. It was a lopsided shadow. One shoulder sagged. The shadow moved in a lurch. Something zinged past Peter's ear. The shadow jerked and a squeal came from it. Peter fired and charged forward, stumbling over the body of Professor Hendricks.

The professor lay on his stomach, his legs and arms bunched under him, his head half buried in the sand, as though he were trying to portray an ostrich. Gently Peter rolled him over and lifted his head from the sand. There was blood in the sand.

The professor's hands were clutched over his stomach. Peter unclasped them and a huge heavy shoe rolled off into the sand.

"I'll be a piebald coyote," said Peter softly, "he got the devil's shoe."

From the excavation Jose was shouting in shrill Spanish. Presently the laborers came swarming up over the wall, contriving to hoist Jose with them. Jose no longer had the knife. A trickle of blood ran down his limp left arm.

Peter gave quick orders.

"Carry the professor to the tent, get a doctor, call the sheriff. Tell him this murdering devil's loose. I'm going after him."

He strode forward. His foot struck something hard in the sand. Stooping he picked up a rusted knife. He handed it to Jose.

"You damn near clipped my left ear off with that, Jose," he said. "Guess you winged him, though. Heard him squeal when it hit."

Peter strode off into the desert night.

THE noonday sun beat upon the tent roof. The tent was very hot. Professor Hendricks, lying on a canvas cot, opened his eyes and blinked. Violent drums were beating in his head. A tentative exploration revealed that it was swathed in bandages. The professor couldn't remember when he had felt worse. He saw a pair of feet sticking over the end of a campchair at the entrance to the tent.

"Hey," shouted the professor in a feeble voice. A head poked through the entrance of the tent.

"How you feel, partner?"

"Terrible," croaked the professor. "Who are you?"

"Sheriff's deputy," the man answered.

"Am I under arrest?"

"Lord no, just being protected. Doctor gave you a shot last night to make you sleep. Sheriff said to stick around till Pete got back."

"Peter!" the professor tried to sit up but found he couldn't. "Isn't he back yet?"

"Nope, liable to show up any minute, though. Sheriff's got fifty men out scouring the sands."

"Maybe he's hurt, maybe he's killed," said the professor anxiously.

"Hurt?" the man laughed. "Not him,

you don't know Peter. But I kinda pity the poor devil he's chasing."

"Where's Jose?"

"Sitting in the shack with his arm in a sling and a sack of gold in his lap. Got two lads with pistols big as cannon sitting on the steps outside."

"He's hurt then?"

"Not much, just a flesh wound."

From outside the tent came a distant shout. The sheriffs deputy disappeared suddenly.

The professor shut his eyes and listened to the tom-toms in his head. After a while a voice said:

"Hey, old-timer, they're coming."

The professor opened his eyes. The sheriff's deputy was grinning at him from the entrance to the tent. Pete's a-comin'," he said. "Guess he's got that varmint with him."

The professor heard a confusion outside, voices calling back and forth. Then with quickening heart he heard Peter's voice: "Where's the professor?" Someone said, "In the tent."

Peter's head thrust through the tent entrance. His eyes were pools of weariness, but they were bright pools.

"How are you, Professor?"

"Better, Peter, and you?"

"Kinda tired, glad to get back. Brought your friend along. Guess we'd better put him in here if you don't mind. He's about done for."

PETER stepped back and two men pushed into the tent carrying a stretcher. They rolled an inert figure onto the cot opposite the professor. The brush of white hair was matted with dried blood. The face was scratched and bruised. A white shirt was tattered and one sleeve dark with blood. Long legs stretched out. The professor saw that one foot was shoeless. Through the torn sock thrust a bloody foot, twisted and deformed.

Peter yanked a campchair into the tent and threw himself into it with a weary sigh. Someone handed him a water jug. He drank in deep gulps.

"Give Carlos some," said Peter with a jerk of his thumb toward the cot.

"Is that his name?" asked the professor.

"Part of it. Rest is De Baca."

The man on the cot groaned, but gulped hungrily at the water, spilling it over his chest.

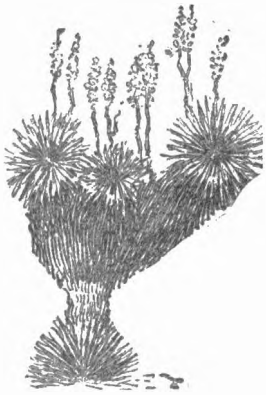
"Where'd you find him?" asked the professor.

"Last night, in the desert north of the sands. But I couldn't bring him in. He was too weak to walk and too heavy to carry. Had to wait till some of the sheriff's men found us this morning."

The man groaned heavily again.

"Get Jose, quick," ordered Peter. "He won't last long and I want him to tell Jose something."

Jose came in promptly. The professor



noticed that the bitterness had gone from his face. His eyes had softened. He wore his left arm in a black sling. Peter told Jose to stand by the head of the cot. Then he shook the old cripple roughly. "Carlos," he shouted. "Wake up, look at me."

The eyes fluttered open, drifted about the tent and settled on Jose's face.

"Do you know this man," shouted Peter, in Spanish, as though Carlos were a block away.

"*Si, Senor,* it is Don Jose Hernandez," the voice was very weak.

"Did you know his father?"

"*Si, Senor.*"

"Did you kill his father?"

"*Si, Senor.*"

"Why?" Peter barked.

"For the gold, but I could never find it. I never thought of the stove, the stove was hot with fire. I looked everywhere but in the stove." The voice trailed off weakly and the eyes fluttered shut again.

"He's almost gone," Peter said. He shook Carlos again. His breath was com-

ing in great gasping sighs. It stopped. The big body seemed to deflate.

"He's gone," Peter said. "But you heard what he said, Jose?"

"*Si, Senor* Peter, I heard and I believe. Will you tell the fat gentleman, that I am sorry to have carried the fierce hatred of his father all these years."

During the afternoon Peter slept a sleep of utter exhaustion, while the professor droused and nursed his aching head. After sunset they sat under the darkening sky looking out over the silver sands.

"Maybe it's the crack I got on the head," said the professor, "but I'm still a little confused. Jose who is, or was Carlos?"

"It's really simple," Peter began. "He babbled it all to me last night, out in the desert. He was one of old Don Hernandez' ranch hands, paid off in Kansas. Must have been just a kid then, but a greedy, ornery brat. He knew about the gold, followed Don Hernandez and your dad back and broke into the herder's hut where they'd holed up for the night.

"There was a hell of a fight. Don Hernandez got himself shot, your father got himself bashed over the head, and Carlos was slashed in the leg by Don Hernandez —accounts for the limp."

"And the gold was in a red hot stove, a slick hiding place," the professor said.

"It was. Afterward Carlos limped off to the border and kept going south. Your dad must have come to, dopey and befuddled. The way Carlos told it I'd say a case of amnesia. Anyway, they met many years later in Tampico. The whole ancient forgotten business boils up again about a month ago when your dad gets in this brawl on his boat and gets himself bopped over the head with a bottle or something and presto he starts chattering about the ranch, the gold, his wife, everything he'd forgotten for fifty years.

"Carlos was there and sees his opportunity. He comes north, to find the house, figuring the gold must still be in it. He'd have been all right except for that letter your dad wrote to your mother, just before he died, that started you off on the hunt."

"Poor dad," the professor mused. "Must have been quite a shock to him to come to after fifty years. It's a sad, curious business."

"There was destiny in it, too," Peter went on. "Remember the knife we found among old Don Hernandez' bones?"

"That Jose threw?"

"Right. That knife originally gave Carlos his game leg, and then fifty years later it finishes him off. It was a wild throw Jose made, but a lucky one. It caught Carlos under the shoulder and cut a big vein. When I found him in the sands he was slowly bleeding to death."

"One last point," the professor said. "Why did no one ever find Don Hernandez' body in that hut?"

"That's easy," Peter explained. "It was a herder's hut, used only by the men who worked the ranch. But with the cattle gone and the gold too the ranch went to pot. Jose couldn't hire herders. The hut just stood there until the dunes inched along and buried it."

Peter stoked his pipe and puffed reflectively for a minute. "What will you do with your gold, Professor?" he asked.

"Make mother's life as pleasant and easy as possible," the professor answered. "But part of it's yours, Peter."

Peter snorted.

"Nothing doing," he said. "I don't need money. Got everything I want. Tell you what, Professor, you're a bugologist or something, aren't you?"

"That's right?"

"And your specialty is cockroaches?"

"Wrote a thesis on them."

"And down under my house you claim you saw an albino one. All right, maybe next spring when the desert's fresh and cool, come back here and make an exhaustive study of the snowy cockroaches of the white sands. Do a monograph, or something on it. How's that for a bargain?"

The professor's laugh sounded over the silent sands.

"And I'll name it *Blattidae Carlos*," he said.

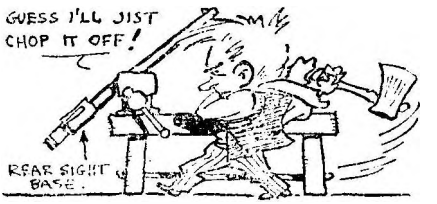
"What the devil?" asked Peter.

"*Blattidae*," repeated the professor. "That is Latin for cockroach, and Carlos stands for the sort of insect that annoys folk who live in the white sands."

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by

PETE KUHLHOFF



Home Gunsmithing

DEAR Mr. Kuhlhoff: After hearing you sing the praise of Baker's Modern Gunsmithing in SHORT STORIES, shortly before Christmas, I "unexpectedly" received the book.

It is everything you said about it. However it leaves me up in the air on one point.

In the chapter on sights and again on altering military rifles to sporting guns, where he speaks about Springfield .30-06, he says "remove the rear sight permanent base" but doesn't say *how* to remove this sight base. Does it unscrew or is it a driven fit onto the base of the barrel? If it unscrews, is it a right or left hand thread? Is it pinned?

I have been "gun buggy" ever since I can remember, "sported" a couple of Krags and made a fairly decent job of it. I seem to get more fun out of working on guns than on using them.

Working as I do, in a local shipyard I got hold of a .30-06 Springfield Model 1903 and a 98 Mauser, both in pretty good shape, also a good supply of ammunition for both.

The question in re the Springfield also applies to the Mauser.

It's quite a large "bite" but I'm going to try and make my own peep sights for both

these guns, besides mounting a three leaf open sight in place of the military rear sight.

If you know of any information or books on the making of these sights, I'd appreciate same.

R. A. H., New York.

ANSWER: The base of the Springfield rear sight is fixed firmly to the barrel by splines.

To remove this base—first drive out the pin under the windage screw end of the base. Then drive the whole base forward.

The base spline, which prevents the band from turning, leaves a cut in the barrel which is unsightly, to say the least. About the only thing that can be done is to inlet a piece of steel into the slot.

The rear sight base on the Mauser (Gew 98) is a sleeve which is sweated on. To get it off, warm it until the solder is soft and drive off toward the muzzle. Go easy on the heat as the barrel temper (heat treatment) might be damaged to such an extent that the weapon would be dangerous to shoot.

I know of no book about the manufacture of micrometer peep sights, but—"Advanced Gunsmithing" by W. F. Vickery, published by T. G. Samworth, Plantersville, S. C., at $4.00 contains a lot of good info on metal working.

Let me know how you "make out" with your remodeling.

—o—

Mauser Parts

QUESTION: Could you tell me where I could get a barrel for a .25 Automatic Mauser?

I have the permit to have the gun, but the barrel is in a very poor shape, so I would like to know where I could get one, or could you tell me where I could get a new Mauser automatic, or a second-hand one in a very good condition?

How much would it cost? How much would a barrel cost?

J. K., U. S. Navy.

ANSWER: Mauser pistol parts are very scarce, but you might try Stoeger Arms Corp., 507 5th Ave., N. Y. C. 17, N. Y.

A .25 caliber barrel would cost $6.00 or more.

You also might try Hudson Sporting Goods Co., 52 Warren St., N. Y. C. 7, N. Y.

Sorry, I can't keep up with the used gun business—but try the above!

—o—

Another Sharps

QUESTION: Can you give me any information about an old rifle I have? On the sight is R. S. Lawrence Pat. Feb. 15, 1859, on the barrel are the words, New Model 1863, and these numbers 82294. Another place has C. Sharps, Pat. Oct. 5, 1852.

It's a lever action, breech loader of the cap type.

I read your Corner and enjoy it very much.

W. A. W., California.

ANSWER: Your gun is one of the famous Sharps rifles (or carbine, you didn't state the length of the barrel, etc.).

It is the same as the "New Model of 1859" I believe.

These guns were made in the .54 (sometimes known as .52) Sharps Linen Cartridge caliber only.

By 1865 over 6000 of these guns had been purchased by the U. S. War Department.

According to the serial numbers around 77,000 were manufactured.

Sharps Martial long guns are generally valued, by collectors, at from $6 to about $20 depending on the model, condition, etc.

The precussion carbine is worth anywhere from $6 to $10, perhaps a little more.

Your gun no doubt has the arrangement (Lawrence's patent, with cut off) for automatically placing the Sharps pellet primer on the nipple.

A very interesting book titled "The Sharps Rifle" by Winston O. Smith ($3.00) has been published by William Morrow & Co., 386 4th Ave., N. Y. C. 16, N. Y.

Incidentally, it is a lot of fun to shoot these old guns, and you'd be surprised at the accuracy of some of them.

Later (metallic cartridge) models of the Sharps are the ones that were generally used by the old buffalo hunters.

All Sharps guns were well made of excellent material.

—o—

Springfield Single-Shot

QUESTION: You've probably never heard of me, but I'm an old friend of yours, having read SHORT STORIES for some 15 or 20 years.

This is to get some dope on a Springfield rifle, whose salient features are as follows: serial #556235—on the barrel are stamped the letters VP, an American eagle, A, P, and an A sideways.

At a guess the caliber is about .50. It's a bolt action, military type forearm, and the bayonet and cleaning or ramrod are combined, the bayonet being a round rod with a point ground triangularly. Said bayonet has a latch to lock it both in the extended and retracted positions. Then the bayonet continues, in a smaller diameter to be a cleaning rod, I believe, since the lower end is threaded, apparently for a tip.

In the butt plate is a pivoted cover for two receptacles, holding a brush and said tip.

Please tell me something of the background of this gun and what value it has, if any.

A friend of mine owns the gun and wants to sell it to me for $25.00. I might buy it for either resale or a decoration for the mantel. I hardly think it possible to buy cartridges for it—although it is in excellent condition.

O. L., Ohio.

ANSWER: The rifle you mention is evidently a Springfield Model of 1884 which is of .45 caliber—being chambered for the .45-70-500 cartridge, which gave a muzzle velocity averaging about 1315 feet a second, with an extreme range of about 3,500 yards.

Shooting at 200 yards the bullet rose about 13 inches, at 500 yards about 8 feet, at 800 yards about 25 feet, and at 1,000 yards about 44 feet.

The rifle and cartridge was capable of averaging 5-inch 10-shot groups at 200 yards under favorable conditions.

The .45-70 ammunition is generally available in normal times.

These rifles in new condition have been selling for under $20. in this neck of the woods.

The Model 1872 (.45-70) Springfield differed from the 1870 (.50-70) model in caliber and details which necessitated retooling at Springfield Arsenal for all parts except minor ones such as butt plate, guard plate, etc.

The .45-70 caliber gun was the U. S. Army rifle (in various model dates) until superceded by the 1892 Krag (.30-40).

The .45-70 single shot Springfield and the .30-40 Krag Magazine Rifle were used in the War with Spain.

—o—

Reloading After the War

QUESTION: I'm a steady reader of your articles in SHORT STORIES. I think your opinion would be of help to me in several matters.

I am interested in reloading and intend to make a hobby of it when I'm back in civilian life. I remember your article several months back which explained the equipment required. I believe you stated that cases which had been used with mercuric primers should not be reloaded. Can the present government .30-06 brass cases be reloaded? I believe the chlorate primer is still in use. Also, I would like to know how many times these cases can be safely reloaded, and what would be a safe load of smokeless powder to develop around 2,800 ft. per second with a 180-grain slug.

So much for ammunition. I have been thinking of altering a Canadian Ross action to .30-06. I imagine the magazine would have to be altered; perhaps a Mauser-type magazine could be installed. What do you think of this plan? Do you know where I could get hold of a Canadian-Ross?

This is asking a lot at one time, and I will appreciate it greatly if you can answer this.

I've been 2 years in the army now, and spent 11 months of that time training men in rifle marksmanship, so I am well acquainted with the M1 rifle and carbine. This weapon experience served to get me more interested than ever in the fire-arms line. Corporal B. S., U. S. Army.

ANSWER: The present government .30-06 cartridge cases can be reloaded as the chlorate primer is not mercuric.

The only objection is that sometimes wartime brass is not so good.

Peace time cases can be reloaded successfully quite a number of times. I have reloaded some cases fifteen or twenty times with heavy loads, and there is practically no limit to the number of times they can be reloaded with light loads.

It generally depends on the amount of working the brass gets from resizing. This working hardens the brass and it will eventually crack—most always at the shoulder or neck, which generally does no particular damage. When a case gives away at the head, the confusion starts, sometimes with disastrous results.

The 180 grain jacketed bullet can be reloaded with 50.5 grains of Du Pont #4064 powder—which gives 2,750 feet a second at the muzzle. This is a maximum load and great care should be exercised in putting it together—and should not be attempted by an inexperienced reloader.

The same charge (50.5 grains) of Du Pont #4320 powder will give slightly greater velocity (2,790 F.S.). This is also a maximum load, which among other things requires the individual weighing of the powder charges on a very sensitive balance (sensitive to 1/10 grain or preferably less). The above loads are for use with Frankford arsenal primers; if commercial primers are used, reduce the load 5 grains.

The beginner should not attempt reloading without first studying a good book on the subject—such as Reloader's Manual by Lieut. Col. Earl Naramore. ($3.50, another Samworth book.)

I wouldn't recommend altering the Ross rifle—it would be an expensive proposition at best with parts not available, etc.

Although the Ross has been a misunderstood rifle and has no doubt received an undeserved cussing at certain times—why not let it pass on out of the picture? There are plenty of excellent .30-06 caliber rifles available (or will be).

Good luck to you, Corporal Bill!

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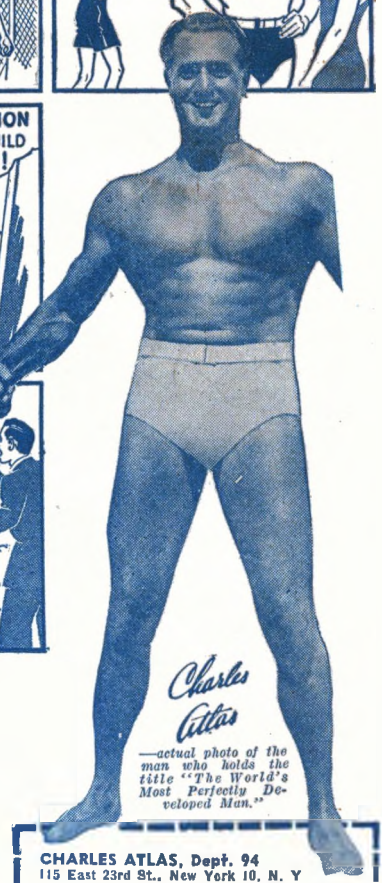
The inspiring story of CHARLES ATLAS



Charles Atlas

—actual photo of the man who holds the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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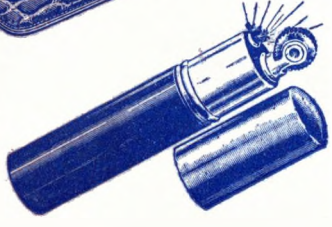

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