W. C. TUTTLE — RAY MILLHOLLAND — JIM KJELGAARD

"On the Night of the Big Wind"—H. S. M. KEMP

Short Stories

August 25th

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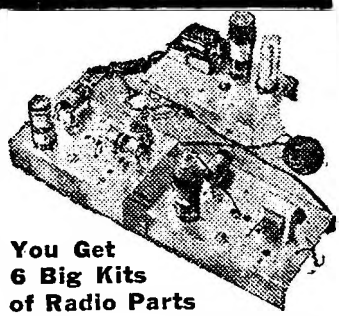

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Short Stories

TWICE A MONTH

THE BEST OF AMERICA'S ACTION ADVENTURE MYSTERY

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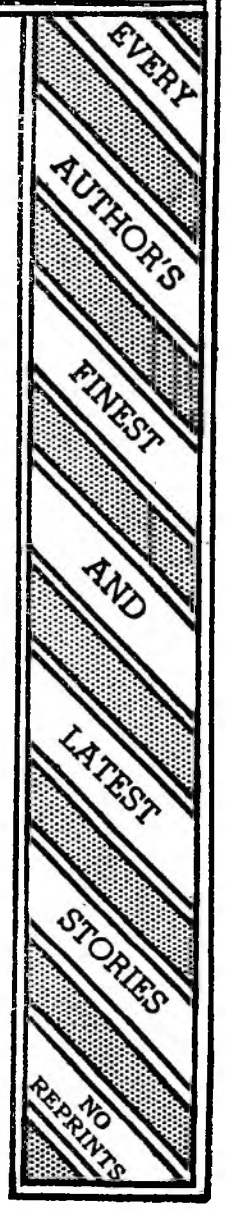
Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.



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When Peace Came To Tonto Town

By W. C. TUTTLE

Tonto City Was Rather Upset Over the Kidnapping of the Sheriff. After All, in Spite of His Eccentric Ways, Henry Hadn't Been a Bad One

TONTO CITY didn't mind a bit of hilarity. It was no news event when some joy-filled cowpoke emptied his six-gun at the moon. All this before midnight, mind you, when it didn't interfere greatly with local slumber. But at four o'clock in the morning—that was not good.

Henry Harrison Conroy rolled out of bed, stumbled over his own boots, slid up the lower half of his window and yelled:

"Stop it! Stop it, I say!"

As a direct reply, a bullet smashed through the two halves of the window, showering glass all over the hotel room, and finished its lethal way against the opposite wall, where something else went *clunk!* and rattled on the floor. From over in the far side of the bed came Judge Van Treece's complaining voice:

"Something stopped it, sir; and I fear it was that marble bust of the Bard of Avon."

"Aye," muttered Henry from the floor beneath the window. "It was not far removed from the bust of the Sheriff of Tonto."

There was no more shooting. Henry lighted their lamp, after yanking down the window-shade, which promptly pulled off the roller, and he came across the room, dragging it behind him, muttering about the decrepit old hotel gradually disintegrating.

The lighting of the lamp disclosed Henry Harrison Conroy, the sheriff of Wild Horse Valley, clad only in a misfit union suit. Henry was only five and a half feet tall, and almost that much in circumference. He had little hair, a face as round as an apple, small, quizzical eyes and the biggest nose in Arizona.

Henry did not look like a sheriff, especially a sheriff in a tough county of Arizona. Henry Harrison Conroy's name had been blazoned on theatrical billboards the length and breadth of the land, until vaudeville waned. He had been born backstage, and the stage had been his home most of his life, until fate tossed him into Tonto City, where cowboys and cattlemen, possibly considering politics a joke, elected him as sheriff of Wild Horse Valley.

Judge Van Treece, over there in the bed, looked very much like a sleepy, but all-wise, old owl, as he watched Henry shake loose from the torn window-shade. Judge was well past sixty, with the face of a tragedian. Well versed in criminal law, Van Treece's thirst had washed him out of the profession, made him a derelict, until Henry, finding in Judge a kindred spirit, appointed him as his deputy. Together with a giant Swede, named Oscar Johnson, the Scorpion Bend *Clarion* had dubbed them "The Shame of Arizona." Oscar functioned as the jailer, when he wasn't seeking personal combat with somebody.

Henry turned from the lamp, considered the glass-littered floor, the smashed window, and then shifted his silent contemplation to a small, rather-crude what-not against the

wall, where there had stood a small, marble bust of William Shakespeare.

"Egad!" he muttered. "It is now a complete bust, Judge."

He picked up some chunks of the marble and placed them on the table.

"He never knew what struck him," said Judge soberly.

Henry rubbed his red nose. Someone was coming down the hallway, treading very heavily. Judge said, "The Vitrified Viking." It was his pet name for Oscar Johnson. The door shuddered under a sharp knock, and Henry called, "Enter, friend."

It was Oscar Johnson, ducking his head to avoid the top of the doorway. He stood there, grinning foolishly.

"Well," said Henry, "what brings you here at this ungodly hour, Oscar?"

"Excoose me," replied Oscar, "but Ay t'ought you might like to know—ve have a dead man."

"A dead man!" gasped Henry. "A dead man—you say?"

"Oscar, you jest," said Judge.

"Yust a little vile ago," said Oscar soberly. "Ay heard shots."

"Shots don't mean dead men," said Henry.

"It mean dead men to dis von, Hanry. Ay t'ink he is—he look dead. Over by de King's Castle Saloon hitch-rack."

"My goodness!" gasped Henry. "Hurry Judge. A dead man! Then it wasn't some benighted cowpuncher, blowing off steam. Judge! You put pants on your legs—not coats."

"Then take my pants off, will you sir? The length, you know. And if I may say so, sir, shirts invariably button in the front."

"Ah, yes, they do, indeed. Oscar, who is the man?"

"Ay don't know," replied the giant Swede. "Who bust de vindow?"

"That," panted Henry, changing the shirt, "would be worth-while information. Evidently the shooter also killed the man down there. Art ready, Judge?"

THEY found the man as described by Oscar. There was no question that he was dead. By his garb, he was a miner. Over against the wall of the big saloon was a saddled horse, the reins still over its neck. Apparently no one else had been attracted by the shots, as the King's Castle Saloon had closed some time before they were fired.

"Oscar, go awaken Doctor Bogart and inform him of events," said Henry.

"Ay don't know what you mean, Hanry?"

"Get Doc out of bed and tell him it's murder!"

"Ya-ah—su-ure."

"Big dummox," sighed Judge, leaning against the hitch-rack, as Henry tied the horse. "My feet hurt, dad-blast it!"

"You probably have your boots on the wrong feet, Judge."

"Wrong feet? By gad, sir, I have only two feet. I possibly have my left boot on my right foot."

"And your right boot on your left foot."

"If I may say so, sir, I have no boot on my left foot. The result of too much hurry and confusion."

HENRY yawned and sighed. "You should remain calm, as I do, Judge."

"Calm? Indeed? And I suppose that is why you buttoned your trousers in the back."

Henry chuckled. "And I thought I was bloated! A tightening of the abdomen. A fine pair of officers, we are, Judge. Damme, we haven't brains enough to dress ourselves properly. Here comes Oscar with the doctor."

"At least," said Judge soberly, "we will be sure that the man is dead."

He was. Old Doctor Bogart assured them that there was not a spark of life left in the poor devil. He had been shot twice. They took the body down to the doctor's home, and searched the pockets of his clothes, but found nothing of any consequence. Then they went back to bed.

"I hope," yawned Judge, "that this is merely a—er—routine murder."

"Routine?" queried Henry. "Just what do you mean, sir?"

"No mystery, if I may use the word, although most things are a mystery to us. We have been at peace for a long time—and I should hate to see a wave of crime sweep down our peaceful valley."

"To use a nautical term, Judge," remarked Henry, as he blew out the light, "it might serve to scrape the barnacles off our bottoms. I am almost resigned to trouble."

Tonto City was not unduly excited over the murder. Flaming six-guns were not a novelty to the town, although things had been quiet for months. This had all the earmarks of an ordinary, perhaps grudge shooting, which affected only those directly concerned.

John Campbell, the big prosecutor, came to Henry's office to talk about it, and a few minutes later Frank Stevens, manager at the Golden Streak mine, came in to tell them that he had identified the man as Jim Barnes, one of the mine employes. Barnes had been with the mine for about two months, and was the assayer's helper.

Frank Stevens didn't like Henry Conroy. He had been quoted in the *Clarion* as anxious for a change in the sheriff's office, and had said some derogatory things about the incumbent. He didn't seem to want to answer Henry's questions, and said that he would take care of everything. The Golden Streak was the richest mine in Wild Horse Valley, with the Yellow Cross running a close second.

HENRY said nothing to them about the saddled horse. The principal reason was because the horse had disappeared from the hitch-rack before daylight. Judge was rather indignant over it.

"Henry, that horse was a clue," he said. "Why was a miner riding a horse? Where would a miner get a horse?"

"A horse," explained Henry calmly, "is a beast of burden, a four-legged quadruped, used principally in this country to transport the population. A miner could steal a horse, buy a horse, inherit one, or possibly, raise one from a pup. It may have been a gift. I am merely outlining possible answers for your silly question, sir."

Judge relaxed, tilted his chair back against the wall, hooked both heels over a rung and opened his dog-eared copy of Shakespeare. It was his favorite position and favorite author. Henry tried twice to put his feet on the desk, but failed at each attempt. It was a dangerous feat, because his old swivel-chair might blow apart at the hinge, which it had done before. Judge marked a paragraph with a bony forefinger, and squinted at Henry over his glasses.

"To us, sir, this may seem a commonplace killing, but just wait until James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly has run it through his *Clarion* mill."

"Ah, yes," said Henry. "No doubt he has something of the kind all set in type, needing only names and dates. Perhaps his good friend, Frank Stevens, will give him all details."

John Campbell, the prosecutor, walked in. Campbell was a big man, not a bit pompous, and always friendly to Henry and Judge. He sat down and stated definitely that it looked like rain.

"You can see the lightning flashes up along Lobo Grades," he said. "Frank Stevens has headed for Scorpion Bend on horseback, and without a slicker."

"John," said Henry reprovingly, "you surely do not expect me to shed any tears over Frank Stevens."

The big lawyer chuckled. "No, Henry; I saw that article in the *Clarion*."

"And just why is Mr. Stevens heading into a storm?" asked Judge. "Or has he fallen in love with some fair maid of Scorpion Bend?"

"No, I don't believe he has, Judge. It seems that Mr. Stevens is a trifle worried. Last night, about eight o'clock, he sent a freight wagon to Scorpion Bend. Just between us, that wagon carried gold, and a short time ago Mr. Stevens met the stage driver, who did not meet that freight wagon on the road between here and Scorpion Bend. Moreover, the freight wagon is not between here and the Golden Streak mine."

"My goodness!" exclaimed Henry. "Did he impart any further information, John?"

"Yes," smiled the lawyer, "and I shall try and quote him. He said, 'For your information, John, and not expecting any assistance from those two old stags in the sheriff's office, Jim Barnes was a private detective, employed by the Golden Streak mine.'"

"A lovely quotation," sighed Judge. "Too bad it isn't in print."

"Wait for the *Clarion*," said Henry quietly. "But, John, why would the Golden Streak employ a private detective?"

The big lawyer shrugged. "Mr. Stevens didn't say, Henry."

"Old stags in the sheriff's office!" snorted Judge. "Cloven of hoof and antler crowned."

A BUCKBOARD rattled up to the little hitching-rack in front of the office. Judge craned his neck toward the window.

"Frijole and Slim," he growled.

Frijole Bill Cullison was the cook at Henry's JHC spread, and Slim Pickins was the only cowpoke employed by Henry. Slim was a thin, turkey-necked, buck-toothed, born-weary cowboy, who walked as though just about to fall apart. Frijole was a half-pint in size, with fierce mustaches, amazed eyes and two cowlicks.

They came in, with Slim in the lead, walking slowly. Both men had removed their hats. Slim was carrying a demijohn, much as though he was bringing a tribute to a King, chest-high and carefully. Frijole halted behind him, his head bowed, as Slim carefully deposited the jug on Henry's desk. Then they both backed up, staring at the jug, as though expecting it to perform some miracle.

Judge said, "What mummery is this, fools?"

Neither man looked at Judge as Slim whispered, "We made it, Frijole."

"Aye," whispered Frijole. "It is well, good servant."

John Campbell had tears in his eyes. He had attended a similar ceremony. The smell of rain drifted in, as the first few drops sent tiny puffs of dust from the street.

"She's calmed," whispered Slim.

"She's gettin' aged," corrected Frijole. "Man, what a batch! Last night she gurgled like a baby, then growled like a wolf, and after that she howled like a banshee, dyin' away to a chokin' gasp along about four o'clock this mornin'."

"Perhaps it was suffering," suggested Henry soberly.

"I told yuh there wasn't enough horse-liniment in it," said Slim. "There was only a quart."

"Yeah, I know," nodded Frijole, "but I added that pint of pain-killer. I hate to see it suffer thataway. But, I reckon, we all make mistakes. Gentlemen, there sets my masterpiece."

"Uncork it," said Henry.

Cautiously Slim unfastened the bailing-wire, while Frijole held the jug solidly on the desk-top. The cork was no problem, it came out without any urging, and emitted an audible sigh.

"Perfect!" exclaimed Frijole. "Do you get the aromer, Henry?"

"The cups, Judge," said Henry.

"Of all the damnable mummery!" snorted Judge, as he uncoiled from his chair and put his book away. "Masterpiece! Prune juice, potato peelings, raisins, horse-liniment and pain-killer! Bah!"

But Judge went to the rear of the office and got the tin cups. It was raining hard now, and thunder shook the little office. It didn't rain often in Wild Horse Valley, but when it did—it was usually of flood proportions.

"None for me, please," smiled the lawyer. "I tried it once, you remember."

The liquor was a sparkling amber, as Judge poured it out.

"Yuh can hear it crackle," said Frijole expansively. "You've got to be good t' make a drink like that."

"And," added Slim, "you've got to be good to *take* a drink like that."

There was no ceremony to the actual drinking. Each man upended his tin cupful, and downed it. Nothing was said. In fact, nothing could be said. When you drank Frijole's liquor, it not only took your breath away, but it muted your vocal cords. Henry drew a shuddering breath, opened his eyes and looked around vacantly.

Frijole whispered, "That's m' masterpiece."

"A masterpiece of murder!" whispered Judge.

"Just what proof is that stuff?" asked the lawyer.

"Proof?" wheezed Frijole. "We don't know. We had one of them gadgets that yuh test whiskey with, but it melted. It was jist like puttin' a thermometer in the fire. 'Course, it's a little new. You give that a couple more hours, and it'll be prime. I knowed it'd be good. Ol' Bill Shakespeare, the rooster—"

"Have done!" said Judge huskily. "Isn't it enough to foist such liquor on human stomachs, without adding lies about that blasted, old rooster."

"Lies, Judge?" queried Frijole. "This'n I can prove. Bill's all we've got left out there. A lobo wolf done et up Bill's harem, and pore Ol' Bill's sick about it. The other day I seen him a-settin' on the grindstone, slippin' off one leg and then the other.

Keeps hitchin' 'em up and lettin' 'em slip down. I went out there—and what do yuh know? He's sharpenin' his spurs. It's a fact.

"Well, I didn't want to contribute to his delinquency, as yuh might say, so I sneaked out after dark and buried the mash from that last batch. But you cain't fool Ol' Bill. Next mornin' at daylight he was neck-deep in that hole, and he had a crop as big as my two fists. He was weavin' and shadder boxin' as he went back to that empty hen house.

"There's a little, square hole at the bottom, big enough for a big chicken to go through. Above the hole is a winder, but there ain't no glass in it. Well, sir, Ol' Bill went inside and flopped up on that winder-sill, where he plants himself. I cain't figure out his idea, 'cause that ain't no place for a rooster full of that mash; so I sets down and watches.

"Well, sir, jest before the sun hits the top of the hill, who do I see but that blasted lobo, sneakin' out of the brush. He's pretty hen-hongry to do that. He sizes things up, figures he's all right, and comes ahead. He sneaks around the corner of the hen house and dives his head right into that hole, figurin' on gettin' him a hen for breakfast.

"Well, he ain't no more'n inside, when Ol' Bill hops down on the outside, lands right behind that wolf's head and socks in both of them sharp spurs. Man, that wolf cuts loose a yelp inside the hen house, and he's still peddlin' that same yelp, when him and Ol' Bill was a hundred feet away, headin' for the corral fence.

"I ain't never seen anythin' as fast as that wolf. Well, sir, jist before they hit that fence, Ol' Bill flaps both wings over the wolf's eyes, and that wolf hit a fence post dead-center. Missed his aim entire. And jist as the wolf hit, Ol' Bill swayed sideways. Oh, it shook him up a little, I reckon, but his spurs tore loose and he landed on his back in the corral dust, halfway across the corral.

"But that wolf! Man, when he got organized agin, he ain't longer than a bobcat, and he's the widest wolf in Arizony. First short-coupled lobo I ever seen. It shorted him so much that he ran like a rabbit. Last I seen of him he was takin' twenty-foot jumps, goin' right up the ridge, headin' for the main divide. I shore had to laugh."

"You didn't have to lie," said Judge reprovingly.

"Lie? Judge, if you'll come out to the ranch, I'll show yuh the post he broke off."

"Did you see it, too, Slim?" asked Henry.

"Boss," replied Slim, "you've got to remember that me an Frijole made a test of that stuff jist before bedtime last night. I was in hibernation, as yuh might say."

"Frijole never has a witness," said Judge.

"I believe him," declared Henry. "Even if there wasn't a rooster nor a wolf on the JHC, I'd believe him. The trouble with us is the fact that we can only tell of the things we actually see, and can prove. Damme, we're ashamed to dream out loud."

"I suppose you believe in Little Red Riding Hood, Henry," said Judge reprovingly.

"Every word of it, sir. Don't you, John?"

"I—I believe I do, Henry," admitted the lawyer. "In fact, I do not see anything unusual in Old Bill Shakespeare, the rooster. After all, the wolf killed off his harem, and Bill was human enough to plan revenge. Cats sharpen their claws on wood—why not a rooster on a grindstone? Perfectly logical."

"If yuh don't mind, Henry," said Frijole meekly, "me and Slim will go back to the ranch."

"We—uh—want to fix that fence-post," said Slim.

They went out into the rain, climbed into the buckboard and went back to the ranch, ignoring the downpour.

"Next time they might tell the truth," said Judge.

"I hope not," said Henry. "After all, their lies never hurt anybody—except the wolf."

"I would like to have seen that wolf," said the lawyer. "Short-coupled and jumping like a rabbit. I shall have to watch for it."

"Yes," said Judge disgustedly, "and very likely you will both see it."

IT was late that evening when Frank Stevens came back from Scorpion Bend. He found Henry and Judge eating supper at the Tonto Hotel, and came over to their table.

He looked road-weary and wet, as he sloshed down in a chair.

"You had no slicker? Man, you are very wet," commented Henry.

"I am wet," agreed Stevens. "Listen, Conroy! I have no faith in either of you, but this is something you'll have to know. Last night a freight wagon left the Golden Streak, heading for Scorpion Bend. It was nothing new—our wagons run at night. But this wagon carried sixty thousand dollars worth of raw gold—about two hundred and forty pounds.

"Conroy, that wagon never reached Scorpion Bend. I have ridden both ways, between here and the mine and between here and Scorpion Bend. That wagon and team have disappeared."

"Remarkable!" exclaimed Henry quietly. "The driver?"

"The driver was Jim Barnes, a detective—the man who was shot and killed here last night."

Henry rubbed his red nose violently. Jim Barnes came to Tonto City on horseback—and somebody took the horse away before daylight.

"You might be able to find something as big as two horses and a heavy freight wagon, Conroy," remarked Stevens.

"Possibly," nodded Henry soberly. "A detective lost it, you cannot find it, Mr. Stevens—and I do not care for your sarcastic remarks. You may as well go home, because the sheriff's office is now on the job. Thank you for keeping it a secret this long."

Frank Stevens got up and left the restaurant.

"He has no worries now that we are on the job," said Judge.

"I shall do our best," sighed Henry. "Had he been willing to inform us earlier we might have done something. Right now I am afraid that this damnable rain has not only washed out all wagon tracks, but parts of the road, as well."

"And my rheumatism is killing me," added Judge. "I am very sure I couldn't even mount a horse."

"Same old alibi," sighed Henry.

"Speaking of horses," said Judge, "it reminds me of the horse that Mr. Barnes rode. That, sir, was our lost clue. Our negligence, if I may include myself. However, it seems that I am not employed as a mental adviser."

Henry chuckled. "Mental adviser! If I remember correctly, you went out with one mismated shoe and a bare foot. Adviser, indeed!"

There was no chance to do anything the next day, because the downpour continued all night, and the roads were in bad condition. Henry was not greatly concerned. James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly, the editor of the *Clarion*, came in on the stage that afternoon from Scorpion Bend. Pelly was scrawny, near-sighted and important. His tongue was sharp, but not as sharp as his pen. There was no love lost between J. W. L. Pelly and the sheriff's office. Oscar Johnson was Pelly's pet obsession. The giant Swede called Pelly "A vorm," and treated him as such.

Pelly came down to the office, peered inside to be sure that Oscar was not there, and came in.

"Something out of the flood, I suspect," remarked Judge.

Pelly sat down, looking severely at Judge, who grunted and went on reading. Henry said, "Mr. Pelly! And in all this wet?"

"Perhaps you do not realize it, Mr. Conroy," said Pelly seriously, "but a man has been murdered and sixty thousand dollars stolen."

"That was night before last," said Henry. "Not unlike your paper, your news is rather stale, don't you think—if you think?"

"I expected sarcasm, Conroy."

"We strive to never disappoint our friends."

"Just what have you done about it?" asked Pelly.

"Everything possible, my boy. The dragnet is out. Unfortunately, your staunch admirer, Mr. Frank Stevens, neglected to inform us of the theft until after the storm broke, and the rain had wiped out all the tracks."

"Tracks?" queried Pelly.

"Yes, my boy—tracks. Freight wagons run on wheels, and those wheels leave tracks. Rather interesting—you should observe them some day. Of course, you know that the wagon and team have disappeared, too. As for Mr. Barnes, the deceased—he was shot at the hitch-rack hard by the King's Castle Saloon. I cried out against such noise at four o'clock in the morning, and the shooter smashed the window just over my

head. In your editorial I suppose you will decry the poor marksmanship of the murderer. However, that is beside the point. Just what information have you, my boy?"

"I am a newspaper man—not a sleuth," replied Pelly.

"That is information" said Judge soberly. "We have wondered."

"Whether I am a sleuth?"

"Oh, no—just what you are—if anything, Pelly. A newspaper man!"

Oscar Johnson came in, filling the doorway completely. He saw the editor and grinned.

"Yu-das Priest!" he whispered. "Ay am yoyful to meet you."

"Keep away from me you—you abysmal brute," wailed Pelly.

"Have done, Oscar," said Henry, and Oscar relaxed.

Henry grinned. "Judge, will you get the cups?" he asked.

"Gladly," replied Judge. "Just a moment. Four?"

"Four," nodded Henry. J. W. L. Pelly winced. There were only four of them in the office, and the editor had experienced Frijole's distillations before.

"I—I believe I shall have to go," said Pelly nervously.

"It is nice to have met you, sir," replied Henry.

But Oscar Johnson still blocked the doorway. Judge brought the cups and filled them. A tin cup does not hold an average drink, and Judge filled them to the brim. Pelly gasped helplessly and accepted his cup.

"Confusion to all crime, gentlemen," toasted Henry. "Bottoms up."

Pelly downed his drink. Experience had taught him that it was not a beverage. Rather it was a depth-bomb. Pelly closed his eyes tightly, preferring to not attempt to breathe at once. The tin cup, fell, hit his knee and bounced on the floor, a shudder racked his frail body, and his first breath was like a pop-corn vendor's whistle.

Oscar reached over, slapped him on the back and almost knocked him off his chair. But it did act as sort of a rough, artificial respiration. Pelly caught his breath and sagged back. No one said anything. Perhaps they were unable to say anything, or perhaps they waited for J. W. L. Pelly to speak.

"The real elixir of life, gentlemen," remarked Henry.

"Yudas!" gasped Oscar. "Das is the best Ay ever tasted."

James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly burped and almost lost his hat. Then he grinned foolishly and flexed his legs. That stuff works swiftly. Pelly stood up, and his eyes were just a little out of line, as he glared at Oscar Johnson.

"Get out of my way!" he hissed. "I'm going out!"

Oscar was so amazed that he stepped aside. Pelly bumped his right shoulder on the side of the doorway, as he went out, and strode up the street, chin up. Henry stared at Oscar, blinked and rubbed his nose. "We shall have to keep that stuff away from J. W. L. Pelly," he said soberly. "It gives him astigmatism."

"I have heard of such stuff, but I thought it was exaggeration," remarked Judge soberly.

"Such stuff?" queried Henry.

"Yes. A liquor strong enough to make a jackrabbit spit in a grizzly's eye."

DAVE WILLIS, manager of the Yellow Cross mine, came in. Willis was a big man, two-fisted, direct.

"Anything further on that stolen gold, Sheriff?" he asked.

"Nothing yet, Mr. Willis."

"I see. I was talking with Frank Stevens about it. Quite a big loss—thirty thousand dollars."

"He told you, of course, that the dead driver was a private detective."

"I knew that," replied the mine manager. "In fact, Barnes was working for both the Golden Streak and the Yellow Cross."

"You—uh—both employed him, Mr. Willis? What for, may I ask?"

"Conroy, both mines have been robbed. We didn't feel that your office could handle it; so we brought in a private detective to work with the men. They didn't know he was a detective, of course."

"Both mines robbed? In what way?"

"High-grading. No, we haven't stopped it. Barnes had no luck in finding out things. Of course, you realize that we are both working in very high-grade ore. A

chunk of that ore no bigger than your fist might be worth fifty dollars. Of course, your office is not capable of handling a thing like that."

"Probably not, Mr. Willis. Still, your detective found out nothing, and got murdered. Did these—er—thieves have any way of knowing that he would drive that freight team?"

"No. Frank Stevens says that Barnes was selected at the very last moment to take the freight wagon to Scorpion Bend."

Henry sighed deeply. "I am sorry that you gentlemen decided to keep this information from the law. After all, both mines are in my jurisdiction."

"It was Frank Stevens' idea, Conroy. For some reason, he hasn't much faith in your ability. However, you know now. I don't know if the Golden Streak wants to employ another detective or not. We don't."

"I believe you are very sensible," said Henry seriously. "After all, Mr. Willis, my office can handle the job much better than any private detective—and much safer, too."

"Much safer?" queried Willis.

"I should have said—without so much loss of life. After all, editorially speaking, we haven't enough sense to be dangerous."

"I see the angle," laughed Willis. "Well, as far as the Yellow Cross is concerned, you may handle the situation, Mr. Conroy."

"Thank you very much for your confidence."

WILLIS went away. Judge closed his book and looked reprovingly over the top of his glasses.

"Confidence!" he snorted. "Confidence in what, if I may ask?"

"Our ability to combat crime, Judge. Mr. Willis realizes their mistake now. He allowed Frank Stevens to talk him into hiring a detective—and it backfired on them. I am very glad to have a free hand."

"A free hand to do what?"

Henry rubbed his red nose and considered the question.

"I'm afraid you have me there, sir," he admitted. "I suppose our first assignment will be to try and find the team and wagon from the Golden Streak."

"How?"

"Ye Gods!" exclaimed Henry. "At least, we should be able to find a thing of that size! You can't hide a freight wagon under a leaf, Judge."

"And if I may advance this question, sir," said Judge, "just what good will it do us to find the wagon? We know a wagon was used in the operation. No one denies that. There were horses, too. What the Golden Streak wants is the gold. You would spend our time and efforts to find a wagon, which means nothing."

"Good, good!" exclaimed Henry. "We will forget the wagon, Judge, and devote all our time to the gold. Let us reconstruct the scene. Jim Barnes, an inexperienced driver, is selected to take the freight wagon to Scorpion Bend. At least, he is inexperienced in driving over the Lobo Grades.

"Perhaps, through his lack of knowledge, he dumped the wagon into Lobo Canyon, but jumped and saved his own life. Do you follow me?"

"With mingled emotions," nodded Judge. "Where did he get the saddled horse and why was he shot here in Tonto?"

Henry squinted thoughtfully. "Well, Judge, he didn't want to walk; so he stole a horse and saddle. The owner followed him here and shot him for stealing the horse and saddle. Do you care for the solution?"

"Not particularly, sir. Men do not shoot horse-thieves and then try to kill the sheriff when he objects to the noise. I would say that the owner of the horse would take it away with him—not sneak back later and take it. Your theory will not hold water, sir."

"Why worry about water, Judge? Go and get the cups. This theorizing is a dry pastime."

Slim Pickins and Frijole Bill came in, just in time to share in the drink. They usually did. After two cupfuls apiece Henry said seriously, "Have you boys any theory as to what became of the team and wagon from the Golden Streak?"

"I've been a-doin' a heap of deep thinkin'," admitted Slim, "and I'd say she's at the bottom of Lobo Canyon."

"Is that your theory, too, Frijole?" asked Henry.

"Yeah, I reckon that's m' theory—but not m' belief."

"What's the difference?" asked Judge. "You think that is what happened, but you don't believe it. Ridiculous!"

"Slim don't believe it either, Judge."

"Nonsense! Slim just said—"

"I don't believe it either," said Slim.

"Of all the unmitigated asses I've ever heard talking—" began Judge warmly.

"Let them explain," interrupted Henry. "Why don't you believe it, Frijole?"

"Like Slim jist said, we've been a-thinkin' deep-like. Likewise, we resoluted that it must be at the bottom of Lobo Canyon. Then we went out to round up our buckboard team, and we found that team from the Golden Streak—them two big, bay geldin's a-feedin' out there with our horses. They ain't got no harnesses on, but it's the same team."

"My goodness!" gasped Henry. "The missing team has been found!"

"But they wasn't pullin' that wagon, Henry," reminded Slim. "We looked all around, but there wasn't no wagon."

"Never mind about the wagon," said Henry. "Now that we have found the horses—you might fill them up again, Judge. Thank you, boys—you have been a big help to me."

IT was about eleven o'clock that night, when Frijole and Slim managed to find the doorway of the King's Castle Saloon. Their celebration had ended, and they were trying to find their team and buckboard. It was a very dark night, and the streets of Tonto City were not any Great White Way.

After pawing around for a while Slim announced that he had found their equipage. Frijole, clinging to the top-pole of the rack, asked, "Howzuh know it's zours?"

"Got round wheels," replied Slim. "C'mon, Free-hooley, we're headin' home."

Frijole managed to get into the buckboard. Slim was handling the lines, and he started hauling back, trying to back into the middle of the street. The team seemed to be doing their part, but getting nowhere.

"Thish is a fee-nom-e-non." said Slim. "Team's schtuck, Frijole. Oh-oh!"

Slim fell out and the team sagged back to the rack.

"Whazzamatter?" asked Frijole owlishly.

"F'rgot to untie 'em," muttered Slim. "Dumbest horshes I ever sheen."

Slim untied them and got back into a buckboard and began swearing at the team.

"Whazzamatter 'ith you, Slimmie. C'mon over in your own buckboard!" said Frijole.

"Lovely dove!" gasped Slim. "Too many buckboards."

Slim was careful this time. He felt all around, until he located Frijole, and climbed in beside him. This time they got away. In fact, they almost upset the buckboard, and went out of town like a fire-team, heading for a blaze.

Frijole promptly went to sleep. Slim sang the words of two songs, the tune of another, and it is surmised that he also went to sleep. Evidently the team forgot to make the left-hand turn to the JHC, and headed straight on for the Yellow Cross mine, about four miles further on.

The mine buildings were on a decided slope of the hill, and the road came in above them. This wandering team came down past some of the bunk-houses, circled the cook-house, hit a rear hub on a corner of the office, throwing the team around to the left, and crashed a front wheel squarely against the steps of the office.

The sudden stop threw one horse down against the wall of the office, where it proceeded to play a tattoo with its heels, the other horse tearing loose and taking off across country. It also threw Frijole crashing against the office door, and Slim into the road, where he skidded on the seat of his pants.

All this happened in split-seconds, and as Frijole crashed into the door, it flew open, and two men dived out. They fell over Frijole, banged into the wrecked buckboard, and one of them yelped a curse, as they were apparently blocked.

A man came running around the corner, yelling, "What's going on here?"

A gun flashed in the dark, and the man cried out sharply. He was apparently on the ground, because he returned the fire from a very low spot. The two men managed to get past or over the buckboard, because they went running, swearing. Slim, shocked back to conscious action, yelped, "Shoot at me, will yuh?" and sent bullets after the two men, who had disappeared.

More men were coming, seemingly from all directions. One man had the forethought to bring a lighted lantern. Frijole got up from the office steps and demanded an explanation.

"Here's a man—hurt!" called the man

with the lantern. "It's Tom Kelly, the night watchman! Help me—some of yuh."

The crowd surged around there. Kelly was badly hurt. Slim came stumbling around there, gun in hand, and Frijole joined them. No one seemed to have any idea what had happened.

"Where the hell did you come from, feller?" a man said to Slim.

"Originally from Texas," said Slim soberly. "What happened?"

Somebody said, "That buckboard's all smashed."

"I cer'nly reshent that," declared Frijole. "That buckboard belongs to the JHC, and we don' let nobody bus' 'em up. Who's to blame? Speak up—or forever hol' yore peace."

The man with the lantern had gone into the office, and now he yelled out.

"Come in here! There's been a robbery!"

The men rushed in. Roped to a chair and gagged was Dave Willis, the door of the big safe was wide open. The men cut him loose. Willis was unhurt, but mad. The men stood back, waiting for him to explain things.

"Two masked men came to my shack, stuck me up and forced me to come here with them," he said. "They forced me to unlock the safe, and then they tied me up. My God, they took the payroll—and everything else in the safe! Where did they go? Didn't anybody see them? What caused all the noise outside—the crash and the shooting? I thought the office was being knocked down."

"Somebody shot Tom Kelly, Mr. Willis," said one of the men.

"Shot Tom? Get him to the doctor! Didn't anybody see them?"

"They shot Tom—he must have seen them."

The big mine manager shook his head helplessly, kicked the safe door shut and sat down. Slim and Frijole went outside. The buckboard was more or less of a wreck, both horses gone.

"We done fine, Frijole. Why did yuh drive plumb up here?" inquired Slim.

"I wasn't drivin'."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. Well—we got here in time for the robbery. My, my, my!"

"What's the matter, Slim?"

"I jist ain't got no seat left in my pants!"

"That's all right—you won't be settin' down for the next four, five miles. Will Henry be mad? Man, I hate to tell him. Is there anythin' in the back of the buckboard? Can't leave anythin' loose around here. Never did trust a miner. Look, will yuh?"

Slim pawed around in the back of the buckboard.

"Yore ol' slicker, an ol' sack and stuff. Ain't worth nothin'."

"Bring it along. Prob'ly some oats in the sack. If Henry acts like I think he will—we'll be lucky to have oats to eat."

They ignored the rest of the excitement and headed for the JHC. It was very dark, and a rough road is awful hard on feet inside high-heel boots. It gets worse after the first two or three miles, and they were completely exhausted, when they reached the ranchhouse.

Slim flung the stuff on the porch and they staggered into the house.

"I've a good notion to never drink again," wailed Frijole. "Look what strong drink got us! Slim, I'd almost sign a pledge."

"Sign one?" groaned Slim. "Man, I'd write one! I never was so tired and mortified in my life. Blisters on m' heels and no seat in my pants. Let's have a big drink and go to bed."

"Big? Slim, I want about three inches in a washtub."

IT was about nine o'clock next morning, when Henry and Judge came to the JHC. They had been at the Yellow Cross since early that morning, having been routed out of bed about two o'clock, and they were not in very good humor. Thunder and Lightning Mendoza, the two Mexican jack-of-all-trades at the JHC, were resting on a shaded porch, but Frijole and Slim were still in bed.

"Sleem?" queried Lightning. "Oh, I theenk he pound your ear on the hay. Frijole? Oh, he mak' meestake."

"What kind of a mistake?" asked Henry.

"Oh," Lightning grinned, "he put hees pant on the bed and got on the floor heemselves."

"A fine kettle of fish!" snorted Judge. "Awaken them at once!"

Henry and Judge sat down on the porch, hungry and weary. It was some time before

the two culprits appeared, bleary-eyed. Frijole looked as though he was about to weep.

"You are a fine pair," said Henry. "Of course, you realize that our buckboard is still partly wrapped around the office porch at the Yellow Cross mine, the harness scattered over the landscape."

"Is it that bad?" whispered Slim. "I told Frijole—"

"You was drivin'," interrupted Frijole.

"Just what on earth were you two doing up there at the mine?"

Slim shook his head painfully. "Ever since then I've been tryin' to figure that out, Henry. Things is kinda blurred."

"Especially the seat of yore pants, Slim," added Frijole. "Man, I ain't never seen such a blurred seat in anybody's pants. Seems t' me like we busted up a robbery."

"You definitely did not!" snorted Judge. "Broke up a robbery, indeed! Those men got the payroll of the mine, together with all else in the safe, and Tom Kelly, the watchman, is dead. A lot of good you two did. And our buckboard is worth about fifteen cents, not to mention a lot of broken harness."

"I'm awful contrite," sighed Slim. "I believe I'm contriter than I've ever been in m' life—and m' head aches, too."

"We'll go up and git the buckboard," offered Frijole. "We've got two, three other buckboard wrecks around here, and I'll betcha I can make us up a good one."

"You'll be a mechanical marvel," said Judge. "How about some breakfast?"

"That's right," said Frijole. "It's mornin'. Yuh know, I've kinda got mixed up on time. Slim, will you get me some wood?"

Slim went around the corner, found Thunder and Lightning, and sent them after wood. The effort was too much for him. He sat down against the house and looked gloomy. Frijole came out on the kitchen steps and squinted at Slim.

"What's eatin' you?" he asked huskily.

"Aw, I dunno," sighed Slim. "I've jist about come to the conclusion that there ain't no future in punchin' cows."

TWO men rode in as they ate breakfast, and Henry invited them to partake of the meal. The two men were Ike Harris and Bob Goss, co-owners of the Conejo mine, a poverty-stricken gold mine, located north of Tonto City, and only a mile off the road to Scorpion Bend.

The two men had purchased it cheap, reconditioned the small stamp mill, and tried to make it pay, but it was a losing proposition, even for the two men, who did all the work.

"We was just cuttin' across country, headin' for the Yellow Cross," explained Harris. "Want to see if they'll sell us some powder. Willis has been pretty good to us thataway."

"Did you hear about the robbery last night?" asked Henry.

"Robbery?" queried Goss. "At the Yellow Cross, yuh mean?"

Henry told them what happened up there, and at the conclusion Harris said, "Well, Bob, we ain't so bad off. At least, we don't have to worry about anybody stealin' our gold or our payroll. Yuh say they killed Tom Kelly? That's too bad."

"Well, there's some compensation to be-in' poor," said Goss.

They left shortly after breakfast. Henry went out on the porch and watched them ride away. When Judge was ready they went back to Tonto City. Judge was worried. Crime was piling up too fast. Two big robberies and one murder.

"Did Willis tell you how much money they got?" he asked.

"No," replied Henry, studying the bobbing ears of his horse. "He said they got the payroll. I imagine it is between twenty-five and thirty thousand dollars. Good Heavens! Sixty thousand dollars in two robberies!"

"And a dead man," added Judge somberly.

"Two dead men," corrected Henry. "You forgot Jim Barnes."

"That I did, Henry. What grist for the *Clarion* mill! Our loss is James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly's gain."

The *Clarion* came to the office next day. Judge came striding stiffly down to the office, banged it down on Henry's desk, snorted his disgust, and sat down. Oscar Johnson was there, too. Henry opened it at the editorial page.

"Not very long, Judge," he commented.

"But damnable!" snorted Judge. "Read it aloud."

Henry said, "The heading is very good, Judge. It says, 'The law of Wild Horse

Valley,' and followed by a question mark. Hm-m-m! Well, well! It says, 'A red-nosed mountebank, a derelict, ex-disciple of Blackstone, and a hard-headed throwback to his Viking ancestors. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the law enforcement gang of Wild Horse Valley.' Gang? I don't like that, Judge. Calling us a gang.

"It goes on, 'The crime count, up to press time—two murders, two robberies, totaling sixty thousand dollars. And what is being done to apprehend the most dastardly gang to ever infest the Valley? Nothing, my friends—as usual. The Shame of Arizona sits smugly in their office, only bestirring themselves enough to reach for their jug, ignoring all advice. They are a disgrace to this wonderful state. Why isn't something being done about them? The *Clarion* cannot carry it all. Act, before it is too late.'"

"A red-nosed mountebank," said Judge dryly.

"Judge," said Henry severely, "isn't it enough to find it in print, without you rolling the words over your tongue, as though tasting some delicacy. He called you a derelict."

"The hound," growled Judge. "Derelict, indeed!"

"And you, Oscar," said Henry soberly. "He called you a throwback to your Viking ancestors."

"T'row what back?" asked Oscar.

"Such intelligence!" snorted Judge. "Are you a Viking, Oscar?"

"Va'al, Ay don't vare horns, Yudge."

"You don't mind being called a Viking?"

"Yudge," grinned Oscar, "Ay love it."

Henry chuckled quietly. "And I," he said, "can hardly get angered over the red-nosed mountebank, Judge. The only inaccuracy in the editorial is the statement that we ignore advice. No one has advised us, Judge."

"Das haar Pelly," said Oscar soberly, "is toff yigger."

"Seriously, Henry," said Judge, "we must do something. The next thing we know the commissioners will invade our office and demand action or resignations. They sway with Pelly's editorials."

Henry rubbed his nose violently. "Truer words were never spoken, my friend—but where to start? There is not a single clue."

"If you had taken care of the horse Barnes rode—" began Judge.

"No recriminations, Judge," interrupted Henry. "Perhaps I was at fault—for the first time in my life, I suppose. We will forget the horse—for the time being, at least."

"For the first time in your life—you suppose," said Judge.

"One has the right of supposition, I believe. To others I may have faults, but to me they are virtues. If you do not mind, sir, I shall devote a few minutes to deep concentration."

THE inquest over the body of Tom Kelly brought Slim and Frijole as the two star witnesses, with old Doc Bogart conducting. Quite a crowd came in from the Yellow Cross, including Dave Willis, the mine manager. There were some from the Golden Streak, and from most of the other mines in the valley.

Willis' testimony had nothing to do with the killing of Tom Kelly, because Willis was all tied up and inside the office. In describing the events that led up to the shooting, he said that the bandits were both well over six feet tall, one heavy, one thin.

Frijole Bill Cullison was called to the stand. Doctor Bogart asked him if he was at the Yellow Cross mine when Tom Kelly was killed.

"I pre-sume so, Doc," replied Frijole vaguely.

"Tell us what you saw happen."

"Stars, Doc," said Frijole soberly. "Millions of 'em. Two big'ns was chasin' two other big'ns—and I accidently got between 'em."

"Cullison," said Doc Bogart severely, "that doesn't make sense."

"That's what I say, Doc—it shore don't. And when I got m' senses back, I'm halfway through the doorway of the mine office, and two big jaspers are trompin' me somethin' awful. I hears a gun, and then I hears m' pardner, Slim Pickins, swearin' somethin' awful, and I think he cut loose a few times with his six-gun. I shucked a crupper and a couple tugs off my legs, fell off the porch, and finally found out I still had both legs. Yeah, I heard somebody proclaim that Tom Kelly was dead."

"What were you doing there, Cullison?" asked the doctor.

"Doin'? My Gawd, Doc, I jist told yuh."

"That's all, Frijole. Slim Pickins, take the stand."

Slim was nervous. Doctor Bogart said, "Mr. Pickins, did you know Tom Kelly?"

"Tom Kelly?" Slim swallowed painfully. "Kelly? I've heard the name some'ers, Doc. Cain't quite place him."

"He was the man who got killed at the Yellow Cross. This inquest is to try and determine how he came to his death."

"Oh, yeah. Well, Doc, that's a cinch—somebody shot him."

"I see. Who did you shoot at, Pickins?"

"Lemme ask you somethin', Doc," said Slim. "Suppose you filled yore skin with prune whiskey, washed down with that kinda hooch they sell at the King's Castle. You get into a buckboard and head for home, but go to sleep. Pretty quick and all of a sudden, one of them front wheels hit the porch of the office, knock both horses down, and you git throwed about fifteen feet, hit on the seat of yore pants and slide twenty feet, burnin' the seat plumb out of yore pants. Durin' all this here hilarity, somebody starts shootin', and a couple of gallopin' galoots bust out of the dark and almost run over yuh, and you yank yore six-gun and uncork it a couple times—how in hell do you know who yuh shot at?"

Doctor Bogart's chin trembled and his eyes were quite moist, as he said, "You are excused, Mr. Pickins."

"Thank yuh, Doc. Awful nice of yuh. I didn't feel it was exactly my fault."

And that was the end of the inquest, with the usual verdict. Slim and Frijole came down to the office, and Judge said:

"You are a fine pair of witnesses. One of you seeing stars and the other out at the seat. You've been a big help to the law."

"Yuh know, Judge," said Slim soberly, "what Doc Bogart asked me has shore made me do a heap of thinkin'."

"Thinking about what, Slim?"

"Who I shot at. Gosh, that might have been a friend!"

"That," said Judge dryly, "is quite possible."

"Willis' testimony is worth sober thought," said Henry. "Two men, both well over six feet tall, one thin, one heavy-set. Judge, you haven't an accomplice, have you?"

"Could have been Henry—on stilts," said Frijole. "Come to think of it, it was either high-heel boots, or stilts that stepped on me."

"After that remark," said Henry, "you may both go home."

"I'm shore tired of the city," said Slim wearily. "Let's go home, Frijole."

"These here flesh-pots git me, too," agreed Frijole. *"Hasta Luego."*

THEY rode back to the ranch, and Thunder and Lightning met them on the porch. Lightning pointed mutely at a front window, the lower half of which had been smashed out completely.

"Henry will give you fits for that," said Slim.

"No, no, no!" exclaimed Lightning. "We not do heem, Sleem."

"Don't lie," warned Frijole.

"Eef these ees a lie, I hope you die," swore Lightning. "Me and my leetle brodder come home on a horse. Down by the estable we see copple men on these porch. One man ees try for open the door, but eet ees lock. Those odder man keek hees foot t'rough the weendo. I yall at heem:

" 'Wait leetle beet and I open the door!' I yall loud for heem to leesten. You know w'at happen? Copple those man tak' out hees gon and shoot t'ree, four time at me, biffore he meese us. Me and my brodder ron een the estable, bot those man ron around those house and we don't see heem some more. He *vamoso pronto.* Nobody ees keeled, biccause I have no gon for shooteeng purpose."

"Well, I'll be a ant-eater's uncle!" gasped Slim. "They actually shot at yuh, Lightning?"

"T'ree, four time—hard he can blow."

"Listen, Lightnin'—yo're silly. Why would anybody shoot at you?"

"I am weeth heem," suggested Thunder.

"Well, yeah, that might make a good reason for it."

They examined the window, and there was a heel-mark on the lower sash. Evidently the two Mexicans were telling the truth.

"Wonders will never cease," declared Slim.

"Even wonders don't give nobody the right to go around kickin' out winders," declared Frijole. "We'll have to tell Henry

about this. Lightnin'," Frijole got a sudden idea, "was it a tall, skinny man and a tall heavy-set one?"

Lightning thought deeply, his brow deeply furrowed.

"Wheech one?" he asked.

"Both of them."

"No—jus' one."

"You mean one man is tall and skinny?"

"I don't know wheech one he ees."

"Which one is what?" asked the exasperated Slim.

"Those man weeth the gon."

"There yuh are," sighed Frijole. "You stay here and keep them from kickin' out any more winders, and I'll go git Henry."

Henry and Judge were glad to come. The county commissioners were in town, and it looked as though a visit to the sheriff's office was imminent. Judge blamed James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly and his *Clarion*.

"They let that nincompoop do their thinking for them," he declared. "We work our fingers to the bone, and—well, we do, Henry."

"We could avoid that very easily, Judge."

"Just how?"

"By getting a corkscrew. Frijole's corks fit too tightly."

"They've got to fit tight," declared Frijole. "You let the air into that stuff and yuh can't tell what it'd do."

"Why didn't you bring the buckboard?" asked Judge. "You know how I detest riding a horse, Frijole."

"What buckboard was that, Judge?"

"Oh, yes—I forgot."

"Frijole," said Henry, "you don't suppose that Lightning and Thunder were romancing, when they told you about that window, do you? Living in that sort of atmosphere—"

"No, I don't believe they was, Henry. No reason to lie. And them heel-marks are on the sill. No, I don't believe they lied."

"It sounds nonsensical," said Judge. "What on earth is in that house that men would wish to steal? Certainly they did not kick out the window merely to hear the glass break."

"They shot at Thunder and Lightnin'," added Frijole.

"True," nodded Henry. "And neither of them were able to give any comprehensive description of the two men."

"They ain't yet," said Frijole. "Maybe you can get it out of 'em, but we couldn't. Maybe they was too scared to remember."

But Thunder and Lightning were still vague. They listened to Henry's questions regarding the height, weight and general description of the two men who kicked the window out, and agreed with him in every detail.

"Lightning, they were both big men, but one was rather thin," said Henry.

"Wheech one?" asked Lightning.

"I have seen more intelligence in a dried herring," declared Judge. "In my opinion, they kicked out the window, not having brains enough to use the door, and then made up this fantastic tale."

"I'll git the jug and the cups," offered Frijole, "so you can think this thing over, while I git some supper."

"They shoot t'ree, four time," said Lightning.

"Meese us almos' every time, too," added Thunder.

THEY had a few drinks before supper, but there was little inspiration in Frijole's prune-juice distillation, it seemed. They ate a big supper, and Thunder and Lightning went to town. Judge, filled to repletion, sprawled on an old couch and went to sleep, while Henry, no less filled, dozed in an old rocker, while Slim helped Frijole clean up the dishes. It was well into the evening.

"I don't think Henry and Judge believed their story about the window," said Slim, as he dried the dishes.

"I'm doubtin' it m'self," said Frijole. "Men kickin' winders out. Why would anybody bother about this place? We ain't got—"

Frijole hesitated. The back door was opening slowly. There was no wind. He stood there, a dish-rag in his hand, water trickling down his wrist. The door opened suddenly and Frijole and Slim were looking down the muzzles of two six-shooters, backed up by two masked men. They came in slowly, their eyes shifting nervously behind the cut-holes in the black cloths. No one had spoken. Neither Slim nor Frijole were armed.

One of the men kept his gun on Slim and Frijole, while the other one went quietly

into the main room, where Judge and Henry were both snoring. Then he went sideways to the door, flung it open and two more masked men came in.

"Well, welcome to the masquerade!" whispered Slim.

"Shut up!" warned their guard.

Henry's eyes opened and he stared at the three men.

"Judge!" he exclaimed. "Wake up, Judge!"

Judge made funny noises in his throat, but finally opened his eyes and sat up quickly. The man herded Slim and Frijole into the main room, where a quick search proved that all four men were unarmed. Slim and Frijole sat down on the couch with Judge.

"This seems rather asinine, gentlemen," said Henry. "After all, there is no need for all those guns—and masks. What is this all about?"

"Just keep your mouth shut," replied one of the men.

ONE of the men walked over and looked down at Slim.

"It's yore turn to talk," he said quietly. "We expect yuh to lie, but it won't do yuh any good. Are yuh ready to tell the truth?"

"It's my nature to be honest," replied Slim.

"Yo're lyin', to start with."

"All right," replied Slim defiantly. "If I feel like lyin', no blamed masquerader will make me tell the truth. What's yore problem?"

"Smart guy, huh? You'll tell the truth. What we want to know is this—where's that money?"

"Hu-u-u-u-uh?" Slim stared at the man. "Money?"

"You know what I mean."

"Yo're crazy!"

Splat! The man slapped Slim's face with an open palm, and it brought tears to Slim's eyes.

"Don't try to act smart with me," snarled the man.

"Wait a minute!" said Henry. "You can't do that!"

Splat! One of the other men slapped Henry across the nose and mouth, knocking him back in his chair.

"Can't he?" asked the man who did it.

Henry rubbed the back of his left hand across his mouth.

"It seems possible," he replied huskily.

"All right, we mean business. Pickins, we want the money you got at the Yellow Cross. Now, don't deny it."

"At the Yellow Cross? We didn't rob that mine."

"Listen, you hatchet-faced road-runner! You two—"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted one of the other men. "Yuh don't need to explain anythin'. There's a fire in the kitchen, and a hot poker will make him talk. Shall I heat one?"

"No. Wait a minute."

The man stood there, staring through the eye-holes of his mask at Henry. Then he laughed shortly and nodded his head.

"Get some ropes and tie the sheriff," he ordered, and one of the men went outside.

"Tie me?" queried Henry blankly. "What for, if I may ask?"

"Oh, just one of my pleasant ideas. Here's the ropes. Tie his hands and—no, just his hands, Tie 'em in front of him—that's all right. He'll have to ride a horse and we don't want to have to handle all that weight."

Henry was quickly tied, and yanked to his feet.

"For Heaven's sake, what is this all about?" asked Judge.

"It's about thirty thousand dollars, grampaw. When them two crooked snakes are willin' to give up that money—we'll turn Ol' Red-Nose loose. No money—no sheriff. We're doin' the county a service, if he never comes back. If he starves to death—that's yore fault.

"If yo're willin' to make the deal, just hang a big white cloth on the corral fence. We'll see it. Then one man can come out on the Lobo Grades, packin' the money. He won't know where we'll meet him—but we will. If there's any crooked work—they'll merely appoint a new sheriff. Maybe they'll put up a monument to us. *Adios!*"

Three of them walked out with Henry, but one man stayed, keeping them covered, until a hail from outside, took him away. A few moments later they heard horses galloping away.

Judge said huskily, "Where is that money?"

"We ain't never had it, Judge," replied Slim. "They're crazy."

"Judge," said Frijole huskily, "you've got to believe us. We never got that money. They'd already robbed the safe and—"

FRIJOLE hesitated, his mouth sagging, eyes closed. Suddenly they snapped open and he got to his feet.

"Slim!" he whispered. "That stuff—from the back of the buckboard—that old slicker and that sack—of stuff. What'd we do with it, when we got back?"

"Are you feelin' all right?" asked Slim anxiously.

"That ol' slicker and the sack—"

"I throwed it on the porch," said Slim. "If it ain't been picked up by—"

Frijole dived for the porch and came in, carrying the stuff they had taken from the back of the wrecked buckboard. There was an old grain sack, with something in it. Frijole's eyes widened, as he felt inside it. Money! Packages of currency! He drew out one and held it out to them.

"They lost it in the buckboard!" husked Frijole. "When they had to climb over the buckboard to git away. Tom Kelly shootin' at 'em—and they dropped it. My Gawd—look at the money!"

"Sinful sisters!" wailed Slim. "All that money—and I thought I was packin' oats! We're rich, Frijole! I tell yuh, we're—" Slim realized that Judge was with them, and finished, "No, I don't guess we are."

"It was there on the porch," said Frijole. "Why, them fellers was almost standin' on it, when they busted that winder. Whooe-e-e-e!"

"And they've got Henry," reminded Judge.

"Yea-a-a-ah," whispered Slim. "They've got—but Judge, we can give 'em the money and git him back. It's a cinch now."

"That is not our money to give, Slim. That is unlawful."

"Then how're we goin' to git him loose? Wouldn't you rather have Henry back than to have these here printed hunks of paper?"

"Certainly! Do not be foolish."

Judge paced up and down the room, trying to figure out what to do.

"We'll trap 'em," suggested Frijole. "We'll take plenty men and go up on Lobo Grades and—"

"No, you won't," said Judge. "They did not designate one place. The Lobo Grades is a long stretch of road. They would have plenty time to smell out a trap, and I have no doubt they'd kill Henry."

"Let's have a drink," suggested Frijole. "We've been under a awful strain. Maybe we can do a little thinkin'."

"Judge," said Slim, as Frijole went to get the jug, "how many of them four men was over six feet tall?"

"Slim," said Judge, with conviction, "I don't believe any one of them was less than seven."

Frijole came back with the jug and the cups. As he poured the liquor, he said:

"Judge, I'm havin' me a idea. Let's not tell anybody about that money. Them four masked men can't *know* for sure that we've got it—and them folks at the Yellow Cross must be over the shock of their loss by this time. We'll just hold it—and wait."

"Frijole," said Judge soberly, reaching for his cup, "that is my idea exactly. I'm glad you agree. Well, here's to Henry."

HENRY HARRISON CONROY was not enjoying his enforced ride. They put him on his own horse, but didn't bother to tie his legs under it. What could one fat man do against four armed men? The theory was right. They rode in single-file, with the leader handling the lead rope on Henry's horse. Behind Henry came the other three riders. Shortly after they left the ranch, one of the men said to another, "This red-nosed soak ain't never goin' back."

Henry's heart skipped a beat. These men didn't intend to let him come back. That wasn't good news at all. It was very dark, and Henry had no idea which direction they were taking him. There were no landmarks to guide him, and they didn't seem to keep on any trail.

Finally they went up a point and onto a long hog-back, climbing higher and higher, the horses slipping in the shale. On both sides the hill sloped very sharply, and they were obliged to travel the narrow crest. On and on they went. There was a generous length of lead-rope on Henry's horse, and he was calm and calculating once more.

He knew his own horse very well. In fact, he had been dumped in the dirt twice, before realizing just what that horse didn't

like. They were evidently taking him far back into the hills, never to come back again. It was worth a desperate chance.

The ridge narrowed, and the leader called back, "Look out for this spot, she's pretty narrow."

This was the spot. Off to the left was only the hazy depths of the canyon, but Henry was desperate. He suddenly spurred with his heels, and the horse came in close behind the leader. Then Henry reached back and caught his right heel in the animal's flank, and at the same time, as he leaned forward, he struck the horse on the right side of its neck with his bound hands.

The action was very sudden. Henry's horse reared on its hind legs, whirled to the left, taking up the slack, and the next thing the leader knew, his horse was being twisted around under him, and Henry's horse had lunged over that almost sheer wall of the canyon.

Luckily for the lead man that he had a dally on the saddle-horn, instead of having the rope tied-off, and was able to let it loose, before he and his horse followed Henry.

Things were happening almost too fast for Henry to know what to do. He felt the animal go into space, grabbed the saddle-horn as well as he could, with both hands, ducked his head, and hoped for the best.

The horse hit the ground, sitting down, and proceeded to tear off hunks of earth, as it slid into mesquite and manzanita. It came to its feet in a leaping rush, and from then on it was a series of bounces, slides, jumps, until a gnarled manzanita reached up, twisting into Henry's right pants-leg, and yanked him unceremoniously out of the saddle.

Henry landed flat on his back, tore the pants-leg loose, and came to a stop against a huge outcropping of granite. For a long time he lay there, panting some wind back into his agonized lungs. Finally he worked his hands loose and cautiously tested his arms and legs, surprised to find that he was still able to use them. There was not a sound. Evidently the four men were not going to search for him. They would figure that he had killed himself and the horse. Henry didn't know about the horse, but he was quite sure that Henry Harrison Conroy was living.

The brush and rocks were so high that he could only see a small portion of the sky and the stars thereof. Henry chuckled. It was a good trick, even if he had almost got killed. That horse didn't like for anyone to spur its flank, and always reacted the same.

Henry remembered that he often shuddered while watching some wild riding cowpoke racing his horse down a steep hill, chasing a steer. How the horse ever kept its feet, he didn't know. He mentally wished that Judge could have seen what he done. Nobody would believe him. He rather felt sorry for Judge—cautious, plodding Judge.

Henry had no idea how far it was to the bottom of the canyon, nor had he any idea how far he was from the top. It seemed as though he had been on that careening horse for hours, but realized that it could be counted in a few seconds. There was no use of him trying to go anywhere in the darkness; so he decided to stay right there until daylight.

JUDGE stayed all night at the ranch, and when he and Slim reached Tonto City next morning, John Campbell, the prosecutor, and three of the commissioners were at the office, waiting for Henry to come back. Judge got stiffly off his saddle and proceeded to tell them what happened at the ranch, before any of them had a chance to ask a question. Of course, he didn't tell them about the payroll of the Yellow Cross.

"But why did they do that, Judge?" asked the lawyer. "Certainly, there must have been a reason."

Judge looked bleakly at the lawyer and shifted his gaze to the other three men.

"You figure out an answer, gentlemen," he said coldly, "I can't."

The commissioners went away, but John Campbell stayed. He was very close to Henry Conroy, and had always worked hard with the office. He sat down in the office with Judge, and Judge told him the whole story, even the kicking out of the window by the two men.

"According to what Slim and Frijole have to say, the two men came out of the office doorway, which was blocked by the smashed buckboard," explained Judge. "They were obliged to clamber over the wrecked vehicle, and at that moment Tom Kelly shot at them, causing them to drop their plunder, which Slim and Frijole inadvertently carried

to the ranch with them, and cast aside on the porch."

"Thirty thousand dollars, lying out there in the open all that time!" marveled the lawyer.

"We did not count it, John," said Judge. "The amount is pure supposition."

"Right now," declared the lawyer, "I am more interested in what has happened to Henry than all the payrolls in the country. Judge, can't you even describe the four men?"

"John, I believe I am slightly above the average in intelligence. There are many who would laugh at such a statement, and at times I doubt it myself. However, those four men were with us in the main room of the JHC ranchhouse for at least ten minutes—perhaps longer—but I give you my word, I haven't the slightest idea what they wore, their height, approximate weights, religion nor political affiliations. Damme, that phase of the situation is a complete blank. I shall never again chide any man for failing to observe the physical characteristics of a masked man with a gun."

"I appreciate your findings, Judge—it has happened to me."

Judge sighed gloomily and paced the floor of the little office.

"Just what to do—that is the question," he said wearily. "Henry is in the hands of desperate men. His life means nothing to them. If the recovery of that money becomes generally known—he hasn't a chance. Our only salvation is the fact that those four men do not *know* where that money is—they only surmise."

"I wonder if it would be possible to trap them, Judge."

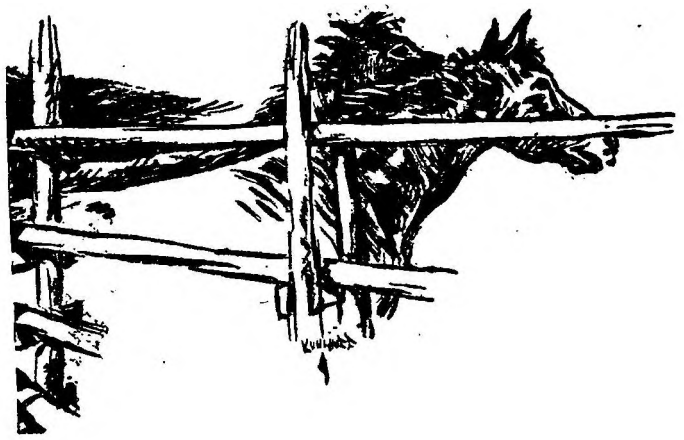
"No! That bearer of tribute must come alone to the Lobo Grades. No certain spot was specified. They will stop him, where they wish. Good Heavens, John, don't you realize that the next man you talk with might be one of those four men? Let them make the first move. They want that money. If no one signals—well, possibly, they might conclude that their idea was wrong. We'll have to wait, John."

IT was a long night for Henry Harrison Conroy, huddled in the deep brush against the rocks. However, he was protected from the canyon winds, and managed to sleep part of the time. After his experience there was nothing that roamed the hills of Wild Horse Valley that had any terrors for Henry.

At daylight he discovered that most of his clothes had been torn to rags, that he had any number of scratches and bruises, and was so stiff he could hardly move. However, Henry was optimistic. He had cheated the outlaws—at least, for a while. He wondered what Judge, Slim and Frijole had done toward rescuing him, as he began trying to climb back to the hog-back ridge.

From a fringe of the brush he could see the ridge, and it seemed an awful long ways away. Just how that horse ever stayed right side up was a mystery. The marks of their descent looked like someone had tried to plough up the hillside. As Henry crouched in the brush, looking out at the furrowed ground, he heard the sound of a voice.

It seemed to come from up on the ridge, and after a while he saw two riders, traveling slowly in single-file on that narrow hog-back. The sun was in his eyes, and he



couldn't see them clearly, as they went on down the ridge and disappeared.

It required at least another half hour for Henry to reach the top, where he hunched down and looked around. It was high up there, and he could get an almost bird's-eye view of the Wild Horse Valley. To the southwest was the JHC, although hills blocked him from seeing the place. Further to the southwest were the dim outlines of the Yellow Cross mine. A little west of north was the Conejo mine, which placed Tonto City almost due west.

Henry had never been on that ridge before, but he knew that it sloped down about three miles east of the JHC ranchhouse. Then he began his long trek home, clinging to that narrow ridge, and wondering how a horse ever stayed on it; some range horses are natural tight-rope walkers. But Henry wasn't going boldly. He believed that some of those four men would want to be sure he did not come out of that canyon but there was nothing for him to do but walk on that skyline, even if the whole world could see him.

"If they show up," he told himself, "I'll dive into the canyon again."

SLIM came back from Tonto and found Frijole saddling his horse.

"You aimin' to go some'ers?" queried Slim.

"I've got to have me some action," declared the little cook. "I'm takin' m' old Winchester, and I'm searchin' for Henry. Are yuh with me, Slimmie?"

"You've been drinkin' while I was away," accused Slim.

"Only a quart," replied Frijole.

"A quart of prune whiskey and a de-funct rifle," sneered Slim.

The weapon in question was a 45-70 Winchester, Model 1873, scarred and furrowed from time.

"All yuh ever git with that there gun is a cracked jaw, busted molars and a black-eye," declared Slim. "If all yuh desire is a almighty noise, you've shore got the tool for producin' same."

Frijole climbed into his saddle and picked up his reins. "Sneer if yuh must," he sighed, "but this yere smoke-pole is destruction and sudden death for any and all varmints in its path—or vi-cinity. She's a wrathy old spitfire, when pointed proper, and I'm the one what can point her."

"Yo're drunk," declared Slim, "and even if yuh was sober, yuh couldn't hit a elephant at sixty feet with that gun. Well, let's go—but you keep the muzzle of that musket pointed away from me."

They left the ranch and traveled east, watching the hills, having no reason to believe that Henry was taken in that direction.

"Do I have to lead the way?" asked Frijole.

"Uh-huh," nodded Slim. "Yo're both drunk and ignorant—and yuh might be lucky."

"I ain't drunk," denied Frijole. "I could shoot the whiskers off a gnat at sixty yards. Just gimme a chance to notch m' sights on one of them masked gallinippers, and he's angel-bait right now."

"Dead men don't turn into angels," said Slim. "All the pitchers I've ever seen of angels was awful young—and fat."

"Mebbe the young-uns learn to fly easier'n adults."

"You'd make a awful-lookin' angel," chuckled Slim.

"Ne'mind about me," said Frijole.

They had kept on going, skirting the hills, until they came to the mouth of a sizeable canyon, where nature, in an ancient and violent movement, had spewed acres of huge boulders down the slope. Most of them were partly covered with desert growth.

It was getting hot out there. They drew up, looking rather vacantly at the landscape, where the heat-haze was already making the visibility bad. They had stopped on a rather high spot, and in the partial shade of a Joshua-palm. Frijole stared at the mouth of the canyon, where he had seen something move.

It was quite a long ways to the canyon, but Frijole saw a horse, coming down over the rocks, limping a little. Frijole yelped suddenly, "Slim, there's Henry's horse. Look over there—jist at the mouth of the canyon! Can't yuh see him?"

"Uh-huh, uh-huh!" grunted Slim. "Yeah, I believe it is. But what's hurryin' him? Somethin' chasin' him, I tell yuh."

Frijole dismounted and yanked his old Winchester off the saddle. Just to the left of them was a pile of huge boulders and

brush, and Frijole went clawing his way up to the top, where he could get a better view.

Two riders came into sight, urging their horses. Slim saw them and called to Frijole, who yelped back:

"I'm a-watchin' 'em, Slim. He-e-ey! One of 'em's got a rope, and he's tryin' to snag that horse!"

"I'll come up there with yuh!"

"Come on, feller. Oh-oh, he got the horse!"

VOICES carry well in that desert air. Frijole turned to give Slim a helping hand, when a bullet went *pwee-e-e-e!* off the rock between them, and Frijole let go of Slim, who went backwards into a manzanita.

"Why, you dirty pole-cats!" yelped Frijole, adjusting the sights on his old gun.

He cuddled the stock against his skinny shoulder, steadied the muzzle, and squeezed the trigger. The echoes of that heavy cartridge blasted back from the hillside, and Frijole did a soft-shoe dance on top of the rock, trying to keep his balance.

"What'd yuh shove me for?" wailed Slim. "Now I'm all sewed up in this blamed bush."

"They're pullin' out!" whooped Frijole. "I shore learned 'em, Slim. By doggies, I'll bet they're drilled from stem to stern. I'll help yuh out and we'll go after 'em."

Slim tore loose from the manzanita.

"Listen, Pot Wrangler," he said, "you didn't kill nobody. If we bust up there they'll salivate us from the rocks."

"Aw, yo're jealous of m' handiwork," declared Frijole. "You hate to see the havoc I raised up there."

"On foot—like Apaches," advised Slim. "Them fellers have got a rifle, too."

"Mebbe I'm jist a impulsive soul," sighed Frijole. "We'll walk."

They left their horses and began their sneak up through the boulders. At short intervals they bobbed up from behind rocks, scanning the canyon ahead of them, but the riders had disappeared. They finally found the spot where the men had been.

Slim sat down on a rock and mopped his perspiring face, while Frijole hunched down against a rock, a picture of despair. After a long period of silence Frijole declared quietly:

"I knowed I'd hit somethin'."

"That horse," said Slim, "never done anythin' to you."

"Yeah, I know," nodded Frijole. "It was Henry's horse all right. Looks like the saddle had been skinned off'n him by force. Legs all scratched up, too. Slim, that horse has had a experience."

"I shudder to think what's happened to Henry."

Frijole said, "I heard that bullet strike somethin'."

"That's what yuh get for shootin' by ear. Killin' Henry's bronc don't mean nothin'. If you'd killed one of the others we maybe could identify the rider by his horse."

"Well, why wasn't yuh up there on the rock, indicatin' which horse yuh wanted shot?"

"Because you deliberately shoved me off into that manzanita. If yuh hadn't been drunk you'd have pulled—not shoved."

"Let's go home and have a drink," suggested Frijole.

"I'll have to credit yuh with one smart idea today, Frijole. Let's go before my brains start fryin'."

They threaded their way down among the rocks and brush, but came out quite a distance east of where they had left their horses. As they emerged into more open country, Frijole yelped:

"Slim, there goes one of our horses! Some son-of-a-rooster has done robbed us!"

The rider was about five hundred yards away, heading west. Frijole threw up his old rifle and sent three shots after the rider, which only seemed to make him move faster. The gun kicked Frijole back into Slim, which didn't increase the accuracy of fire the least bit.

"Dad-blame him, I shore creased him!" panted Frijole. "Bet I didn't miss him more'n a inch on any shot."

"I dunno about the first two," said Slim, "but on that last one you was shore shootin' at the sky. You ort to git a brace for yore little carcass, before yuh shoot that iron-mule any more. Why, I felt the shock plumb through yuh. Ain't hurt, are yuh?"

Frijole was caressing his right cheek-bone.

"Course I ain't hurt!" snapped Frijole. "I allus wear my cheek bone up over m' eye. Dad-blamed thieves! They circled us and took one of our horses."

Slim's horse was tied further up in the brush, but they had lost the one Frijole had ridden. Swearing at their bad luck, they both got on Slim's horse and headed for the ranch. It was very hot now, and Frijole's gun kept banging Slim on the knee, until he took it away from him.

They came in behind the stable and put up the horse. There was no one in sight as Slim said, "You can use a cup, but I'm drinkin' direct from the jug. Man, I'm tored and disgusted."

They went into the main room, and stopped suddenly. On the old sofa was Henry Harrison Conroy, his clothes in rags, his face scratched and swollen, and his nose like a red light on a railway switch. He squinted at them thoughfully.

"May I never drink again!" exclaimed Slim. "Henry! Are yuh alive?"

"That," replied Henry huskily, "will require a referendum vote to decide. What a night! I believe I died six or seven times."

And then he painfully recounted his adventures, not leaving out a single detail.

"Just after daylight I saw two riders on the hog-back," he recounted. "They came down this way. That walk was terrible, boys. I had no idea that any distance could be so long. Later, and I believe I was on the verge of delirium, I heard shots. Isn't it queer what a disordered mind will do to one?

"I finally got off the hill, and a little later I found a saddled horse. Imagine—finding a saddled horse out there. It belonged to one of those outlaws. I suppose they were trying to ambush me. But I—well, I took the horse. A few moments later they began firing at me, but I escaped."

Slim swallowed painfully. "Wh-what did yuh do with the horse, Henry?"

"Just out there aways," Henry gestured vaguely, "I stripped the bridle and saddle off, threw them into the brush and turned the horse loose."

"Lovely dove!" breathed Slim. "Henry, did yuh—uh—didja notice what color the horse was—or the brand?"

"Slim," replied Henry wearily, "I have gone through too much to be bothered with trifling details. Will you get the jug, Frijole?"

"Yeah," said Frijole. "Yeah, I will, Henry. You had a time."

"I'm sure you boys appreciate it," said Henry. "I am weary."

"What was they aimin' to do to yuh, Henry?" asked Slim.

"Their intentions were, simply—to murder me, Slim."

"Huh! Well, from the looks of yuh, Henry—you almost beat 'em to it."

"I am," stated Henry soberly, "a man who has just run the gamut of death and destruction. I was near enough to the Pearly Gates to fairly grab at the golden doorknob, as I slid past."

"Terrible," agreed Slim. "What became of yore horse?"

"Slim, my boy, I am afraid that my horse is dead. Perhaps," Henry's voice grew husky with emotion, "he died to save me."

"Well," said Slim, "that's a awful nice way to think about him."

Frijole brought in the jug and the cups just as Henry said, "Boys, those desperadoes think I'm dead. Let them think so."

"Yuh mean—don't tell nobody yo're alive?" asked Frijole.

"Oh, we might let Judge into the secret. Well, here is confusion to crime, boys."

"It was shore confusin'," agreed Frijole. "Here's to you, Henry."

After their drink Slim told Henry about the payroll of the Yellow Cross mine, which they had discovered on the porch, after the masked men had taken him away. Henry listened in amazement.

"We hid the money," said Frijole. "Judge didn't want to take it to town, until we found out if we couldn't git you back without buyin' yuh."

"That," declared Henry, "would be compounding a felony."

"That's what I told Judge," said Slim soberly. "I said that you'd rather die than to be a party to a thing like that."

"Well," said Henry dryly, "I wouldn't go quite that far. However, it is quite a compliment to my honesty. Slim, I wish you would ride casually into town and bring Judge out here. Yes, you might also bring John Campbell."

"And you want to remain in-cog-neeto?" asked Slim.

"In oblivion, is the word, I believe, Slim. In the meanwhile, I shall sleep."

Tonto City was rather upset over the kidnapping of their sheriff. After all,

they argued, Henry, in spite of his eccentric ways, had been a good sheriff. James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly was in from Scorpion Bend, and told Judge he was really sorry for many of the things he had written about Henry.

"Would you," asked Judge, "be willing to make public retractions?"

"No," replied Pelly quickly as he departed. "After all, his demise has not been confirmed."

JOHN Campbell was in the office by the time Slim showed up, and he told him and Judge that Henry was at the ranch, and wanted to see them. They both wanted Slim to tell them how he ever got away from the masked men but Slim merely said that Henry didn't want anybody else to know he was back.

Judge rode with Campbell in a buggy, and they lost no time in getting out to the ranch. Henry told them of his narrow escapes, as they sampled Frijole's prune liquor. As Henry started his tale, a man rode into the yard. He was Frank Stevens, manager of the Golden Streak mine. Henry went into a bedroom and closed the door.

Stevens came in, asking if they had any word from Henry, and was very sympathetic. Judge said, "After all, Mr Stevens, you didn't like Henry."

"Merely as a peace officer, Judge. Personally, I like him, but I do not feel that he has any ability. After all, handling as much money as we do at the Golden Streak, we'd feel much safer if we had a capable sheriff."

"I've been wondering about that freight-wagon robbery," said Campbell. "Did you ever send gold that way before, Stevens?"

"No, we never did. It was an idea—which didn't work out."

"How many men knew about it, Stevens?"

"Very few. Joe Carson, the foreman, myself and the bookkeeper."

"You could personally vouch for all the others, I presume."

"Oh, certainly. Joe Carson has been with us a year. Capable and reliable. In fact, Joe was recommended by Dave Willis, manager of the Yellow Cross. Carson used to work for him in British Columbia."

"And the bookkeeper?"

"An elderly man, crippled. Rarely leaves the mine."

Stevens talked for a short while longer, and then went on to Tonto City. Henry came out and joined them. Judge asked him if he had heard the conversation.

"All of it, Judge. Very interesting. I never have cared much for Mr. Stevens. And how could any sheriff prevent such a robbery?"

"I'm afraid," said Campbell, "that the Golden Streak is just out thirty thousand dollars."

"I'm not so sure of that, John," remarked Henry.

"You're not? Henry, you don't suspect Stevens, do you?"

"Stevens? Why do you ask that, John?"

"Well, he and Carson and the bookkeeper were the only ones who knew the gold was going to be shipped."

"True," mused Henry. "Very true. Hm-m-m-m! No, I have no definite suspects, John. In fact, there must be at least six bad-men in the Valley."

"Six?" asked Judge.

Henry grinned slowly. "Four last night, Judge—and the two tall ones that robbed the safe at the Yellow Cross. None of the men here last night were over six feet, and one was no taller than I. Must be at least six. That will require quite a lot of suspecting."

"An awful lot," agreed Campbell. "But what are your plans, Henry? How long do you intend to remain among the missing?"

"I do not know, John. Perhaps tomorrow. Who knows? But until I do, my friend, you haven't seen me."

Judge went back with the lawyer, and Henry spent the rest of the day, stretched out on a bed, recuperating, while either Slim or Frijole watched the roads. Tomorrow would be Sunday, the mines would be closed, and most of the miners would be in Tonto City. Before they went to bed that night, Henry got an idea.

"Frijole, have you a white sheet in the house?" he asked.

"White sheet? Henry, I swear I ain't seen a white sheet since I was twenty years old."

"Some large, white cloth, which we can hang on the corral fence."

"Yuh, mean—that signal, Henry?"

"Yes, I believe I have that idea in mind."

"Holy henhawks! Somethin' white and —Yea-a-ah! Henry, I've got a new canvas

tarpaulin that ain't never been used. She's as white as an angel's wings."

"Hang it when you first get up, Frijole. Good night."

"Bonus notches, Enrico. And if that ain't pure Spanish, I'm a cow's uncle."

"Moo-o-o-o-o," bawled Slim.

"Allus belittlin'," sighed Frijole, and went to bed.

JUDGE and Oscar came out together next day. The canvas was still on the corral fence, and Judge looked grimly at it, before going into the house. Henry was feeling fine again.

"That white sheet on the fence, Henry—why?" asked Judge.

"Wouldn't you," asked Henry, "be willing to pay thirty thousand dollars to save my life?"

"But your life is not in danger."

"You think not. Read that, my doubting friend."

Henry handed Judge a small piece of soiled paper, on which had been written in pencil, and badly smudged:

COME TO LOBO GRADE AT MIDNIGHT. MAKE ONE CROOKED MOVE AND THE SHERIFF DIES.

"Where on earth did this come from?" asked Judge.

"A young Mexican lad, astride a sway-backed mule, Judge. He said it was given to him on the road by a masked man, who gave him a peso to make the delivery. The lad's name is Ortega, I believe—and his story was honest. It was for anyone on the JHC. Of course, he did not see me. I sent him out an extra peso, and he went away quite wealthy."

"They think you are dead, Henry."

"Aye," agreed Henry thoughtfully. "But one thing worries me. I was shot at yesterday, presumably by some of the men who kidnapped me. If they didn't think it was me—why shoot?"

Frijole coughed nervously, and Henry looked at him curiously.

"You wanted to say something, Frijole?" he asked.

"Yea-a-ah, I reckon so. Me and Slim talked it over. Henry, where in hell didja hide that saddle and bridle?"

"Why, uh—Frijole, I do not quite—"

"I shot at yuh, Henry. That horse was mine. We was out lookin' for yuh, and you swiped my horse."

Henry stared at Frijole for several moments, as the humorous side of the incident began to unfold.

"I—I took your horse—and you—you shot at me?"

"Don't let it make yuh nervous," said Slim dryly. "He couldn't hit the King's Castle at sixty feet."

"I resent that!" complained Frijole.

"Be resentful, if you wish," chuckled Henry, "but fetch the jug. That calls for celebration."

IT was about eleven-thirty o'clock, when Henry, Slim and Frijole met Judge and Oscar in Tonto City the following night. The King's Castle was about the only lighted building in Tonto City at that hour on Sunday night.

"Henry, I did as you asked, and checked the crowd over there, but Dave Willis is the only mine official present," said Judge. "If I knew what you had in mind, I'd—"

"Good, good, Judge!" interrupted Henry. "That is very fine."

"I am glad it makes you happy. After all, some folks only have enough intelligence to applaud silly things."

"Thank you, Judge; you are very kind. Now, Slim, I have a job for you. I want you to go over there and attract Dave Willis' attention. Quietly tell him that Henry Conroy is back, and that he can assure everyone concerned that the thieves will be in custody in a few hours. Do you understand?"

"I can understand it, Henry—but I don't have to believe it—do I?"

"Miracles," said Henry, "might happen. Go ahead, Slim. As soon as you whisper that information, you may come back here."

Slim hurried to the saloon. Judge said, "It all seems so silly."

"It really is, Judge," assured Henry. "But at times it is fun to be silly. Frijole, I may want you to ride away in a few minutes."

"I wouldn't be surprised at anythin'," said Frijole.

Slim came back quickly and informed them that he contacted Willis and whispered the information.

"Willis didn't act like he believed me—at first," reported Slim. "He wanted to

know more about it, but I said that's all I knew."

"There he is now!" said Frijole quietly. "Headin' for that rack in front of the blacksmith shop."

"Ride north, Frijole," ordered Henry. "Get to the forks, where the road forks to the Conejo mine. See if he turns there."

Frijole was hurrying down the street, and they heard him ride away, ahead of Willis, who rode slowly. Henry chuckled.

"Is it funny?" asked Judge.

"It really is, Judge. Now, if you do not mind, we will join the parade. To horse, gentlemen."

They rode at moderate speed in the moonlight. Henry did not offer any explanation, and when they met Frijole at the forks of the road, he said:

"Willis was about ten minutes behind me, and he turned on the Conejo mine road."

"Good, good!" exclaimed Henry. "You have done well, Frijole. We will proceed to the mine buildings. Slim, I believe you are familiar with the layout at the mine, are you not?"

"I worked there a couple months, Henry."

"That ain't what I heard," said Frijole.

"Have done with bickering," ordered Henry. "No talking now. We must use extreme caution from this point forward. Let us go."

"I brought m' old forty-five-seventy," whispered Frijole.

"May I say a few words, Henry?" asked Slim anxiously.

"Don't let him, Henry—it'd be jist slanderous," said Frijole.

"No talking," ordered Henry.

THEY rode in carefully and dismounted before reaching the shack where Harris and Goss lived. Slim led the way and they came in quite close. There was no light in the place, and not a sound. Then the tiny flicker of a match. Someone on the rambling old porch had lighted a smoke. They could see the tiny glow, as the man smoked a cigarette or a cigar.

Henry was able to see the face of his watch and it was thirty minutes past midnight. They crouched there for possibly fifteen minutes longer before they heard hoofbeats, as several horses came along the old road. They passed, not over fifty feet away—four riders—and drew up at the porch.

"This is Willis!" called the man on the porch.

"Willis?" replied a rider. "What are you doin' here?"

"Your man didn't come with the money, eh?"

"No, blast his heart—he didn't! A man came along on a horse, and we stopped him. Goss didn't take any chances, so he batted him over the head. Know who it was? That damned Pelly, the newspaper guy!"

"You didn't kill him, did you?"

"Na-a-aw! He's all right. But what are you—"

"Listen, you fellows, we've been foxed. Slim Pickins came to me in the King's Castle Saloon, and whispered that Henry was back, and that he'd have every guilty man dead or in jail inside of twelve hours. Smoke that in your old pipe. No wonder they didn't come to deliver the money."

"Yuh mean that Conroy is back, Dave?"

"That's what Slim told me. You're a fine bunch—you are. You four fools talked too much. Probably bragged to Conroy, and let him know too much. I was afraid of that. Now, we're in a fix."

"Wait a minute, Willis," growled one of the men. "We didn't talk. Don't pull that sort of stuff on me. Conroy didn't know any of us. How he ever lived after goin' into that canyon is a mystery."

"Yeah, yo're so smart, Willis!" exclaimed another. "Slim came and told you. Whis-

pered to you, eh? That's fine. Didn't tell anybody else, huh? Willis, you gullible fool, that was a scheme to get you to lead 'em to the gang! And you bit on bait like that!'

"Just a moment, Joe!" snapped Willis. "I don't like that kind of talk. How could they suspect me—unless you mouthy fools talked."

"You don't like my kind of talk, eh?" said Joe Carson tensely. "That don't worry me. If they suspect you—you're through and—"

"Hold that, Joe!" rasped Willis. "I'm running this show, and don't you forget it. If anybody is through—"

Blam! A six-shooter blasted, the flame seeming to splatter against one of the dark figures on the porch, and the man went rolling down the few steps to the ground.

"You shouldn't have done that, Joe," protested one of the men.

"You, too, eh?" snarled Carson.

"No, not that, Joe, but—well, it's all right. One less to split the pot with—and Dave was goin' to take the big chunk."

"That's better," said Carson. "Now, we'll—"

Ker-Wham! Henry's eardrums almost exploded from the blast of Frijole's old forty-five-seventy. A man yelped painfully and went over the end railing of the porch, taking most of the railing with him.

Blam! Again that big rifle bellowed, and one of them ripped out a shrill curse, as he dived through the doorway and managed to kick the door shut. Two men didn't go inside. Henry yelled:

"For Heaven's sake, Frijole!"

"Well, dad-blast it!" wailed Frijole. "I was tryin' to see if I could notch m' sights at that feller, agin the moon, and the dog-gone gun went off. Then I thought I might as well shock 'em complete, so I heezed another hunk of disaster at 'em."

Slim went running for the other side of the house, and his six-shooter blasted twice.

"I got me a specimen!" he yelled.

Another shot echoed back from the house and Slim yelled:

"My mistake, gents."

Henry started to circle toward a window, and a bullet almost clipped his ear. He went flat on his face.

Blam! Frijole was still in action, and that bullet, judging from the splintered glass, must have taken out a whole window. Slim was swapping shots with someone out there.

"Frijole, you quit shootin', will yuh?" he yelled. "Them blasted slugs are comin' plumb through the house. One almost got me."

A voice called from the house, "All right—stop shootin'; I'll open the door. No use fightin'."

"Light a lamp," called Henry.

The man obeyed, and stood in the doorway with his hands above his shoulders, while Henry, Judge and Slim came up on the rickety, old porch. The lone survivor was Ed Ferris, foreman of the Yellow Cross, white-faced, trembling. Ferris had lost his nerve.

Joe Carson and Bob Goss were on the floor; Goss, face-down, almost in the old fireplace. Ferris sank down in a chair and looked at them vacantly. Frijole came in, the old rifle in the crook of his arm, his right cheek bone bleeding.

"I kinda rampsed 'em, didn't I?" he asked.

"Point that blasted smoke-pole the other way!" exclaimed Slim. "No use killin' off everybody."

A hasty check showed that Willis was still alive, but Carson, Harris and Goss would never again covet other men's gold.

"Want to talk, Ferris?" asked Henry.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll talk," panted Ferris. "It was Willis' scheme. He got Carson in at the Yellow Cross. We've been stealin' high-grade for a long time. It's all stacked away in the Conejo. But we wasn't makin' money fast enough, so we framed to get that shipment. We wanted Barnes out of the way, anyway. Goss and Harris pulled that one, but Barnes jumped. He got Harris' horse and headed for Tonto, and Harris took Goss' horse and ran him down. They had to get the gold to the mine; so Goss done that.

"But he had to git rid of that wagon, and when him and Harris got together, they took the wagon apart and dumped it into one of them old shafts. Then the rain washed out the tracks."

"Where is the gold?" asked Judge.

"It's under the kitchen floor."

"Who pulled the robbery at the Yellow Cross?"

"Harris and Carson."

"With the able assistance of Mr. Willis, of course."

Ferris didn't admit it, but they knew it was true.

"Carson shot Tom Kelly," he said.

SOMEBODY stumbled up on the porch, and they turned to see James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly, hatless, owl-eyed, a streak of blood down his face. Pelly looked very bad, indeed.

"I—I don't believe I—I know just where I am," he said vacantly.

"That seems to be your trouble most of the time," remarked Judge.

"Dead men?" asked Pelly. "What happened? Someone struck me, I believe. It was back on the grades. That's right, I was held up."

"Yuh need holdin' up right now," said Slim.

"Are you mentally able to understand things, sir?" asked Henry.

"Why, I—yes, I believe I am, Henry."

"Good, good! You arrived just in time to find that the crime wave has busted against the rocks. Dave Willis, Joe Carson, Ike Harris and Bob Goss are all *hors de combat,* as it were. Mr. Ferris has just made a complete confession that this gang robbed the Yellow Cross, killed Tom Kelly, stole the Golden Streak gold and killed Jim Barnes. Any questions, Mr. Pelly?"

"My heavens!" gasped Pelly. "What a story!"

"Any questions?" repeated Henry soberly.

"I'd like to ask one," said Ferris weakly. "Conroy, how did you ever find this out?"

"From you, my boy," said Henry quietly.

"From me?" Ferris stared at Henry, his eyes puzzled. "From me?"

"Exactly. The rest was guess-work, I may assure you. Suspicion pointed to Joe Carson, as the only one of the three possibilities to know about that shipment of gold. I had a faint suspicion that Mr. Willis might have been a willing victim in the payroll robbery, especially after his description of the two men, both over six feet tall. Then I discovered that Willis had recommended Carson to the Yellow Cross. It rather tied in, as I saw it."

"Marvelous!" exclaimed Pelly.

"I can understand some of it, Henry," said Judge soberly. "Your suspicions, et cetera, but—and this is a big but—how on earth did you ever connect the Conejo mine and its two owners in all this deviltry? What ever made you think that Willis would lead us out here? Harris and Goss have—well, their reputations are as good as any other."

Henry smiled slowly.

"Elementary, my dear Watson," he said. "Remember the night that Jim Barnes was killed?"

"Very well," nodded Judge. "In fact, I have mourned the fact that we lost that horse, which might have been a clue."

"It was Judge. I may have lost the horse, but I remembered the color, size and so forth—and the brand. It was a brown mare, branded with a Seventy-Six on its right hip —the mare that Ike Harris was riding the next day."

"You might have saved me a week of worry," sighed Judge.

"Frijole," said Henry, "will you ride swiftly to town and get Doctor Bogart and John Campbell. Have them bring a wagon."

"Shore," nodded Frijole. "Shore will, Henry. Goin' right now."

"I'm glad he's gettin' out of here with that blasted, old—"

Frijole stumbled on the dark porch, swore wickedly, and they heard him falling down the steps.

Blam! That old rifle shattered the quiet again, and the men in the house instinctively ducked. Then came Frijole's voice:

"Dad-blamed country's gettin' so bad that yuh fall over dead men everywhere yuh go! Gotta git that trigger fixed—she's too soft. Huh!"

They heard him working the lever on the gun.

"Out of shells, anyway," he said.

"Now," said Slim fervently, "maybe we can have peace."

Curioddities By Weill

Hatred Pursued a Young American Across the Ocean; only to Meet the Justice of the Orient and of the Jungle

WHITE SHIKAR

By EDWARD DALY

CAPARISONED in the trappings of the State of Alipore, the four elephants dominated the silent group in the jungle clearing. Three were in line, with old Muezzin, hunt- and jungle-wise, slightly forward of them, like the leader of a parade.

Afoot, among the servants and gun-bearers, Jimmy Wharton kept his eye on Muezzin. At length, his watchfulness brought its reward. A spasm, massive yet delicate, a creaking of the howdah on his back, the uneasy play of his trunk, told Jimmy Wharton in headlines that the wisest of the prince's hunting elephants had caught scent of the approaching tiger.

The young white man made a last and final grouping. From his howdah on the leftmost animal, the prince watched him with a careful, approving eye. At a nod from him, Jimmy went forward, got Muezzin's mahout to back him a little, looked up to meet the nervous smile of the beautiful woman on Muezzin's back.

"In a few minutes, Miss Fairburn," Jimmy said. He pointed. "He ought to break through there—where the brush thins. Take careful aim and let him have it."

The woman smiled apprehensively. "Supposing I miss, Mr. Wharton?"

Jimmy grinned. "You won't miss." He turned away, his ear cocked, measuring the din made by the approaching beaters as they drove the tiger forward.

Slowly, with casual self-effacement, he backed away from the tight, intent group of men and animals. Only the prince gave him a side-long glance. To the left and rear of the hunting party, he lay down in the fringing underbrush where it met the massed foliage of the jungle. He snugged his lean body hard down, dug with his elbows till they rested in the hard earth. The drabness of his khakis melted into the faded tawniness of the brush.

He examined the high-powered Winchester carefully, ran his fingers over the silencer on the muzzle. He relieved the tension of waiting by glancing over at Chudra Dass, the head shikar. A grin sped between them, as though at some private jest, secretly shared.

But there was a lingering soberness in Jimmy's dark eyes as he looked over the sights of his rifle. He hoped that the prince's guest would bag her animal herself. However, the light, dappled, uncertain, filtering through the dense canopy of leaves overhead was bad for shooting and movie stars are rarely at their best when faced with a tiger.

Then one corner of his mind would hope that Miss Fairburn would muff her shot, for if this was to be his last shot at tiger, he wanted to remember it as being a good one.

He shrugged without movement. He wished, that just for this moment when his mind and senses should be funneled together for the extinction of the tiger he could forget Warren Root.

But no amount of mental strangulation could choke in him the knowledge that tomorrow Root was to be a palace guest. Root, whose marksmanship was a byword in great hunt-clubs the world over. Root the magnate, the hunting pal of presidents and princes. Root, who hated Jimmy Wharton with such intensity, it amounted to a malign dedication.

His money had driven Jimmy from every job he ever held in America and now the long arm of his malice was reaching out to touch Jimmy here. Automatically, the eyes of the young white man swung toward the impeccable, fastidious despot for whom he worked. Sir Badur Rowanduth Banargee, Prince of Alipore, was leaning forward, his hands gripping the rim of the howdah, intently peering into the forest. The elephants, the regalia, the beaters combing the jungle, Jimmy himself, even the tiger now being driven forward inexorably to his destruction were all offerings on the altar of the prince's hospitality. A guest could do no wrong, he

was not permitted to and his whims were indulged without question.

"Same old story," Jimmy thought woodenly.

The gray hopelessness flared into sudden anger. His fingers trembled about the stock of the Winchester. He shook himself uneasily, the thought of missing the tiger sobering him. To miss altogether would be bad enough; to merely wound would be infinitely worse, for then he would have to go into the jungle after the animal.

ALL the time, he kept close watch on old Muezzin. Now the agitation of the old beast was reaching a minor crescendo. It brought coolness, singleness and fixity of thought to Jimmy Wharton. Muezzin turned his head slightly; Jimmy followed with his sights to where he faced.

Then, abruptly, in swift frightened stealth, the tiger broke cover, his head turned back, directed toward the pandemonium of the beaters behind him.

"Now!" Jimmy thought. He heard the prince's insistent yell. "Shoot!"

The tiger heard it, too. His head snapped around. One foot poised in the air, he froze, evaluating the menace of the group of living statuary that faced him.

Jimmy threw a rapid glance at the woman on Muezzin's back, caught the quality of her fluttering tensity as she stared at the tiger, now crouching back, its teeth baring slowly, the snarl gathering in its throat.

Jimmy curbed the almost irresistible impulse to squeeze his own trigger. Above all, he must not beat Miss Fairburn to it. He caught the movement of her gun, waving uncertainly.

Some inner instinct warned the tiger where danger lay. Of a sudden he leaped, a compact mass of violent fury, straight at old Muezzin.

The woman shrieked. Muezzin trumpeted his defiance, swung a half-turn, neat as a ballet-dancer, offering his inch-thick hide to the tiger's onslaught.

The woman's shot rang out while he was in mid-air. Jimmy studied the small drama with the utmost tenseness of concentration. Her shot had missed!

Instantly, then, he squeezed his own trigger. The small plop of the silencer was lost in the echo of the other shot.

The impact of the bullet did not stop the tiger's leap but it killed the malignant fury of it. In its death throes razor-sharp claws raked down the flank of Muezzin. Jimmy rose; slipped his gun to Chudra Dass. The old man was grinning as though at a great joke. From the dhoti, wrapped round his loins like a gigantic diaper, he produced a pull-through which he drew through the barrel of the Winchester.

The prince left his guest staring incredibly at her handiwork. He crossed to where Jimmy stood. His dark handsome face broke into a smile.

"Damn good shot, Jimmy. Perfectly timed."

Jimmy did not say anything. They watched while the tiger was slung on a litter for the triumphal return to the palace. The prince said suddenly, "You know Warren Root?"

"Everyone knows Warren Root, sir."

"Of course; he's a countryman of yours. Now there is one guest about whose shooting we will not have to worry. He's almost as good as you are. I hunted with him one time in the Canadian Rockies. Grizzly."

"I hunted with him too," Jimmy replied, "but it wasn't in Canada and it wasn't grizzly. Besides, I was only guiding."

"Perhaps, he'll remember you," the prince smiled.

Jimmy answered, "He'll remember me all right." He smothered the impulse to tell the prince of that hunt and what happened there. But though his employer was young, not a great deal older than Jimmy himself, there was unbending dignity in the man. He was far from being unfriendly but he did not invite confidence. He belonged to the small compact world of men whose wealth is beyond count. He wore his polished aloofness like a sheath, lived by a narrow rigid code. In a conflict between the desires of a friend and those of an employee, he would stick by his friends.

Jimmy kicked savagely at a broken root by his feet; kept his mouth shut. The other eyed him in mild astonishment. A trumpet blared in the clearing. They both turned. Once more, Miss Fairburn was on Muezzin's back.

"We're ready to go, sir," Jimmy said.

Jimmy Wharton was unaware of the orchestra playing, the gay and glittering

uniforms, the dancing-girls, hips swaying in arrogant rhythm across the floor of the assembly hall of the palace. All he could see was the black, mocking eyes in the dead-white face of the man who stood before him.

"So this is where you are," Root said. "Among the Nabobs. You've come up in the world." His big body shook with huge amusement. His baleful regard swung contemptuously past Jimmy and about him.

"Take a good look at it," he snapped. "You'll not be here much longer."

Softly, Jimmy said, "He'll keep me here till you have had your shoot, I guess. We can never let it be said that the great Warren Root ever missed anything."

Though he spoke lightly, he recoiled inwardly before the venomous malice, the uncontrolled aversion the older man held for him. All of a sudden, he felt very much alone and friendless. A wave of dark depression swept through him as he thought of himself out of a job again. There was no way of fighting such inexhaustible and powerful hatred. The monstrous notion of killing Root, being free of him for all time, hit him. He could do it. Root had done just that—and worse things.

He heard Root say, "You know damn well I need none of your help when it comes to shooting."

"You did a fine job on Roger Fry," Jimmy answered. "Remember him? The man you mistook for a deer? Even though he had a red hat on? How surprised you were when you learned you had a witness!"

The foul, indelible recollection of the cold-blooded murder he had seen lent fury to his voice. For a moment, briefly, he held the ascendancy.

"Before the coroner's inquest, you tried to bribe me," Jimmy continued relentlessly.

"It wasn't necessary, as you promptly discovered," Root gloated. "I was exonerated anyway."

Jimmy nodded bitterly. Then he said slowly, "It seems to have missed everyone's attention but mine that it is Fry's fortune you are now spending." He stared hard at Root. "Out here," he went on softly, "questions occur to me that the D. A. should have asked. When I go home—"

"You underestimate me," Root said with cold malevolence, but there was an inner wariness, a cold calculation in the black eyes intently studying Jimmy's narrow face. "I told you I'd run you out of every job you ever hold. I'll cut you loose from this fancy Aladdin's palace too—"

"Someone taking my name in vain. Both men swung to face the prince. The shrewd brown eyes divided a glance between Jimmy, white-lipped and taut, and Root, flushed and arrogant.

Root fixed his eyes in fascination on the single immense diamond at the breast of the Hindu's cream-white tunic. Jimmy eyed his employer uneasily. How much had he heard? He shrugged; it did not matter anyway.

The prince said, "Jimmy, one of the shikars had reported spoor of panther on the Garauli track about two miles this side of the Jumna. Supposing you go take a look in the morning. Report back to me. If it's o. k. we'll let Mr. Root take a bang at it."

Root tore his eyes away from the diamond. He licked his lips. "Panther, eh? Long time since I had a crack at panther." He stared hard at Jimmy, then at the Hindu. The sight of a million dollars worn merely as an ornament shocked him stiff. He smiled patronizingly at his host. He could buy a lapel pin like that too if he wanted. He said "Where can you and I have a little chat—more or less official?"

The prince did not smile back, and he stiffened slightly. His face clouded a little; he was in the habit of dispensing patronage, not receiving it. He answered: "I'm busy with Miss Fairburn's party which is leaving us tomorrow but I can grant you an audience at ten in the morning."

Open-mouthed, Root stared after him. "He'll grant me an audience," he echoed. "What does he think I am—a coolie?"

"The coolies," Jimmy said, "have their audience at nine."

JIMMY went straight to the palace when he returned from the Garauli location. Tired and pessimistic, he had no doubt of the reception that probably awaited him. From bitter experience he knew the freemasonry existing between the men who rule humanity. His job was as good as lost.

He found the prince in the gun-room, a double-barreled Purdy in his hands. The Hindu wore the traditional knee-length, many-buttoned black coat of the ruling

Brahmin. Jimmy met his brief measuring glance. He tried to read the import of it but the other's face had the schooled composure of a judge. He asked, "Ever used this gun, Jimmy?"

Jimmy shook his head. "This is hardly the time for me to develop expensive habits." He waited a minute while exasperation stirred in him. He thought, Why the hell don't he shoot and get it over with! He said, "There is a panther, sir."

"Excellent. Mr. Root will be glad to hear that."

"A charcoal-burner told me he had seen it," Jimmy continued. "He said it is a black *devi,* a beauty."

"Damn," the prince swore softly. "A black panther!" He made a face. "Well, we have promised him to our guest. Otherwise, I would like to go after him myself. I think we should leave about five in the morning. Get yourself a good night's sleep."

Jimmy looked at him levelly. He asked, "Did Mr. Root discuss me with you, sir?"

The prince laid the Purdy in the rack. He met Jimmy's bleak look, unsmiling. He replied, casually, "He wants me to discharge you."

"Am I discharged?"

"No."

Jimmy let his breath go. He had the feeling that something wonderful, that he could not express in words, had happened to him. He realized that he was fantastically, extravagantly, grateful to this dignified aloof man for whom he worked. Numbly, he said, "It's the first time, I suppose, anyone has ever said 'no' to him."

"You said it once," the prince told him. He smiled at Jimmy's astonished look. "You have a position of peculiar confidence here. Before I engaged you, you were investigated very thoroughly. I know all about you; perhaps rather more than you know yourself." His eyes darkened. "And I am not a bazaar *babu,* to be easily intimidated. Let him have his panther, then he can go. He looked at Jimmy thoughtfully. "I make the laws of this country and I enforce them. Therefore, it seems fantastic that I should warn anyone to be on their guard in my own country. But when your name is mentioned, the man becomes a demented fanatic. Tomorrow, he will have a gun in his hands."

"With your permission," Jimmy replied, "so will I." He smiled. "I'll not shoot first —but one does not trust—a panther!"

ALONG the dim track in the matted jungle, the *shikari* strode like a frieze in the half-light of the morning. From his swaying howdah on the rearmost elephant, Jimmy could see the ponderous gray hulk of Muezzin, the prince on his back, at the head of the small cavalcade. He blamed the vast brooding jungle for the uneasiness that filled him but he kept his eye on Root, riding the elephant in the center.

Sometimes Root would look back at him, glances of such concentrated malignancy that Jimmy reached for the cool comfort of the revolver in his hip holster. The express rifles were borne by the men afoot and he had taken very good care that Root should be carried by a bearer, too. There would be no accident on this hunt! He looked for the familiar figure of Chudra Dass trotting along on his thin tireless legs till he remembered that the head shikar had been taken sick in the night. But his own guns, the reliable Winchester and the big-bored Swiss with tremendous stopping power and no great range were there; the Winchester for normal shooting and the Swiss for when he had to go into the green after wounded game.

Three hours after leaving the palace, the elephants lumbered to a standstill at a thinning rather than a clearing in the forest. There a giant teakwood had been riven and felled by lightning, creating a tangled slash just off the path.

"Best place around here," Jimmy said with a faint air of apology. "We'll beat the brush down, make it easier for you."

Root glared at him.

"Do I need it made easy for me?"

The prince ordered some of the men to go to work with jungle knives on the brush. Others prepared a light breakfast while the elephants backed, casually, untidily but with ultimate effect forming a line that fronted the dead teakwood.

Jimmy could not shake the vague uneasiness that clung to him, unaccountable, yet with the tenacity of a blight. All round him were the familiar sights and sounds of the jungle: the pulsing hum of tireless insects, the noisy contention of birds, the flat blank-

eting heat and the cathedral gloom. And now, from far off, still muted by distance, he could hear the vague uproar made by the beaters, an uproar that would be upon them in a pandemonium of beating drums and furious shouting in exactly twenty minutes. Everything was as it should be, yet the sense of foreboding, of impending calamity persisted.

"I'm jittery," he thought.

He heard Root mutter, "Damnable background to shoot against," and saw the prince nod deprecatory agreement as though assuming responsibility for the murky green light and the high foliage that roofed out the sun.

The latter said, "We have about fifteen minutes. Better get on Muezzin, Mr. Root. He does not startle easily."

Root stared at him. "I'm not getting on any elephant!"

The Hindu's face clouded. "I don't understand," he said. "You intend to take him on foot?"

Root's expression did not change before the open incredulity of the other. "Certainly! I'm going to take him on foot."

Jimmy whistled to himself. He saw the prince's face whiten as robust skepticism gave way to the conviction that Root meant what he said. He persisted, "You are my guest, I'm responsible for you. It's going to be close shooting and the light is tricky. Believe me, many a howdah has been torn from an elephant's back by panther."

"Here, then," Root replied, "is where you save a howdah." He faced the prince, legs apart, the white face smiling, his solid bulk dwarfing the slim elegance of the other. The prince shrugged, helplessly, swung on his heel, ordering the mahouts to take their charges farther back among the trees. Jimmy thought he even caught a look of astonishment in the eyes of Muezzin.

The substance of Root's decision conveyed itself to the attendants, huddling behind the elephants. They looked upon him with fearsome admiration. Even Jimmy allowed a certain reluctant respect to rise inside him. Then the purpose behind it struck him and he grinned to himself. Root wanted the prince to mount while he stayed afoot. It would be a fine story in many a hunting lodge. Well, Root was due for another surprise if Jimmy knew his prince.

The din from the beaters grew louder. A hurried trek of small game began an unheeded scurrying across the floor of the clearing, frightened by the clamor of the beaters. Root stood some ten feet out in the clearing, forward of Jimmy and the Hindu. There was a casual perfection to his stance that Jimmy envied. He had the feeling Root would make the taking of black panther on foot, in uncertain light, look easy.

"He's writing a story for himself," Jimmy thought.

The young white man had his arm round Muezzin's trunk. He felt the trunk stiffen under his caress. His own body went taut. He stood for a minute, in stepped-up tension, his eyes straining. His whispered warning reached out to Root.

"Look out, he's around!"

The fury of the beaters had now risen to its crescendo. Jimmy stared hard at the far end of the clearing, probing at the twining roots and vinery, his eyes straining. Then he saw it.

A lean shadow, swift, black and stealthy among the trees, now visible, now not. He stole a swift glance at Root. Root, too, had seen it. He stood, poised, alert, gun thrown forward at the ready, following his uncertain target. Again envy stirred in Jimmy.

"Damn him," he thought. "He's got guts all right."

The panther sensed the imminence of danger. He seemed reluctant to loose himself from the anonymity of the trees, but, finally, maddened by the furious pounding of his pursuers, he broke cover, springing lightly into the clearing.

With unerring instinct, the hunted beast's attention fixed itself on Root. He walked back and forth in a short sentry go, pause; turn again. There was contempt in the easy, flowing stride, invitation to disaster in the rippling muscles, the wicked little eyes never once unaware of the man who faced him. Root stood with the easy assurance of a tamer in a cage, confident, immobile, the rifle to his shoulder.

The panther stopped, faced him. His teeth bared in a noiseless snarl. Jimmy thought furiously, "Why the hell doesn't he shoot? Quit the grandstanding!"

Fascinated, he watched the panther gather back on his haunches. He felt the perspiration bead on his own forehead. For two sec-

onds now, there had been a perfect target.

The crash of the rifle shot cut short his misgivings. In the nerve-racking split second before the panther uncoiled himself, Root had fired.

The shot was like a signal gun. An enormous quiet settled on the jungle. The beaters stopped their mad tom-tomming, the unseen birds shrilled to silence, the mysterious chorus of insects arrested itself——

Then a high agonized shriek broke the uneasy quiet. Its spine-tingling shock jerked Jimmy back into a renewal of let-down tension.

"Ye gods!" he muttered blankly. "He missed!" Instant, malicious joy filled him. Root, the great hunter had to take a second shot to bring down what amounted to a sitting target!

His eyes swung to the panther, thrashing to its feet on the floor of the clearing. The left fore-leg hung limp. He grew sharply aware of its swift, ungainly retreat on three legs.

An involuntary cry broke from Jimmy Wharton. He yelled, "Get him before he holes up!" He stared frantically at Root, fumbling with the breech of his weapon, then threw his own gun to his shoulder. He was aware of the prince bringing his gun up, too.

He waited, the prince waited, unwilling to rob Root of his shot. But the panther was too quick for them. All chance of a shot had gone by the time they had grasped the fact that Root was not going to fire again.

The Hindu sprang forward, his eyes blazing with anger. "Why the devil didn't you throw another shot at him while you had the chance?"

Root met his anger with his own. "Because my gun stuck—that's why! Hell damn the luck!"

While they argued, Jimmy warily circled the spot where the panther had holed up. It had gone in by the main limb of the teakwood. The trunk and branches were densely festooned with weird fungus forms and vinery, an unnatural, parasite foliage. He stared into the tunnel it had made. The panther was out of sight, lost in the maze of branches. He could see nothing. "I don't envy Root crawling in there," Jimmy told himself.

The prince was saying, "What if you get hurt crawling in there? You see the predicament you put me in?"

"You're in no predicament," Root stated flatly, "for the very simple reason I am not going in! The hide of Root is worth more to me than any panther!"

Jimmy froze where he stood, turned slowly to see the tautness of shock hold the prince rigid. In a daze of unbelief, the latter said, "You mean you would leave a wounded animal to die?"

"Better him than me."

"I guess that makes it my move," Jimmy broke in cheerfully. This was his job, this was what he was paid for. He told himself this very carefully and if it had been a woman or some non-hunter, he could think of it with unconcern—but Root!

He looked down into the hole into which he would have to crawl. The luxury of scorn or hatred would have to wait.

He took the heavy Swiss with the short barrel from the bearer who had come in the place of Chudra Dass. He tested the smooth action carefully. He avoided looking at Root. The prince crossed to him, removing himself from Root as though the latter's nearness contaminated him.

"Be careful, Jimmy," he pleaded.

Jimmy got down on his knees. He began creeping forward on knees and elbows, warding off the clinging vines, into the almost dark tunnel the cat had bored. He had a morbid dread of snakes and he tried to contract himself within his skin, listening for the deadly rustle of a krait. He held the gun forward delicately, the action cocked. He wondered, if, after all, Root was a coward. Resolutely, he expelled Root from his mind.

The tunnel turned, following a branch in the trunk. So far he could see nothing. A malodorous pungency, crowding out the odor of decay in the hot confinement of the tunnel assailed his nostrils. His skin crept a little. He was getting near.

He found himself turning again, following a kink in the branch. He came to an abrupt halt, freezing rigid, for five feet from him now, he could see the eyes of the cat, luminous and yellow, glaring at him in the eerie gloom.

The stillness tightened round him. Only the beating of his own heart, the harsh ebb and flow of the panther's breathing broke

the vault-like silence. He raised the Swiss in slow, deliberate movement, aiming between the eyes. He lay perfectly still, taking careful aim.

He squeezed the trigger, bracing himself for the tremendous recoil of the Swiss.

Click! A misfire.

For an instant, paralysis numbed him. Then his right hand flashed with automatic, unthinking action, ejecting, reloading again. The misfired cartridge swung off in a tiny arc. His pent-up breath came back slowly. He squeezed the trigger again.

Another click.

For the first time in his life, Jimmy Wharton knew fear so strong that he was afraid to load the Swiss again. He lay there, the cold hand of terror on his heart, his mouth sagging open, staring at the unwinking eyes in the dark.

A convulsive shudder swept through him. He tried to marshall his faculties. It dawned on him slowly that there should be some significance in two misfires. His mind was fuddled but the animal instinct for self-preservation was easing his hand back to the holstered revolver on his left hip. The flap was buttoned. His fingers worried at it. He thought of Root again and it hit him with the force of a revelation that Root was behind this.

The panther stirred. In the fascination of horror Jimmy wondered if the invisible body was coiling for a spring. His hand was around the revolver. He had it out.

Then it happened. The yellow eyes winked out. The little tunnel became a churning tumult of furious action. The great lithe body was upon him and there was his own barrage of shots from the revolver, thin slivers of flame splitting the darkness.

JIMMY came to slowly, rolling his head from side to side, picking out the familiar appointments of his own room, settled his eyes on Dr. Mukergee, the palace physician.

The door opened and the prince came in. His eyes swung from the doctor to Jimmy and back again. "How is he?"

"Splendid. We have multiple lacerations of the right arm and side but we are young."

The prince crossed to Jimmy's bed. The young American thought he detected a hint of nervousness in the Hindu as though the schooled composure of the latter had been penetrated. He asked, "Who got me out?"

"I did. I heard the revolver shots and that puzzled me. Then you didn't come out and I went in. And I examined the Swiss—wondering why you hadn't used it—"

"You found out?"

"Yes. The charge was pulled in every cartridge. Chudra Das had been poisoned or he might have discovered it. It was very neat. You were never meant to fire that revolver."

"You know who did it?" Jimmy asked quietly.

"Root did it." The Hindu's nose twitched; the nostrils were oddly white and flaring in the dark face. "I held court and sentenced him myself this morning."

"He'll be a hard man to keep in jail," Jimmy grumbled. "All sorts of people will be after you to let him go."

The prince smiled with his teeth alone. "He'll be here a long time." His face lit up, smiling broadly at some cherished recollection. "I ordered him fifty strokes on the soles of his feet." He paused. "My jailer, unhappily, is a heavy-handed man."

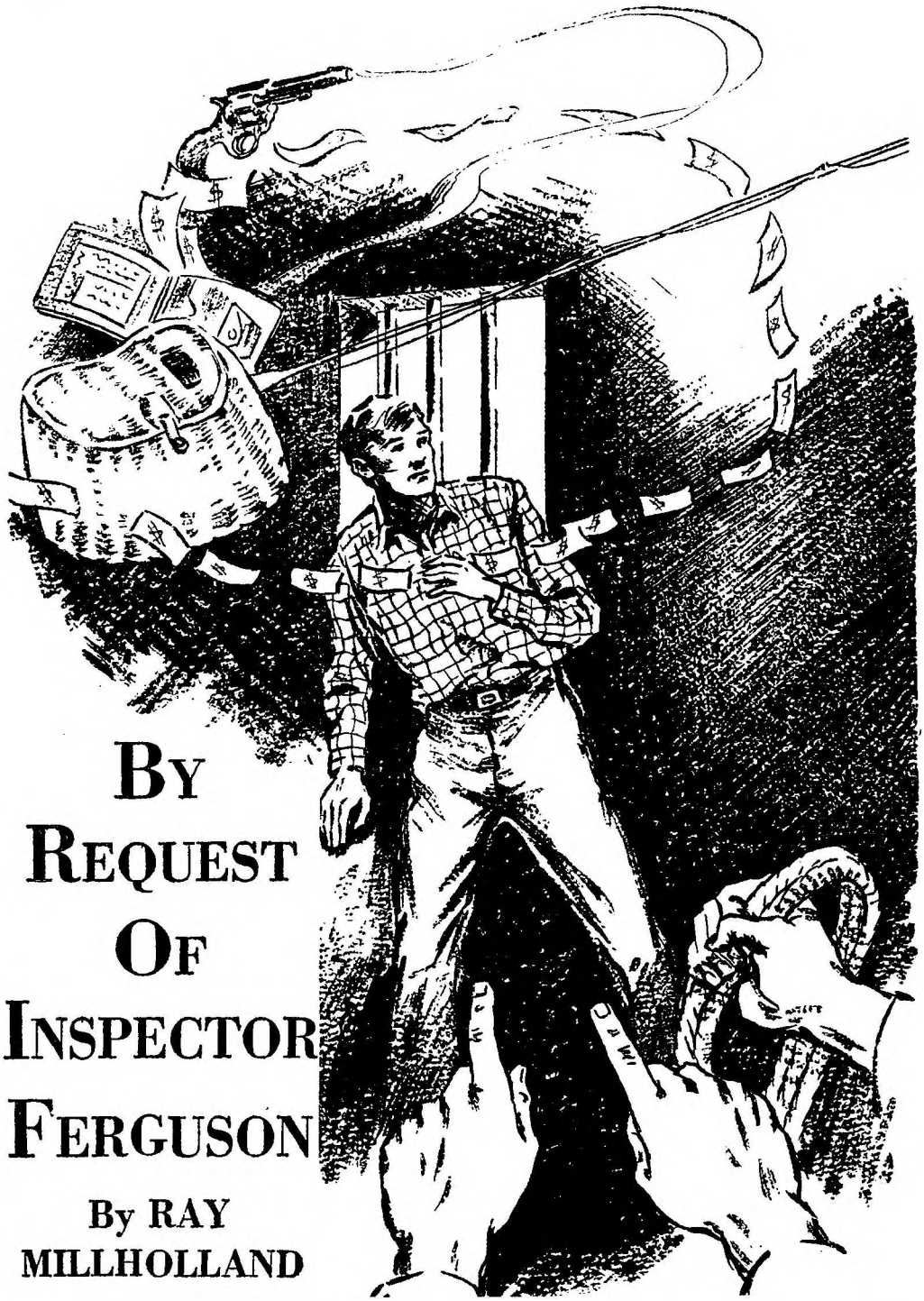
Jimmy had partially raised his body. Now he flapped back on his pillow. An odd, lengthy silence filled the room. The two Indians watched him, unsmiling.

The effort was agony, but Jimmy jerked bolt upright. "Are you trying to tell me he is dead?"

"He had a weak heart," Dr. Mukergee proclaimed stoutly. "An extremely fragile heart. The aneurism—but you wouldn't understand." He shook his head in despair at the denseness of laymen, muttering, "Weakest heart I ever saw."

"Exactly what I told Sir Percy Trent, our Resident Commissioner," the prince said. "I told him what happened. The excitement must have been too great for him, Sir Percy judges," the prince said dryly. "And he wants a panther, too, but he can't shoot worth a damn."

"He won't miss," Jimmy said fervently, then shook his head. The thought of Warren Root being brought to Oriental justice was too much for him. Sagging back onto the pillow, he went into a faint again.



By Request Of Inspector Ferguson

By RAY MILLHOLLAND

A HALF-PITCHER of lemonade, made with the teeth-chilling spring water that bubbled up through a pipe in the cold box on the back porch of his trout-fishing cabin was Inspector Ferguson's customary afternoon indulgence. But this afternoon the pitcher he carried to his screened-in front porch was brimming full, in honor of a very special friend of years' standing.

Though it had been ten years since he had retired from active duty with the United

A Man Can Afford to Be Polite When He's Got His Enemies on a Spot Where They Have to Commit Suicide to Kill Him

States Postal Service, all six-feet-one of the inspector's lean body still retained the tough resilience of a well-tempered steel spring.

"Well, I see you remember my favorite brand of liquor," said his stockily built guest, draining half his glass in one hearty draught before lowering it to stroke his sweeping handle-bar mustache with his bandana. Mat Emmes, specialist in shooting oil wells with nitroglycerine, chuckled at his own joke and winked a merry brown eye at his host. "Remember the first time we met?"

Inspector Ferguson took a deliberate sip from his own glass and said, dryly, "I still break out in a sweat, every time I recall it."

Their first meeting had occurred in a saloon in a new oil-boom town. The inspector had just alighted from a buckboard and was entering the place, on the trail of a man of misguided judgment who had made the serious mistake of holding up a train and making off with a registered mail pouch. The moment the inspector had surveyed the interior of the saloon, once, he knew he had reached the end of his quest, for standing a stride or two away from the bar was a man with a peculiar shade of red hair and a gotched ear that had been mutilated in some bygone knife fight.

But Inspector Ferguson had remained perfectly motionless—that is, once he had stepped inside and had moved unobtrusively to one side of the possible line of flight of a bullet from the six-shooter in the hands of his quarry. However, the man with the gun was concentrating his attention on the short, squat figure of a man who was this same Mat Emmes.

Mat was saying, in about the same tone of voice as if he were commenting on the weather, "Hard likker and my business don't mix, pardner. But if you're dead bent to make a drinking man of me, I'll take a glass of lemonade on you."

"I give you while I count ten, to drink what I bought you," the man with the gun had said tipsily.

Mat had held up his hand, apologetically. "Just give me a second to get this pint of nitroglycerine I'm carrying in my shirt, out onto the bar—"

"Duck everybody!" somebody in the room yelled. "That fellow is an oil-well shooter!"

The man who had said that dove through the nearest window, without the formality of raising the sash. The man with the gun had galloped erratically for the swinging doors with his left arm futilely shielding his head from the impending blast—only to trip over Inspector Ferguson's extended foot. The rest had been the mere formality

of snapping on a pair of handcuffs and loading his man into the buckboard and driving away.

"Yes, I remember that time well, Mat," said Inspector Ferguson. "Mmmm—tell me something. Was that nitroglycerine in that bottle you took out of your shirt?"

"It sure as shootin' was," sighed Mat Emmes, then finished the rest of his lemonade in a draught.

"You certainly acted pretty cool about it," commented the inspector dryly.

Mat nodded at the headlines of a newspaper lying on the table—U. S. RETAINS A-BOMB SECRET—and said, "That was pretty much my fix. I figured it was only the right thing to do, to give all the innocent bystanders fair warning what was liable to happen if any shooting started. That cuss's gun-muzzle was wobbling right at where I was carrying that pint of nitro."

MAT now looked at his watch and said, "Gosh, I got to be tracking for town and send the office a wire, so's they'll know I ain't scattered a mile around a big hole in the road, someplace." He dropped an ignition key on the table and nodded to it. "My nitro truck is parked, back down in that old marl pit, where you told me to. Never can tell when a brush fire'll happen. So if one does, you can take your choice. Either run like blazes for the nearest ditch and dive in, or hike down to my truck and drive her out of there. But be careful you don't hit no big bumps."

With a wave of his hand, Mat left the porch and started on his mile-long hike into Bightly. A car turned into Inspector Ferguson's driveway, just then, and a tall young man wearing a snap brim tan hat walked a little wearily to the front porch, where he dropped into a chair with a tired sigh.

"Looks like you've pitched a lot of hay today," said the inspector, pouring his new guest a tall drink of cool lemonade. "How is the trial going?"

A half-wry smile flitted across Rob Gale's tired face as he slowly turned the glass in his hand. "A lot better than I had any idea than when I let Judge Bassick talk me into defending my first murder case."

"Mmm," said Inspector Ferguson, lighting one of his long twisted cheroots. "Sounds like the prosecution hasn't been able to present any direct evidence yet." He nodded at a smoke ring he had just blown, adding, "I've had a copper-riveted conviction all along that young Todd just didn't have it in him to kill a man for money."

Rob Gale flicked him a quick glance. "The idea must be catching, Inspector. I'm beginning to feel the same thing myself." He took a long sip from his lemonade and stared at his glass, reflectively. "And I think I could convince the jury, if I could only present some concrete piece of evidence to counteract the effect of Todd's being arrested with the murdered man's wallet in his possession. If I can offset that, I think the jury will think a long time before bringing in a verdict of guilty."

Inspector Ferguson nodded his gray head affirmatively. "You're hammering on the prosecution's strongest link in the chain of circumstantial evidence. This is a murder charge, remember. I've said this before, but it's worth repeating because I've seen it happen time and again during my thirty years with the Department. And that is when a jury has to decide the guilt or innocence of a man charged with first degree murder, they have to be convinced that he *did* do the job. Just making it look pretty strong that he did don't go with the jury."

"You forget we don't have capital punishment in this state," said young Rob Gale. "Here, it isn't a matter of a jury choosing between even a faint danger of condemning an innocent man to death or turning loose a murderer. There's always the thought in the back of their minds, if they do bring in a verdict of guilty, that some time—if the accused really is innocent—the truth will come out and the convicted man will be released from his life sentence."

Lost in his own thoughts, Inspector Ferguson had allowed his cheroot to go out. Suddenly, he lifted his head and pointed the ash-end of it at Rob Gale. "Follow this, son. Todd had this oil-well driller's wallet on him when he was arrested by Sheriff Jenkins for the murder. It would be foolish for the defense to make an attempt to disprove that."

"That's the one solid fact in the case which can't be challenged," said Rob. "And I'd lose all sympathy of the jury if I tried."

"Mnnn—how much money was in the

murdered man's wallet when it was found on Todd?" asked the inspector.

"Two hundred and eighty-six dollars."

"Has that been admitted as evidence—without challenge by either you or Simpson?" asked the inspector.

"Yes. Simpson presented it, and I couldn't for the life of me find any reason to challenge the fact."

"Can you—" Inspector Ferguson, looked obliquely at his young guest— "can you prove that was *exactly* the sum the murdered man had in his wallet the last time he was seen alive?"

"Oh, that was established by two witnesses, early in the trial," said Rob Gale, helping himself to another glassful of lemonade. "Wanger, the foreman of the drilling crew and another one of the drilling crew, both testified they saw Pete Garland, the murdered man, count his money and heard him brag about how much of a roll he had. Both said it was two hundred and eighty-six dollars."

A faintly amused smile played on the inspector's thin lips as he re-lighted his cheroot. "Maybe if the jury were reminded of that important fact, it might offset some of the effect of Todd's being caught with the dead man's wallet on him."

"Don't worry," said Rob Gale, sardonically. "The prosecution won't let the jury forget it. Simpson keeps reminding the jury, every chance he gets. He's got that fact nailed down, cold."

"Cold—for Todd," said Inspector Ferguson, dryly.

"How do you figure that?" Rob Gale straightened up and looked sharply at the inspector. "For Pete's sake, don't say a thing like that unless you've got something to back it up. I'm just about at the screaming willies stage with frustration. I *know* Todd is innocent." He struck the table with the palm of his hand. "I know it just as sure as I am that this is a table. But how, in the name of heaven, can I make the jury believe it?"

"Well—" Inspector Ferguson stretched out his long legs and clasped his lean hands back of his head— "for one thing, a man who would commit cold-blooded murder for money, and money alone, would be likely to start spending some of it for a few shots of hard liquor to take the tension off his nerves. By all the evidence, Todd had the wallet in his possession for almost six hours before he was arrested. And for another thing—" the inspector's cheroot described a vague circle— "you already have my testimony, to the effect that when the sheriff arrested Todd, that Todd was walking on the path that *leads to the sheriff's office*. Now if I were sitting on that jury, trying a man for first degree murder, and the defendant testified—as Todd has done—that he was taking the wallet, which he had found on a sand bar while he was trout-fishing below the Red Bridge where the body was discovered—was taking the wallet, mind, to the sheriff's office, for the purpose of turning it in as lost property which he had found; then—"

"Wait, wait—" Rob Gale, held up his hand, excitedly. "It's even better than that. Todd went *twice* to the sheriff's office, trying to turn in that wallet. Once, when he walked in and found the sheriff out. And the second time when you saw him walking *toward* the sheriff's office when he was called back to the curb, where the sheriff snapped the handcuffs on him when Todd reached out to shake hands." The young lawyer snatched up his hat and left the porch in a bound. "Much obliged for the inspiration, Inspector!" he called over his shoulder and went racing back to Bightly in his car.

Inspector Ferguson leisurely finished his own glass of lemonade, then walked around to the side of his cottage, got into his own car and drove to Bightly. He stopped off at the railroad depot, to ask Ted Shaw, the station agent, how the night-fishing was around the Old Mill stretch on the Pine.

"Been kinda slow, for three nights running," said Ted disgustedly. "You'll be wasting good sleep until we get another big caddis hatch."

The inspector thanked him and turned back to his car. But the station agent followed him and handed him a scrawled note.

"Nearly forgot to give you this. Mat Emmes, that feller who drives the nitroglycerine truck and shoots oil wells, gave me this when he grabbed the four-fifteen, northbound. I was fixing to drive out to your place with it after I locked up tonight."

Inspector Ferguson took the note and read: "Just got a wire from the office. One

of our trucks blowed a big hole in the road, up near Manton. I gotta go up and see if I can find enough of the driver to identify. Yrs. trly, Mat Emmes. P. S.—Sort of keep your eye on my truck until I get back. M. E."

STILL on the trail of a good tip where the trout were biting, the inspector stopped next at the state trout hatchery, on the opposite edge of town. He walked into the cool office of the hatchery superintendent and made himself at home in a vacant chair. After waiting for five minutes or so for the superintendent to show up, the inspector got up and walked along a narrow corridor toward one of the rooms where the long wooden troughs of running spring water were in the process of hatching a late spawn of brook trout eggs.

As he passed a small laboratory, he glanced in and saw the superintendent seated on a high stool before a powerful microscope. Rob Gale was leaning anxiously over the superintendent's shoulder.

"Yes, these are what is locally known as shiner minnow scales, all right," the hatchery superintendent was saying. "No question about that."

"Are you sure—dead sure?" asked Rob Gale, breathlessly.

"I've spent twenty-five years at identifying fish scales," said the superintendent, waving to an array of enlarged microphotographs on the wall. "I wrote a book on the subject, once, that still sells a few hundred copies a year."

Just then Rob Gale caught sight of Inspector Ferguson.

"We've busted the wallet evidence, wide open," he exclaimed, exultantly. He pointed to a soiled desk blotter on the laboratory bench. "That's from the sheriff's desk—right where Todd said he laid the soggy wallet while waiting for the sheriff to come back. Remember how Todd said he had been carrying it in his fishing creel, where he had some dead minnows that he had been using with a spinner to catch rainbow trout?"

A nod was all that was needed to keep the young lawyer talking. "This is the picture. Todd finds the wallet on the sand bar, at the bend below the Red Bridge. He can see the bridge from where he is, so he wades upstream just far enough to see if somebody who had been still fishing up there might have dropped it out of his pocket. Nobody is there, so he back tracks—with the wallet still in his hand. Then he drops it into his fish creel, because it is dripping wet and he doesn't want to carry it in his hip pocket. He leaves the stream and takes a short-cut back to town, going straight to the sheriff's office. But the sheriff is out—on a call to investigate the finding of the murdered man's body lying in the pool just under the Red Bridge. So Todd lays the wallet on the sheriff's desk and waits. Fifteen minutes, he thinks. Then, he picks up the soggy wallet again and puts it back into his fish creel and starts out to hunt up the sheriff around town. About an hour later, he starts back to the courthouse and the jail, thinking, possibly, that he has missed the sheriff and that he may be back in his office. *That,* of course, was when he was arrested and the wallet taken from him."

Rob Gale reached down and lifted an old willow basket from the laboratory floor and lifted the lid. "Look; there are the dead minnows Todd was using for bait. Some of their scales worked off onto the soggy wallet—and from the wallet they were rubbed off on the sheriff's desk blotter. That proves Todd was telling the truth when he said he *had* been to the sheriff's office for the purpose of reporting his finding of the wallet."

"Hmmmm," said the hatchery superintendent, "now you're getting me to switch *my* ideas. Like everybody else around town, I was pretty much convinced it was a dead open-and-shut—Hmmm, guess I'd better not say what if I'm going to be mixed up in this as a witness."

WHILE picking up his mail at the post office, a few minutes after that, Inspector Ferguson discovered that pretty much everybody else in town still held the hatchery superintendent's former opinion of Todd's guilt. He overheard a group of roughly-dressed oil-well workers discussing the case.

"If this was out West, in the old days," growled a driller, "we wouldn't put the law to all the time and trouble of trying a low-down killer."

"Yeah, he kills Pete in cold blood for his dough," growled another. "And all this state will do to him is put him away in a nice, safe jail—for life they say. Yeah, but in six-eight years he'll be out and doing the same thing, first chance he gets."

Even Ted Dingle, the mild-mannered little grocer from whom Inspector Ferguson bought his week-end supplies just before driving back to his summer cabin, reflected the ugly resentment for the defendant of the murder trial in progress at the courthouse:

"Rob Gale is making a bad mistake, standing up before all his neighbors and trying to make Todd out as innocent," said Dingle, shaking his head. "Mighty bad start he's making as a lawyer, defending a murderer caught red-handed, like that. Honest folks will never trust him after this." The little grocer put the inspector's purchases into a large paper bag and pushed it across the counter. "I've always sided with the law," he said harshly, "but this time, I think the law is making it too easy for a cold-blooded murderer to get off scot free." He fixed his eyes intently on the inspector. "You've known Rob Gale for a long time, haven't you?"

"Yes, ever since he was a barefoot youngster who used to dig worms for me, at ten cents a hundred," said Inspector Ferguson with a faint nod.

Ted Dingle leaned over his counter and said in an urgent undertone, "Rob thinks the world of you, Mr. Ferguson, and would do anything you say. You better tell Rob that he better pull in his horns. I mean not try so blamed hard to make black look like white and talk the jury into letting that scoundrel go free. This is an oil town and I know how the people in it feel. They'll take the law into their own hands if this trial don't come out right."

"I don't agree with you, Mr. Dingle," said the inspector quietly. "The people of Bightly are too level-headed for that."

"That's where you're wrong," said the little grocer, tapping the counter with a forefinger. "Steady, sober, law-abiding people can stand so much. Around here, we're not used to locking our doors to keep thieves from stealing our money. And we've always moved around, day or night, without a thought about a murderer jumping out of the weeds and knocking our brains out with a rock and pitching our dead bodies off a bridge. We've had five—count 'em—five money robberies in the past two months, and nobody knows how many outboard motors have been stolen from summer cottages around here. That was bad enough to make even a man like me carry a pistol when he went out at night. Now, it's murder. I tell you, Mr. Ferguson, we've run out of patience. We've got the man who did it over there in the county jail. And either the law sends him to the penitentiary for life—or the folks around here will handle the matter in their own way."

Inspector Ferguson paid for his purchases and carried them out to his car, intending to drive straight back to his cabin. But on second thought he walked across the street to Rob Gale's new law office over the ice-cream parlor.

The young lawyer had several law books open on his table and was deeply absorbed in making notes.

"The case goes to the jury, about four tomorrow afternoon," he said, after recognizing his caller. Then, still without looking up made another note before adding, sardonically, "Just when—thanks to the tip you gave me, Inspector—I begin to see some hope of acquittal, I'm beginning to wonder if it wouldn't be better, all around, to let Todd get a life sentence."

"Hmmmn," said Inspector Ferguson. "Sounds like you've changed your mind, about there being at least a reasonable doubt in favor of your client."

Rob Gale looked up quickly; then shook

his head, emphatically. "I'm more convinced than ever of Todd's complete innocence, now that we have scientific proof that he *did* lay the murdered man's wallet on Sheriff Sumner's desk blotter. And I don't think a single member of the jury will believe that a man with a murder on his conscience would deliberately hunt for the sheriff for the purpose of handing over the one piece of evidence which could convict him."

Rob Gale laid aside his pencil and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. "But that's the big trouble, Inspector. I mean, that Todd will be safer in the penitentiary than as a free man."

"Yes, I heard the talk around town," admitted Inspector Ferguson. "And it's ugly. That's what I came up to see you about." He fixed steady gray eyes on his young friend. "What plans have you made for getting Todd safely out of town if you get an acquittal?"

"That's exactly the question I asked the sheriff," said Rob Gale.

INSPECTOR FERGUSON recalled overhearing the sheriff in the drug store asking for a box of cold tablets. The sheriff apparently had no objections to being overheard, for he announced that he was fighting a nasty summer cold, and as soon as the jury brought in its verdict that he was going home to bed and stay there for at least twenty-four hours. "I'll have double pneumonia again if I don't, sure as shooting, Doc," he had told the druggist.

Dryly, the inspector said, "I've got a pretty good idea of the answer you got from the sheriff."

"He told me to keep my nose out of his business," snapped Rob Gale. "Said he had been protecting life and property in this county for sixteen years and didn't need any suggestions from a fresh-hatched young lawyer who wasn't dry behind the ears yet."

From where he was standing at the window, Inspector Ferguson could look across the street. He saw two burly oil-well workers emerge from the hardware store. One of them carried a coil of new rope. His companion pulled a pint whiskey bottle from his pocket and took a long swig. The man with the rope playfully tossed a loop of it around his companion's neck and gave it a jerk. They both laughed. But what deepened the inspector's frown was that several townspeople, watching, laughed, too—one man pointing up the street toward the jail as he did so.

"If I were you, son," drawled the inspector, without taking his eyes off the scene below, "I'd get myself on record at state police headquarters." He glanced at his watch. "The telegraph office at the depot will be open for another fifteen minutes."

"I filed one, an hour ago," said Rob Gale, pushing a carbon copy of his telegram to state police headquarters across the desk. "But I already know what the answer will be—if I get one, that is. The state police superintendent will cite the law forbidding him to interfere with the authority of a county sheriff, unless specifically requested to do so by him."

"Good thing always to keep the record straight," said the inspector impersonally, but there was a tightening of his thin lips when he said it. He walked to the door before adding, "Put your head and back into it tomorrow, son. Remember, it's the responsibility of the law to protect the innocent just as much as to punish the guilty."

He went out. But instead of going to his car, the inspector walked up to the sheriff's office at the jail which adjoined the courthouse.

Sheriff Sumner was a heavy-jowled man in his middle fifties with an air of assured authority. He sat at his desk with his shirt sleeves rolled up exposing hairy, powerful wrists. His black felt hat was pushed well back from his shaggy, iron-gray brows.

"Be with you, soon's I write this telegram," he rumbled without looking up. When he had finished, he jammed the carbon copy face down on a spike file on his desk and thrust the original over his shoulder at one of his deputies. "Hustle this down to Ted Shaw before he closes up the depot. We'll show some of these hot-shot young lawyers around here who polices this county."

Then he looked up, to see Inspector Ferguson's unwinking gray eyes regarding him. "What's on your mind, Mr. Ferguson?"

INSPECTOR FERGUSON bit the end from his cheroot but did not light it, his eyes remaining fixed on the sheriff's. "It just occurred to me that you might be in

the frame of mind to swear in a few deputies," he remarked evenly. "You can count on me, if you do."

The sheriff leaned well back in his chair before saying, "Don't let the loose talk around town worry you, mister. My boys and me can handle any situation that comes up."

"You may be underestimating what you're facing," replied the inspector, unruffled.

"Look," said the sheriff, showing his impatience for the first time, "I've been handling this job for going on sixteen years; and the odds are six to five, all over town, that I'll be still doing it after Election Day in November." He waved a huge hand in dismissal. "You can go back to your summer house and forget it. Nobody is going to bother you, anyways. So why should you stick your nose in what ain't none of your business, in the first place?"

"Habit, I suppose," said Inspector Ferguson, contemplating the unlighted end of his cheroot. "I've spent thirty years, myself, helping the law to punish crooks and protect innocent people."

"That is still my business," said the sheriff pointedly; then seemed to remember that his tall, leathery caller had been spending his vacations in the bailiwick for the past twenty years and that it would be bad politics to incur the enmity of a man who personally knew every important personage in the county, as well as hundreds of plain people. "But you've done your share, Inspector. So, I hope you'll go back to your comfortable little place and let us younger fellows sweat this thing out. And by the way, Ted Shaw is getting some nice brook trout above the Sheep Ranch bend on a Mallard Quill fly. He doesn't want the news spread, so keep it under your hat."

"Thanks for the advice, Sheriff," said the inspector, and left without indicating just which bit of advice he meant.

Just before sundown that evening Inspector Ferguson fried two fat trout for his supper, but left the dishes unwashed and went out the back door of his cabin. He followed a little used track into the scrub oak for a quarter of a mile to where it led down into an abandoned marl pit.

There he found Mat Emmes' fire-engine red nitroglycerine truck parked at the far end, where an accidental explosion of the tall metal cans in the small boxlike body would dissipate its violence against the steep walls of the marl pit. He walked around the truck and gave each tire a testing kick to make sure they were all up to pressure.

He checked the gasoline tank and found it three-quarters full. Apparently satisfied with his inspection, he walked back to his cabin and washed his supper dishes.

Later, he turned on his small portable radio. Some official in Washington was speaking in measured tones: "We Americans can afford to be polite, even when some other countries are feeling their oats and talking loud and tough." Whoever it was had a good-natured hint of a chuckle in his delivery, as he went on to say, "After all, we *know* that we've got the A-bomb. And everybody else knows that we've got it. Other nations are claiming they've got it, too. Maybe they have. We haven't any corner on brains, here in America. But we *do* have the A-bomb; and I don't think anybody is going to crowd us to the point where we'll have to use it again. So let's sit tight with our cards right up against our vest buttons and let the loud and tough talkers do the worrying for both of us."

The inspector listened for the upstate weather forecast that followed. Colder and light rains were predicted—poor trout-fishing weather for a man who fished only for fun. He turned off the radio and went to bed, deciding that he would stay around the cabin and split some stove wood, and —well, do any other odd jobs that might need doing.

The next morning, the inspector clad in a light mackinaw jacket was out in his three-sided woodshed, expertly plying a double-bitted axe when the 'teen-aged son of a neighboring farmer appeared, carrying a small screen-wire cage.

"Mr. Ferguson, the big trout are hitting on grasshoppers now, Pop says. I got two dozen real big ones here."

With a twinkle in his eye, the inspector laid aside his axe and thrust a hand into his pocket. "What's the OPA ceiling price today, son? Still a dime?"

SMALL brown fingers closed over the coin, but the usual delighted smile was not forthcoming.

"Hmmmn," said the inspector with a mock frown. "Has the price gone up?"

"No, sir. It's just the same." The youngster looked regretfully at his dime. "But Pop says he won't take me and Bobby to town with him this afternoon, to see the cowboy picture. Pop says there's a lot of wild drinking that's been going on since last night and there might be trouble." Suddenly the boy lifted his eyes. "What happens to a murderer, Mr. Ferguson, when they give him a necktie party? I heard Pop telling Mom, but when I asked him he sent me out to bug the potato patch."

The inspector took out his pocket whetstone and gave the edge of his axe a touching up. "Is the movie show open on Monday afternoons?"

"Yes, sir. But Pop can't leave his work to drive to town, only on Saturday afternoons."

"Funny thing," mused the inspector, plucking the edge of his axe with his thumb. "Just occurred to me that I haven't seen a good cowboy picture, myself, in years. Do you suppose your father would let you and Bobby go with me, Monday afternoon?"

"What Monday?" asked the boy, almost breathless with delight.

"I mean *next* Monday—" Inspector Ferguson, then and there, would have been talking to himself if he had continued. Instead, he watched a pair of brown legs twinkling off down the sandy road.

Suddenly, the smile left the inspector's lips. He went into the house and changed into a gray business suit. He pulled open a bureau drawer, to get a handful of his cheroots to take with him, and saw the dull glint of his old .44 caliber short-barreled revolver. As a matter of habit he flipped the side catch and swung out the cylinder, to make sure it was loaded. For a brief moment he weighed the weapon in the palm of his hand; then laid it back into the drawer and went out to his car.

IT WAS two o'clock in the afternoon when he reached Bightly. The afternoon session of the trial had already begun. But it would have been impossible for anyone to work his way through the crowd packed around the courthouse entrance, much less hope to get inside of the already jammed courtroom itself. However, the sheriff, with an eye to the coming Fall election, had rigged up a temporary public address system for the edification of those unable to get inside. A large card hung from the outdoor loud speaker, bearing the announcement: "With the compliments of Sheriff Sumner. Provided at his *personal* expense. Remember me, November 4th."

A light cold drizzle was falling. Inspector Ferguson buttoned his oilskin rain coat to his chin, snapped down the brim of his hat all the way around, and leaned against the trunk of a tree. Rob Gale had already begun addressing the jury. His voice came harshly distorted through the loud speaker:

". . . Mark this well, gentlemen of the jury. Not a single eye witness has testified during this trial that he *saw* my client commit this dastardly deed. Every scrap of evidence which the court has permitted to become part of the record on which you—and you alone—are to decide the guilt or innocence of the accused has been *circumstantial*.

"I make no attempt to persuade you that my client was not very near to the scene of the crime, within an hour of the time the murdered man's body was discovered. The accused has freely admitted that fact himself. The accused has also freely admitted that, at the time of his arrest, he had the murdered man's wallet in his possession.

"In a few moments I shall demonstrate to you that the inferences drawn from these two freely-admitted facts by the prosecution are based on untenable assumptions. But first I take the liberty of reminding you of the most important fact of all that is involved in this trial. That fact is that the highest law of this land *places the burden of proof* of crime, allegedly committed by the accused, *upon the State*. The State must prove beyond all cavil or doubt that the accused actually committed the crime. And mark this well, the accused *does not have to prove* that he *did not* commit the crime. Under the highest law of this land, every man enjoys the absolute right to be judged innocent until incontrovertible proof of his guilt is presented under oath before a jury of his peers."

Inspector Ferguson, listening intently, unconsciously nodded his head. But an oil-well driller, in a dripping rubber raincoat that smelled of crude oil, squatting at the base of the tree, growled "The hell with

that double talk. Anybody with better than axle grease for brains knows he killed Pete."

One of the town barflies turned around on his seat on a pyramid of rusty iron cannon balls and offered the driller a pint bottle. "You said it, pal. Have one on me for that."

"Keep it," said the driller, curtly. "I'm working tonight. That stuff don't mix with a string of tools at the end of two thousand feet of cable."

The barfly winked knowingly. "Maybe some us'll be out, tonight, to borrow some rope off you."

"Dry up," snapped the driller. "I want to hear this guy's spiel." He glanced up at Inspector Ferguson, and said, "It's mugs like him that give us drillers a tough name. Every place we go, they come flocking along to pick up easy money that we sweat our guts out for."

Inspector Ferguson merely nodded; he also was trying to hear what Rob Gale was saying to the jury:

". . . You have heard a qualified expert, who has spent a lifetime in studying fish culture, right here in this locality, testify that the minnow scales he found on the sheriff's desk blotter were from exactly the same kind of shiner minnow which the defendant was carrying in his fish creel, when he was arrested. You also have heard the sheriff himself testify that he found the water-soaked wallet in that same fish creel, at the time he arrested my client."

The driller, squatted at the base of the tree where the inspector was standing, broke in with a comment, "What next will that guy drag in? Minnie scales—helluva lot they got to do with it!"

Rob Gale's voice came even more harshly from the badly adjusted loud speaker: ". . . Just ask yourselves this question, gentlemen of the jury. Doesn't that fact that the minnow scales found on the sheriff's blotter, and on the minnows still in my client's fish creel—on the table there—and these dried scales still clinging to the murdered man's wallet indicate a very strong probability that the fish scales on the sheriff's blotter *were rubbed off the wallet* when my client placed it there while waiting to turn it over to the custody of the sheriff as lost property which he had found. Does this act of impeccable honesty square with the prosecution's feeble attempt to prove that robbery was the motive of the crime for which my client stands accused?"

The driller nudged Inspector Ferguson's knee with his elbow for his attention. "That's the first hard sense that guy has spieled yet. Take me, if I'd conked Pete with a dornic for his wad, I sure wouldn't be hanging around no country cop's hoosegow with it on me." He shook his head, mystified. "Twice this mug Todd walks smack into the tank, looking for this big-mouthed country cop, like he was a cousin. Either he was screwy or he is telling the truth. It beats me, yet, which."

A sharp gust of wind sent the insecurely fastened loud speaker tumbling from its position. A quick-thinking driller caught it in his hands as it fell. The thing kept on rasping away; but from its new position on the courthouse steps—where the driller had placed it—Rob Gale's voice was no longer intelligible to Inspector Ferguson.

NOT entirely reluctantly, he walked away from the courthouse and on up the one main street of Bightly to a small restaurant. An elderly woman came out of the kitchen, and said, "I'm sorry, but all

my help have gone to the trial. So we won't be able to serve a regular supper tonight. As a matter of fact," she added, upon recognizing her customer, "I'm going to lock up before the jury brings in a verdict. There's bound to be bad trouble if the jury doesn't send that Todd fellow to the penitentiary, for life."

Inspector Ferguson ordered two cups of

coffee. He drank the first quickly to counteract the chill he had contracted, out there in the cold drizzle, but took his time over his second cup.

The elderly proprietress kept vigil at the front window with her eyes fixed on the crowd on the courthouse lawn. Suddenly she pulled down the roller curtain over the glass of the restaurant door, and said, apprehensively, "I'll have to ask you to leave, Mr. Ferguson. The crowd is breaking up, like the jury had gone out. If they get in here and start drinking coffee, I won't be able to close up in time."

Inspector Ferguson left, and heard the night latch click behind him. He walked to his car, parked in front of Rob Gale's office, and started the motor; then switched on the car heater fan for warmth. He looked at his watch. It was just a few minutes to four.

THE first of the slowly disintegrating crowd from the courthouse lawn came straggling down the sidewalk. He lowered his car window a few inches, to catch any possible scraps of comment:

"Betcha four bits the jury is out all night," one man said to his companion.

"Betcha, if they free him," countered the other, "the jury ain't out more'n an hour or two—just long enough to make it look like they talked over all the evidence, for and against."

"In that case," said the first man, "we'd better grab us a couple of quick shots in here"—nodding to the tavern they were passing—"because I hear, if they spring that guy Todd, the sheriff is going to close the town, tight, to head off the trouble."

"He shoulda thought of that before," said the other, and laughed callously. "It would take twenty tough state cops with tear gas guns to break it up when it starts." The two men entered the tavern.

With a stern set to his mouth, Inspector Ferguson rebuttoned his raincoat and stepped out of his car and faced the cold, slanting rain on his way back to the courthouse.

The three taverns of the town, as he passed them, were rapidly filling with men who had stood in the rain for more than two hours listening to the trial over the outside loud speaker. They were not talking loud but in a rumbling undertone. Very little beer was on the bar, the inspector noticed; mostly straight whiskey.

He found it impossible to wedge his way even inside the front entryway of the courthouse. It was jampacked all the way up the stairs and along the corridor to the courtroom. The crowd inside was waiting to hear the verdict of the jury.

"You ain't got a chance, getting even inside this door," said a farmer, when the inspector tried to open it. "Folks is packed in here so tight a woman what fainted, halfway up the hall, is still out on her feet, and no way of getting her to fresh air."

The inspector walked around to the rear and tried the small door there. But it was locked, and his insistent pounding on it brought no response. He continued on around to the jail annex. The iron gate in the sixteen-foot jail yard wall was locked with a heavy log chain and a large iron padlock. Through the one-inch square steel bars he could see Rob Gale's car parked right at the jail rear exit. He felt a little better—for a moment, at least. Then he noticed that Rob's right rear tire was soft, as if it had a slow leak.

That left only the public entrance to the sheriff's office as a last means of getting inside, to warn Rob Gale and the sheriff of the growing ugly temper of the mob. The locked front door rattled flimsily under the inspector's vigorous shaking of the knob. Eventually a jail trusty shambled to the door; but without opening it waved him away.

Standing in the rain, the inspector took out his pocket notebook and wrote, "Situation outside very serious. Check your right rear tire, and get your client out of town and under protection of state police, soon as freed. Ferguson."

HE FOLDED the note lengthwise and poked it halfway through the crevice between the door and the frame, where it stuck. Then he shouted to make himself heard by the trusty through the glass: "Take my note to Rob Gale or the judge. Hurry, it's important!"

"Can't. I'm locked in," came back the muffled answer from the trusty, who turned away and vanished down the jail corridor.

The inspector started walking backwards,

looking up at the open courtroom windows which had been raised to provide a little ventilation for the stiffling interior. But the windows were solidly blocked by unfamiliar backs. Finally, he picked up a stone a little larger than a marble, intending to go back to the jail door and retrieve his note and toss it up through an open window, on the bare chance that somebody would get it and pass it along to Rob Gale or the judge.

But he met two hard-faced men approaching him on the walk to the jail entrance. One of them held his note in his hand.

The man with the note stopped squarely in the inspector's path and poked the note at him.

"We been watching you nosing around, trying to get inside, old-timer, to peddle this. Take a hunk of friendly advice and go home before you get hurt trying to stop something you can't."

Inspector Ferguson almost smiled, thinking what a wide open shot he had at the man's jaw, and how easy a heel planted in the other man's groin would put him out of action, too. But he also realized that nothing would be gained by it, so he turned away and walked back to his car.

But instead of entering his car, he started to walk up a flight of stairs to the local telephone exchange, intending to call the state police barracks at Manton, in a last minute effort to persuade the sergeant in charge there to send down at least one squad car equipped with tear gas. Instead, the same man who had accosted him in front of the sheriff's office seized his arm and spun him around without relinquishing his grip.

"We're still watching you, old-timer. Now get in your car and beat it. You ain't sending out no telephone calls to nobody. See?"

What happened next was a little too fast for the human eye to follow. The inspector plucked the man's hand from his arm with one hand, then gave it a quick twist. As he felt the bone snap, he hit the second man charging in on him in the pit of his stomach with his heel; then measured him and laid him out, cold, on the wet sidewalk with a back-hand blow with the edge of his hand.

Still breathing normally, the inspector mounted the stairs and walked into the telephone exchange.

"Get me the police barracks at Manton, Miss. Make it as quick as you can."

"I'm sorry, sir," said the operator on duty. "All the lines went out of order. It just happened not ten minutes ago."

"Ring up the judge at the courthouse, then," said Inspector Ferguson.

The girl shook her head. "I said *all* the lines are out. I can't even call my relief, to find out why she is an hour late. She's jammed into the courthouse, I expect, and can't get out."

Inspector Ferguson slowly descended the stairs. Several men were carrying a limp man into the tavern next door, followed by another with a broken wrist who was nursing it against his chest with his uninjured hand.

Unnoticed, the inspector went to his car and drove back to his cabin, a mile north of town, on the road to Manton. He switched on his small radio for the five o'clock news broadcast and started changing into dry clothes.

". . . The tense situation upstate at Bightly, caused by local ill feeling over a possible acquittal of the defendant in the murder trial now in its final day, has greatly eased," the newscaster was saying, glibly. "A state police headquarters spokesman reports that it was in telephone communication with Sheriff Sumner at Bightly, shortly before noon today. The sheriff insisted that he had the situation well under control, and that no state police assistance was needed. A cold, driving rain, the sheriff reports, has driven indoors all the population of Bightly and the streets are deserted. 'It is the quietest Saturday I've ever seen in Bightly,' the sheriff is reported to have told state police headquarters."

The inspector built a wood fire in his heating stove and hung his damp clothes on the chair back to dry. He also set a bucket of water on top of the stove for a hot foot bath to forestall a possible cold.

The rain increased to a steady downpour, and by five-thirty it was almost dark outside, though at that time of year daylight usually continued until well past seven. Then cars started passing his cabin at increasingly short intervals. Farmers, possibly, thought the inspector, hurrying home to their evening milking from Bightly. That pointed strongly to the fact that the jury had re-

turned a verdict—of not guilty, more than likely. The jury would be out still, if——

The inspector's mental speculations were interrupted by the back door flying open. Todd, the murder trial defendant, his thin cotton shirt clinging to his body, staggered in with Rob Gale slung over his shoulder. Rob's face was gray with pain.

"Caught his foot under a root stump in the swamp," panted Todd, easing his burden down onto the inspector's cot. "Don't know whether it's broke or just badly sprained. Got any hot water? I'll need a bucket of cold, too, and a couple of big towels, for hot and cold compresses."

All the while Todd was talking he was stripping off Rob Gale's shoes; then his clothes, until he had the injured man snugly wrapped in a wool blanket.

Rob Gale unclinched his teeth and said hoarsely, "Don't bother with me, Mr. Ferguson. Take Todd to the police barracks at Manton. And, for God's sake, get moving. The verdict was for us and the mob will be here any moment."

Unconcerned — outwardly, at least — Todd, the object of the mob's vengeance, dipped a large towel in the bucket of hot water on the stove, wrung it out and deftly wrapped it around Rob Gale's already badly swollen ankle.

"Just sweat it out, pal," he said soothingly. "Soon's the heat gets in, I'll slap a cold one on. Pretty soon, we'll have the swelling down, so's we know whether it's a break or just a bad sprain."

"Don't be a fool," Rob snapped at him. "Get out of here with Mr. Ferguson. I'll be okay. It's you they're after. They mean to kill you. Can't you understand?"

Rob Gale broke off in a fit of coughing.

"He's had the flu, bad for three days," said Todd, holding Rob's head down on the pillow with the palm of his hand. "He had a bad chill in the swamp, after a tire went flat and we left the car and started cross-country to get yours. Now his fever is up."

"Get going, you two," gasped Rob Gale.

Inspector Ferguson came in with a hot cup of coffee. Todd lifted Rob Gale's head and said, soothingly, "Drink this, pal."

Grimly, Inspector Ferguson went to his small bureau and slipped his old short-barreled .44 revolver into the side pocket of his rain-proof fishing jacket. Then he walked over to the fireplace and picked up the ring of keys which fitted Mat Emmes's nitroglycerine truck that was parked back of the cabin in the old marl pit.

"I'll be back in five minutes, or so," he said to Todd. "There are dry clothes in the other room for both of you. Get Rob dressed, good and warm. We'll take him with us to Manton, where we can get a doctor."

The inspector strode out the back door, down the old logging trail to the marl pit. It was almost dark now, but the fire-engine red nitroglycerine truck stood out strikingly in the misty gloom.

The engine caught with the first revolution of the starter. Todd was waiting at the back door with Rob Gale in his arms, wrapped in a thick woolen blanket.

"What the hell?" said Todd, in astonishment, at the sight of the brilliant red truck with the large NITROGLYCERINE—EXPLOSIVES! signs painted on it.

"Get Rob in, and climb in yourself," said Inspector Ferguson. "When we start for Manton in this, nobody is going to stop us."

The truck rolled out on the gravel road to Manton, both windshield wipers going, but barely able to maintain a hundred foot range of visibility. Fifteen miles per hour, the speedometer indicated.

"Step on it, step on it," said Rob Gale, querulously.

Inspector Ferguson switched on the headlamps but continued driving at the same cautious rate.

Todd, meanwhile, had been watching intently the rear view mirror projecting from his side of the cab. Without turning his head he said out of the side of his mouth: "Two pairs of headlights coming up, fast, behind us—*Oops!* the first one hit that big puddle you eased around back there. Did *he* nearly go into the ditch!"

INSPECTOR FERGUSON pulled over as far as possible to the right and eased up on the accelerator until the truck was hardly making fifteen miles per hour. The first of the two overtaking cars flashed by, followed almost immediately by the second.

Rob Gale clutched Inspector Ferguson's arm, and whispered hoarsely, "That's some of them! I recognized that crumpled left rear fender. It was the car they had block-

ing the jail yard driveway. I had to ram through the little white lawn fence to get by it. Turn off at the next crossroad. Maybe we can lose them."

For a moment or two, the inspector was too busy dodging two large pools of water in the road to reply. And even then only after he had held his breath after feeling the left front wheel drop into a water-filled chuck hole, "That's why we don't dare make any more speed," he finally said. "We're carrying a hundred quarts of nitroglycerine in the back. That stuff doesn't like getting jolted."

"Those two cars are stopping ahead," announced Todd, in a grimly hopeless tone. "Okay, you two; unload here and gimme that wheel. If they try to take me, it'll sure as hell be the last thing they'll ever try. Come on, I said, *unload!*"

"Sit tight, son," said Inspector Ferguson. "We're taking Rob to the doctor in Manton. Forget anything else you're thinking about. And if I do have to stop up there, keep down out of sight and your finger off the trigger of this." He handed over his short-barreled .44 revolver, adding, "Keep your hair on, and don't shoot until I yell 'shoot.' Then put your first bullet through the windshield—but save the last one for yourself."

"Okay, fellas, I'm ready," said Todd, taking the gun. He gave Rob Gale's inert arm a grateful squeeze. "You're the whitest guy I ever met, pal. Just remember I said it, will you?"

Inspector Ferguson drove slowly up to the crossroad. A flashlight was wig-wagging in the middle of the road. He stopped the truck, lowered the window and said sternly, "What the devil do you mean by passing me hell-bent, back there? This is an explosives truck, loaded with enough nitroglycerine to flatten this whole country for a mile around."

The man with the flashlight in one hand —and a deer rifle in the other—stepped closer and flashed his light full in the inspector's face. Then he called back over his shoulder, "This is them, all right. We got 'em, boys!"

Several armed men in dripping raincoats moved closer to the truck.

Still in that same stern tone, Inspector Ferguson said, "If there is a tool pusher among you, let him step up and take a look at what truck this is."

"Back, you crazy fools!" one of the armed men exclaimed, "That's Mat Emmes's nitro-truck. And she's *loaded!*"

"Okay, hand over the guy that killed Pete Garland, and we'll let you go," said the torch holder.

"Sorry, boys," said Inspector Ferguson, clipping off each word like a bolt cutter working on a wire-mesh fence. "Everybody in this truck is headed for either Manton or the Hereafter. And if it's to the Hereafter, every man jack of you goes with us. Are you ready, Todd, to put a bullet in that can of soup between your feet?"

"Ready, Cap," said Todd, grimly.

"Now, boys," said the inspector, addressing the dripping armed men blocking the road, "I'm starting for one of the other of

those places. If you're tired of life, come along with us."

Just as the truck started moving again, one of the armed men raised his rifle, threateningly. But another man struck up the muzzle and wrenched the gun from him.

"Let that old devil go," he snarled. "He's a cold killer. I seen what he did with his bare hands this afternoon to two men half his age. He'll blow up that dam' load of soup and us with it, outta pure meanness if you cross him."

"That is my intention, son," nodded Inspector Ferguson as he drove slowly past the speaker, completely ignoring the two men who had to jump aside to avoid getting

knocked down by the truck bumper. "Good night, gentlemen."

CONVERSATION inside the truck cab did not revive until the crossroad was several miles behind. Then Todd said with a dry laugh that was almost a croak, "Cap, that's the first time in my life—and my last, I hope!—I ever saw a bunch of men scared stiff by polite talk."

"Son," drawled the inspector, "when you've got your enemies on the spot where they have to commit suicide to kill you, they cool down pretty fast. A man can afford to be polite then."

Rob Gale had begun to snore. Inspector Ferguson looked anxiously at him. But Todd said, "He's okay, Cap. The fever's broke. He's just dead for sleep over sitting up every night for almost a week, doping out how to make the jury see it my way."

"I heard only part of his talk to the jury from outside," commented the inspector. "I guess I missed the real fireworks."

"You know, that's a funny thing," said Todd, as if speaking of something he had seen in a moving picture. "He didn't let off any fireworks. He just went ahead picking the mortar out from between the bricks of the prosecutor's case, a little hunk at a time. When he started, I was in a cold sweat and my legs shaking like liver. And I don't even remember when I stopped feeling scared. But, somewhere along the line, I see one of the jurors look my way. It was the first time one of them had looked me in the eye without looking away, like he was seeing a dead man. All the time, Rob kept picking his little pieces of mortar. So when the jury walked out—honest, the palms of my hands weren't sweating any more."

Rob Gale stirred and mumbled drowsily, "Save the bouquets for my funeral, gentlemen." Gingerly he straightened up and shifted his damaged ankle to a more comfortable position with his hands. Then said half-jokingly to Inspector Ferguson, "Just give me clients who can look a jury in the eye, like Todd did, and I can win my cases every time, just by reciting the multiplication table!"

They had reached the pavement which extended five miles out of Manton. Inspector Ferguson increased his speed to thirty miles per hour. When they reached the outskirts of town, he coasted to a gentle stop on the wide gravel apron in front of the state police barracks.

A sergeant and four troopers were just about to pull away in a patrol car. The sergeant was listening to a short but broad-shouldered man giving staccato directions: "Now, my nitro truck is parked back of the little fishing cabin, a mile this side. See? It's loaded with a hundred quarts of nitro. The guy who is dropped off there is to stop any of the mob from getting to it—Hell!" roared Mat Emmes, breaking off. "That's my truck, right there. And the old bandit grabber, himself, behind the wheel!"

"I've got Todd and Rob Gale with me, Sergeant," said Inspector Ferguson over his half-lowered window. "Rob has a badly sprained ankle. Can you scare up a doctor for him?"

"Unload, boys," said the sergeant with a deep sigh of relief. "This is another time the customers come to us, instead of us having to go after them."

TWO troopers carried Rob Gale into the barracks. Mat Emmes fell in step with Inspector Ferguson, exclaiming, "By time, this is the happeningest day I've seen since the time I was up on a hill, five miles off, and saw a thousand quarts push a warehouse roof clear off this earth. Judas Priest, but this has been the derndest day! I'll tell you all about it, soon's the boys fix you up with some hot coffee."

Mat kept right on talking while Inspector Ferguson stretched his lank legs in comfort under a spotlessly scrubbed mess table and sipped steaming black coffee. "I gets up here, like I said in my note I left for you with Ted Shaw, to find a few hunks of this guy who's got blowed up with his truck, ten mile the other side of town, on a back road. But what do I do but run smack into him, trying to hop the same train I was getting off of.

" 'No you don't, mug,' I says, putting a wristlock on him and hauling him back off. 'You ain't lamming outta here until I get some facts to wire back to the office.' He puts up a wild fight. But by the time he breaks loose, the train is gone, and the sergeant, here, pinches us both for disturbing the peace and hauls us out here to his hoosegow."

"That's twice, in one day, I've had my customers come C.O.D.," drawled the sergeant; then was all seriousness the next moment as he looked up from the report he was writing, to add, "Your friend Todd might be interested to know that we've got locked up the man who killed Pete Garland."

"Yeah, this same gink I pulled off the train," cut in Mat. "Seems he was sneaking through Bightly about midnight, the day before that guy's body was found below the bridge. This driver knew he was breaking the law, driving through an incorporated town with a load of bang-soup, so he was moving."

MAT EMMES took a quick sip of coffee, and continued. "Well, right there at the Bightly bridge approach this stiff Pete Garland—a roughneck sinking No. 3 Well for the Moreland outfit—wobbles out of the weeds. Whammy, and there's a big splash in the creek—the truck has knocked him overboard."

"That must have been when his wallet went out of his pocket, too," remarked Inspector Ferguson.

Mat grunted, but went right on with his story. "Our driver is a new man. See?" he explained. "What he's got back of him has been working on his nerves for several days. So he goes to pieces, inside. Don't stop like he should. He drives all night, like the devil was after him. Gets lost, way back up in the swamp country. Been chain-smoking cigarettes all the time, which is against company rules. See?"

Mat tossed his hand in one of his characteristically dramatic gestures. "He gets careless. One live butt blows back in and goes down the crack between the seat and the back cushion. Finally the dope gets one whiff of burning upholstery stuffing. Jams on his brakes, and starts running. Mile off, he is, when, whammy, there's a helluva hole where the truck was."

"Just a minute, Mat. Just a minute," said Inspector Ferguson. "Pete Garland was knocked off Bightly bridge somewhere around midnight, six weeks ago—"

"The hell you say!" exclaimed Mat Emmes, completely flabbergasted. "And the office only got around to checking up now. What's one truck more or less to them guys!"

"That's right, Mat," said the sergeant, glancing up from his report. "Also the nitroglycerine truck explosion happened six weeks ago. Your driver has been holed up, back up in the swamp country, working for old man Nostrand, skinning cedar posts."

One of the state troopers said, "No wonder I hunted for three weeks around that blast hole and couldn't find even a man's belt-buckle for a clue."

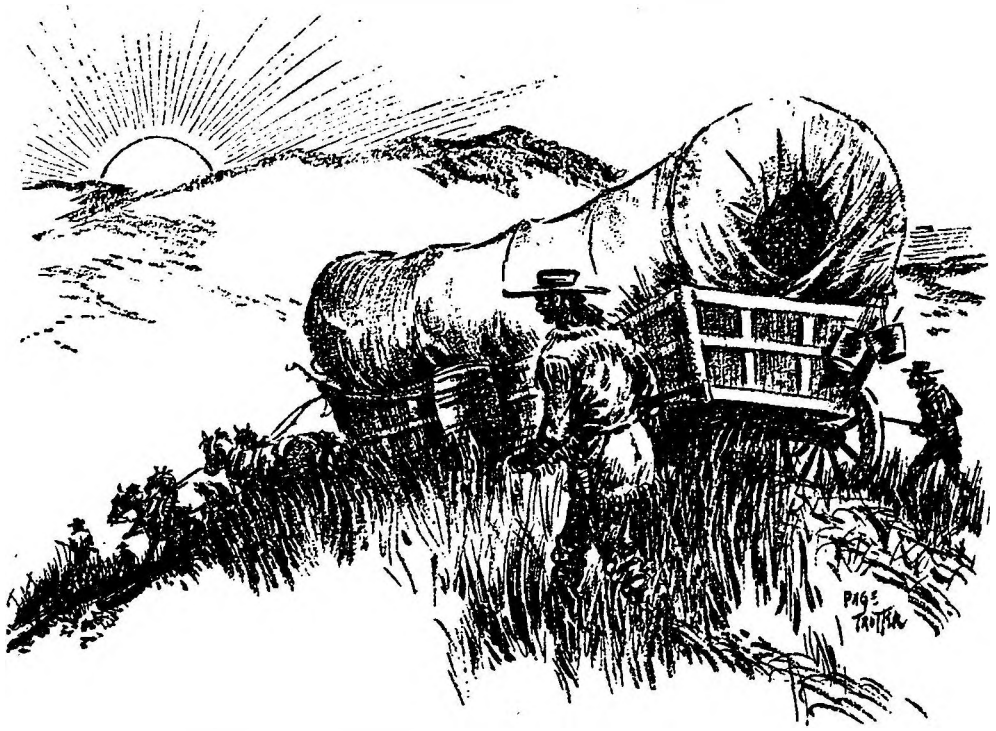
The sergeant picked up his report pad and said, "Excuse me, gentlemen, while I bat this off on the teletype. State headquarters has ants in its pants, waiting to hear that you people are safe." He turned at the doorway to the communications room, adding pointedly for Mat Emmes's special edification: "There's a nice, deep gravel pit around back that we use for a pistol range. I'd feel a lot more comfortable if you'd move that red truck of yours down into it."

Rob Gale, with his sprained ankle supported on another chair, but otherwise looking fit as a fiddle, grinning ruefully at his ex-client, Todd. "I guess we did it the hard way."

Inspector Ferguson pulled out a long cheroot and touched Mat's arm as the well shooter was getting ready to move his truck. "How about a match, Mat?"

"Ever see a real well shooter who carried matches?" inquired Mat Emmes, in a manner that answered his own question, and went out.

The Rances—Old Dab, His Seven Sons and One Daughter—Had Come a Long Way to Shinnegar Valley



THE COURTING OF HOYT MAGLOON

By JIM KJELGAARD

THE head of Shinnegar Valley sat in a footy little northern pond that even the mallards passed when they tucked their goods under their feathers, quacked a good-bye to their summer nests, and coursed on rattling wings down to where there wasn't any winter. But those same mallards flew a little faster, and quacked a little gladder, when they came to where Shinnegar pours its waters into the ocean. They could pass even an uncommonly hard winter there. And Shinnegar was so wide that, it's said, some of the Indians born along the broad river that chuckled down its middle lived out a full life without ever visiting the mountains that flanked either side.

But they didn't belong to the band led by Chief Paul. Those renegades hunted ducks in their northern resting grounds, and in winter their fires might spot and the smell of roasting mallards scent the ocean shore. When they got tired of hunting the buffalo that grunted along the chuckling river, they'd go to the mountains on either side and hunt elk for awhile. Chief Paul's band hunted a lot of things, including the white men who came in to settle Shinnegar when they discovered it was just as rich as it was big. But this isn't Chief Paul's story; he has to be mentioned only because he was

part of the things found in Shinnegar Valley.

And he was not the most important, in spite of the fact that maybe one in ten of the bearded, buck-skinned white men who came into Shinnegar to trap the beaver that swarmed along its little creeks, or to pan the gold in the headwaters of those same creeks, screamed out their last at one of his torture fires, or had a split second to be surprised when an arrow nicked into their breast. Not that some of the white men didn't deserve it, or that their ends didn't bear out the biblical death by the sword. Few men are angels. But seven out of ten of those who came into Shinnegar were as far from the celestial chorus as men ever get. The other thirty per cent, less burdened with mortal sin, probably would just as soon have been.

They all came to get as much as they could of Shinnegar's treasure. But of all the men who came, only two understood the most precious gift it had to offer.

THE RANCES, old-bearded Dab, and his seven tall sons, came a long way to Shinnegar. Drawn by four horses, their covered wagon had creaked over mountains and down into valleys. It had floated across rivers, lurched into and been yanked out of swamps, sunk to its hubs in the soft plains earth, been battered by snow, wind, rain, and hail. But still, while old Dab and his seven sons walked to the side or ahead with their long rifles under their arms, the horses pulled patiently on.

Anything would have been patient if it was guided by the same being who held the reins of those four horses. Imagine a black, lustrous and velvety midnight, with a soft moon too lazy to climb over the horizon, and five million glowing stars adding their light to that of the moon, and you'll have a fair idea of Sally Rance. She was eighteen, and brunette, and all the things that dreams are made of glowed in her brown eyes. But she was a throwback. Returning to the English moors from which old Dab's ancestors had come a long way to America, nothing but sons had ever been born to the men of his family. However, if that record had to be smirched, it was well to have it done by a daughter like Sally.

She sat on the wagon seat, holding the four horses' reins in her slim hands, while her gray-bearded father and her seven black-bearded brothers flanked the advance. It was a very long while, with many storms behind them, until they finally wound out of some mountains to strike Shinnegar Valley in its luscious center. Tall grasses bent their Lorelei forms about the horses' necks. A herd of buffalo snorted at them, and resumed grazing. In the far distance three puffs of smoke drifted lazily into the sky. Old Dab halted, leaning on his long rifle while he surveyed the land of promise that opened before him. His seven sons spread out, with Guy and John lurking behind the wagon—it was just as well to make sure nobody took you from the rear.

Old Dab liked what he saw. It was not the first land of promise that had unfolded before his eyes. He had seen them all the way from the Atlantic coast. But this one seemed to beckon, to have for him what he had dreamed of all his life, to embody within itself all the visions that his wild soul had ever conjured. He knew, when he saw it, that Shinnegar Valley was the rightful and just home of the Rances.

Even as old Dab looked, the five sons who stood beside and beyond him—Peter, Anthony, Alfred, Dabney, and Cotton—swung to face the moving grass. They didn't raise their rifles because there was nothing to shoot at—you cannot kill moving grass. Then a man—a pale, bearded, buck-skinned man—rose out of the grass and held his rifle high above his head to show that he had no intention of shooting. With his rifle still held high, he advanced towards the Rances and approached old Dab.

"My name's Searles!" he said, while the terror he had found in Shinnegar Valley still colored his face with its ghostly hue. "I'm John Searles! My God, go back! Go back! Chief Paul's on the rampage down there, and the white men you'll meet are worse than Chief Paul! Go back while there's time!"

"Well, well, well," said old Dab Rance.

THE RANCES were very kind. They told John Searles that he could go along with them. They said he'd be safe enough. They had come a very long way to get into Shinnegar Valley, and, anyway, they did not believe that there was anything so terrible down there. They said that they were peace-

loving people who invariably minded their own business, and as such they expected to get along fine. But terror sinks its fangs so deeply into some men that the scars never can be erased. When John Searles affirmed that nothing could persuade him to go back, the Rances pointed out their wagon tracks, said they stretched eastward, opined that it was as safe as any way for a man to travel, and went down into Shinnegar Valley.

Sally, who had driven the four black horses so far that she knew the least whim and mood of each, held the reins loosely while the wagon crushed Shinnegar Valley's rich grasses beneath it, and the horses lowered their heads from time to time to get a nip. But that, as any good driver knows, is the prerogative of horses. They work very hard, and are entitled to any small rewards they can gather while working.

Old Dab and his seven unexcitable sons walked beside, behind, or beyond, the wagon. But they still carried their guns in the crooks of their arms because, obviously, it was a waste of effort and a foolish thing to raise them when there was nothing to shoot at. And Shinnegar Valley continued to awe them with its richness and goodness. Tall grasses, enough to graze all the cattle they had ever seen, bent under the wagon's wheels and were eaten by the horses—they were growing fat. Buffalo scarcely bothered to move out of their way. Antelope, their white, tailless rears flashing in the sun, bounded aside. Gray wolves came up to sniff curiously at the scent left by the passing horses.

But, in all this wealth, there was still something missing. It was nothing tangible, nothing upon which they could lay their fingers. But the Rances' last home had been in Kentucky. Blue mountains had shimmered around them, inviting all with a soul to come and explore. They had gazed into haze-shrouded valleys, and had seen hawks swooping far below them. The Rances knew that they were trampling wealth untold beneath their feet, and crushing it with their wagon. But, though they could do without wealth, they could not do without at least the sight of a mountain—an everlasting reminder that a man could climb if he wanted to.

It was not until the ninth day after they descended into Shinnegar Valley that they sighted their next mountains. It was then that old Dab leaned on his rifle, satisfied, while he thought of all the things he'd seen since coming into Shinnegar.

There was grass, and more grass, and a few trees, and buffaloes, and white men with the eyes of wolves who had come for brief moments to sit before the Rances' camp fire while they tasted Sally's cooking. Also, but only in their minds, they had tasted something else when they looked at Sally. It was on the nights when such visitors came that one of the Rances had always lingered sleepless around the wagon, with his rifle cocked and raised. But nothing ever came of it. Old Dab walked on, while his seven sons spread around the wagon and Sally clucked to the team.

BY NIGHTFALL they were much nearer the mountains, almost able to distinguish individual trees in the green forests that clothed them, and a great peace had come over all the Rances. They camped on top of a knoll—it was just as well not to stay in a swale or gulley because anyone at all might be surprised there. When their meal was finished they lay strategically around the wagon to sleep. It was midnight when old Dab came awake, and, feeling his uneasiness, his seven sons came awake with him.

Out in the darkness shadows were moving. They were more an aura than a distinct presence, things that could not quite be seen or heard. But they could be felt. Old Dab said:

"Sally, break out a keg of bullets, and stay down in the wagon box."

He shot into the night, cradling the stock of his long rifle affectionately against his cheek and squeezing the trigger. A yell arose, and things whistled out of the grasses to thud like sporadically falling rain against the canvas cover of the wagon. Old Dab's sons deployed to fight off Chief Paul and his warriors. They fought and shot well, and Anthony swore when an arrow pierced his favorite hat.

Then, from the other side of the warriors, another rifle spoke sharply. It was only a flash and a noise in the darkness, but, added to the Rances' sharpshooting, it shook the nerve of Chief Paul and his remaining warriors. Finally, instead of snapping bows and

streaking arrows in the darkness, there remained only a voice.

"Hall-oo! I'm coming in!"

"Come in," said old Dab Rance.

A young, dark, and incredibly lithe man glided out of the night into the defensive circle. He paused by the wagon, and said, "My name is Hoyt Magloon."

Old Dab re-primed his rifle and leaned against the wagon box, beside Hoyt Magloon. He closed his eyes, and upon their closed lids were flashed pictures of his thoughts. Especially, old Dab Rance thought of the men he had seen.

He had seen them all the way from the mud hut in Virginia where he had lived with his first wife, to the cabin in the Kentucky hills where he had abode with his second, clear across to this wild Shinnegar Valley. And they were not beautiful or sentimental pictures that old Dab conjured up while his seven sons stood ready to repel another attack should Chief Paul make one. Most of the men old Dab had seen were traveling alone, and not all of them had wolf's eyes and a panther's insides. But, without exception, all of them had been haunted by a desperate fear and gnawed by a terrible foreboding. And they all did foolish things—things like coming to Shinnegar Valley. All of them, as though that was their excuse for living, thought that they had to get their hands on a lot of fur or a lot of gold.

But old Dab Rance, who as men go had lived a very long while, knew that they were all wrong. All the gold or all the furs a man could carry was just so much trash to him if he could get nothing else. But most men did not understand that, and because they did not they were capable of terrible as well as foolish things. Of course, old Dab was not thinking of the tame men who lived along the seacoast, and tilled the same fields every day and went to the same tavern every night. He was thinking of wild men—such as would come to Shinnegar Valley.

"So you're Hoyt Magloon?" he asked, opening his eyes.

"Yup," said Hoyt Magloon. "And when I heard your rifles I said to myself, 'Hoyt, you had best go down there, load up your gun, and shoot a couple of times at Chief Paul's warriors. Then you'd best tell those travelers to turn back east before they get themselves massacreed.' But I see you ain't gonna turn east."

"That's right," said old Dab Rance. "How many white men are in here?"

"Fifty, last count," said Hoyt Magloon. "May be less now. Chief Paul's been raidin'."

"How long you been here?"

"Six months, off and on."

"What do you aim to do here?"

"I—"

BUT just then the canvas that covered the wagon box rustled. It was a soft and wispy little sound, as though something soft and wispy had brushed against it, and a second later Sally Rance jumped over the tailboard to land easy-like on her moccasins. The ten million stars that glowed in the sky seemed to glow just a little brighter and twinkle a bit more as she walked around the wagon box to stand with her head just touching old Dab's shoulder. And there in the darkness Sally Rance smiled at Hoyt Magloon.

Tall and lean he stood before her, with his rifle in the crook of his arm and one hand on the hunting knife in his belt. And, though he moved not one inch over the two yards that separated them, and Sally Rance stayed by her father, they seemed to stand side by side in the darkness. But only old Dab Rance and the ten million much-older stars saw that. Sally Rance and Hoyt Magloon—they just felt it.

"I—" said Hoyt Magloon.

"Never mind," old Dab Rance said.

He sounded very tired, and Dabney and John came to stand beside him. Their rifles still were not raised. But they were gripped hard, and ready to raise in the twinkling of an eye, because now there was something real to shoot at. Old Dab closed his eyes again and again, from all the men he had sealed behind them, he tried to pick one with no faults or shortcomings. But he could not. Brave men lived behind old Dab's eyes, and daring men, and reckless men, and men with the souls of beasts. But not one of them was fit to mingle with angels—or even conscientiously to enter a church. All of them had stains.

"Are you going to settle here?" Hoyt Magloon asked politely.

"Yes," said old Dab Rance. "Today I looked, and I saw a valley. There is timber there, and water, and a mountain for men to climb. We will build right in the mouth of that valley."

"You will need a week," said Hoyt Magloon. "Then I will come calling."

"Don't," old Dab Rance said softly. "Don't come calling."

Hoyt Magloon thought of old Dab's seven sons, five of whom were scattered in the darkness.

"I think," he said, "that I will come at night. That's fair enough. It will be the seventh night from this one."

FOR one week Hoyt Magloon wandered around Shinnegar Valley, going where he pleased and doing as he wished. He saw Chief Paul's band again, and they saw him. But Chief Paul was a wise leader who knew that, unless they could be taken by treachery, it was far better to leave some men alone. On the seventh night Hoyt Magloon came back to begin his courting of Sally Rance.

He came silently, and the smell of wood smoke from the Rances' cabin was heavy in his nostrils as he paused in the tall grass to plot his way. He knew the little valley which old Dab Rance had chosen for their home, and he knew men who thought as old Dab did. Three hundred feet up the valley was a wide bench covered by tall pine trees. If a man built his cabin there, he could justly claim part of the mountains and as much of Shinnegar as his rifle would hold for him. Of course, it was open to enemies—but what wasn't? And you still had to think, when thinking of enemies, that old Dab had seven tall sons.

An enemy could approach the cabin by going up the valley or coming down it, and surely one of old Dab's sons would be standing sentry at each approach. Or—supposing an enemy came—he could go either up or down the bench, or climb the mountain and come straight down—there'd be a Rance at every approach. The other two sons, and old Dab, would be lying in front of the cabin or inside it. Knowing that, Hoyt Magloon knew what he had to do.

Hoyt Magloon dropped to his belly, and silently as the snake he was aping, wriggled through the tall grasses. The smell of wood smoke was very plain in his nostrils now, as was that of pine. The tinkling little stream that played down the valley made soft music in his ears. But it didn't obscure the softer sound, the slithering noise that was made by a man's shirt rubbing against a boulder. Hoyt Magloon wriggled out of the tall grasses to rear over the boulder. He cocked his rifle and pointed it down at Cotton Rance. Knowing he was a dead man, Cotton turned to look.

"How will you fight?" asked Hoyt Magloon. "With guns, knives, or fists?"

And Cotton Rance, who back in Kentucky had whipped all who came against him, but who could admire a man who'd give him a chance to fight when he could just as easily have killed him, laid his rifle down on the boulder and raised his fists. They came together in front of the boulder, but the blow that should have shattered Hoyt Magloon's jaw went instead over his shoulder. The next second Hoyt Magloon's right fist smashed Cotton Rance's jaw, and his left followed. He hit again and again, while Cotton Rance swayed before him like a pole-axed bull that won't go down.

Then he did go down, and Hoyt Magloon stood panting over him the while he nursed one sore hand and picked up his rifle with the other one. He had been lucky. But there were six of the Rances, and old Dab, still to be met. Hoyt Magloon slunk into the tall pines, and wove through them to a barricade of logs that the tinkling little stream had in flood-time cast up on the bank. But the shot that came out of the darkness cut a bloody furrow across his scalp even before he saw the rifle's flash, or heard its dull report. Hoyt Magloon ran forward—some people could reload their guns in two seconds—and came face to face with John Rance.

"How will you fight?" said Hoyt Magloon. "With guns—"

But John Rance, who didn't know too much about men, bellowed like a bull and ran forward. His swinging fist caught Hoyt Magloon in the belly. But it was a hard belly, toughened by lying in the grass, and marching, a-teaching Chief Paul that he'd better let some white men alone. Hoyt Magloon should have been knocked breathless. But all he did was stagger backwards, while John Rance piled on top of him.

There's fighting—and then more fighting—and Hoyt Magloon knew what to do now.

He brought his right foot forward to kick John Rance in the groin. But no kick ever put a Rance out of a fight for more than a second or two, and the blood from Hoyt Magloon's scalp wound was running into his eyes.

He shook his head fast to throw it out, and swung his fist to John Rance's jaw when he charged forward. Then he ducked, grasped John Rance's flailing right arm, and heaved. There was a dull thud, and John Rance did not get up again when he flew over Hoyt Magloon's shoulder against a tree.

Hoyt Magloon dipped his face in the cold stream to clear the blood away. The next second, for some reason, he seemed incredibly to have aged. Physically he was still a young man. But in another way he was almost as old as old Dab, and knew some of the things that old Dab knew. And, among the things he knew, was that he had to go on. Shinnegar Valley was a place of wondrous riches. But all those riches would be empty in anyone's hand if— The vision faded, and all Hoyt Magloon knew was that he had to find and fight the next Rance.

He could not think any more clearly. But this seemed neither the time nor the place for thought. And deep within him lived a thing that seemed to have been born—he didn't know how many million years ago. He could see with amazing clarity, and even in the dark night the trees were very distinct. A force that he could not deny impelled him forward. A man was a man, and when a man was dead—— He might be dead very soon.

But he met Anthony Rance on the up-side of the bench where old Dab had built his cabin. He saw Anthony crouching among the trees with rifle raised and cocked, and Anthony did not see him. It seemed, Hoyt Magloon thought, that nobody at all could see him because the magic seven-million-year-old thing still impelled and controlled him. Or was that thing him? But a man, regardless of anything else, still had to retain the honor of a man. He could not shoot another man who was unaware of him. Hoyt Magloon stepped deliberately on a twig, and when Anthony Rance whirled, Hoyt shot. But he aimed for the shoulder, and saw Anthony Rance drop his gun. That was all right. That was good. Even a Rance could not fight when he had a bullet-shattered shoulder.

Hoyt Magloon felt a little shame—but can a man ask another how he'll fight when twenty yards separate them, and he knows that other is ready to kill? Hoyt Magloon climbed the mountain to find the Rance who would be guarding that approach. He heard himself asking, "How will you fight—?" and felt himself flung down when he met Dabney on the up-hill side of the cabin. For a second million stars shone in his head the while his wonderful guide deserted him. But it came back again, and with it came a savage, unrestrained delight. If one had to meet and fight men, these were assuredly the kind to meet. Hoyt Magloon saw Dabney Rance stagger, and hit him again.

WHEN at last he stood before the Rances' cabin, the wonderful clarity of vision that had descended upon Hoyt Magloon was still upon him. But he had no more strength, and was scarcely able to bear the weight of the buckskin thongs that bound his arms. His rifle was down on the bench, where he had met Peter Rance. Now, with a battered and bloody face, Peter stood behind him.

Hoyt saw old Dab, flanked by Guy and Alfred, come from the cabin to meet him. But their rifles were at their sides—no Rance would raise his gun unless there was a good reason for shooting. Behind, in the cabin, Sally Rance was watching. And again, Hoyt felt they had met halfway across the space that separated them. Old Dab leaned calmly on his rifle.

"So," he said. "Tell me about it."

"He came upon me," said Peter, "and he asked me how I'd fight. I fought him with fists."

Old Dab turned his searching, wise eyes upon Hoyt Magloon. "Did you meet the rest?"

"I met them," said Hoyt Magloon, "and except for one I asked them how they'd fight. That one I shot in the shoulder. Had I not, he would have shot me."

"I warned you not to come," old Dab reminded.

"I'm not sorry I came," said Hoyt Magloon. "There's something here I have to have. I'd better die if I don't have it."

"Yes," old Dab said, suddenly gentle. "I

know what you mean—but you do not. Untie him, Peter."

When Peter Rance cut the bonds, Hoyt Magloon's arms dropped loosely to his sides. He felt a measure of strength reenter his body.

"I'll fight you," he offered.

"I think you needn't," old Dab Rance said. "You've come a long way to court Sally. The way is open."

Old Dab closed his eyes, while the men he had known passed in review. Though none of them had been angelic men, it was probably just as well. An angel would flinch, and retreat from, things men had to meet and conquer. Most of them had been lonely men, driven by a demon and misguided by the thought that they would have a complete life just as soon as they got the riches—the gold or furs—of which they had dreamed. But they wouldn't, and it made no difference whether they died at the hands of Chief Paul's band or took their wealth back east where it would buy a mansion and servants. They would all die knowing that they had been frustrated and deceived.

Unless—old Dab opened his eyes and looked at Hoyt Magloon. He was one of the lucky ones, one of those who would find life.

There would be sons—the rare Rance woman would bear sons. Shinnegar Valley would be a fine place for all time to come. His own sons could hold it for a long while. Hoyt Magloon's would take over. More women would come and—— A man could always climb a mountain. Old Dab thought of the men with wolf's eyes who were in Shinnegar now, and of the things they would do.

"I said you can court Sally," he repeated. "Any man able to meet and best four Rances can take care of her."

Hoyt Magloon went slowly forward, his eyes shining and happy. He touched Sally's hand, and together they walked out into the night.

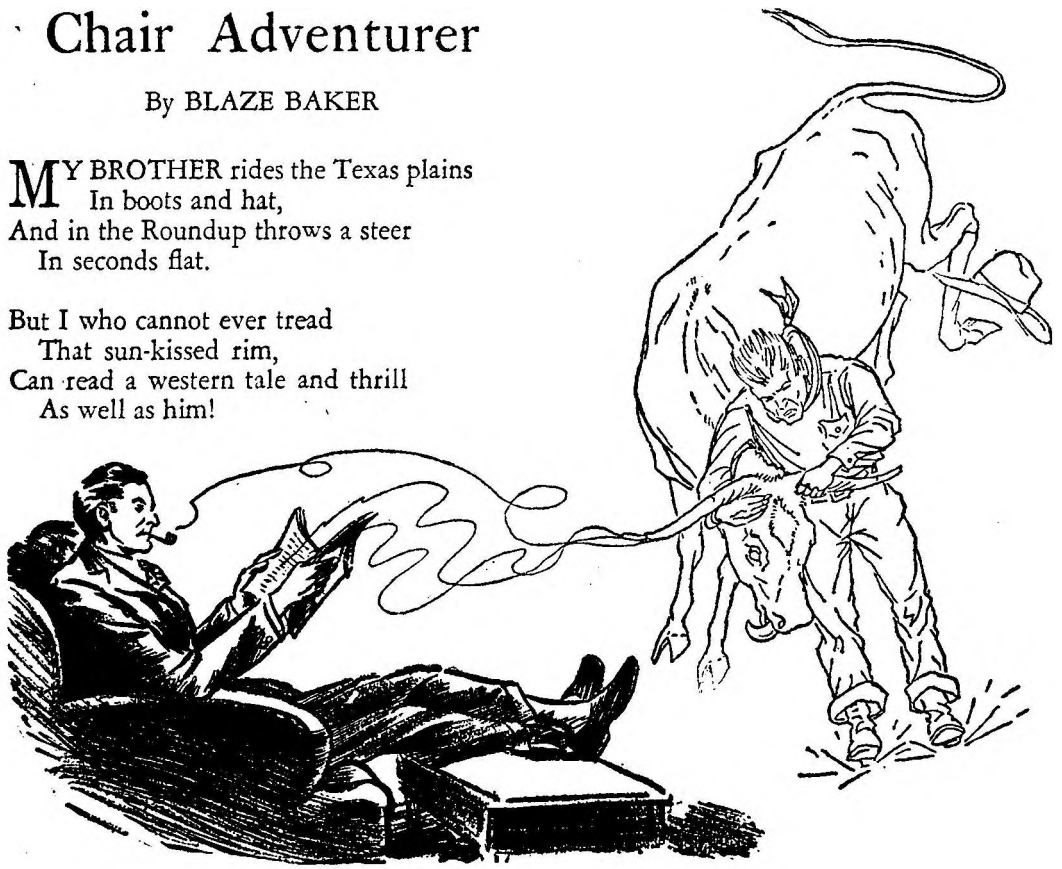
Over them, the stars shone very brightly.

Chair Adventurer

By BLAZE BAKER

MY BROTHER rides the Texas plains
In boots and hat,
And in the Roundup throws a steer
In seconds flat.

But I who cannot ever tread
That sun-kissed rim,
Can read a western tale and thrill
As well as him!



The Head Indian Was Topside, Dropping Ashes on the Snow

THE DAY OF THE BLACK SNOW

By JOHN E. KELLY

THE Chamber of Commerce has done its work so well that tourists through the Northern counties, recalling pictures of bathing girls lolling under the winter sun at Tucson or Yuma, goggle in disbelief as their cars or trains push between settled blankets of white carpeting the pine and thorn-clad slopes. But snow was no stranger to us at the Mammoth Midas and I did not even look up from a tracing I was finishing on rush orders from the New York office, as the first flakes came sifting down, stroking the panes with ghostly fingers, filling the air with a faint whistling hiss, barely within the category of sound. When the last elevation had been inked, I wiped the pen and straightened, yawning, squinting at the storm with eyes strained by close work. I thought at first that Ah Fuey had again shirked his detested chore of window cleaning, for the foreground pines beyond the head-frame were tinted a dirty gray. But a searching finger rubbed no more than normal dust from the glass; puzzled, I stepped out on the small roofed portico of the engineering shack.

The air was clammy with the wet breath of snow, the flakes fell normally. But they were even darker close at hand. I scooped a handful from the porch rail. They melted on my palm; under the snow-water lay a precipitate of fine gray ash. Mal Norton came up the steps, beating his hat and shoulders free of their fleecy load.

I held out the evidence. "What's this?"

He nodded. "I noticed. Soñador's blown its top, I guess, and the ashes are falling through the snowstorm."

"But the peak's a hundred miles from here, air line!"

"That's nothing." Norton was the com-

pany's rock hound. "You can pick up ash falls twice as far away. The old heavy ones are good geologic markers."

I glanced at the storm; the swirling flakes, blacker now, almost inky against the pines. "Are we in any danger?"

He shook his head. "Only the Injuns'll worry."

I was new enough in that country to ask questions. "What's it to them?"

"Bad luck. Seems when the first Spaniards came into these parts, they had a brush with the Hualapais in a snowstorm. The Injuns had never seen guns and thought the powder smoke mixing with the flakes a special bad medicine. So it was, I reckon. Anyhow, they swear all the devils are loose when the snow turns black. They'll be hiding with the hole pulled in after 'em, till after sun-up tomorrow."

In the drafting room Malcomb, the chief engineer, was bending over my work. "O. K.," he pronounced. "Put it in a mailing tube, Hilton, and I'll get Tubi to take it to town."

He stormed back into the room, his forehead corrugated with anger. "Tubi's in a blue funk, won't stir out of his hogan! Claims the head Injun devil is topside, smoking his pipe and dropping ashes on the snow, waiting for fresh Hualapais meat. I'd sack him, but we've no spare driver." He paced the room, muttering, while Norton winked at me and went into his cuppyhole lined with open boxes for ore specimens and drill cores, closing the door behind him.

I pulled the black oilcloth cover over the drawing board and turned to find Malcomb standing before me, holding the mailing tube.

"This has to make the Flyer east at Hasbrouck tonight. You can take my car."

Delighted at escape from the confinement of the office, I ran to the kitchen, bulldozed Ah Fuey into slicing the cold joint for sandwiches, and came into the camp garage where Malcomb was backing his light car through the door. He stepped out and I slid behind the wheel, awaiting any final instructions. He dropped a Colt on the cushions beside me.

"Just in case," he said drily, "though I doubt if you'll need it. Better take the lower road past the Reservation, the high grade will be slippery with this snow."

Although it was yet early afternoon, the day could muster rather less than a gray twilight. The evenly falling snow now rode a rising Norther; gusts packed the flakes, cutting visibility to a bare ten feet. I nosed down the steep access road in second gear, riding the brakes until the odor of hot rubber warned of trouble. The world shrank to a ribbon of rutted earth streaming backward beside the fender.

An hour out of camp I halted, striving to gauge my progress. I should be halfway to the valley floor, whence the road stretched another forty miles to the railway at Hasbrouck. But all landmarks were lost in the storm; I sat in a globe of translucence, a dozen feet in diameter, floored, walled and roofed by black snow.

I DID not see him coming. He climbed on the running board and tapped on the right-hand window while shock clawed at my nerves and Malcomb's gun rose pointing at his head, my finger tightening on the trigger. His next gesture saved his life, for a small palm scraped away the snow clogging the pane and I saw him clearly, as clearly as might be in that half light. Ashamed of my fright, I dropped the Colt into my lap and reached over to press the door latch. He slid through the aperture and sat crouched on the far edge of the seat, a half-grown Hualapais boy, wet, cold and terrified, his coppery skin paled to a muddy tint. Only overmastering fear could have made him approach a white man unbidden. Then it came to me that he might be a decoy, put forward while his kinsmen surrounded the car; I let in the clutch and dashed forward in the blizzard recklessly, but there was no pursuit.

I spoke to him in the halting pidgin we used with our Hualapais miners. "Where you live?"

"Reservation." It came out in a piping grunt, from a maturing larynx, after a perceptible pause. That he answered at all was a concession to polity, but enforced association with a white was preferable to the dark winging terror without. If monosyllables paid his fare home, he would disgorge them, anything rather than find himself alone on the road again.

"Reservation long piece," I pursued, "what you do here?"

"Hunt." He held a coiled rawhide lariat, a soiled and bulging sack of sisal fiber; a mail-order knife was stuck through his home-made snakeskin belt. Poor equipment, I thought, as I saw no bow nor gun about him, but a good shot might kill the tame "fool" quail with stones.

The subject seemed exhausted; I had recourse to the universal topic of the weather. "Snow bad," I announced.

He said, "Black!" in a hissing rush, then cowered in his seat, his opaque Mongolian eyes fixed in abject fascination upon the discolored flakes beating upon the windshield. Nor would he speak again.

AT the foot of the mountain I halted, unwrapping the sandwiches. The boy's eyes swivelled toward me, his nose twitched, but he refused the alien food. At my insistence he took one, hesitantly, with a sort of stubborn shyness. He sniffed cautiously, parted the slices, and spurred by hunger, gulped the beef. But the bread was taboo, though he licked it clean of butter. Catching my amusement in the dark mirror of the windshield, his broad Indian face stiffened with embarrassment and sureptitiously he hid the rejects in his bag. A hard-boiled egg was more welcome, its unbroken shell proof against the white man's magic. Remembering Malcomb's sweet tooth, I rummaged in the pocket of the driver's door and came up with a bit of chocolate bar. Aboriginal shyness and pride alike melted, under his dark skin he was all boy. Almost he smiled. He held the sweet in a brown paw, licking it slowly, ecstatically, his eyes closed.

I put the car in motion. The snow was over the tires now and there was no end to the huge wet flakes pelting down from the unseen sky, freighted with volcanic ash. The headlights' glare died futilely in the storm, a car's length before the bumper, reflecting from the myriad facets of the frozen downpour. The grades were left behind, but the dirt road zigzagged across the valley floor toward the Reservation and Hasbrouck, skirting gulches and arroyos, detours being cheaper than bridges. A little better than snail's pace I felt my way about the hairpin turns, skidding dangerously when memory of my rendezvous with the Flyer induced more pressure on the accelerator.

WHEN a break in the storm gave a momentary glimpse of a straight-away between thickets of mesquite and prickly pear, I stole a glance at my passenger. He sat relaxed, his normal ruddy color restored, the terror of the sinister snow lessened by food and the swift journey home. He would even talk a little. He was Jose Yerub, twelve years old, a four-grade pupil at the Reservation school, an obligation honored in the breach whenever possible, as today. On the superiority of the rabbit over the three R's he was laconically emphatic: "School no good, rabbit him good!" He had ridden in an automobile before, but "all open, no seats." He professed disinterest in baseball while his eyes caressed the Colt. "Good for hunt cougar!"

The snow had thinned, though the fine ash yet gritted on the windows when the Reservation village came into sight. The hospital and administration buildings, gifts of the Great White Father to his glumly acquiescent wards, showed a long line of lighted windows on either side of the highway. Between them other lights, as of flares and lanterns, bobbed and tossed spasmodically; the wind brought the murmur of mass exaltation, rising and falling like the surf on a rocky shore, cries, a febrile drumming, occasional shots. A dark mass, amorphous and swaying, blocked the road. As the headlights picked out figures on the edge of the crowd, the boy laid a hand on my arm.

"You stop! I look." His tone was peremptory but not hostile. He was out of the door before the wheels halted, carrying his possessions. I did not expect to see him again. I snapped off the lights and considered my position. Running through a crowd of armed, drunken Indians at night was inviting the undertaker, the alternative a long detour by a side road that joined the high grade halfway to Hasbrouck. Holding my watch to the dim glow of a dashboard indicator, the time was appallingly late, I could barely meet the train at top speed. Make the connection I must; Malcomb took no excuses. Since there was no help for it, I cramped the steering wheel and backed the car to turn, leaning out to watch the ditch.

The boy Jose materialized at my elbow, panting a little, the frightened look again in his face. "You go!" He pointed back,

away from the Reservation. "Many man mad, they kill!"

I found him another piece of chocolate. "What's the matter? Big drunk?"

The moment was too tense for sweets. He dropped the gift into the pocket of his ragged jeans, his face rigid with emotion. "Bad! Many Injun dead, all day spirits pass over Reservation." His arm described an arc upward from the south.

"How you know?" I asked, startled by his words, impressed by his manner. In the grip of the supernatural, he had become an automaton, parroting the story.

"Old feller, Hualapais wise man, see um!"

"But why the shooting?" Despite myself, the hair crawled on my nape, covertly I glanced at the veiled sky.

"My people not wantum stop here, drive um to Sonador where devils live." His mouth clapped shut; he had said too much, and to a white. I saw his eyes glisten at the enormity of his lapse, then with a cat-like bound he had gained the ditch. The mesquite rustled for an instant at his passage, and was still. I was alone in the black snow. A burst of shots and howls from the crowd greeted a break in the scudding clouds; I swung the wheel and raced for the detour.

The Flyer lay panting at Hasbrouck station, late from snow-clogged rails in the Pass. I charged down the platform, tossing the mailing tube to the postal clerk as he closed the door. The first deep "chuff" of the locomotive showered the train with hot cinders, the Wallschaert gear clanked in its greasy cage, the long file of lighted coaches rumbled eastward, hurrying the tracing to New York.

In the morning I slept late in the Kendall House, confident that the mine access road was impassable before the nooning sun should melt the drifts. At breakfast there was the unaccustomed luxury of the day's paper, truly appreciated only by those whose mail comes weekly and stale. I propped the *Daily Arizonan* against the sugar bowl and took an exploratory sip of the hotel coffee. The factual dispatches recalled in tolerant contrast the night's superstitions. "Old feller see um spirits," eh? I smiled derisively, remembering my own incipient reaction. My eyes focused on the black letters of a box heading a column:

MEXICAN EARTHQUAKE

Indian Villages Engulfed

Hundreds Die.

Red Clark was singing as he rode along—and that was how come the girl didn't shoot him. Otherwise she'd have taken it for granted that he, too, was after that hellish gold hoard. . . .

Part I of a rousing new serial by Gordon Ray Young

"RED CLARK'S SHORT CUT"

Old Cush said it did his soul more good to hear dice click than to see the sun peek over a mountain, or smell a spruce, or yet to hear no bee buzz amongst a flower—that was on Half-aday, of course. . . . . .

"A Man Hires a Guide"

JAMES B. HENDRYX

SHORT STORIES Sept. 10

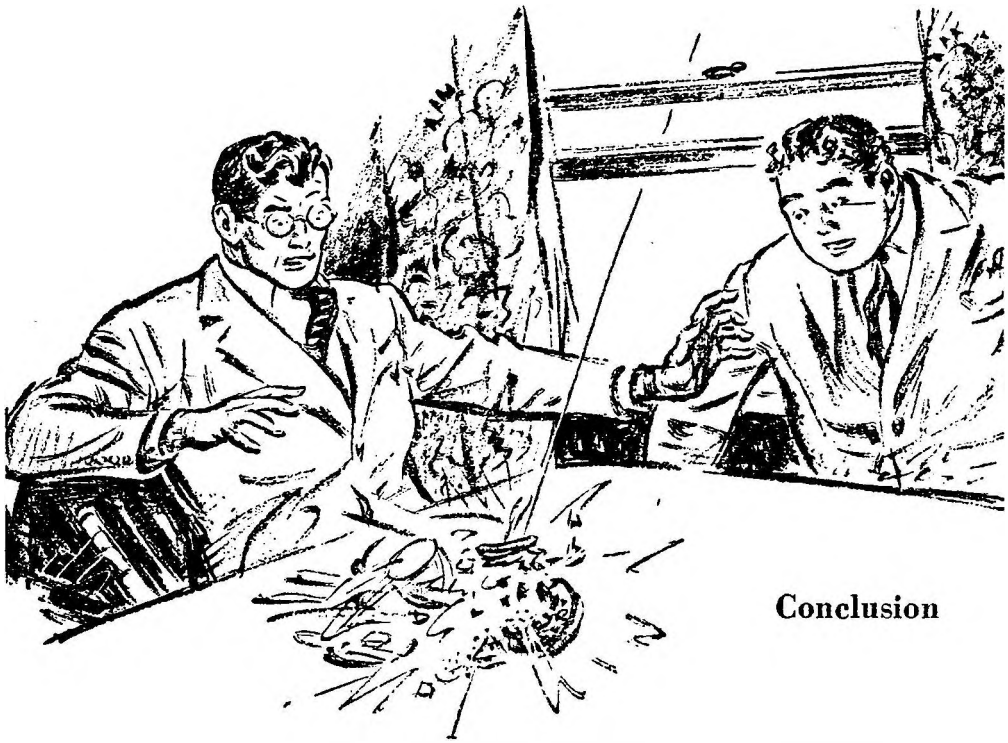
From the North to Australia in two novelettes

Frisco Ed McKinney finds himself mixed up with some very sinister activities Down Under.

"Unfinished Business"—NEIL MARTIN

And other favorite features . . . . .

It Was All Over, and the Solution Was Like a Doctor's Prescription—Easy to Take, but Hard to Assemble



Conclusion

DEATH ON A PARTY LINE

By MERLE CONSTINER

Author of "The Skull of Barnaby Shattuck," etc.

XVIII

PAUL SAXBY sat on a slatted park bench in court square, beneath a spreading magnolia, and watched the tail-light of Mr. Caudry's car diminish in the distance. Moonlight glazed the rooftops bluely, like skimmed milk. Across from him Main Street's long marquee was a cloudy ribbon of coal dust, impenetrable, deserted, its shop windows darkened but for an occasional dim bulb hung deep in the bowels of a store, above an old-fashioned cash register. The courthouse clock struck twelve. A man, a woman, and a little boy in a toy wagon came down the sidewalk; the woman was pulling the little boy in the wagon, the man was flooding their path with a powerful coon-hunter's flashlight, testing door knobs and locks as he advanced. The marshal and his family making their midnight round. They passed from view and again the street was a sepulchre.

As the small group disappeared, Saxby felt suddenly desolate. It was as though the last survivors of mankind had withdrawn from him.

He arose and crossed the dappled street. In the shadows of the marquee, he passed Bewley's undertaking parlor, the Red Bird Café, the drugstore—and came to the golden hand in the entranceway, the hand which tilted upwards and said, UPSTAIRS. He ascended a narrow flight of steep, foul-smelling steps and came out into a bare hall.

Noduled cobwebs hung from the walls and the floor cracks were caulked with decades of litter.

Three doors lined the short hall; a dentist's office, a storeroom, and—at the far end—a panel of frosted glass which said in black letters: *VICKERY POYNTER—REAL ESTATE, NOTARY.* The lock on this door was an old-style cylinder affair. Saxby got out his picklock. It took him eight minutes to tease it open.

He entered, closed the door behind him, and got out his torch. Subduing the beam with his handkerchief, he looked around.

The room was large, and had the feel of antiquity about it. The floor space was divided into an anteroom and office proper by a low wooden railing which was obviously little more than an ostentatious formality. Saxby passed through the battered gate, had the sensation of being taken back fifty years into the era of gaslights and washable collars and arm-movement penmanship. There was a big desk, a corroded brass spittoon and several bent-hickory armchairs. On the desk blotter was a lightning calculator, a notary stamp, a tray of steel-pointed pens and a chamois penwiper. Along the walls were rows of golden oak filing cabinets, their sticky varnish gleaming in the torchlight.

THE place looked as though a cyclone had swept through it. The cabinet drawers had been splintered with an iron tire tool and their contents lay strewn about in wild disorder.

Saxby grinned. Again, it appeared, Vickery Poynter'd had his private papers manhandled. Yesterday it had been his study, now it was his office. But the *modus operandi* here was quite different from yesterday's looting. At the Poynter home everything had been neat and orderly; here, all was turmoil.

Emerick Fraley was responsible for this particular confusion, Saxby decided. That would partially explain the keys under the plank at the Fern Spring Church. Say Emerick had been released from jail and had come while Poynter was occupied with Alicia's obsequies. That would work out very well, would give him plenty of time to make his search and keep his appointment with death.

Saxby turned his attention to the desk. Finally, in the lower lefthand drawer, at the back, he found something which interested him acutely. Under a stock of neatly-folded *Falksville Examiners* was a black oilcloth folder. He inspected the papers carefully before he touched the folder. The *Falksville Examiner* was a weekly paper, issued on Thursday and the copies were several months old. As the papers were stacked, the dates were not consecutive. They ran: May 3rd, 17th, 31st, June 14th, 28th. At first it didn't make sense—and then, abruptly, it did. The dates weren't consecutive but they were alternate, that is, every second week was represented, and in order.

Saxby chuckled. Just like Vickery, subtle, and arithmetical. If anyone got into his drawer, got to his black folder, he could tell so by the disarranged papers. A prowler would examine everything, would be sure to disturb their complex order.

Yet, strangely enough, Saxby was sure that very thing had happened. Emerick Fraley had split open the filing cabinets, had pawed through their contents, yet he had left this desk drawer with its black oilcloth folder and newspapers intact.

Saxby spread the contents of the folder on the desktop before him. There was Vickery's high-school diploma, his college diploma, and a certificate bordered with mauve and flesh-colored angels stating that when Vickery Poynter was twelve years old he had a record of attending Sunday School one complete year without a single absence. There were three insurance policies, totaling sixty-two thousand dollars, with Mother Poynter named as beneficiary. There was a brief, iron-clad will bequeathing the kit and kaboodle of his property to Mother Poynter, or, in the event of her demise, to his daughter, Alicia. There were three papers fastened together with a paper clip indicating a business-and-or-pleasure flurry with Miss Cora Bob Wilkerson.

The first of these was a letter on powder-blue notepaper, in a flowing haphazard script:

Dear Vick:

Thanks a lot for the Jersey cow. The men on the truck brought her this afternoon. What with milk and chickens and

eggs I'm beginning to see daylight ahead and it begins to look as though I might be able to meet my monthly payments on this little house which you so generously financed for me.

Always yours,
Cora Bob.

With this was a yellow second sheet carbon copy of his answer:

Miss Cora Bob Wilkerson
Falksville
Dear Miss Wilkerson:

Your interesting and pleasant communication of the 7th received and we feel it necessary to explain that the cow is not a gift from us but is to be taken in the light of an enterprise.

Very truly yours,
Vickery Poynter.

Clipped to this was the carbon of yet another note, obviously a personal addendum to the above:

Dearest Cora Bob:

I hate like the deuce to write a business letter, such as accompanies this, to you but you must see it in my light and remember that after all I'm just sort of a menial, a custodian of the Poynter money.

I saw the opportunity of picking the cow up at a farm sale very cheaply and realized that it would mean dollars and cents to you in milk and cream. While I got her for thirty-one dollars, the money I spent was essentially Poynter money and I feel that I must somehow account for it.

It's not a large sum and allocated in small amounts along with your regular house payments you should hardly feel the difference.

How long are we going to continue this unnatural relationship? Please marry me.

Always yours,
Vickery.

Saxby replaced the documents and policies in the folder, restored the folder to the drawer beneath the newspapers. He clucked his tongue, said moodily, "Good old Vickery Poynter! No wonder he has more money than I have!"

Silently, he left the building and went down upon the street.

DR. MATTISON'S hospital was dark but for a single light in the dispensary window. Saxby skirted the building in a wide circle and entered the grounds from the rear. Dry locust pods crackled and snapped beneath his feet. He hoped to high heaven that Cora Bob had taken her bull terrier home with her. This would be a bad time for Moonrise Blizzard the Second to cut loose with his harrooping!

He made his way directly to the little one-room building beyond the grape arbor. He stood a moment in the shadows, listening. Satisfied that he was unobserved, he stepped inside.

The liquor cabinet should be to his right, the desk directly in front of him, and the old, broken-down sofa on his left. He groped for the desk, his fingertips touched the old woolen blanket. It was this blanket that had brought him here.

He paused for an instant by the window, looking out across the lawn—into the window of the dispensary. Dr. Mattison, in candy-striped red and white pajamas, was lolling in the wheelchair, at his ease, pursing his lips, adding up something on his fingers. Saxby smiled. The occupational hazard of a small-town physician. Ten to one, the doctor, was balancing his bank account, trying to make ends meet, casting off bad debts and speculating on the good ones. It was a homey scene and made Saxby feel a little sentimental. His father had been a country lawyer, Saxby had seen him go through the same absorbing ritual.

Saxby dropped to his haunches. He pulled the blanket to the floor. Shielding his flashlight with his hat, he examined the fabric minutely. After a moment, he found exactly what he was searching for. In each of two corners a small hole had been punched.

Cupping his beam with his hands, he inspected the baseboard. Here, just under the window, he found a long, deep scratch. A hideous, ogreish voice from out of the night said, "Don't move or I'll have your liver and lights! Come out one at a time, with your hands up!"

Saxby laughed. "Enter, Doc. I've some-

thing to ask you." He swung his flashlight to the doorway. Dr. Mattison, unarmed, his pajamas drooping from his skinny frame, blinked in the glare. He said with relief, "So it's you, Saxby! I should have known. I saw your light and—"

"Come out with my hands up or you'll have my liver and lights, eh? You had me cornered. What if I'd have been the killer?"

"Then, gad, sir, I'd have garroted you with the drawstring of my pajama pants!"

Saxby said, "Come here a minute." He led Mattison to the window. "See. From here I can watch your dispensary."

"Of course. And from the dispensary I can watch the office. My mother arranged that. You'll observe there's no curtain here on the window. That was so mother could keep an eye on my alcoholic father when he retired to his *sanctum sanctorum*. Do you find that interesting?"

"I do, indeed. Because it tells me much about what happened that night you say you were called away on a false alarm. The night you made that wasted trip out to Big A schoolhouse to succor a non-existent sick hillchild."

They sat down on the doorstep. The night was cooling and a faint breeze from the hills tossed the grape leaves in the arbor like black fish in the murky bowl of the sky.

Dr. Mattison said, "Well, what happened that night?"

"Alicia Poynter, with a boil on her neck, came to you for treatment. You weren't home so she sat down in the dispensary and waited. Someone, the person who had lured you away, stood here in this little building and watched her. That sealed her doom. That was why she was later killed."

"What in the world was she doing?"

"I suspect she was carrying a straw suitcase."

Dr. Mattison asked harshly, "This person at the window here, was he waiting for her?"

"No."

"Was he waiting for me?"

"No."

"Then what in the hell was he doing?"

Saxby said softy, "He was just standing here in the dark. Thinking about death and murder."

XIX

DR. MATTISON walked with Saxby down the winding drive, his carpet slippers clopping angrily. At the arched fieldstone gate by the sidewalk, he said, "Good night, Saxby."

Saxby said, "Good night."

Dr. Mattison hesitated. "I know you're going to catch this maniac, Paul."

"We're not dealing with a maniac, Doctor. Our killer is as sane as you or I. What makes you say you know I'll catch him?"

"Because I'm a pretty good doctor and a man of science. By that I mean violent death by pistol and hatchet and cyanide appear mighty crude and always leave traceable earmarks. Our salvation is that we're confronted by an untutored and primitive mind. They say there's no such thing as that perfect crime business. That, of course, is bosh. Our cemeteries are half full of homicides, designed and executed by intelligent and educated brains."

"Our killer has an intelligent brain. And so far he's done pretty good."

"Fiddlesticks! You'll have him in handcuffs before the week's out!"

"How would you have handled it?"

"I'd have killed the girl with lead carbonate. This is odorless, colorless, and in itself harmless. If it is given to a person, say in food, over a period of time, and then acid is administered—blooey, the end! The acid could be vinegar in a salad, or even a bad cold which causes acidosis."

"Baloney!"

"It sounds fantastic but it's true. Emerick Fraley, I would get intoxicated—which shouldn't be so difficult to do. After he'd passed out, or gone to sleep, I'd give him an enema of benzoil alcohol and ethyl alcohol. He'd simply die in his sleep. To an examining doctor it would be just another drunk, acute alcoholism. It's foolproof."

"And how would you kill Hart Killigrew?"

"Who is Hart Killigrew? Whoever he is, I'd fix him with a dose of lethal egg-white."

Dr. Mattison yawned. "Absolutely no trace!"

"Egg-white?"

"That's right. The white of an ordinary

chicken's egg. But you have to know how to do it. And I'm not going to tell you, not tonight anyway. I'd better be hitting the hay. I'm out on my feet."

Saxby said, "Good night, Doctor."

SAXBY, too, was out on his feet. He'd had a hard, active day. He didn't realize how tired he was until he rolled over on his paper-thin mattress in his room in the Magnolia House and tried to line up the day's events. There was a patch of stars in the night panel of his window and he was thinking about those footprints out at the old sawmill. The next he knew he was sitting on the edge of his bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. The window was bright with turbulent morning sunshine. He was still thinking about those footprints. His wrist-watch said ten minutes after ten.

When Saxby came down the stairway into the lobby he found Lester Caudry leaning against the desk wicket, listening with fatherly boredom to Nodie Pounds, the pimple-faced bellboy, who was explaining with secret gestures and leers how to jug fish, what kind of wood to use in a whiskey still, and how to load dice with birdshot. This morning Mr. Caudry was wearing immaculate flannels. The old-fashioned ceiling fan rattled and clumped, roiling the stale air with its listless blades. Nodie said enthusiastically, "Howdy, Mr. Saxby! The sheriff from Dupre County was in last night. He borried a pair of yore shoes to fit into some mud-tracks he found."

"So that's where they went? I thought they'd gone the way of my black crepe tie."

Nodie laughed genially. "But I got that tie, don't you remember? How about some breakfast? It's a little late but yo're one of our favorite guests. I'll run and fetch the cook. He's sittin' in the kitchen of the Red Bird Café, low-ratin' the grub they put out. That's the way he spends his spare time—"

"Thank you," Saxby said. "That would be splendid." He started for the dining room. Mr. Caudry said, "May I join you? I've something I'd like to show you." Saxby nodded. "Do, please."

As usual, the dining room was as cool as a cave. Saxby was getting pretty fond of this dim, pleasant retreat, with its single long table, snowy in spotless linen and gleaming in silver. He'd always remember it, he knew, with its black onyx fireplace, with its neatly dusted mantel decorations: the Indian basket, the conch shell, the lop-sided starfish. Caudry said: "We'll sit here where we can get a good light." He pulled back the lace curtains. Sunshine, violent and rose-tinged, pooled the white tablecloth. From somewhere, probably court square, mocking birds were calling. Below the window, in the pie-slice segment of Mr. Imes' private back yard, Mr. Imes' mangy peafowl strutted in the sun, pecked at the dry wisps of grass between the cracked brick paving.

Mr. Caudry said impressively, "Well, it's come, Saxby. I've got a letter. I don't know what in the world it means—but I've certainly got it!"

"You mean a letter addressed to Killigrew, at Moonrise?"

"No. I mean a letter addressed to me, here at the hotel." Caudry huffed, looked extremely self-conscious, said impressively, "But first I want to tell you about Miss Dineen. We've been wrong, both of us, about that infant, Paul." He slapped his palms together absently, spoke from the depths of his chest. "I think I'll marry her, Paul. Make her mistress of Moonrise, make her Mrs. Lester Caudry, give her a little joy in life. She needs someone like me to—"

"For heaven's sakes! When did this happen?"

"I guess it's been happening all along but I didn't realize it. I dropped by the store today and had a little heart-to-heart talk with her. Now that Fraley is dead, and she's out from under his influence, she'll be a new girl, body and soul. She says she's sorry she treated me the way she did. I've never seen such remorse—and I'm a mighty good judge of human character. It was a wracking experience, Paul. Ever'thing I'd say would break her out in a seizure of weeping. The only thing that would help would be when I patted her shoulder. She wants to work for me for nothing, just living off of crackers and peanut butter from the store but that's out of the question, of course. Well, one thing led to another and I proposed to her. I'm sending her around a little engagement present so it will be waiting for her when she comes back from lunch."

"Really? What?"

"A dog. Moonrise Blizzard the Second. I just saw Vickery on the street. He's changed, Paul, since you last talked with him. He's mad as hell. So I'm going to take Moonrise back and give him another one. I'm giving Dina—"

"I see. What about that letter?"

"In a way you brought the real Dina and the real Caudry together. So I want to give you something. I want to give you our blessing!"

"Thanks. Now, if you don't mind—?"

Mr. Caudry pawed in his breast pocket, came out with a handful of string, rubber-bands, pencil stubs, a worn wallet and two envelopes. He replaced everything but the letters, picked up the top one, handed it to Saxby. It was postmarked Mobile. Caudry's name and the Magnolia House address were printed across the face of the envelope. Actually, there was no letter—just two loose clippings enclosed in a folded sheet of blank paper.

The clippings were faintly yellowed and badly worn, almost frayed. The first said:

> was had by all. Ye editor maintains this to be the jolliest supper to be held in this section of rural Alabama in lo these many years. We take this opportunity of welcoming those two friendly out-of-state newcomers to our community, Mr. and Mrs. Hart Killigrew. We hope they like the cozy little "nest" they've outfitted in the old K. P. hall. They've only been with us a month and already they are among our most popular residents. Mr. Killigrew, we understand, intends to be in and out as he has farming interests in Tennessee. Mrs. Mary has endeared herself locally as a leading member of the sewing circle and organist at the

Saxby turned this clipping over. The reverse, part of an article about clearing new ground stumps with dynamite, was crossed out and offered nothing of interest. He perused the second scrap of paper in amazement. It said:

> with deepest grief we inform the public that two more deaths have occurred from that ill-fated ptomaine chicken salad of last Saturday's church supper. Mr. and Mrs. Hart Killigrew passed away this morning, expiring within an hour of each other. It was Mr. Killigrew's dying wish that they be buried with his wife's family so the bodies are being shipped this afternoon to Mississippi.

Saxby turned this clipping over, too. Again the reverse item had been crossed out with penstrokes but this time he clucked his tongue. An incomplete notice said that everyone would be interested in knowing that a horse-pulling contest would be held the following week at the edge of town, light, medium, and heavyweight. Prizes up to ten dollars, a black bull to pull in the singles. The date of the event was September 11, 1942.

Saxby said slowly, "Moved from Tennessee, died in Alabama, was buried with wife in distaff cemetery in Mississippi. Where in Alabama? Where in Mississippi?"

"We'll never know, Paul. And that's a fact! It would be a life's work tracing those clippings. They weren't printed locally, the *Falksville Examiner* has a linotype. This is done with old-fashioned hand-set stuff. What have we got to work on? Nothing! Running down church suppers in rural Alabama would be worse than counting hog fleas. What do you make of it?"

"Right back at you, my friend. What do you make of it?"

Perspiration was standing out on Mr. Caudry's forehead. "The date says he died in nineteen-forty-two. Three years ago. Yet a week ago I sat upstairs and watched him swill my good whiskey."

"Are you sure it was Killigrew?"

"I bought that timberland from him five years ago—and I never forget a face. Besides, Dina and Emerick both saw him and—"

"But they didn't know him."

"No," Caudry said steadily. "But I knew him. It was Hart Killigrew that registered at this very hotel, Paul. And here's another interesting point. This clipping was published a couple of years after everyone thought he'd killed his wife. And yet it says as plain as the nose on your face that he just moved her down to Alabama in the sticks and set her up in housekeeping in an old lodge hall! Why in the hell would a fellow do a nutty thing like that?"

"And who sent you these clippings from Mobile? These clippings that appeared to have arrived just in the nick of time. Who do you know down there?"

"That's the strange part about it. I don't believe I know anyone in Mobile, Paul."

Saxby pointed to the other letter on the tablecloth.

"What's that?"

"Just an ad of some kind. I saw it had a brown postage stamp and didn't bother to—"

Saxby picked it up. It, too, had a Mobile postmark. He ripped the flap, drew out a sheet bearing a multigraphed message.

OLD DIXIE MAILING SERVICE BUREAU

Offices: MIAMI, MOBILE, NEW ORLEANS

Dear Stay-at-home:

Do you sit in your easy chair, daydreaming of the carefree life of a happy-go-lucky vagabond? Do you envy your friends who can bask beneath the Southland's tropic moon, on silver, sanded beaches, eating pralines and listening to the gentle breeze rustling in romantic palms? Through the OLD DIXIE MAILING SERVICE BUREAU all this, and more, can be yours without your leaving your doorstep.

Our service bureau will re-mail any item you send us, to any address you give us.

Fool your friends! Make an impression on your sweetheart! Get in the swim!

Our prices are reasonable.

Packages up to ten pounds, five dollars.

Letters (mailed in your original envelope) fifty cents, four for one-sixty.

Postcards (scenic) twenty cents straight.

Saxby said, "There you are. That explains it." The cook came through the door from the kitchen, laid Saxby's breakfast before him, and retreated.

Saxby buttered a slice of toast. "Someone here in town mailed those clippings to Mobile, had them re-mailed to you here. The Old Dixie Mailing Service Bureau isn't too scrupulous how it picks up new customers. It simply sends one of its hypnotic follow-up circulars along with its service."

Caudry said, "Why didn't they send them to you?"

"I wasn't in the picture yet. You forget the time element."

"The time element," Caudry repeated thoughtfully. "That's right. The clippings had to make a double trip, didn't they? That would take a little time. Could Killigrew himself have sent these, Paul?"

The china sugar bowl by Saxby's elbow disintegrated in a spume of porcelain shards.

They hardly heard the shot. Afterwards, Saxby realized it must have been a .22 or .25. Small calibre but high velocity.

Saxby moved his platter of eggs three chairs down the table, out of the line of fire. Caudry got lumberingly to his feet, walked angrily to the window. For a long moment, he stood completely exposed, staring balefully out into the court yard. At last he turned, breathing heavily. He said, "Paul, this is beginning to make me mad. You know what? That shot came from up yonder." He pointed across the court, upward to a second-story window. "And that's two-ten, my room!"

"Did you leave your door unlocked?"

"I generally do. I'd say yes. You wait here, Paul. I'll be right back."

Saxby said, "Okay, Mr. Caudry. I'll wait."

He finished his toast and eggs.

A little later Mr. Caudry returned. He said tautly, "No good, Paul. They high-tailed on us."

Saxby said, "I got to tell you right off, dear friends, they wasn't nobuddy kilt; but my spine got mighty bad bent, dear friends, and a lot of sugar was spilt."

Caudry looked at him in amazement. He said in admiration, "Doggone, Paul, that's mighty nice poetry! I sure wish I could make that stuff up. That's high-class. I guess that's what an education does for a fellow!"

Saxby said, "It came to me one day while I was out in the country. I haven't been the same man since."

"I've heard it was that way with genius," Caudry said in wonderment. "Now that you've got it off your chest you feel better, eh?"

"I feel fine, thank you, Lester." He arose, said, "now if you'll excuse me. I've got a few things to do in town—"

XX

SAXBY sat on a cane-bottomed chair in Cora Bob's living room and spoke in the general direction of the open bedroom door. He said, "Maybe I should have waited at the foot of the lane. I'm not sure Vickery would approve."

He heard the swish of sudsy bathwater from what he knew must be a galvanized tub. Cora Bob's vibrant voice came to him from the bedroom. "Don't worry about Vick. He's broadminded."

Saxby passed that one up. Hot sunlight fused the folds in the canary-yellow curtains, rippled the black painted floor like molten gold dust. The thermometer at the hotel had said ninety-eight and he had no reason to doubt it. Through the bedroom door he could see the cheap vanity and a corner of the bed with its candlewick spread; on the edge of the bed was the navy-blue frock with the big nickel buttons and under the bed was a wad of castoff clothes which had just a minute ago been catapulted into his range of vision. He heard her step from the tub to the floor, heard her firm muscular footbeats as she groped for her clothes. The air was soapy, oppressive, animal.

Saxby said, "Cora Bob, if Vickery Poynter didn't have a penny, would you marry him tomorrow?"

Her voice answered him placidly. "What a question! Not tomorrow, maybe. But perhaps the day after. I'd have to adjust myself, I guess."

"It's a peculiar love affair, isn't it?"

Her buxom arm flashed whitely, disappeared with the navy frock. "And you can say that again! But I guess they all are. At least that's been my frustrated experience. Why didn't you ever marry, Paul?"

"We won't go into that," Saxby said stiffly. She laughed loudly, "It's not so comfy when someone else is asking the personal questions, is it?" She was clacking around in spike-heeled pumps. The air, now was filled with cinnamon fragrance of powder, and with lilac perfume.

She appeared in the doorway, crisp and cool looking, with her gloves and key, and a small overnight bag. She said, "We can talk on the way to town. I'm due at Poynter House. I'm staying there for a few days, sort of helping out with Mother Poynter—"

"And whose idea was that?"

"Mother Poynter's. She's really a dear when you get to know her." They locked up the tiny house and started down the lane.

Saxby asked, "Cora Bob, has anyone, anyone at all, suggested—or in any way at all involved you in—say, unusual business arrangements. Has anyone asked you for your power of attorney, for instance, or offered to make you a partner in anything?"

"Of course not. I'm practically a pauper."

"Has anyone taken out insurance on your life?"

"No, I'm sorry to say. Why?"

"I just wanted to clear up a few routine details. By the way, Emerick Fraley died yesterday and already Les Caudry and Miss Dineen are discussing nuptials. I'd like your feminine opinion on that, my dear."

She looked interested. "Well, I give them about one blissful year. What's your estimate?"

"No comment."

They passed the water tower, turned down a shady side street towards Poynter House. Cora Bob said, "Something tells me you're leading me into this by the subtle power of suggestion. However, here goes. There's a story around town that's been bothering me. It's this. Out there at that old sawmill Sheriff Trezevant of Dupre County found Fraley's footprints, yours, Vickery's, and a fourth set. The fourth set, of course, belongs to Sheriff Masters. If you were there, he was too. You don't have a car, for one thing. But that's neither here nor there. I've been thinking it over and boiled down it means this. The two important sets of tracks out there are Vick's and Fraley's. Isn't that true?"

"Yes."

"It hasn't occurred to anyone yet, but from where I stand it doesn't stack up so well for Vick. You were there, you found the body. What is it all about? How was the evidence rigged to make it look like Vick killed Fraley?"

"The killer murdered Fraley and drove him to the hollow in a car. He then put on Fraley's shoes and carried Fraley's body into the shed, carefully stepping where he could leave tracks. Tracks won't show over the entire surface of the hollow, you know. Only in the sawdust—and in the mire by the

spring. After the killer had deposited Fraley in the shed, he walked in Fraley's shoes by the spring to scatter Fraley's tracks thoroughly."

She thought this over. "How do you know? I don't see how you—?"

"I can swear to it in any court in the land. Tracking is not new to me. Here's how I know this to be true. The footprints, Fraley's footprints, in the sawdust were very deep because the killer was carrying Fraley. The other Fraley prints by the spring were much more shallow. Don't tell me that Fraley made these then. He couldn't. He was dead when he was carried in. And they'd been made after the big rain the night before—so he hadn't made them on a previous trip. Vickery's footprints were perfectly normal. They were made by Vickery—and he wasn't carrying anything. Does that clear it up?"

"Yes. And I thank you. Can I tell Vickery. I'm sure he's been worrying about it, too."

"No," Saxby said rudely. "Just keep it to yourself. If I was telling it to anyone else I'd very likely tell it differently."

"But it's true, the way you told it to me?"

"Absolutely!"

THEY paused on the walk before Poynter House, the big yellow hulk with its gaping verandas, its satiny green lawn and shiny black-iron lion. Saxby said, "It's a creepy old place, isn't it?"

She flushed. It was on the tip of her tongue to say that some day she would be Mrs. Vickery Poynter, that this would then be her home. He met her eyes and smiled. She said angrily, "You know! How did you find out? I didn't know it myself until last night."

Saxby put everything he had into it. He said, "I was standing in the hospital main hall last night when Vickery came down the stairs.

"His face was as white as a sheet. He was trembling. He saw me, said, 'Saxby, it's a wonderful world, isn't it?' I put two and two together and got Cora Bob. It looked to me mighty like he'd just proposed and you'd accepted."

She was watching him closely as he talked. She said venomously, "It had better be that way, Paul. I'd never better find out that you were in that upstairs hall listening in. I do hate an eavesdropper."

Saxby asked anxiously, "What hall, Cora Bob?"

She seemed undecided. She said, "Okay, maybe I'm wrong. I'll be seeing you. 'Bye."

THE brown shingle bungalow sat in a weedy lawn, back of a matted privet hedge. Its weathered shingles were awry and askew and it looked for all the world like a crazy-feathered brown turkey who had been socked in the stern by a forty-mile gale. There was a decrepit red motorcycle in the side yard, a barrel hoop nailed high up on the side of the house, and a row of five rabbit hutches by the kitchen window. From the house's parlor came the sound of recorded music, a phonograph playing a waltz with a trombone duet. One trombone was sweet and true and clear, the other was as hot as a pocketful of rivets—and as sour as a green persimmon. Saxby winced. He climbed the steps and knocked on the door. The barrel-house stopped, the sweet music continued.

A girl answered the knock. A girl with a trombone in her hand. Saxby said, "I'm afraid I'm interrupting your music lesson."

She said, "Phooey on that. Come on in."

She was about fifteen, with fishy, stupid

eyes, pale blond hair that looked as though it had been trimmed with tin snips, and a stocky athletic figure that gave the impression of being packed tightly with buckshot. Saxby followed her into an untidy living room. She shut off the phonograph, sat down with a flounce, and said, "It's hot today, isn't it?"

"It gets to be a hundred and thirty-eight in the Lybian desert," Saxby said. "The highest record in Death Valley is, I believe, a hundred and thirty-four."

She said with interest, "Is that right!" She hadn't the slightest idea who he was, or what he wanted—and didn't much care.

"I'm a college professor," Saxby explained. "Just passing through. The soda clerk at the drugstore informs me that you're the town's most popular high school student. I'd like very much to discuss your activities with you. Do you object?"

She said smugly, "I am pretty popular, all right. At least that's what everyone tells me."

"To what do you attribute—?"

"I ride a motorcycle. I keep rabbits. I tap dance and play the trombone. I debate. I'm captain of the girl's basketball team. I keep busy. I figger it keeps me young."

"Really? It would age me, I'm afraid. Particularly the motorcycle and the trombone. You never play the trombone while on the motorcycle?"

"No, sir. That ain't customary. I just do what's customary."

"A very shrewd formula to follow, my dear. You'll get someplace, I'm afraid. You say you were captain of the basketball team? Did you have a good year?"

"Not bad. Wait a minute and I'll get my scrapbook. Some of the stuff's personal, notes from boys and dance programs, and so on. But you won't mind that, will you?"

"Not at all!" Saxby said enthusiastically. "I'd really enjoy it!"

She produced a large simulated leather folder and laid it on his knee. He opened it. The title page said in art-class Old English script:

PATSY ANN FAVERSHAM — CLASS OF '48. Ever Onward!

FROM the phone booth in the drugstore, Saxby called the courthouse, got the sheriff. He said, "Sheriff Masters? This is Paul Saxby. It's all over."

Sheriff Masters was speaking with his lips close to the mouthpiece. "You mean you know who?"

"I know who. And I know why and how!"

Sheriff Masters whispered excitedly, and the whisper sounded over the wire like someone sanding a hardwood floor. "Where are you? Don't leave. I'll be right over—!"

"We can't do it that way," Saxby said. "Things are much too delicately balanced. Are you listening, Sheriff—?"

"Yes, Paul. Doggone you!"

"Here's the way we'll handle it. About four o'clock this afternoon pick up Lester Caudry and bring him to the Poynter home—"

"Why Caudry?"

"He's taken a sort of civic interest in this business from the start. It's only fair that he's on hand when we finish it up. At exactly a quarter after four, enter the Poynter house without ringing. Go directly upstairs, to the second-floor sitting room. I'll be waiting."

"With our killer? Can you prove it?"

"I can prove everything, Sheriff. It's been a sly and deadly affair but the answer's been right before our eyes every minute. I don't see how we missed it. I'll be seeing you."

Saxby eased the receiver into its bracket. He stared absently at the rough plaster wall.

Four o'clock wasn't so far away. Just a matter of a few hours.

He only hoped he lived to make it.

XXI

VICKERY POYNTER said, "Sit down, Mr. Saxby. Over here, over there, anywhere. I'm sure you'd be more comfortable if you were seated—"

Saxby said, "Thanks, I'll just stand. I won't be here a moment. I just want to make a brief report. To post you on how things are going."

The real estate office had been straightened up since yesterday's burglary; the filing cabinets had been repaired and neat-as-a-pin order restored. Saxby had wandered inside the little wooden railing. He half leaned against the window-sill, resting his shoulder against the wall. Immediately below him was the narrow, sloping roof of Main Street's marquee, beyond was courtsquare, abandoned beneath the impact of the noonday sun; Sheriff Masters came out of the courthouse, got into his cream-colored sedan and drove off to lunch in a nimbus of thin blue vapor; high up, along the circular ledge of the courthouse cupola, pink-footed pigeons with iridescent breasts prospered plumply in the shimmering heat haze.

Vickery Poynter said pleasantly, "You want to make a brief report. You want to post me on how things are going. Very well, sir, how are things going?"

"So-so."

"And—?"

"Things are going so-so."

"I heard you the first time. Is that your report?"

Saxby nodded, yawned. "That's my report. It's like a doctor's prescription. It's easy to take—but it's very difficult to assemble. How are you today, Mr. Poynter? How does it feel to be a prospective bridegroom?" Poynter stiffened, "I wish you'd amplify that, sir."

"Cora Bob was saying that—"

"Very well, I understand. We'll just drop the matter. In answer to your question, being a prospective bridegroom gives me no sensation whatever."

"Numbs you, eh?"

Poynter lolled lazily in his desk chair. He polished and repolished a steel penpoint with the chamois penwiper. His jet eyes, deep set beneath the furry bar of his straight black eyebrows, were cloudy, benign. He said indulgently, "Neatly put, sir. It's been so long since I've been through this sort of thing, I'd forgotten the ragging it entailed." His tough, brown cheeks quirked slightly, his gentle, relaxed lips said, "Shall we change the subject? Somehow I keep thinking you're insulting me. It makes me nervous. I'm cursed with a hair-trigger temper, drat it!"

SAXBY said, "Lester Caudry is getting married, too. To Miss Dineen. Back in Arkansas, where I was raised, they'd make it a double wedding and have an evening band concert in the bandstand."

Poynter said amiably, "The Chickasaws used to do the same thing here in Tennessee hundreds of years ago, marry each other in droves. Forty or fifty at a whack, with much gourd shaking. Marriage rites are certainly interesting, aren't they?"

Saxby struck fire to a cigar, watched the match curl to an ember and dropped it in the big brass spittoon. He said, "Mr. Poynter, since I've been in town I've been shot at twice. Once to scare me and once for keeps. The first attack occurred in your back yard a couple of nights ago. The second came off this morning while I was eating breakfast with Mr. Caudry in the dining room at the Magnolia House. I'm telling you this so when I present you with a juicy bill this evening you'll know I've earned it."

"This evening? Are you saying that you've finished the case?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. But for a few minor details."

"What about this shooting?"

"I was sitting at the table. The shot came from across the court, from up in Caudry's room. My guess is that they were really after my scalp. And that the old, watery window glass refracted light and threw the marksman off. Caudry went upstairs but there was no one in sight."

Poynter considered it as an abstract problem. He said, "Very clever—and comparatively safe. The villain must have entered by that side door. Getting upstairs wouldn't be too difficult, the lobby's generally deserted. After he cut loose, he simply popped into an empty room and waited for the chase to cool off. What about the attack the other night in my back yard?"

Saxby said, "That was just a bluff, to scare me out of town. I'll pay for that one myself."

"Was the same person behind both shootings?"

"Of course. There's just one person behind this whole business."

Below them, on Main Street, a farmer in a wagon was fighting a team of skittish mules. The farmer's family, his wife and three daughters, were seated on kitchen chairs arranged in rows in the wagonbed and what with bucking and jolting and twisting everyone was having quite a time. Arms and legs were tossing and sprawling—but the faces of the hillman and his family remained frozen and dignified.

Vick Poynter said, "I don't know if I should mention this, Saxby—but I've been wondering. It can't be too important, if it has any significance at all, but something sticks in my mind. Something that Cora Bob let slip some time back. Before I go into it, I'd like an honest direct answer from you on this point: in your investigations, have you found anything to indicate that an elderly lady is involved?"

"How do you mean involved? In what way? What—?"

"Gracious! You can be tight-lipped, can't you? All right, here goes anyway. I'll tell you about the elderly lady that

frightened Cora Bob out of a year's growth a few days back."

"How long ago was this?"

"I don't exactly remember. No doubt she can recall. It happened like this. She came home one night just about dusk. The lamp was lighted in her living room and an elderly lady was sitting on her doorstep. Cora Bob said, 'Hello' and the old lady showed her a small lard bucket full of blackberries. She tried to sell the berries to Cora Bob but Cora Bob said she couldn't afford them. Cora Bob went on into the house and the old lady followed her in. She asked for a bite of supper but Cora Bob was growing terrified and said there was nothing on hand. The old lady then began to question her. She asked how well she knew me, whether I was financially solvent, who owned that nine hundred acres of timberland. At that time Cora Bob hadn't heard of any timberland. I owned it, of course, I'd taken it off Caudry's hands."

"And how did Cora Bob get rid of her?"

"By telling her she had to dress, that I was due any minute to take her to the moving pictures. As a matter of fact, I did happen to drop by later in the evening and found her shaking like a leaf."

"It was a gruelling experience, certainly —but not to my notion, terrifying. What seemed to—?"

"She swears there was something funny about the old woman, something unnatural. I can see her myself, right this minute, the way she described her. Little and frail, in an old mouldy hat, carrying a black purse."

"Was her voice tremulous and high-pitched?"

"That's right."

"And what about her hands. Did Cora Bob say anything about—?"

"Her hands were large and covered with brown speckles. And kept fussing with a metal monogram on the purse. The monogram said *M. K.* Or *K. M.* Does that mean anything to you?"

DESPITE himself, Saxby felt as if a cold hand were laid across the nape of his neck. "The person you describe, the person with the big speckled hands, was not an elderly woman—but a man. And the clothes you describe are graveyard clothes. I'm very glad to pick up this final bit of information." Before Poynter could retort, Saxby said, "I wish you'd call your mother and ask her if I may drop in for tea. At four o'clock. The sheriff will be along shortly afterwards. We'd like to recheck the general setup again. You know, where Alicia was killed, when she was killed."

Poynter said emphatically. "That's an excellent idea. That's the sort of detective work that I can understand. Would you like me on hand—or would you rather I stay otherwheres?"

Saxby said carelessly, "Suit yourself, Mr. Poynter."

But Mr. Poynter hardly heard. Suddenly in a spurt of delayed energy, he produced a mass of important looking papers from his desk drawer, spread them on the blotter—and began the absorbing business of studying them intently, tapping his manicured fingernail with a needle-sharp draftsman's pencil. The interview was over. Money was being made.

Saxby returned to his room at the hotel. He put a chairback under the china doorknob, examined the window, decided it was fairly secure—and stripped to his underwear and took a nap. He slept throughout the hot afternoon. His alarm clock awoke him at three fifteen. He arose, put on clean clothes after a cold sponge bath, and went down to the street.

The afternoon sun was hanging over the hills and the town was scorched and deserted in the cauldronlike heat. Saxby took a chance on the Red Bird Café. Two Western sandwiches, a can of cold mushroom soup, a rewarmed pork chop, about the size and shape of a shoe tongue, and a quart of iced coffee, somehow gave him a new and vigorous outlook. It put him in fine fettle. He didn't understand it, and he didn't try to understand it.

XXII

THE afternoon sun came across the hot slate roof of Poynter House, edged through the window into Mother Poynter's upstairs sitting room, and bathed in hot amber the potted caladium in its jardiniere by the window-seat. The pendulum wall clock, the clock which had been stopped at Alicia's death, said four minutes after four.

Saxby's wrist-watch, and the courthouse cupola, said four o'clock exactly.

Cora Bob came into the room with the tea things and placed them on the teak taboret before the old lady. The caladium made Saxby a little moody; his grandmother had always had a caladium about. They'd called it "the elephant ear" because of its long, dusty leaves; she'd had a rubber plant, too, and a night-blooming cereus. This was the hour of Alicia Poynter's death, and this was the place of death. This lofty barn-like room with its musty pastoral wallpaper, with its ancient, tinder-dry furniture and faded, threadbare carpet. Mother Poynter leaned forward from her wicker chair, in her throne of pillows, and inspected the tea tray.

Politely, Saxby inspected it, too.

There were two tiny salad sandwiches, star-shaped and filled with watercress and cottage cheese; these would be for Saxby and Cora Bob. There was the big blue teapot and three delicate bone china cups decorated with pink nymphs and lavender flowers. Cora Bob placed a bouillon cube in two of these cups, one for herself, one for Saxby, and added hot water. She laid two milk crackers on Mother Poynter's saucer, smiled, and poured the old lady a cup of tea. There was a general air of tension, no one said anything.

Finally Mother Poynter spoke. She said sweetly. "I don't seem to see the cloves, dear. I always float a few cloves in my tea. If you'll just help me across the hall—! They're in my bedroom, in a small tin canister, in the top drawer of my dresser, I believe—"

Cora Bob said, "I'll get them, Mother Poynter," and left the room.

When they were alone, Mother Poynter smiled austerely. "I wished to speak with you in private, sir. What nonsense is this?"

Saxby waited with an air of profound courtesy.

The old lady said acidly, "Vickery phones me that you expect to find a murderer here in our home. I hope you know what you're doing."

Saxby said, "So do I, ma'm. This is going to be serious business. If there's a mistake made, I'm the one who will pay the forfeit —and frankly, I don't relish the prospect!"

Mother Poynter lay back in her billow of cushions. She said casually, "Run across the hall and fetch the girl. Tell her I've remembered that I have no cloves, that I've used them all—" Downstairs, the doorbell rang. "Now who in the world is that? Have the girl run down and answer it."

Wordlessly, Saxby followed the old lady's injunctions. He gave the message to Cora Bob, returned to the sitting room, and a moment later Cora Bob entered with Dr. Mattison. The doctor seemed bewildered. Saxby said, "Hello, Doc. Mrs. Poynter, I took the liberty of having a medical man on hand. This might be a bit of a strain on your heart."

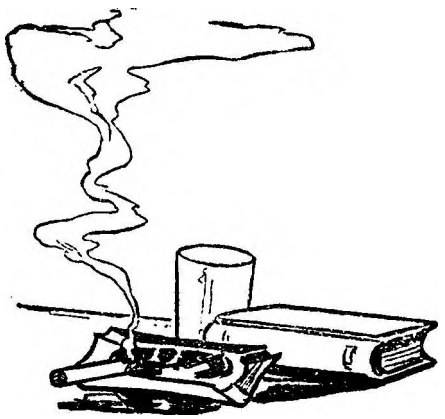
Mother Poynter bristled. "All this is decidedly presumptuous, Mr. Saxby. Cora Bob, get the Doctor tea."

Dr. Mattison shook his head. "No, thank you, if you'll excuse me. I don't partake between meals, husband my meager gastric juices, you know. Saxby, what's this all about?"

Saxby asked, "Mrs. Poynter, where's Vickery?"

"At his work, I assume. He rarely gets home before six. Why?"

Mother Poynter sipped her tea. Cora Bob picked up her bouillon cup. Saxby selected a sandwich, munched it thoughtfully. "Mr. Lester Caudry and Sheriff Masters are due to arrive shortly," he announced. "We're all set to trap a vicious multiple killer. A slayer with three kills already to his credit. Permit me to set the scene. The victims are Hart Killigrew, shot with his own pistol, Alicia, who—believe it or not—was slain with the aid of an old bicycle bell,



and a hillboy named Fraley who was carried to his temporary resting place in his socks."

Cora Bob was frowning at him in a strange, tense way. Mother Poynter said haughtily, "We haven't retained you to police the county, Mr. Saxby. My son Vickery and I are solely concerned with the calamity which befell our sweet Alicia—"

Cora Bob got suddenly to her feet. She said tautly, "Would you help me carry the tea things to the kitchen, Paul? I'll take the tray, you take the crackers and things." Saxby arose; she said tonelessly, "Thank you, so much!"

Mother Poynter blinked. "What's the rush? What's the rush?"

Saxby followed the girl out into the hall.

HE WAS halfway down the back stairs when his mouth began to sting. It came on gradually, like he'd scorched his tongue, and by the time he'd reached the kitchen the inner membranes of his cheeks, and his tongue, and the roof of his mouth, were in maddening torment, almost senseless from the pricking of a thousand darting needles. He tried to speak and no words came.

Cora Bob set the tray in the sink, turned toward him in alarm. She picked up the remnant of his cress sandwich. "There's something funny about this," she said rapidly. "It looks different, somehow. It's not the way I made it. Notice these points on the stars. I cut the bread with a cutter and one of the tin points was bent. It marks the bread. I put them together so they matched and now they're twisted around. As if they'd been opened and then—"

Saxby said, "My mouth—my mouth—it feels—"

She studied him coolly, with compassion. "You've been poisoned. I'll get Dr. Mattison." Quick as a flash he had a glass of milk in his hand. "In the meantime take this. Milk is an antidote to almost everything. Milk and mustard water—"

Saxby said, "Don't get Dr. Mattison. This'll do nicely."

Out in the hall they heard the front door open. Saxby's wrist-watch said a quarter after four, to the second. He raised his voice, called, "Back here, Sheriff. Back in the kitchen."

Sheriff Masters and Mr. Caudry came through the kitchen door.

Saxby said, "Here she is, Sheriff. Your killer. I'm willing to charge her formally if you so desire."

Sheriff Masters was stunned. He said, "You ain't jokin', Paul? You mean what you say? You mean Miss Cora Bob Wilkerson, here?"

"I mean Mrs. Hart Killigrew. Mrs. Mary Killigrew. Don't I, ma'm?"

CORA BOB looked not so plump and jolly now. She looked older, and cruel—and infinitely dangerous. The change came and went like a flick of the eyelashes—but any jury in the country would have convicted her on the strength of it. One instant they were looking through the bleak and violent windows of her eyes. And the next, she was cozy and helpless and chubby again. She said in wonder, "Whatever do you mean?"

Saxby said softly, "Call Dr. Mattison. He, too, has a right to hear it."

When the doctor had joined them, Saxby said, "It was a very simple deception and would no doubt have been easily successful if something hadn't gone wrong, bringing an epidemic of death and bloodshed. Here's the story, correct me, Mrs. Killigrew, if I'm wrong:

"Up to five years ago, over in Dupre County, Hart Killigrew lived with this woman as his common-law wife. Mr. Killigrew wanted to sell a piece of property, some timberland, and a court's decision confirming a state of legal matrimony was necessary to release dower and homestead rights. Mary Killigrew wasn't any too happy with Hart. She liked money and he was notoriously stingy. So she caught a midnight bus to Florida one night. The story got out locally that he'd done away with her because he seemed so bewildered by her exodus. The simple truth is, that she did what he said she did. She deliberately pulled out on him."

Sheriff Masters shook his head. "Wait until the law over at Dupre hears about this!"

Saxby continued, "She went to Silverton, Florida, took up residence at 309 Silver Avenue. From there she wrote a neighbor of Hart's, a fine old gentleman named Uncle

Mort—with a talent for song-making—to have her clothes sent to her. By the time Hart got them off to her, she'd left and they were returned as unclaimed. Doubtless she knocked around a while, living by her wits, and wound up here in Falksville.

"In Falksville she met Vickery Poynter, a man with an inexhaustible bank account, the man of her dreams. Vickery found her attractive. She endeavored to ease him into a condition of marital servitude but he was naturally, or maybe unnaturally, cagey. Just as she really got the ball rolling, she made her mistake. Something incited Alicia Poynter's suspicion. This is just a guess, but I imagine it was Alicia who contacted Hart, the husband, and brought him to town. Hart brought some of his wife's old clothes with him as a confirmation to identify. The trouble with Hart was this, while in his funny way—he kept his wife's room ready for her return, for instance—while in his funny way he felt an attraction for Mary, yet when he hit town he saw monetary possibilities."

"So that was it," Mr. Caudry exclaimed. "That was what he was talking about!"

"Yea! Vickery's bank account is sweeter than honey and the honeycomb. Cora Bob, with Fraley's assistance, shot Killigrew with his own pistol. She couldn't marry Vickery, of course, until something was done about Hart. And divorce was obviously an impossibility. Later Alicia got hold of this gun, Hart's gun, which I'll wager she took with her when she decamped. And Alicia, worried about the discharged shells, and knowing more than met the eye, contacted me. Cora Bob was scared. She fired five shells at a panel truck of a friend of the sheriff's, a Mr. Walkenhorst, hoping if the gun should turn up the unexplained attack on the extract salesman would act as a blind."

Cora Bob said affably, "Is that all I did?"

"You rifled Vickery's study the afternoon of Alicia's murder, looking for the deed to the timberland. You knew it was in Vick's possession. You knew, too, that your name was on it with Hart's and you weren't just sure whether there was some mention of the common-law business, or anything else that might throw a monkey wrench into your matrimonial plans. Vickery, in spite of your remark this afternoon, isn't any too broad-minded!" Saxby sighed. "You shot at me twice."

Cora Bob said, "I've killed a lot of people—according to you. Can you prove it?"

"I can't prove Alicia's murder. Nor Fraley's. You were the one who carried him into the hollow, by the way. But I can prove you killed your husband, Hart. And anyone in your old Dupre County neighborhood can identify you as Mrs. Mary Killigrew."

After a moment, she said, "That part I admit. But where is Hart's body. You can't claim murder unless—"

"You told Vickery a bald lie about having an old lady visitor with speckled hands, an old lady who wore Mary Killigrew's clothes. You suspected that I knew about a certain straw suitcase and its contents, and about Hart—and thereby you attempted to implant a false concept about your husband being still alive—"

"But I was in danger, too. You, yourself said so. Remember the trap you discovered? That gasoline—?"

"Yes, I remember the fruit jar of gasoline in your wash-house stove. Hidden there, by you. When you broke into Vick's garage—looking for that bicycle bell—you had to roll away an empty oil barrel to get to the loft. You got grease on your frock. I know. I got grease on my trousers the same way. You were using that gasoline for a little home dry-cleaning. Now weren't you?"

She shook her head. "No. No, I wasn't. I don't know what you're talking about. You're saying a lot of slanderous things about me—and you can't prove a thing. I'm going home!"

"That's a grisly thought!" Saxby looked grim. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but this is no time to present the damnable evidence against you."

Sheriff Masters seemed uneasy. He said, "If all you really got agin her is that she's Mrs. Hart Killigrew—I don't see how I can hold her. That hain't no terrible crime, Paul."

Saxby said, "Look here, Sheriff." He held up the glass of milk. "I'm top man on her death list. When Vickery phoned I'd be here for tea she worked out a neat plan for my execution." He told about carrying the tea things to the kitchen. "To get me out of sight of witnesses," he explained. He

described the strange burning in his mouth. "That almost fooled me, for a time I thought I was a goner. Then I remembered the caladium up in the sitting room. We used to give a scrap of elephant-ear leaf to each other when we were kids, as a prank. It burns like a ball of fire but is perfectly harmless. After a while the sensation passes away. Caladium in the cress sandwich to scare me, so she could give me an 'antidote' —a glass of milk, loaded to the brim with cyanide saved from Alicia's—"

"Hand it over," Dr. Mattison said gruffly. "I'll test it."

Saxby said, "Thanks for coming, Doc. I thought I might need you—one way or another."

Cora Bob said, "If that milk has poison in it, I'm not responsible. I just took it from the refrigerator where I found it—"

"All poured out and waiting for just such an occasion. I see. No. Your plan was to get me downstairs here and kill me. Kill me instantly because your poison was cyanide. Upstairs was Mother Poynter, and later Dr. Mattison. Down here you could drag me into the cellar and dispose of me at your convenience. That would be the mysterious end of Paul Saxby. He left Mother Poynter's sitting room with some tea things, they'd say, and simply vanished. Like Hart Killigrew vanished."

She said harshly, "I didn't shoot at you, get that straight, but I wish that whoever did had finished you!"

Saxby said quietly, "Maybe sometime someone will. I've often wondered."

XXIII

IT WAS a good meal, a marvelous meal, but Saxby couldn't help thinking of it in terms of volume and weight. He'd eaten three drumsticks, two fried peach pies, about a pint of mashed potatoes and giblet gravy—to say nothing of golden brown cornbread and assorted garden vegetables—yet the mounds of food on the table appeared untouched. Mrs. Sheriff Masters, always in the background, materialized at his elbow with a tinkling pitcher of purple raspberry shrub. Saxby said desperately, "No, no! Please! It's impossible. I can't do it!" Mrs. Sheriff Masters looked happy.

Sheriff Belknap Childress Masters selected a toothpick from the little cut-glass baby's bootee, arranged the chicken bones on his plate in an orderly row, said, "What was once a sprightly hen is now a gleaming skel-e-ton!" Mrs. Sheriff Masters whispered behind her palm, into Saxby's ear, "He always says that when he's been chicken-fed."

Sheriff Masters stood up. He hooked his ankle in the rungs of his chair, spun the chair deftly against the wall, said politely, "Shall we go into the parlor, Paul? I sure want to hear about that evidence."

Mrs. Masters said, "I do too!"

Saxby hesitated. "It's a rough and bloody tale."

Mrs. Masters said placidly, "I've been in this-here sheriff business as long as my husband, remember that."

Saxby said respectfully, "We'd be delighted to have you join us."

The Masters' parlor was kempt and homelike, with comfortable easy chairs, high small-paned windows, and a pink marble fireplace. Soft twilight through the open door touched Mr. Masters' tatting, which appeared everywhere, in antimacassars and runners and doilies, to silver foil in the gathering shadows. Saxby seated himself on the couch, the sheriff turned on a frilly table lamp and faced him from the depths of an old Morris chair. Vickery Poynter came up the walk. His face appeared whitely at the screen door; he said, "Hello, folks." Mrs. Masters let him in. He seemed the same old Vickery, tough, elastic, proud, but there was a flinty quality in his lustrous black eyes. He chose a chair, sat down, and waited in silence.

Saxby said gently, "I'm sorry I had to do this to you, Mr. Poynter—but the woman killed your daughter."

Poynter's mobile lips drooped noncommittally. "Let's hear about it."

"You've heard the charges," Saxby said. "Tonight we're concerned with evidence and proof."

Vickery Poynter said, "Understand my situation, please. It might surprise you to learn that if Cora Bob is Mrs. Killigrew, and she admits it, that in itself makes no difference to me. However, if your charges against her are true that fact simply and completely negates my affection for her because it places our entire relationship in

the position of a deliberate fraud on her part. That might seem cold and heartless to you, you probably think that if I truly loved her I would follow her into hades. This is not so. It is physically impossible for me to love anyone who connives against me to the point of slaying my only daughter. I think that's only natural, don't you?"

Mrs. Sheriff Masters said, "—to put it mildly!"

Poynter ignored her. Sheriff Masters asked, "What's my case against her, Paul?"

"It's Hart Killigrew's body."

"Sure-sure. But where the heck is—?"

"Alicia could tell us. That's the real reason she was killed. I myself will tell you in a moment—but let's take some other evidence first." He opened his wallet, laid out several miscellaneous papers on the couch beside him. "From the start it was obvious that one Hart Killigrew, a Dupre County farmer, was hogging the Falksville spotlight. The more you inquired into Alicia's death, the oftener you ran across traces of this outsider, this stranger, Killigrew. At first it seemed hard to reconcile. It couldn't have been a business fracas over that timberland, because Hart had long ago sold out his interest in it. Yet the timberland, or rather the deed to it, was certainly of prime significance. I went to Yellowfoot, looked up the original deed, and heard about Mr. Killigrew's marital difficulties."

Mrs. Masters asked with interest, "And what were they, Mr. Saxby?"

"You'll have to ask your husband later. I blush to discuss them with a lady present."

Sheriff Masters coughed, said, "That's better, Emma. That's better. Later. The man is right."

Saxby went on, "After my visit to the Dupre County courthouse, I suspected Cora Bob was Mrs. Mary Killigrew. From an old gentleman named Uncle Mort, a neighbor that lived across the road from the Killigrews, I acquired a postcard—" He picked up a scenic card. "—which was sent by Mrs. Killigrew when she was in Florida. I compared the handwriting with Cora Bob's and found them to be definitely the same—"

"Just to keep the record straight," Vickery put in lazily, "where did you get this sample of Cora Bob's writing?"

"In your downtown office. I read a letter she sent you about a cow."

"Oh," Vickery said. "Yes, yes, of course." He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry I interrupted, old man."

SAXBY indicated the two clippings he'd gotten from Mr. Caudry. "Here is more evidence, of a sort. These clippings were sent to Les Caudry by a mailing service in Mobile. They purport to be authentic records of the death of Mr. and Mrs. Killigrew, sometime ago, down in Alabama. They're phonies, of course. Earlier this afternoon I spent a breathless fifteen minutes with a Miss Patsy Ann Faversham, the town's most popular high-school student. I looked over her scrapbook. As I suspected, these clippings were run off on the old-style, hand press at the high school. The one used for the school paper. Killigrew was always a threat to remarriage and wealth in Cora Bob's mind. My guess is that when she was a teacher, and had access to the press, she prepared these items for the day she would have to kill him."

Sheriff Masters broke in. He said, "Listen, Paul. For God's sake. Where is Hart Killigrew's body?"

"Under the floor of that little building back of Dr. Mattison's hospital. That little outside office."

Sheriff Masters asked, "Is that a guess?"

"No. It's a fact. At first it was a deduction—now I know it's a fact. Here's what happened. Cora Bob and her assistant, Fraley, killed the Dupre farmer and decided to bury him under the office floor. It was a wonderful idea. A hospital such as that is a private and at the same time public place. They lured Mattison away with a note about a sick child. They arrived with the body, first prowled the hospital to be sure everything was okay. They must have left the straw suitcase containing the gun and the garments in the car by the front porch.

"Alicia must have arrived on the scene, with her neck boil, just after they did. She didn't see them with the body—but she saw something that made her suspicious. She was after Cora Bob anyway. She took the suitcase into Dr. Mattison's dispensary and opened it. From the dark outside office, Fraley and Cora Bob could see her as plainly as if they were in the room with her. They stood at the window and watched, and knew that she, too, must die."

Sheriff Masters made an angry noise in his throat.

Saxby said, "She saw something in the office window herself. Maybe a patch of white dress. She became frightened and left.

"When she was gone they got to work. They'd brought a blanket and some nails with them. They curtained the window with the blanket and got to work. I found the nails on the window frame and the blanket. I examined the floor. There is mud beneath that carpet. The baseboards have been removed recently and put back again.

"As they'd have to be if the flooring was taken up. I'd gotten around to that little building sooner or later but Moonrise Blizzard the Second expedited things."

Vickery asked, "How so?"

"Lester Caudry's had ants in his pants about this business ever since it broke. He's a natural busybody and he launched himself into a sort of one-man investigation. He suspected the Poynter clan and whenever they assembled he tried to be on hand, to pick up any stray remarks. That's why he brought the dog. To crash the party."

Mrs. Sheriff Masters said, "Well, bless my heart!"

Saxby said humbly, "Don't laugh but when I saw that blanket and those two nail holes in the window frame I knew that I had found Hart Killigrew. People only put up curtains to keep other people from seeing in."

Vickery said good-naturedly, "That's pretty obvious, isn't it?"

"Of course it's obvious," Saxby said. "But it's important, too, isn't it? I mean that was the key to the whole puzzle, wasn't it?"

Vickery Poynter reached for his checkbook. He said, "How much is this going to cost me?"

Saxby said promptly, "It's going to cost you fifteen hundred dollars in one check and five hundred in another. The large check you make out to me, the smaller one to Mrs. Sheriff Masters."

Vickery Poynter frowned. "That's a little steep for two days work, don't you think so?"

"It wasn't work, Mr. Poynter. It was an enterprise."

Vickery smiled blandly, filled out the two checks.

Mrs. Sheriff Masters' eyes glowed. She held the slip of paper in her hand, said falteringly, "Thank you, Mr. Saxby. I'll give it to charity."

Vickery Poynter nodded. "A very generous idea, Mrs. Masters. Possibly I can be of some assistance in directing you in its disposition. As you know, I'm a man of affairs and am consequently in position to know where a charitable dollar will do the most good."

"It would do the most good right here," Saxby said angrily. "Right here in this home! You hang on to that check, ma'm, cash it—and stick it away under the mattress with your egg money and old love letters and insurance policy!"

Sheriff Masters said coldly, "Falksville has safety deposit boxes and bank accounts, Paul." He paused, added pompously, "And she ain't got no love letters. I never wrote her none—so what do you say to that, By Jeepers!"

THE END

Another Generation Was Learning to Call Jerry's Father "Cap'n"

JANUARY STORM

By FRANCIS GOTT

EVEN for mid-winter, darkness came early that day. A drooling maw of grayness, it first rolled in swiftly from the sea, blotting out the fishing launches in the harbor, sweeping up over the shore and blotting out the houses of the fishermen, and passing on over the land, warning of storm.

The darkness rolled in from the east, and it was into the east Jerry looked, face flat against the pane, striving to see the champing boats and the fish houses and wharves and the entrance to the harbor beyond. It was a bad night and he knew it and the whole village knew it and was restless and uneasy.

"You comin', Jerry?" his father asked. "I'm goin' down to the shore."

Jerry took his face from the pane and looked from the dark sitting room into the lighted kitchen. He saw his father standing there beside the woodbox, dumpy and insignificant, struggling into boots and oilskins and a sou'wester appearing too large for his head. His father looked up then and Jerry caught the play of light on the weathered face and in the brown eyes; and a feeling of shame that he strove to choke down came upon him again and caused him to step farther back in the darkness so that his father could not see his face. He should not feel this way, he knew; yet how could he

help it when his father always looked so meek and mild and undemonstrative, never joking nor play-acting like the fathers of the other boys?

But the storm was brewing out there and Jerry wanted to hear the fishermen talk. So he said, "I'm comin', Pa," and went out into the kitchen. He got into rubber boots and sweater and knit wool cap and stood ready to follow his father.

"You be careful, John, and don't slip on the ice," Jerry's mother said, tying his father's sou'wester under his chin.

Jerry almost choked for shame then. He wondered why his mother had ever married his father. His mother was tall and clean-limbed and lithe while his father was already beginning to stoop and looked so workworn.

"Have we got plenty of coffee in the house, Mary?" his father asked.

Jerry looked at his mother and saw her nod, but he wondered at the sudden tremble to her patient lips and the troubled and scared light in her eyes, glowing so soft and violet and pretty against the blue pattern in the wallpaper, before she turned her face away.

Outside, his father said, "It was on a night like this fourteen years ago your Uncle Tom was drowned."

An inkling of past sorrows came to Jerry, then; for Uncle Tom had been his mother's brother, and a brave man.

IT WAS only a slide and a jump from house to shore and they made it without mishap. They stood for a time on Joley's wharf, looking out to sea, striving to pierce the murk, the cold wind whipping their faces with spray and needling through their clothes to the very bone.

Jerry's father laid his mittened hand on the boy's shoulder. Jerry winced. The man's strong fingers dug in hard as if working quite free of the brain yet knowing the man's thoughts and attempting to pass them on.

"No able-bodied man will take to his bed this night, I bode," his father said. "Flood tide will bring the ice and the wind and snow, too, perhaps—and a full moon dragging the sea right to our very doorsteps."

It was a long speech for his father to make and Jerry stood there, wondering. For the first time of a long time of late he felt drawn to his father; yet he fought the mellow feeling down while disappointment mounted. At twelve years already he was the taller and held the promise of being a big man. It was no easy thing of late, in school, and out, to endure the twits of his chums that his father had never grown up and was never a full man because of it. He could fight them, yes, as was the natural right of a redhead; but the mocking tongues tossed keen barbs which were cruel torture in the flesh, digging in ever deeper, day by day, poisoning him with whispers of doubt, and keeping him sleepless on his bed at night.

So Jerry stood there in the darkness, conscious of his father's bent stature beside him, and ashamed because of it. The wharf worked under their feet, the spiles groaning against the blows of ice and tide, churning and swirling and throwing up spray which the wind caught and drove up through the cracks between the planks. Jerry's body crawled with cold and he shivered, wishing his father would enter the store.

As if to the promptings of his thought, his father turned, the dry snow crunching under his feet and the heavy planks groaning with frost. It was only a fathom or two to the store where it rested on the shore end of the wharf, its windows full of light and winking with cheer.

Inside, Jerry found the store swollen with warmth and ship's chandlery and watchful fishermen spitting into the red maw of the pot-bellied stove. Smells of smoke and sweat peeled the cold from his nostrils, aided by other smells of tarred hemp and oil-soaked manila, of ganging twine and marline and humberline. And then, from a corner, came special smells, new rubber boots and new oilskins all shiny and black and yellow.

The fishermen nodded, calling Jerry's father "Cap'n," and muttering about the storm. Behind the backs of the men, the boys winked at Jerry; and one boy, Spud Gleason, bigger than the rest and soon to own his own dory, made as if to pat Jerry's father on the back. Jerry saw red, then, and felt like taking Spud outside, despite his size, and rubbing his mocking face in the snow. The night was portentous, though, and he shook the red haze from his eyes.

His father sat down on a bench, picked up a stick of soft pine and began whittling out lobster plugs and laying them in an even row on the shelf beside some canned goods. He said little, brown eyes thoughtful, grunting and nodding his head to the comments of the fishermen about the mounting storm. Jerry suddenly became conscious, then, of how often the men called his father "Cap'n" and he wondered at it and was puzzled by it and looked at them closely for any sign of ridicule. Behind those sober faces he could detect no hint of mirth nor any sign of play-acting now; yet they must be baiting his father quietly, he reflected; for his father was no captain—he was just a fisherman like the rest, seldom going more than a score of miles from land.

JERRY squirmed and his freckled face grew red and hot, more from thinking about his father than from the heat in the store. Turned twelve, Jerry had all at once become painfully aware of the world of reality about him and all the people in it and their places therein. His father was not like the other fishermen, he knew, and doubts gnawed at him like little sea mites because of it.

Buck Gleason, Spud's father, turned his raw-boned face away from the window and muttered, "Tide's turned."

All the fishermen looked at Jerry's father, then, quiet-like. Jerry's father kept on whittling, quiet-like. Shame surged up in Jerry because his father didn't answer nor give any other indication that he had heard, except a nod. His father just sat there, leathery lips pinched yet tranquil, a dumpy little man all schooched up as if he might be afraid. Yes, as if he might be afraid! Jerry caught his breath, and swallowed, hard.

There was a great silence in that room then. No man moved nor spoke, and the boys were as still as mice. A half-mile away, Jerry could hear the sea, muted yet thunderous, boiling against the offshore ledges. The wharf and the store shook and trembled to the rising pressure of wind and to the buffeting of the mounting ice cakes beneath them; while a tremor, constant and foreboding, like a taut wire being strummed, came right up through Jerry's boots from the solid granite of the earth itself.

"Worst blow we've had in ten year," grunted Buck Gleason, broad shoulders jammed against the spray-lashed window again.

Worst blow in ten year! All at once Jerry felt as young as if he had not really been born yet. A thin knife-point of fear pierced him. He gazed, wide-eyed, at the fishermen, sensing their mounting tension and perturbation. And respect, and an overwhelming feeling of being a part of them, swept over him as he watched them. They had been through this before; they knew what to expect—and they were not happy about it.

Old Gramp Maydew sucked at his scraggly mustache, and muttered, "The boats?"

Yes, the boats. Jerry thought of them out there, fighting the tide and the ice and the full sweep of the wind; for the wind was just right, this rare time, to blow straight upon them through the narrow entrance of the harbor. Jerry saw them now as representing the wealth of the village, and he became uneasy and alarmed and as anxious as the men.

Again all the fishermen looked at Jerry's father—as if waiting. For what?

The boats! Some understanding added weight to Jerry's thinking then. The bread and butter of this whole down east village depended on the boats. If they should be destroyed—? The thought was too fearful of contemplation.

He had never thought of the boats in just this way before. His life had been easy enough, even with chores of wood lugging, tending the hens, and reeling a gill net or two and baiting a trawl after school. His belly had always been full of fish and lobsters and clams, alternated with chicken and meat and other things.

JERRY'S father closed his knife. At that sound, small as it was yet apparently full of significance, each and every fisherman looked at him and began buttoning and putting on mittens.

Jerry's father got up and walked to the door, shoulders hunching to a better fit into his shapeless oilskins. The men drew up in a knot behind him, faces set and sober in weathered lines. The boys, quiet and unobtrusive yet missing nothing, looked in uncomprehension at Jerry's father. Jerry was as uncomprehending as they were.

Outside, they found the night a mad cacophony of sound; tide and wind beat into the harbor, and floes of ice churned by. The gale carried snow with a force that plastered the cheeks and filled the eyes. The tide, swollen and angry and of an inky blackness, was racing in, faster and faster, the whole weight of wind and sea behind it; and a full moon, unseen, yet throwing its awful might with the tide.

Jerry choked and gasped and bent low to escape being dragged from the wharf by the wind. His wonder grew; how could any man do a thing this night? With his head turned from the wind he could breathe again. Down the shore he caught sight of a man coming toward them, slowly, clutching a bobbing lantern and following the path above the mounting ice.

Reaching the wharf, the man stumbled toward them, crying, "Cappy! Where's Cap Greenlaw?"

Jerry's father elbowed his way from the crowd, "Here, Herb."

The man raised the lantern, young face strained, haggard, worried sick. He was Herb Myers, Jerry saw, who had a wife and five kids.

"My boat, Cap'n!" he shouted. "She's nigh aground. Engine's on the blink. Mooring's draggin'." He caught his breath. "She'll stave up sure once she hits the ledges on the south side and the ice gets to pilin' agin her. What'll I do?"

Jerry's father shoved his lips close under Myers' sou'wester, "I got a piece o' three inch manila in the fish house. I think we can save her. The line's in the sou'west corner in a hogshead. You get it while we rustle a dory."

Myers' thin shoulders straightened. Hope flared in his gray eyes. He turned away toward the fish house, running in a stumbling lope, lantern knocking against his oilskins.

Gleason bent over Jerry's father, "Goin' ter try to tow 'er, Cap'n?"

Jerry's father shook his head, eyes confident and sure and easy in the light from the store window, "Don't have to. We'll tie one end o' the line around the big spruce on this side, get the other end out to Herb's boat, and warp 'er into the lee o' Sammy's fish stand."

"Pretty chancy."

"We can do it."

Jerry thought of his father's boat, then, and he became all hollow and jumpy inside. If Herb Myers' boat was dragging, then his father's must be, too. Then relief flooded through him when he remembered that his father's boat had a mooring cut out of a solid piece of granite weighing a quarter ton with a big iron ring bolt driven into the middle of it. No boat the size of his father's could ever pull that mooring from the mud; still and all, though, the mooring chain might break, but he doubted it.

HERB MYERS came then, bent under the coil of line. The men crowded around Jerry's father expectantly. The boys elbowed in on the fringe, big-eyed and quiet, red faces shiny and wet and important at being out with the men this night.

Jerry was beginning to feel important, too, but not exactly like the other boys. Little waves of pride, growing bigger all the time, began to lap and tug at his heartstrings. Yet there was a certain fearfulness there, also, as if the spell might break and he would find his father sitting back there in the store after all, hunched up on a bench, whittling his life away, humble and quiet and saying nothing.

It came over Jerry then that it wasn't always so important what a man said but when he did at a time like this that counted. The men who had always talked the loudest, he noticed, men so boastful and cocksure, were quiet now, looking at Jerry's father and letting him do the talking.

"Bill," Jerry's father said, "you'n Jason take one end o' this line and make it fast to the spruce."

"Snub 'er out?" asked Jason Lawley, scratching his bewhiskered face.

"No. Leave the coil here; we'll dump it into a dory. Ye couldn't see us out there in all that smother to snub the line out even. Besides, it ought to be made fast on the solid end."

"Heck of a row," Mark Sims observed, looming up huge and burly in a sheepskin coat. "What with tide and wind and ice and all agin ye. Too much of a chance of swampin' or gettin' stove in or gettin' the oars snapped off short like match sticks. Besides—"

Jerry, keeping the line clear as it snaked out from the coil between his legs, looked

up quick at his father's face then. His sudden anxiety was cut adrift, however, when he heard the sharp edge of steel in his father's voice.

"We'll make it all right, Mark. Now who's goin' in the dory with me, 'sides Herb?"

Mark Sims pushed forward, voice gruff, "I'll go."

"Ye're too heavy." Jerry's father frowned yet he thanked Mark Sims with his eyes. "Ye weigh nigh three hundred, Mark. I cal'ate it better be you, Buck."

Before he had time to think, Jerry turned away from the diminishing coil of manila, crying, "Let me go, too, Pa."

Spud Gleason pushed forward, "Me, too."

Jerry's father hesitated, just an instant, "All right, son. I cal'ate ye boys gotta learn. Here, take this flashlight. Ye can use it in paying out the line. All set, Herb?"

They went to a dory on the banking, turned it right side up and dragged it down over the ice to the water. There was a bit of lee here on the western side of the wharf and they got in and shoved off.

"A couple of men better stand by on Sammy's wharf," Jerry's father shouted, his voice whipped away by the wind. "And two, three more better keep us covered with flashlights, just in case—"

IT WAS a big gray dory, Gloucester type, light and easy to handle; yet, rounding the wharf into the full sweep of the storm, wind and tide and ice almost made of it a plaything—almost but not quite. Herb Myers and Buck Gleason sat side by side on the big thwart amidships, each rowing with a twelve-foot oar. Jerry's father was in the bow with another oar, fending off the ice and trying to clear a course. In the stern, Jerry and Spud pounced on the coil of line as it was thrown into the dory when they passed by the wharf.

The dory tossed and plunged and took dizzying slides down the champing seas. It scraped ice cakes and missed others by inches. Jerry's heart leaped and his throat felt tight and dry, but exultation rode him when he met Spud's blue eyes shining in the reflected glare of the flashlight.

"Great, ain't it!" Spud cried, wiping spray from his face.

Jerry squinted into the lacing snow, and grinned, "Sure is, Spud!"

Jerry felt deft and sure and strong as he helped clear the line. He had never known that a night could be so wild, or that so much of the sea could be forced into their small harbor.

Slowly, the men forced the dory across the harbor, slantwise with tide and wind, taking what advantage they could of the drift. The boys worked desperately clearing the line, striving not to pay out too much nor too little, and trying to keep it from snagging among the ice floes.

Flashlights from the shore stabbed at them, beams spreading and growing more feeble with distance, to be engulfed finally and completely in the streaking snow and the darkness.

Herb Myers became more taut and anxious and looked over his shoulder more often as they neared his boat. At last they crawled up to two launches, one of them Jerry's father's, and the other, the one almost on the ledges, Myers'.

Suddenly Buck Gleason shouted, "Your boat's got a hole stove in it, Cap'n, looks like to me."

Jerry flashed the light against the side of his father's boat. Up near the bow he saw a hole, splintered and yawning and taking water, where an ice cake must have rammed it just right.

"She'll sink!" Herb Myers cried. "We better 'tend to her first."

"No, you're first," Jerry's father shouted, but his voice was thin and torn by the gale and sounded full of despair.

At last they reached Myers' boat and fought for a place beside it.

"Ten minutes more—" The wind ripped the sentence from Buck Gleason's mouth, but no one, not even the boys, missed the implication.

The ledges, saw-toothed, dark, dangerous, and strewn with ravaged seaweed, were being piled higher and higher by great blocks of ice by the hammering sea. Myers' boat had dragged to within three fathoms of destruction. Jerry realized, suddenly, as if being smashed between the eyes, that in a matter of minutes Myers' whole livelihood would have been splintered into wreckage.

Jerry's father sprang into the boat, caught the three-inch line and took several turns

around a stout oak towing post in the bow. The rest followed, Jerry with the dory painter which he made fast, close hauled, with a bowline to the stern of the larger craft. The dory swung out behind, almost touching the ledges but broadside to them.

THEY had an even more severe struggle then; for the three-inch line had to be heaved on by all hands in order to warp the launch farther into the channel. They had to clear the ledges and pass them and drift down toward Sammy's fish stand.

"All right, take a turn!" Jerry's father shouted. "Now—cut the mooring!"

A knife flashed and they were free, depending wholly now on the shore line

"Now heave! All together now!"

Jerry pulled on that line until the blood sang in his ears and the wind became a droning echo. Tight-lipped, narrow-eyed, nostrils flaring with strain, he bent his weight to that line. He looked towards shore. They were gaining! It was unbelievable; yet true. They were getting the whip hand of sea and tide and wind—and the old moon, too, hidden there behind the wracking smother yet pulling the sea with mighty reins.

Blobs of shadow moved against the shore; lanterns and flashlights winked and flared against the moving figures of men and boys. Jerry thought of his mother, then, knowing that she must have water boiling and steaming on the stove, ready to make fresh coffee.

Above them, partially sheltered by the spit of ledge jutting out like a breakwater, other motor boats yawed and rolled and snapped taut mooring cables against the tide.

Finally they eased Myers' boat into the lee of Sammy's wharf, making her fast to a lobster car. Then, once more, the laborious pilgrimage began again to save Jerry's father's boat. And they made it, too, and none too soon.

After that, other jobs carried Jerry through that night. They saved a fish house by means of logs shored against the sides and tackles run to trees ashore and heaved taut.

Through it all, men came to Jerry's father and asked him about this and that and what it was best to do. To Jerry, his father was just his usual, unhurried, quiet self; yet making each move and each man count against the storm. He was different, though, somehow transformed; and Jerry was proud to work beside him.

IN the light of morning they found the village to have suffered a terrific beating. Two fish houses had been lost; for ancient foundations had given way to the unusually high tide. Yet all the boats had been saved or had safely ridden out the blow. The village had taken everything full moon and tide and wind had to give.

Then reports began to come in by radio: Wires were down. Millions of dollars in shipping had been lost from Newfoundland to Hatteras. Homes were flooded and wharves carried away and several bridges undermined along the coast.

What pleased him most, however, was when Spud Gleason, shining in glory, threw out his chest and began telling the other boys that the Cap'n had said this'n that, and that he had helped the Cap'n do such and such a job, and that yuh gotta heave just so on a line, all hands, and then take a turn quick, like the Cap'n did.

After that, Jerry went home, following his father into the house. Breakfast was ready and his eyes glowed, when, sitting across from his father, he nodded and grunted, taking his father's lead as his mother wormed the night's doings from them.

His mother sighed, sleepless and tired yet happy, "I guess you're most a man now, Jerry."

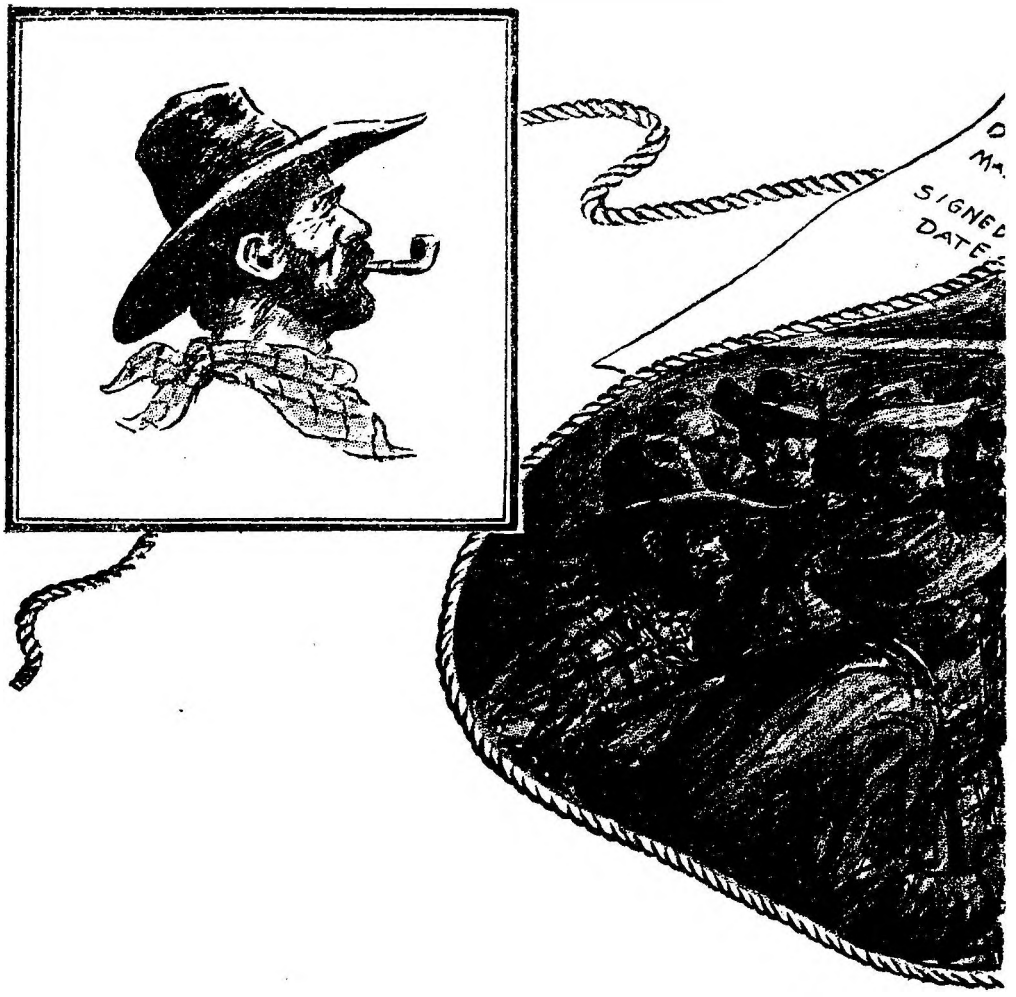
"I cal'ate he be," his father said, real quiet-like but his eyes shone. "I'm real proud of him and of that Gleason boy, too. They did a right good job."

Jerry's eyes glowed.

"You two had better get your sleep now," his mother said.

For the first time in his life without being sick Jerry went to bed by full morning light just like his father in from a night's haul. He nestled between the blankets, warm and comfortable and with his stomach full, tired and happy and secure in the strange knowledge that another generation of boys had learned to call his father "Cap'n," himself among them.

ACCORDING TO THE BOND



By GEORGE BRUCE MARQUIS

THE speaker was drunk with the heady wine of inflated self-appraisements. Or were they? As the uninhibited voice crashed out in its grand *finale* Bat Jennison turned to Doc Levitt to grin cheerful comment.

"He sure auctions himself off good, don't he Doc?"

"Yes," Levitt agreed with a smile. Then he added shrewdly, "But if he makes a sale of his wares, the purchaser will regret his investment."

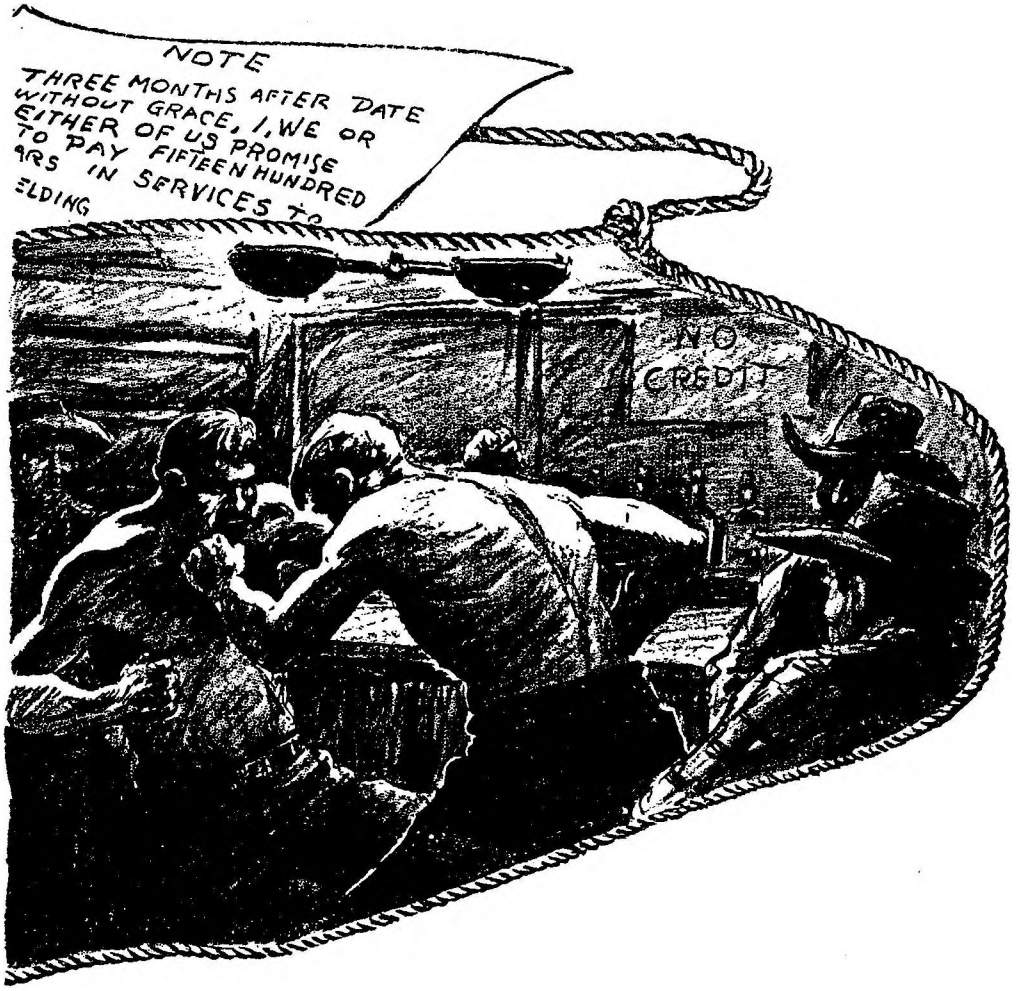
"Tall talk," was no novelty in mining camps. It was only that this untrammeled stranger had played on some normally unused chords. Hear his challenge.

"I can out-hop, out-jump, out-run, for fifty yards, out-lift and out-wrestle any man in this camp of Buttercup and here's a thousand dollars that says Hercules G. Samson can do it."

Jennison reverted with a puzzled frown to Levitt's judgment of the orator's likely ability to make good on his boasts.

"But, Doc," he argued, "he sold too tall a bill of goods. Mebbe he can out-hop and out-jump everybody in this camp but he oughta should stopped thar. Comes weight liftin' fur instance. What chance 'ud he

If Anyone Told Bat Jennison That Things Looked Pretty Bleak, His Retort Was Only, "Well, We'll Unbleak 'Em."



have with Whisperin' Thompson if he was here 'stead of off freightin'? Besides bein' the stoutest man west of the Rockies, Whisperin's got six inches onto that braggart in height, and seventy-five pounds in weight. And nobody pound fur pound even can lift with Whisperin'."

"Bat my noble friend," Levitt said soothingly, "I yield to no man in laudation of Whispering's titanic strength, who is in very truth a modern Aias. But he is not here, nor will he be for three or four days. I view the camp as it is. And you have erred in Hercules G. Samson. He is shy but three inches of Whispering's six-feet-three, and but thirty pounds of his two hundred fifty. Observe how his muscles strut to the bursting his sleeve. Consider his neck—"

"Doc," Jennison squinted interruption, "he ain't rightly gotta neck, now has he?" Then he chuckled, "Don't believe you could hang him less the rope got caught onto his years."

"And that name," Doc Levitt mused. "Mythical trilogy of brawn, the Greek, the Philistine, the Hebrew. Hercules G. Samson. That is to say. Hercules Goliath Samson."

"Goliath," Jennison recited brightly, "was the pelican who accordin' to The Scriptures carried off the corral gates from a camp called Gazooks."

"Gaza," Levitt corrected without a smile,

"and 'twas Samson who performed that notable feat not Goliath."

"You're mebbe right," Jennison conceded doubtfully. "But and anyway I do remember that that said Samson slaughtered three thousand Philadelphians with the jaw bone of a jassax. I allus kinda wondered why it didn't break."

Further maimed exegesis of The Scriptures was derailed for the *nonce*. Someone was challenging the prowess of Superman.

Sulky Pete was a big, hard-grained Swiss with a voice gratingly reminiscent of the forced meshing of unoiled rusty gears. His voice, his manner, even what he said was insolent.

"You twittered a minute past about *outliftin'* anybody in the camp. Does that go for pulling over a pick handle for instance? And if so for *money?*"

"Pete's got him there," an elbow companion of Jennison's chuckled. "Pete's got a trick of twirling the stick just before the pull. Remember? He all but got Whispering Thompson. In fact I've always thought—"

JENNISON turned a glacial eye on the chatterer.

"Whisperin'," he stated, "can pull that hunk of buzzard meat up with one hand. Also Pete's overdue fur a chunk of lead in his belly fur that and similar tricks, and I ain't goin' to be the one to stop it. Mebbe you'd like to tell him that fur me."

"Hell!" the other disclaimed hastily. "I ain't no friend of Pete's, hell no. Let's see what the stranger's saying."

"Sure I'll pull with you," Samson was informing Sulky Pete, "but on two conditions. Yes, three. I want a square stake holder, the bet's got to be worthwhile—say anyway a hundred dollars—and the pick handle's got to be new. I broke the last one I pulled on and got splinters in my thumbs."

Sulky Pete's mind moved slowly over this, Levitt's speedily.

"He's asking for an honest judge," so Levitt interpreted, "square stake holder."

"That's fair," Jennison admitted. "Still, him sayin' it that way kinda puts the doubt onto the camp. And as fur that broke pick handle—"

There was a sneer in Sulky Pete's harsh voice now.

"Ever' man in the camp's square," he asserted bluntly, "anyway, them *native* to it. And don't fret any about breaking the *pick handle* I'll get."

"Get it," Samson bade him crisply.

The room buzzed with pros and cons as Sulky Pete hurried away. The camp was loyal as a rule to its own citizens, but a rule has standing only in the just light of occasional exceptions. And Sulky Pete furnished immense reasons for these rule-saving exceptions. But on one point there was all but universal concord. Sulky Pete would win. The lone dissenter to this camp thesis was Doc Levitt. Jennison, shaken by what he considered sheer obstinacy on the medico's part, nevertheless found comfort in Levitt's poverty. At least he would lose no money in his championship of Hercules G. Samson.

Now Sulky Pete clumped in, bearing in his gnarled hands a shiny new pick handle of unbreakable assurance. He thumped it down on the bar.

"There!" he laughed nastily. "I reckon even *you* 'ill admit that *that* stick's sound."

"Seems to be," the other said carelessly. "How about a referee and stake holder?"

Sulky Pete glanced round hopefully, searching for the protagonist whose bubbling enthusiasm had earlier been deflated by Jennison. But he looked in vain. That chastened man was in the discreetest backwash of the barroom crowd. Then the bartender spoke with the authority inherent in his high position.

"I suggest Bat Jennison."

As the camp's first citizen Jennison could scarcely refuse, doubly so as the bartender's nomination was seconded immediately by a roaring approval. It was a selection that failed of unanimity by one very silent vote. Jennison's uncompromising honesty did not recommend him to Sulky Pete, the devious. Yet he stood voiceless, but his crooked grin did not deceive Jennison. At that, Sulky Pete would get a square deal.

THE bets in gold dust had been duly weighed on the bartender's scales, poured into a buckskin poke and dropped into Jennison's side pocket. Now he picked up the virgin pick handle.

"You men know the rules," he stated needlessly. "Thar'll be no early jerkin', nor spittin' tobacco juice into the other man's eyes, nor no tricks. When you git settled, I'll put the stick into your hands. You can spit into your hands to give you a firm clutch, twist it around to suit you and so forth. *Then* I'll tell you to git set, and *then* I'll say, 'tug.' You'll set to it then, quick as you can. The first man whose tail clears the floor is loser. Let's at it."

Sulky Pete removed his mackinaw and rolled his sleeves above his bulging biceps. And they were just that. Flexing his muscles in prideful anticipation, he tossed a disdainful glance at his antagonist. But if his thought was to awe his opponent, it was wasted effort. Samson after searching out a spot on the puncheon floor reasonably devoid of splinters, was just sitting down. And he had not troubled to remove his mackinaw nor hat either for that matter. Was he a vapid fool or was he indeed a reincarnation of those three mighty men of old?

Sulky Pete sat down facing Samson and stretched out his massive legs until their boot soles made firm contact. When they had adjusted themselves, their legs were pressed flat against the floor, their soles solidly engaged. Jennison watched with critical eye, then passed down the pick handle. Sulky Pete circled it near the middle of its length, his hands touching. Samson slid his hands up on either side of his antagonist's and touching. Some experts considered this an advantageous position, others disagreed. Jennison nodded as they settled their hands.

"Git set!" Then a brief pause, *"Tug!"*

Sulky Pete, the victor of many like contests had mastered the art of psychic timing. So in the clipt second interlude between the end of the pause and "Tug," he executed his famed twirl. The handle held strangely lax in Samson's hands made parirevolution, back and return, then Sulky Pete centered his mighty pull exactly on top of Jennison's command. Yet his artifice won him nothing and he tugged too late, a fractional moment too late. Hercules G. Samson rhythmed his pull at the *apex* of Jennison's word. And what a pull! Sulky Pete found his vast plenilunar base wafted from the floor like a dehydrated thistle-down. The bout was over. Mythology had triumphed over modernity. Jennison dropped the poke of gold dust in Samson's hand with the superfluous remark, "Mr. Samson's the winner."

Both men were on their feet now. Samson grown suddenly very pale, Sulky Pete, with face a thunder cloud of rage.

"Mr. Jennison didn't see it," he dropped a prudent anchor windward, "but *you yanked* ahead of 'tug'."

"Fighting words," Samson tagged them coldly, "unless you retract."

"Retract hunh!" Sulky Pete snorted derisively. "Take 'em back you mean! Well, *I repeat 'em!* Fighting's my special game. Square off you!"

SULKY PETE was indeed a seasoned rough and tumble fighter of the gouging, biting, kneeing type, utterly unvexed by scruples. And extremely able. Now he chorded actions to words. Sinking his touselled head between his hunched shoulders he struck a stance, his left fist advanced, right moving threateningly up and down his ribs. His formula was the surprise attack, the sudden onslaught, finishing the overthrown antagonist on the floor with feet and knee and remorseless iron-like fist. But for the second time in one fateful evening, he was too slow for Samson, adding a corollary to his already self-assessed muscular superlatives had whipped a bullet-like blow to the other's chin. There appeared both lift and carry in that piston punch, for when Sulky Pete's evolutions ended he was a dozen feet away flat on his back and out for a dozen counts.

"Jest like snuffin' out a candle," Jennison observed. "Take a look, Doc, and see if he's bad hurt."

"Nothing permanent," Levitt announced following a rather desultory examination. "He's taken worse many times. Though," he added dryly, "for a week anyway, everytime he clamps down on his pipe stem he'll remember that lone tap."

"Mr. Jennison," Samson was tugging at his sleeve, "tell the men here whether I tugged ahead of your signal or not. I want it understood clearly."

"Nope," Jennison distinguished carefully, "but thar wasn't more'n the thickness of a gnat's heel between the word and your

pull. Still and but, that thin sliver was thar."

"Thanks," Samson nodded. "I hope he's not hurt much. I tried—"

"He ain't," Jennison assured him, "and I wouldn't fret about it. If he'd a got you down, he'd a basted your face off and tramped your guts out. That's his way of battlin'."

"After this," Samson asked a little doubtfully, "do you think the men here would have a drink on me, even if I don't drink?"

"Try 'em," Jennison grinned. "You'll be sure of two customers anyway, Doc and me."

Presently he drifted out. A little later a shaky and befuddled Sulky Pete left with the shoulder assistance of a whilom crony. Doc Levitt and Jennison soon followed bound for their common cabin.

"Frum surface scratchin's," Jennison observed from around his pipe stem, "that Samson man can deliver of himself quite a cargo of this and that."

"Yes," Levitt instanced, "that single knockout blow is a fine example. I've seen a deal of professional boxing in my day, and I think I never witnessed a cleaner, deadlier blow."

"Yet he pulled back on it, Doc," Jennison said wonderingly. "He could a lammed Pete twice as hard. How do you figger that?"

"For fear probably that he might kill him," Levitt speculated.

"You're mebbe right," Jennison made tentative agreement, "with no loss to the camp though. But one thing's sure. Samson's gotta weakness."

"He has," Levitt nodded, "a very grave weakness indeed."

WHATEVER the nature of this doubly diagnosed "weakness" it was to remain for the present unnamed, for there had come a light rap on the cabin door. Jennison threw it wide to face a mild surprise. Hercules G. Samson, no less stood before their castle gates.

"Come in, Mr. Samson," Jennison greeted him warmly. "You're as welcome as a huckleberry bush is to a Injun. Set down. We're glad to see you."

"Yes, sit down my friend," Levitt ably seconded Jennison's cordial invitation. "You've had a rather strenuous evening and are probably a bit tired."

"Well yes," Samson said slowly, almost absently. That the stirring events of the barroom, however, were not on his agenda was made very evident by his next words. "I'm told," he began rather abruptly, "that you two men are friends of Mr. Thompson the freighter."

"Mr. Samson," Jennison said with an odd vibrant note in his voice, "'friend' is only the limpin' shadow of the korrect word when Whisperin' Thompson and Doc and me are concerned."

"Yes," Samson nodded. Then, "I understand that he won't be back for a few days."

"*Three,*" thus succinctly did Jennison equate uncertainty with sureness.

"I was told too," their visitor reported almost musingly, "that Mr. Thompson is extremely powerful."

It was Levitt who picked up the verbal gauntlet now, and to Jennison it was a novelty for a new Levitt was speaking, with ice in his tones, and a distinct warning.

"Mr. Samson," said he, "if you think to find your urn of gold at the end of *that rainbow,* you reason in error. And I will add, irremediable disaster. You are strong, but you are not that strong. *For,*" and he trod heavily upon it, "a contest with Mr. Thompson will connote not only a muscular outlay, but one in which the *time element* bulks larger. In plain words it will involve not only brawn but endurance."

"Gentlemen," Samson protested, "you misunderstand me and my reason for coming to your cabin. I am not seeking a contest with Mr. Thompson. I'm here to tell you a story and get your advice."

"Pardon us, Mr. Samson," Levitt said for the two. "But we are very jealous for our absent friend. By all means tell us your story. We will listen gladly."

"That's very generous of you," Samson said gratefully, "for I do need advise. Well here it is. After I left the other saloon I went into another. The Split Skillet, I think they call it."

"A deadfall," Jennison grunted disapproval. "Square men don't go thar."

"I don't doubt it," Samson nodded. "But I'm raising money, and I can't be too particular. Well," he added wryly, "I blatted but no takers."

"The word had probable trickled down about what you'd done to Sulky Pete," Jennison chuckled. "Also the crooks and thugs that hang around thar *take* money. They don't give it *out.*"

"No doubt," Samson smiled faintly. "Anyway I left pretty soon. But a man followed me out and stopped me. Said he had a proposition to make. We just stood there outside the saloon and talked. What we talked about is why I came here. First of all he told me about Mr. Thompson, how strong he was and so forth. Then he told me that Mr. Thompson could straddle the hub of a rear wheel of his freight wagon when it was loaded, grip a spoke in each hand and lift the wheel clear off the ground—"

"Hell," Jennison interrupted, "I've seen him do it dozens of times. So has Doc."

"You didn't let me finish," Samson told him. "He said Mr. Thompson not only would lift that tremendous weight, but that *he would hold it up for three full minutes.*"

"That's a lie," Jennison said flatly. "He mebbe could, but Whisperin' ain't no damned fool, and that 'ud be a damned fool act, nothin' less. Who was this tall liar if you know?"

"John Smith."

"Thar ain't a John Smith in this camp of Buttercup," Jennison asserted, "'less he's come recent. And that name is easy took. More'n that, thar's something damned smelly about this. But go on, fur you ain't yet finished, I'm bettin'."

"Not by a good deal," the other assured him. "Well after he'd told me this, he wanted to make me a bet."

"I'd hazard the guess," Doc Levitt spoke up, "that he offered to wager that you could not duplicate Mr. Thompson's alleged feat."

"If you'd been listening," Samson said thoughtfully, "you couldn't have reported it better."

"And of course you refused," Levitt added a semi-question.

"I did," Samson assured him. "Then he made me a strange offer, or so it seems to me. When I refused to bet with him on my ability to lift the hind wheel of Mr. Thompson's freight wagon and hold it up for three minutes he made me an odd offer. He said that he'd give me a thousand dollars if I'd lift it and *hold* it up for three minutes and a few seconds. He said 'a few seconds' meant at least ten."

"Of course he gave a plausible reason for his *amazing* generosity," Levitt suggested.

"You men can judge its plausibility best, I imagine," Samson answered. "Here's what he said, anyway in substance. He said that since Mr. Thompson had held that wagon wheel up his bragging had been sickening. That it was worth a thousand dollars to him to see Thompson taken down a peg."

WHILE Jennison raged, Levitt was studying very gravely the man whom Smith had attempted to lure into more than the impossible. Now he asked an earnest question.

"What was your answer, Mr. Samson?"

"I didn't make one," Samson said very slowly. "And I know what you're thinking, Doctor. Yes. I know. But what *you* do not know is how badly I need money, and how little time I have to get it."

"Mr. Samson," Levitt smiled winsomely, "I hold to the thesis, that my gray hairs are proof of the relentless march of the years, *not* the accumulation of great wisdom. Yet sometimes there is value in counselling with friends. Mr. Jennison and I are your friends. Any problems you might choose to disclose will be held inviolate by us."

Samson was strangely moved by the kindly *medico's* words. He swallowed hard and there was husk in his voice when he said a bit haltingly.

"I do believe you men are friends. God knows I need friends and advice too. Here's my story."

He had sprung, so he explained from a race of strong men, not only noted for their great strength but also for their agility. As an instance of their remarkable athletic prowess he cited the feat of his grandfather, a scout under Mad Anthony Wayne in his Indian campaign. This ancestor, in a running high jump cleared a baggage wagon of the Conestoga type complete with bows and canvas.

"I've often read of that truly remarkable jump," Levitt said thoughtfully, "but—"

"His name was not Samson," their guest

completed Levitt's thought. "That name was my improvisation. I'll explain that later."

Now he went on with his story. He had grown to manhood in Ohio, graduating from one of its well-known colleges. Always the athlete, he soon joined one of the famous traveling circuses of that day as weight-lifter, wrestler and general all-around athletic stunt man. In a day of small wages, his remuneration was relatively high.

"I wish," he said regretfully, "I'd stayed with that show. If I had I'd never have seen the town of Dead Rock."

"Dead Rock," Jennison nodded, "I've never been thar, but I've heard aplent about it. They unloaded the mill tailin's of hell and spread it out to make that camp of accordin' to report. And I've also heard considerable about the *Ogemow* of that said camp. Let's see. Name's Schmelding, ain't it?"

"Max Schmelding," Samson amended unsmilingly. "If Satan ever walked the earth in human form, he's running a saloon and hurdy-gurdy right now at Dead Rock. Schmeldings ruthless, cruel, and vindictive, and he's got that camp clamped in his hand."

"Somebody," Jennison opined, "oughta should unclinch his fingers." After a moment's thought he added speculatively, "Wonder jest how fur it is to Dead Rock frum here."

LEVITT smiled knowingly. The ferment of justice was working. It was a wormy hardtack to a fifty dollar slug that Jennison would travel presently. Also that Dead Rock would be his port of call. Now Jennison turned to their cabin guest.

"S'pose," he suggested, "you unwind the rest of your bobbin."

"Well as I've told you," Samson continued, "I quit the show. We were out in Kansas then and I decided to see something of the west. I'd saved some money, so I climbed on the stage. And I went it blind. I paid fare to Dead Rock. I ought to have bought a ticket to Hell instead."

"You'd probable been shipped to Dead Rock anyway," Jennison grinned.

"Or it maybe," Levitt said dreamily, "that you were needed at Dead Rock."

"If fate sent me to Dead Rock, as you seem to suggest," Samson said bitterly, "to hell with fate!"

"Let's leave fate holding the cryin' rag fur the minute," Jennison said whimsically, "whilst and till you've told your full tale. Tell us a mite about the camp."

"You've seen dozens like it probably," Samson provisoed, "so that's easy. Anyway it's spread along Dead Rock Creek, though mainly on one side, the east. All the town is on that side, but there are a few cabins hanging onto the canyon wall on the west. That side is steep and rimrocky. The placer gravels they tell are very rich, and the camp has a floating population of around a thousand I should say. If there's any decent men—"

"Sure there are," Jennison interrupted emphatically. "Never yit a camp outen square men. They jest don't prance around on the streets yellin' about it. But comes the need they'd unite together in a damned swift hurry. And you say *Satan Schmelding* runs it."

"It's *Max*," Samson corrected, "but that doesn't make any difference. The Devil could take lessons from Schmelding. He owns a big combined saloon, gambling house, dance hall and hurdy-gurdy. He's got about forty girls who live above the saloon. Outside of them I don't suppose there're a half-dozen other women in town, and one of them is a widow because of me."

There was pathos and anguish in that final ten-word sentence, a measured castigation of soul for a failure not yet laid bare. Levitt looked at him with pity in eyes swift to understand and condone frailty in a fellow-man. Jennison's glance was keen, yet as ready to condone, if indeed, the fault was Samson's. And someway he doubted. More indeed must be told to warrant condemnation. So he said simply, "I figger we've come at the kernel of your trouble, Mr. Samson. Should you feel moved to do so, mebbe it'll help some if you tell me and Doc about it. We're both hell fur good listeners."

"I'll go back a little," Samson said after a moment. "I'd never been in a mining town before and for a few days I found a lot of things that interested me a lot. I don't drink and I don't gamble but I was around the saloons a lot anyway. No place

else to go as you men know. I did some lifting stunts and wrestled a few times, even pulled over a stick like I did tonight. And I did break a stick and got some splinters in my hands, but it was a *broom handle,* not a pick handle. Schmelding's establishment was by far the largest in the camp and I spent my evenings there generally. And the only man in town I could call a friend worked there. He was a bartender, named Jack Ribaut, who worked from nine in the evening until nine next morning. He was a nice easy-going young fellow densely ignorant of the shifty ways of the world. But you'll see later why I say that. He was married to a pretty little girl only just eighteen. Two weeks ago," he said very slowly, "she was a very, very happy wife. Then she become a widow through me."

"But not through an intended act on your part, I'll warrant," Levitt filled in the pause with sureness. "You may have bungled, have erred even, that would be all."

"Outen a mortal doubt," Jennison collaborated with Levitt's judgment. "But go on, Mr. Samson. Unriddle the now rebus."

"Yes, it is a puzzle," Samson agreed. "Sometimes I wake up at night, and wonder if after all it is not just a horrible nightmare, not reality. Well as I say I got acquainted with Ribaut and one evening he took me home with him for dinner, or supper as they called it. His cabin was on the other side of the canyon from the saloon where he worked. It was set on a tiny flat spot flush against a low cliff. I noticed that the top of the chimney seemed level with the top of the cliff. Two shallow dry washes hemmed in the cabin on both sides curving together just a few feet in front of the door. Snug against one corner stood a boulder a good four feet high. The cabin was low. I could have reached easily the projecting end of the corner ridge pole. Inside it was neat and clean. The door was unusually thick and substantial, opened in of course, and was held shut by *two* cross bars and by a pole brace. One end fitted into a notched undercut near the top of the door, the other end fitted snugly into a slot down at the bottom of the rear wall. Ribaut didn't take any chances so far as his wife was concerned in that hell hole of a town. I've wished a thousand times he hadn't been so cautious."

"And I figger," Jennison said shrewdly, "that the set-up of the cabin thar between them two dry gullies is added to your wish."

"That's God's truth," Samson nodded. "That's why I told you. How'd you know?"

"I figger," Jennison told him, "you ain't jest wastin' words. Thar had to be a reason. And now you've got yourself to the cabin. Go on."

"We had a good dinner and a pleasant time," Samson continued. "About eight o'clock I left for town. As usual I went into Schmelding's saloon. Did I tell you that it was named The Dead Angel? Schmelding himself was behind the bar at the inner corner and as soon as I came in he crooked a finger at me. As I walked over wondering a little at what he wanted, I noticed that a faro dealer named Johnnie Rustle was following me over. But I didn't think anything of it then. The moment I reached there, Schmelding leaned over the bar scowling like a devil was gnawing at his liver."

" 'You double-dealing thus and so,' " he grated. 'I'll give you just one warning. Keep away from Jack Ribaut's woman! *That's* a dish you're not eating. Hear me!'

"Then before I could gather my wits, something was jammed hard against my spine and Rustle was saying:

" 'That's a forty-one slapping your crupper, Mr. Samson. Just push your nice belly up against the bar, and hang your hands by your sides.'

"Well I ought to have known what was coming," Samson admitted ruefully, "but anyway I was helpless for they knew I was unarmed. The moment they had maneuvered me into position at the bar, Schmelding hit me. He's bigger than the man you call Sulky Pete, and his fist caught me flush on the chin. I guess I was out for several minutes. I know I was groggy for an hour or so when I did come to and even after I'd got to my room and laid down I could still feel the effects."

"You've never carried a gun?" Jennison queried.

"Not till after that night," Samson answered. "Next day I got one, a thirty-two."

"Hell!" Jennison said scornfully, "you might as well carry a squirt gun. I'll fit you out with a *real* gun, a forty-five. *That* packs a wallop, believe me. But that can

come later. Go on. Your story's warmin' up."

"I wandered the camp next day," Samson detailed soberly. "I was pretty miserable. Not from the blow, but what he had said. I knew he owned the camp with his killers, but even that didn't really worry me. But I did get myself a pistol. Some of the miners smirked knowingly when I walked by. They'd heard about it and enjoyed it. But there were others who looked at it differently. One of them, a shrimp of a man, crawled out of his prospect hole and stopped me. 'Do you know what I'd do to that Schmelding?' he said in his deep bass voice, 'I'd get me a good sharp knife and gut him.' "

"THAR you've got it," Jennison declared triumphantly. "Sure thar's square men in Dead Rock. All they need is organizin'. But go on. We'll come at that later."

"The thing that really matters," Samson again took up the narrative, "happened that afternoon about two o'clock. It had been a hot sultry day with thunderheads bobbing along behind the canyon walls. I was downtown then, not far from The Dead Angel Saloon and almost directly across the creek from Ribaut's cabin. I've wondered since just why I happened to be at that particular spot at that particular time, but speculation is bootless. Anyway, I was there."

"You was likely sent," Jennison said gravely. "I've had that feelin' more'n seldom."

"I've wondered about it," Samson repeated. "Yet I only halfway did my job. But I tried," he insisted with terrible emphasis. "I want you to believe that."

"Granted before you complete your story, my boy," Levitt assured him. "We are both very sure you did your best."

"Thanks," Samson faltered briefly. "That does help. Well, I was standing there on the street, when a shimmer of lightning fixed my attention on an odd-looking cloud that seemed to teeter along the top of the canyon rim up there above Ribaut's cabin. It wasn't only that it was the blackest cloud I'd ever seen, but I think what struck me especially was its narrowness. I could see clear sky on both sides of it."

"Yep," Jennison nodded. "She's a puzzler the first time you see it. Next time too fur that matter."

"I hope," Samson said fervently, "there's never a next time for me. But there it was dangling there a mile away from where I stood. Then it seemed to glide down the steep canyon slope toward the Ribaut cabin. A thin streamer of the cloud had pushed out ahead like the peak of a cap over the town and a few drops of rain began falling. It was then I heard the roar, and saw a wall of water rushing down the canyon slope. Not very deep, a foot maybe, and not very wide, a hundred yards, possibly two hundred. But it was carrying a lot of gravel, small boulders and trash. Then it hit the heads of those two gullies I told you swung around in front of Ribaut's cabin, piled up, filled them, then roared on, a terrible thing to watch. And the wall of water that was not sucked into the two gullies flowed right on down over Ribaut's cabin. I told you it set back against the cliff just about as high as the top of the stick and mud chimney. Well, I saw the chimney swept away and the roof simply disappeared under the sheet of muddy water that rolled on over it. You could see the cabin behind it like you see the falls behind its curtain of water. It was the most terrifying thing I ever saw. Yes, and the most paralyzing!"

"But quick," Jennison contributed out of a rich experience. "Them cloudbursts are hell on wheels, but soon over. Notwithstandin' you had a cabin full of water right thar before you with two people in it, and of course water was still flooding down the chimley hole. It always runs fur some minutes. I reckon you flanked the cabin."

"YOU *have* seen a cloudburst work," Samson fairly gasped. "And you've described my next move exactly. I *did* flank the cabin. I ran a hundred yards or so up Dead Rock Creek, crossed it on a footlog and was on the cabin side. When I reached the gully that arched around in front of the cabin I jumped it. Then I waded over to the cabin. Water was seeping out everywhere even from between the logs shoulder high to me. Looked like the cabin was a leaky reservoir with plenty more pouring in at the top. I heard Ribaut yelling and the girl screamed once. I yelled back to

Ribaut, and he said the door prop was jammed. He couldn't budge it."

"Couldn't a opened it agin that weight of water anyway," Jennison said practically.

"Probably not," Samson agreed. "Well, another man got there then and for some reason he'd lugged a crowbar along. When I saw it I had an idea. If we could pry loose a side log or two we could get them out. We tried but couldn't budge one. Too much weight with the roof, covered now with rock and mud so it held the side logs down like in a vice. Just then the girl screamed again and that made me try something that seemed impossible. But I had to try something. You'll remember maybe that I mentioned a boulder that stood at the corner of the cabin? I told the miner with the crowbar what to do, then I climbed up on top of the boulder. Bending half double, I got my right shoulder under the rafter that projected over the side wall corner, put my hands on my thighs and began straightening my back. Never before in my life had I lifted like that. But I did take the pressure off the side wall till the man with the crowbar pried out a breast-high log. I heard him yell, 'Hold it for God's sake!' And I did hold it," he panted, "till he got the girl out. And then while he was trying to pull Ribaut through, he'd got caught, something seemed to snap in my chest, everything went black and I collapsed. Oh!" he mourned. "Why couldn't I have held out just a few precious moments longer?"

LEVITT laid a hand on his shoulder with a gesture of infinite compassion. "Even God," he said gently, "cannot do the impossible."

"Hell no," and Jennison unashamed wiped his eyes on the back of his weathered hand. "You'd held up fur minutes likely a load like Mt. Hood. But go on if you feel able so to do."

"Well," Samson said slowly, "when I regained consciousness they'd got the girl up to another cabin and had moved Ribaut's body too. A good many men were milling around, among them Schmelding and Rustle that faro dealer I told you about. They pushed by me propped up as I was against the boulder, and I heard Schmelding say to Rustle 'Well, the little lady will have to pay that note Johnnie. *I'll* tell her in what coin.' "

" 'You sure will,' Rustle laughed. 'In about two weeks, ain't it?' "

Then they saw me and turned back.

" 'Look, Johnnie,' Schmelding leered, 'Here's the lad who dropped the load on Jack so he could get the widow. Forgot all about *me*, didn't you?' "

"My breath came in gasps but I did manage to call him some names—"

"Hope to hell you got the right ones," Jennison stormed. "Here's some I hope you plastered onto him."

"Some of them, but not all," Samson admitted regretfully. "But I did pretty well, and ended by telling him, *I* was going to pay that note. Then he kicked me in the face and told me to be out of town by sundown. He took a couple of steps then turned back to yell down at me, 'If you ever show up here again you'll be gutted and tossed out to the coyotes.' "

"About that guttin'," Jennison remarked, "I've gotta hunch he's korrect. But I figger him wrong onto who'll to be handlin' the knife. Also you said something twice about a note. Tell us more about that."

"Yes, the note," Samson said savagely. "Here's the diabolical thing about it. It wouldn't be worth a continental any place else in the world, and yet in Dead Rock its collectible, because Max Schmelding is the payee, and Schmelding is Dead Rock. Here's the story. Ribaut's father owned a small saddle and harness shop in Moline, Illinois. About three months ago the father wrote to Ribaut asking him for fifteen hundred dollars to save the store from a chattel mortgage foreclosure. Ribaut didn't have the money but borrowed it easily enough from Schmelding. The Ribauts are not very educated so they *both* signed the note. They didn't even read it. I heard Schmelding boast about it myself."

"You've examined it?" Levitt asked quickly.

"No," Samson replied, "but I heard Schmelding read it one night at the saloon. Read it and comment on its terms in veiled lecherous way. I'll give you the gist of it, and some of the words. They were burned into my memory. I can tell you. It ran something like this. 'Three months after date without grace, I, we, or either of us

promise to pay fifteen hundred dollars in services to Max Schmelding.' "

"A joint and several note," Levitt commented, "payable in *services,* and Ribaut is dead. Therefore the debt is now the obligation of the wife."

"Why the woman's, Doc?" Jennison doubted. "She didn't git no money."

"No, but she signed it," Levitt explained, "as maker. Even if she'd merely signed it on the back as endorser or guarantor she'd now be liable."

"Name the idee agin, Doc," Jennison said speculatively, "I've gotta notion to unsnarl."

Now Jennison sat wrapped in clouds of thought, while Samson wondered and Levitt smiled. For Levitt knew his Bat Jennison.

FIFTEEN minutes later, armed with a semi-description of the philanthropist John Smith, Jennison left the cabin. His first port of call was the cabin of two staunch citizens, men high in the counsels of the law and order group in Buttercup. Sam Krutzsinger and Ahab Spratling, they were, charter members both in the camp's flourishing Vigilante Committee. Both were there and not yet undressed. Jennison gave them a swift and succinct transcript of Samson's tale and suggested that they accompany him on his quest for this opulent stranger within their gates. It was an invitation they accepted with pleasure.

The presence of the three within the walls of the Split Skillet Saloon had a sudden and muting effect on the border line crowd that found their solace in the malodorous saloon. Loud guffaws were amputated midstream and there was a noticeable drift towards the doors, for these stern upholders of justice were feared by the dubious crowd warehoused by the Split skillet.

Frank Spike, obese owner, viewed their approach barway in alarm though his smile was childlike and bland.

"Evening, gents," he greeted them yards away. "Have a drink on the house."

"Not now, Spike," Jennison declined politely. "We're lookin' fur a stranger callin' himself John Smith, who somebody seen here earlier this evening."

"I reckon I ain't seen him," Spike said judicially, "anyway by name. What for looking pelican, Mr. Jennison?"

"I reckon *pelican's* close to telling it," Jennison told him. "A kindy long hungry-lookin' bird decked out in short red whiskers. Shaved mebbe two weeks ago."

Spike ran an inventorying eye over the saloon and card room then sighted a spatulate figure at the faro layout. "Second from the end," he hazarded. "Looks that way to me from this distance anyway."

"You're probable right," Jennison nodded. "Thanks fur helpin' out, Spike."

The designate was merely an onlooker, not a participant, yet an interested sightseer at that. So it was that the first inkling that he was an object of interest came rudely. Jennison had nudged him with what most emphatically was not a bony forefinger. Smith turned round at Jennison's soft word to find the three men ringing him semi-fashion. Nor to his educated eye was there apparent the filmiest doubt that here were men with iron in their veins, men highly dangerous to his breed. Jennison was speaking now.

"Mr. Smith," he stated, "my name's Jennison. My pards here are Mr. Krutzsinger and Mr. Spratling. We've been more or less appointed by the camp to meet up with strangers and kinda feel their moral pulse."

"Yes," the giant Krutzsinger amplified, "we look over their credentials. If we slap an okay on them the camp accepts them on trial anyway."

"Credentials?" Smith puzzled. At any rate his facial contortions simulated puzzlement in a rather admirable way.

"For you see," the tall and not too amiable appearing Ahab Spratling cleared away all debris, "when men wade in from a hell swamp like Dead Rock we like to know how much of the muck is clinging to their garments, so to speak."

"So," Jennison clinched down the interview with superfluous addendum, "we're takin' you out fur a stretch of conversation."

Smith's glance swept over the crowd searching for a friendly face. But vainly. Stolidity, indifference, a wan trace of sympathy heavily veiled, but no word, no gesture of dissent at the proceeding nor the thinnest suggestion of active aid. Frank Spike waddled over from the sanctuary of

the bar to offer the crumbless comfort of left-handed optimism.

"If you go peaceably, Mr. Smith, there's a chance that your bowels will be fitten in the morning to hold your breakfast."

So with Krutzsinger snuggling his right arm, Spratling his left, the suspicion-blanketed Smith left the Split Skillet Saloon. Jennison the comparative midget played fullback on this four-man team. Reaching the cabin, Jennison entered to light the candle in its wax bemused holder. Then he stood aside while the two guardsmen marched in the guest from Dead Rock.

"I s'pose," Jennison remarked practically, "that before you turn him loose we'd be smart to reap him fur any weapons. He don't carry a belt gun I notice."

"I don't *even* carry a pistol," Smith disclaimed unctuously, "never ever having any need for one."

"I figger," Jennison retorted, "that a knife 'ud be the stylish thing to tote in Dead Rock."

Now while Smith glowered Jennison ran expert fingers down inside the other's shirt collar exploring for the scabbard often smuggled cunningly between the shoulder blades, a style of deceit affected by premier cutlery artists. Nothing there. Nor did painstaking search disclose sleeve gun, arm pit, or shoulder holster. The envoy from Dead Rock seemed a simon-pure nudist so far as weapons went. And then the widely educated Ahab Spratling put his hard-garnered wisdom to a test.

"Bat," he suggested to the baffled forager, "I misdoubt a gent who pulls his pants down over outside his boot-tops, 'stead of tucking 'em inside like a man."

It was sowing seed on hundred-bushel ground. Jennison wrinkled the right pants leg up above Smith's knee and swore at his own stupidity. A bone-handled dirk protruded coyly from the boot. A formidable, glittering weapon, its six-inch blade nicely bedded down in a thin leather scabbard stitched inside the boot leg. Jennison tossed it on the table with what seemed signs of giving over further search. But Spratling hallooed him on.

"Try the other boot," he insisted. "I've seen—"

"What I've done got," Jennison completed triumphantly as he tossed the second knife onto the table, "I sure missed once but I wasn't goin' to repeat." Now he looked scornfully at the despoiled Smith.

"You don't *never* carry a pistol," he mimicked. "Nope. But you pack a *span* of gut rippers. She's plain writ Max Schmelding knowed his butchers when he sent you out to trail Mr. Samson. Set down. We're askin' you some questions."

Smith, with a light in his eyes as of a trapped animal nevertheless chose the role of abused ignorance.

"I don't get your talk at all," he grumbled. "I ain't even been in Dead Rock and I don't know a Mex named Shalding, was it? Why—"

HE STOPPED here abruptly. Jennison had got up with an aside to Krutzsinger. Now he walked over to inspect a coil of rope hanging on a wall peg. With professional interest he slid a few feet of rope in exploratory way through the well-greased loop and found it satisfactory judging from the confirmatory nod. Still caressing the hangman's noose he turned to his two partners.

"I figger we might as well string him up," he said, pseudo-regret bulking in his tones. "Fur apparent he's made up his jassax mind to stick by his lies."

"Yep," Spratling corroborated Jennison's diagnosis. "S'pose we'll use that same tree. Ain't a fittener limb no place."

"Cracked a mite last time," Krutzsinger contributed comfortless detail, "but then of course we were swinging off three men together. This man here ain't heavy, remember."

Smith's capitulation was instant and abject. And he fairly grovelled as in incoherent phrases he babbled out the sordid story. Schmelding, disturbed somewhat by the faint mutterings of revolt in Dead Rock against his sway, had concluded that it was unwise to allow Samson to return. So Smith had been set on his trail to trap him into some strenuous physical feat that the doctor in Dead Rock had said would be fatal. Yes, Schmelding had given him the thousand dollars. Yes, he had it on him in a money-belt. Would he produce it? With pleasure. Jennison dangled the money-belt in his hand. Did Smith have any money of his own? Yes, two hundred

or so. Now Jennison asked a highly pertinent question.

"Who told you anything about Whisperin' Thompson?"

"The fellow Samson pulled up tonight," Smith tattled eagerly. "And he said all the things about Mr. Thompson that I told to Mr. Samson as coming from me."

"Sulky Pete," Jennison said ominously, "is sure due fur a soon visit with yours truly.

"As fur you," he turned to the deflated ambassador from Dead Rock, "we plan to move you on in the morning. You'll travel *west* on account Dead Rock's *east*. If you want any advise frum me, which you probable don't, it 'ud be to change your ways, likewise them you've been pardnerin' with. That way you might die natural in bed."

AT DAYBREAK the following morning, two groups of threes rode out of Buttercup. West wended Sam Krutzsinger and Ahab Spratling mothering in their midst John Smith. East galloped Jennison, Levitt and Samson toward Dead Rock over a hundred miles away. Fifty miles distant, and on their route, lay the mining camp of Beegum on Honey Creek, where they planned to stay that night. They were pointing for Beegum for a highly special reason. Here lived three men, Steve Donaldson, Milt Scougal and Old Bud Wiley, comrades of long ago and comrades still. Now as Jennison lovingly conned over their names aloud, Samson drew up his horse.

"Say," he asked excitedly, "what kind of a looking man is this Scougal? You see," he explained, "I was in Beegum and pulled over an ax handle with a man who's name could have been that. He was a fat-looking fellow, but unbelievably powerful. It's a big question in my mind whether I could have swung him up or not, but his sense of fun helped me out in a tight spot. Just as we were setting to the tug a miner wandered in with a pet skunk perched up on his shoulder. It was so pert looking that my antagonist just about forgot what we were doing. I remember how he roared with laughter."

"That's Scougal outen a mortal doubt," Jennison chuckled affectionately. "Milt 'ud laugh about his coming funeral."

At sundown they drifted into Beegum to meet a riotous welcome from the three. And equally riotous acceptance of Jennison's proposal that the three accompany them to Dead Rock next day. And that without details.

"Fur after we've et," he promised, "We'll tell you what's broodin'."

They had hardly finished that monolithic meal when a light rap sent Steve Donaldson scowling to the door. But his scowl faded at sight of their visitor, Saul Travis, bantam proprietor of the Selfish Pup Saloon, yet chief of the town's Vigilantes no less. Scant ninety pounds of brain, courage and daring, Jennison had learned to like and trust him in their recent affair here at Beegum with the Red Ruppert gang. Travis crossed the room with swift eager steps and extended a thin, finely wrought hand.

"Mr. Jennison," he apologized needlessly, "I shouldn't pop in on you this way perhaps, but knowing your elusive habits, I couldn't let the opportunity pass of seeing you again. How are you, my friend?"

"No kicks, Mr. Travis," Jennison smiled warmly. "And I'm sure glad to see you agin. Meet my friends," and he introduced Levitt and Samson.

"Ah, Doctor Levitt," Travis greeted him. "A fortunate man indeed to have won so high a place in the hearts of these four friends. Welcome to Beegum. And you too, sir," he added to Samson. "Though if my memory serves me you were here recently."

"Your rememberer is okay," Scougal grinned. "I remember him also, to the tune of forty dollars."

"If you hadn't got so tickled at that skunk—" Steve Donaldson put in loyally.

"That was just a cover-up," Scougal insisted, "I knowed I was a goner."

Following the general laugh Travis pushed a pointed query Jennisonway.

"What brings you back to Beegum, Mr. Jennison? Have we sprung another leak, criminally speaking?"

"Not here, Mr. Travis," Jennison said gravely, "but down at Dead Rock. I was jest gittin' ready to tell the boys about it. I'll be double glad to have you listen to it."

"Happy to," Travis assured him, "I know something of that camp. I've even been there but not recently. Max Schmelding

had not taken it over then. But from what I've heard the retchings of hell have been spewed over that camp."

"Admirably put, Mr. Travis," Levitt murmured approvingly. "Yet if I may be permitted to suggest a slight deviation, I would say that the retchings of hell are but a pale and spiritless ghost compared with the retchings of Dead Rock itself. Now, Bat to your story."

Succinctly Jennison related Samson's experiences at Dead Rock, and his efforts to raise the money equivalent of the dubiously phrased note, including also the sinister mission of Smith and his disposal. With it he outlined a plan of action to be inaugurated at Dead Rock. A phase of this evoked from Scougal a grumbling though good-natured protest.

"I don't like it," he said. "Anyway I'd like to draw straws for the chance. What say Steve?"

"Personally *I* like it," Donaldson declared smugly. "Narry a straw, Milt. I might lose."

Travis chuckled at this comradely passage at arms, then he turned to the architect of the all-embracing plan.

"Mr. Jennison," he declared with full-bodied admiration, "you are a genius at mapping a campaign. Your strategy is admirable and you plot it out to the sheerest detail. You leave little to be disturbed by a whimsy of chance. I take off my hat to you."

Jennison, modest to confusion at open praise hastened to his own rescue with a blurted query, "How fur do you figger it to Dead Rock frum here?"

"By the proper route for us," Travis provisoed, "about seventy miles. By the freight road it's ten miles farther but by trails about seventy as I just said. We can leave here in the morning, early, and by night will be only some twenty-five miles from Dead Rock. We camp there, and next day move at your pleasure, to arrive in Dead Rock at the time you choose."

Plainly the unquestionable scheme was Jennison's but Travis had elected himself to the high company. Unorthodox or no it was an election that found instant concurrence with Bat Jennison.

"Mr. Travis," he said sincerely, "you're more'n welcome to jine us. I was goin' to look you up to proposition you on the genrul idee. You jest beat me to it by a eyelash. Let's now have your notions about this and that."

AT DAYLIGHT the following morning the seven rode out of Beegum. And beyond the seven none knew whither they travelled nor why. It was also a bedrock gamble that no one in Beegum would have queried them had they been observed. Not that curiosity in Beegum did not flourish. It did. But well-equipped caution did also.

At sundown they reached the camping spot chosen for them by Travis and found it everything his enthusiasm had painted. They made a leisurely start next morning. And by six o'clock that afternoon they stood ready to rap on the municipal gates of Dead Rock. They were coming on the town from the east. The trail had angled down the canyon side through a heavy growth of jack pine and fir, emerging here into a cleared space from which valley and camp were in panoramic view. A hundred yards more of tolerable trail would bring them to the creek and the upper reaches of the gravel bars.

Cabins were spaced widely over this eastern side slope as if the citizens stubbornly maintained the fiction of loneliness, even in the unavoidable press of communal life. The west canyon slope, as Samson had already explained to them was in the main as uninhabitable as the sides of a church steeple. That is with a few notable exceptions. Jack Ribaut's cabin had been one, the Wills' cabin was another. Ribaut's as they already knew was all but across the creek from the Dead Angel Saloon. The Wills' cabin was before them now, that is to say a mile upstream from Ribaut's. It was to the Wills' cabin that Ribaut's widow had been taken for sanctuary. Its owner was a widow of recent date, her husband having been killed by an unpunished claim jumper. Jennison pointed across the already shadow-cloaked way to the cabin.

"She looks okay over thar," he observed with relief. "But when they learn we're in town and why, they mebbe 'ill make a grab fur the gal. So I want you boys to ride a tight herd onto that said Wills' cabin whilst I go down to make that offer to Schmelding."

"Mr. Jennison," Travis demurred strongly, "you're wrong two ways there. First there's nothing dishonorable in *not* making an offer. You're dealing with an unconscionable crook not a man. Second you ought not go alone. Take me, at least, with you."

Jennison looked at the gnome-like Travis, and his face softened.

"As to the latterly," he reverted to the voiced objections, "my hunch says fur me to go it alone. And you mebbe 'ill be needed at the cabin yonder. As to my offer, I'm only rememberin' that I've gotta square *myself* at all times with *myself.*"

The small gray-eyed traveller who presently entered the Dead Angel Saloon was patently drunk. Dust from the trail muted the creases in his worn overalls, his shirttail had escaped the restraining clutch of his belt, and flaunted its flannel length in shameless way. All Indians wore their shirts that way, but few whites. *Unless to hide the span of forty-five Colt's!* Now he swayed there briefly just inside the door while he looked about in seemingly vacant uncertain way. Then he straightened his shoulders and set out for the bar and Max Schmelding, smiling sardonically at the inebriated stranger. Not many men in the room, Jennison noted, and these apparently bartenders, faro and stud dealers. Yet there was a feel in the air he did not like. Was it exultation or wolfish anticipation? Jennison would have given something to know. He teetered to a halt before the man he knew to be Max Schmelding. Huge he was with undershot jaw, and eyes so colorless they looked white. A livid scar from the left eyebrow to where it disappeared at the point of his prognathous jaw did not add to his beauty. Jennison steadied himself with a hand against the bar while he smiled vacuously at the beetle-browed owner of the saloon.

"I'm jest come from Beegum," he hiccoughed sociably, "to make a offer to Mr. Schmelding."

Schmelding lifted a craggy eyebrow.

"Well, I'm Schmelding," he said coldly. "Keep talking."

"I'm Jim Hood," Jennison announced himself affably, "and I'm sure histed to meet you, Mr. Schmelding—"

"Talk business," Schmelding cut him off. "To hell with who you are."

"Sure, sure," Jennison fumbled. "Anyway at Beegum I run into a man frum here named Simpson—no that ain't it but anyway a awful stout man he was who got himself hurt thar liftin' and holdin' a helluva big boulder up fur money which he sure got but the liftin' put him in bed so he asked me to come down here and offer you fifteen hundred dollars and mebbe a hundred dollars more interest fur a note he said you had and—"

Schmelding had listened to the rambling tale with a look on his saturnine face that Jennison could not interpret. Now he changed abruptly as he leaned over the bar to ask in wheedling tones:

"You say you brought all that money with you that Samson gave you in Beegum?"

"Samson," Jennison repeated. "That's his name, not Simpson. N-o. I didn't bring it. He wants to find out if he gets it here in say a week—"

Schmelding threw back his head and laughed, a raucous grating sound stripped bare of honest hilarity. So might a ghoul laugh, Jennison reflected, but not a man.

"Tell Samson," he said gleefully, "I'd not accept for twice that sum, or any sum. Besides—"

He did not finish. Jennison was already walking toward the door. And some way, somehow, his inebriety had been sloughed miraculously away.

Jennison did not mount his horse swiftly and race away. No much. He was too canny a man to do that. He might be watched and some keen-minded thug might assess his haste at its true value. So in unhurried way he mounted his saddle pony and nonchalantly rode away. That is, for a hundred yards or so. Then he was riding at pace with his racing thoughts.

He had known that a man on a sweat-mantled staggering horse had swooped down on the saloon not five minutes after he had made his conscience-demanding offer to Schmelding; it may be that Jennison would have deferred his journey toward the Wills' cabin. But guessing as to Jennison's actions is a profitless *excursis.* He did not know, and he did ride toward the Wills' cabin.

Night had already fallen in the deep gorge that housed Dead Rock Creek, driv-

ing the miners cabinward for supper. So it was that Jennison met no one until half the distance had been traveled between the Dead Angel Saloon and the Wills' cabin. Then out of the dusk before him came the drum of hoofs. Someone rode in a violent hurry and he guessed not only the urging that winged that haste but the messenger as well. It would be the centaur-like Travis. And so it proved, when Jennison hailed him:

"That you, Saul?"

"Yes, Bat."

In the moment of crisis the ceremonial "Mr." had been dethroned. They were now but man to man. And when their horses' heads all but touched, Travis delivered his chilling message.

"The girl's gone."

"Tell me."

Now as they rode side by side, Travis made a swift report. When they approached the cabin door they saw certain evidences of battle. Just a few feet from the door were three great gouts of blood, not yet coagulated. And inside the cabin two people, both desperately wounded, both unconscious. A man and a woman, Mrs. Wills and a miner. Levitt was endeavoring now to restore them to consciousness.

"The girl's gone," he repeated bitterly, "kidnaped, without a doubt. Held now as a hostage against our future good conduct. It looks pretty bleak."

"We'll unbleak it," Jennison said simply.

Donaldson, Scougal and Wiley were a low-voiced, swearing knot before the cabin. Jennison tarried briefly, then turned to enter the place. But he paused before the door. Light filtered through, its dull arrows streaming out irregularly through oddly spaced apertures, patterned by what manner of augur Jennison knew well. Now he pushed the door inward with gentle insistence and entered.

Four candles, an enormous prodigality in those harsh pioneering days, all but lighted up the cabin. Some shadows lingered in the corners and up against the roof, but there was illumination enough for Levitt, bending tirelessly to his work. A swift glance showed Sampson slumped, pale and shaken in a chair. A thought chorded to sentiment, flitted through Jennison's brain, was dismissed, then he stood beside Levitt and, like him, looking down upon the woman stretched out upon that rude lower bunk. She had fought the good fight, had the widow Wills, was indeed still fighting as she battled her indomitable way back to consciousness. Gray eyes opened now slowly as if levering up reluctant lids by sheer force of will. Unafraid eyes, they were, yet clouded now with puzzlement that would clear away. Levitt leaned nearer to say with knightly gentleness. "You're in the keeping of true friends, Mrs. Wills. Try to tell yourself that. Your eyes say that. What happened? Where's Judy?"

Then her eyes closed wearily, fluttered open. No puzzlement now, but clear sanity, and sense of failure yet unclouded by disgrace.

"They got her then. I see it in your faces. But I done by best, I figger. My pappy died with Davy Crockett at the Alamo, and—I tried to live up to him. Mebbe I failed, but I tried, me and the one man who come to help me—Scrimp Manning."

"Scrimp Manning!" Jennison's voice had in it surprise and exultation; yes, and love at this casual naming of a tried companion of years gone by.

"Who—said that?" That deep-bass laboring question came rumbling down from the second and upper fir-mattressed bunk. Jennison leaped to his feet. A swift stride and he was leaning over the miniature of a man lying in the bunk. A hundred pounds of whalebone and steel was Scrimp Manning. And as sometimes happens, endowed by prankish nature with a pipe-organ voice.

"It's Bat, Scrimp."

A hand fumbled blindly, but not for long. Jennison gripped it, held it, and by that imperial gesture told a whole story, a full-lengthed tale without words. And when Manning had talked in half-sentences and halting phrases, he had added little to what they already knew. His claim was near. He had seen the stealthy approach of a half-dozen men. Yes, he knew some, Johnnie Rustle, for instance. Johnnie was very dead now. He had accepted a load of buckshot and slugs, gift of Mrs. Wills. Yes, another was Sad Pilkins. Dead, too. Wills to Pilkins. Yes, and Bill Moote, Manning's target. No, he hadn't seen them take the girl, but of course they had, damn

them! If only Clint Shaub knew about it! They must get word to Shaub some way.

"Don't fret, Scrimp," a voice cut across Manning's importunate pleadings, "I do know."

A tall, thin man was Shaub, co-organizer of the long-needed Vigilante Committee, gambler and solid citizen.

"All fine, now," said Manning in relaxed satisfied tones. "You show him where, Clint. Bat 'ill do the rest."

THE house stood back of the Dead Angel Saloon in a grove of jack pine that had escaped the ax of the cabin builders. Escaped because Schmelding had willed it so. It was his house, the best in the camp. For Schmelding, professional bachelor that he was, often held high carnival and he had built this cabin as setting for his revels. Solid and substantial, not large, one room, it would be difficult to take by assault. Its weakness, as in all pioneer settlements, would be to fire. Now it stood dark and seemingly untenanted, though more than rumor had it that here Mrs. Ribaut had been taken following the attack on the Wills' cabin. Jennison turned away from the heavily shuttered window against which he had been pressing his sensitive ear and threaded his way back through the trees to the group hidden in the close-laced shadows.

"She sounds empty," he reported. "Also thar ain't no lights. I'd a noticed it."

"Probably been moved," Travis suggested. "There's evidence around the saloon that they're on the alert. Somebody has warned them, I imagine."

"Yep," Jennison conceded, "it does so look. Even so, we've gotta pry into that said cabin. Thar's mebbe some signs to pint us on in the right direction."

"Milt and me and this big miner Dan can smash in that door with a log," Donaldson offered in low tone.

"I'd say you could," Jennison grinned an unseeable grin. "But not outen considerable noise. Therefore we put that said log smashin' off fur a minute, whilst we try the effigy of my old knife."

THE drawstring to the locking bar was inside, either pushed or pulled so. Jennison whittled out the round slot that ordinarily housed the drawstring, then with another and thinner blade engineered the locking cross bar up and out of the retaining prongs. Nothing to do now but push the door inward and enter. Yet it was not quite that simple, as Jennison explained in whispered tones.

"They mebbe rigged a spring-gun up, or men could be planted inside waitin' fur us to show up in the doorway. So you all git outen range. I'll open her up frum round the corner."

And so from around the corner, using a properly crooked stub of a limb, he levered the door inward and open. Swung as it was on well-greased hinges, it opened readily and without protest. No violence from within, no shattering gunfire. All was as silent as an orderly tomb. Now Jennison drew a pistol and, crouching low, crept crabwise into the totally black room. For a long moment he listened intently, then a match flared and holding the robust flame aloft he swept the room with a lightning glance. It was empty. Why had they bothered to punch the drawstring inside? A possible answer seemed to be that if it were entered forcibly the incident noise might serve as an alarm. Or maybe it was sheer malice. The joy of putting Jennison and his men to unnecessary labor. Anyway Jennison was in, had now lighted a candle, and with Travis and Shaub was inspecting that single room with meticulous care.

Nothing much here after all to call for prolonged scrutiny. There were the things normally expected, only the chairs were not all home-made and there was a desk not constructed in Dead Rock. But the extra wide bunk cleated there against the wall in a corner, was the work of some local craftsman. Its only oddity was that the sides came down flush to the puncheon floor.

In a moment, perhaps a very long moment, Travis had found something. Clinging beneath a splinter of the window-sill was a soft golden thread, a hair from the head of Mrs. Ribaut. So Shaub identified somberly. And the cabin had been watched by the Vigilantes from the moment Schmelding's thugs had hustled her inside. Yet they had managed to remove her, and by the window as the gleaming thread of gold mutely attested. But Jennison, as wily a man as ever lived, was cannily skeptical.

"She don't foller," he argued. "That said

hair, which is sure purty, mighta been snaggled thar under that handy splinter as a fooler. And my hunch whispers it so. Your man didn't see her snuck out, Mr. Shaub, on account she wasn't mebbe."

Both Travis and Shaub glanced again about the room, then up at the bare cross beams and both shook their heads. And the floor had yielded nothing. There was not the slightest sign of cellar or trap door. Shaub voiced it.

"No trap door, Mr. Jennison, and when this cabin was built there wasn't any digging. It just sets flat on the ground."

"Could be done later shovel full by shovel full and of nights," Jennison maintained. "I call to mind a case at—"

That tale was never to be finished. He had solved the rebus.

The bunk had intrigued him. The upright supports were cleated solidly to the log walls, or were they? To casual inspection yes. But Jennison had small faith in casual inspections. No question but that the heads of heavy wrought iron nails were countersunk into the upright cleats, giving an appearance of solid union with the cabin wall. But there was an inch wide gap at one end. To seize the bed and swing it savagely aside was but to bare the deceit. The seeming union with the wall was a cunning fraud. The nail heads were just that, nothing more.

The three men were scowling down at the narrow trap door now unmasked. So Jennison's hazarded guess that an excavation did exist beneath the cabin floor was approaching proof. The viewable trap door was but a self-evident corollary to the guess. The girl then had not been smuggled out through the window. Was she dead or alive in this dungeon beneath their feet?

"Don't say what we're all thinkin'," Jennison said harshly. "I'm goin' down. Mr. Shaub, you grab that strap and git ready to yank. Saul, hold that candle down so as I can see to jump. Better shield it with your hat when the door swings up."

"I'm lighter," Travis pleaded. "Let me go, Bat."

"No," Jennison denied him as he drew and cocked a pistol. "But give me all the light you can. Now, Mr. Shaub."

The light from the guttering candle flickered on the upper rungs of a ladder, and down it Jennison scampered like a squirrel. But not far. Six feet and his boots jarred into soft earth. Travis was a whisper behind him still with the candle, a gun also for that matter.

The cellar was little more than a slit in the ground and some ten feet long. It had been a grand project that completed would have been run a tunnel a hundred feet and so beneath the Dead Angel Saloon. It was not to be. The last spade-full had been dug. And in the tip of the excavation toward the saloon, they found the girl.

Trussed up cruelly, a wooden gag thonged back between her jaws, a bloody spume drooling from her macerated lips, eyes wide with terror, it was something they would remember, as lingers a nightmare. Then though they were strangers, terror fled. Jennison had knelt down swiftly to wrestle with her bonds, and was murmuring encouragement, whose tone was more revealing than words could possibly have been.

"Don't fret ma'am. We're friends, by God. Jest hang to that notion, whilst we turn you loose. Thar. Now this damned gag. Hold the light a mite to one side, Saul. Fine. Here. I'll dab a little at that corner. Handkerchie's middlin' clean. Now give me your hand ma'am. Up you come. See, you can stand. Easy now. Back up, Saul. We're comin'. Slow does it. See here's Mr. Shaub stretchin' down his hands. Let him grip your wrists. Up we fly!"

Fifteen minutes of gentle, patient questioning of the girl had put them in possession of certain facts. They knew now that the phantom Smith had some way escaped from his Buttercup guards to bring to Schmelding the appalling news that Jennison had set out from Buttercup for Dead Rock. It was appalling in the very present tense because from Smith's description Schmelding knew to his immediate peril that Jennison was now in Dead Rock. The mimic inebriate who had pretended to carry the offer from Samson was this deadly man. And Schmelding had heard a great deal about this gray-eyed little man and what he heard was sterile of comfort to the Dead Rock king of thugs.

SCHMELDING had blurted this out to the girl when following Smith's catastrophic news he had rushed to the cabin,

pinioned and gagged her with his own hands and thrust her into the dungeon beneath the cabin floor. From her hesitancy at points and certain limping elisions they knew that she had been subjected to brutalities other than physical. Verbal tortures more wounding than blows, more excurciating than cinctures.

Now with the testimony in, Jennison placed her in the charge of Samson and three of the local Vigilantes. They were to take her up to the Wills cabin, and *guard* her. No. Samson was *not* to return. Levitt's orders than which there could be no higher.

The Dead Angel Saloon was two stories high, built ruggedly but substantially of unbarked logs, and roofed with split pine shakes. The upper story was living quarters for the dance hall and hurdy-gurdy girls, the lower was barroom, gambling hall and dance pavilion. The division here was more a matter of immediate need than planning. The building had a frontage on the street of thirty feet, a depth of seventy. And it had no windows. Glass in these new and remote camps was often long non-existent. Lamps were more easily procurable, candles always. And the absence of windows was a military precaution not to be lightly set aside. Sly pot shooting was hampered, yet not eliminated. There were still of necessity doors. Three there were in the ground floor plan of the Dead Angel, two set side by side in the street exposure, one in the center rear wall. All were massive with thick blocking bars slotted into heavy retaining prongs. But the rear door was especially formidable. To burglar it would require a unique kit of tools.

A word now as to the pattern and equipment of the ground floor. The double street entrance was in the west near the center. Along the north side starting from the west corner of the room a bar extended for some thirty feet. Like the building it was shaggy with bark, built as it was of split logs. The top, however, had a tolerable smoothness thanks to some skillful adzman. An imaginary line extending from the inner or eastern end of the bar, to the south wall, would roughly delimit the barroom and gambling hall. The other forty feet of depth was the dance floor. Along its two sides ran heavy puncheon benches. Generally speaking the building was lighted with bracketed coal oil lamps reinforced with tin reflectors. But from the ten foot ceiling at the middle of the bar swung a double lamped chandelier, very grand with glass dangles. A venturesome pack train master had performed a notable feat over rough trails that the Dead Angel should be so glorified.

Schmelding was in touching distance of bitter facts. From the ill-omened courier Smith, he knew Jennison's mission, from ocular demonstration he knew that the renowned thug buster was in Dead Rock. Nor had he come alone. A goose-brained henchman had observed their arrival at the Wills' cabin and had magnified the six to ten. Too, the rumor ran the underground channels that the long slumbering unrest in the camp no longer slumbered. Men were organizing. That Jennison would know it, that he would activate it, was like stating an axiom. And Jennison would attack, swiftly, yet with consummate art. That was the universal tale. He, Schmelding, must prepare for defense and that now. The place, the Dead Angel Saloon.

So he sent out a frantic S. O. S. and like many a foundering vessel tossed on turbulent seas met disappointment. Many of his followers proved indeed "sunshine patriots." Of the dozens who had basked in his favor in the heyday of his power only eleven by actual count responded to his Macedonian call. So with Smith and himself there were thirteen. And the number of steps in the gallows' approach is thirteen. He had some advantages. The girls had been herded upstairs and locked there. He reckoned and justly, that this was ironclad insurance against purposely set fires. Also black powder bombing. Dynamite was yet an unknown in the West.

AND the building, save for the doors, was practically impregnable to assault. Now the thirteen counselled and the refined honey of their wisdom was this. The mighty rear door, if additionally braced could hardly be breached. The two street doors could, *and must*. If a barricade of the dance hall benches was constructed from the inner end of the bar across the south side wall, it and the bar could be defended against the anticipated frontal attack. Then with the dance hall lights extinguished masking it in semi-gloom they were ready. The men pelting

through the two front doors would be targets limned against the light.

The essentials of this Jennison had already observed. At the northeast corner of the saloon within two logs of the ceiling he had noted a wedge of light. The moss and clay clinking had become dislodged where the logs misfitted, leaving an irregular hole just fitted to his predacious eye. So leaving the men at Schmelding's cabin, he had taken the ghost-footed Travis as guard and gone questing. Bootless, he had climbed the ladder provided by the criss-crossing log ends and applied his eye to the happily focused lens. Ten minutes later, they were back with their men. There were eleven of them now all told. Jennison did not know how many were in the saloon, but that made no difference.

"She's plain," he said, "that they expect us to come rappin' on the front door. Fur that reason we're unlockin' that said hind door."

"That's a mighty door," Shaub remarked out of his own knowledge. "It's awful thick and solid with two heavy cross bars."

"And braced extry," Jennison contributed. "I could jest see the end of that brace. Even so we can unlatch it with the proper key. I figger we can find it by feel in his woodpile here by the cabin."

The "key" was a log, some ten feet long, a foot or so in diameter. From the fine bark splinters that plagued them they knew it for red fir, a tough heavy wood. As a battering ram it was above reproach. Five would wield it. Donaldson and Scougal toward the front end, Wiley and one of the Vigilantes near the rear. At the rear to help give the final devastating punch was the giant miner Dan. When the door yielded they all had their orders. Seven men were in the attacking party. Shaub and his three were to create a diversion at the front, *when the rear one crashed.* But be careful with your shots. Your friends will be in the saloon. Ten feet above the imprisoned girls. Now Jennison added a final word. Schmelding was "his meat." Poachers beware.

Jennison and Travis had made a careful though noiseless exploration of the approach to the door, which Shaub had supplemented from personal observation. At any rate the last dozen feet was smooth and free from obstruction. Now the five laid down the "toothpick," so Scougal dubbed it, and spat lustily in their leathery palms. This for sure gripping power. Travis moved to the left, Jennison to the right, the men picked up the log. And because surprise now was only a matter of fleeing seconds, Jennison counted for the burden bearers, "Left," "Right," "Left," "Right." With steadily accelerated tempo. Propelled by more than a thousand pounds of brawn, the log would not be denied. It sheared away the door as if it were cardboard and heaved the wreckage out on the dance room floor.

Instantly from before the front of the saloon roared out wild yells, punctuated by a fusillade of shots. Not four men now, but a dozen for Shaub had received reinforcements. And before the demolished door had ceased to quiver the seven were swarming inside, Travis as flanker on the left. Jennison on the right and bar side of the room. Scougal, whose voice had carrying power had puffed, "Hands up you—" According to the parable there were five foolish Virgins. And while the comparison is doubtless inept, the number of the foolish is pat. Of the number was Smith that ill-omened bird of passage, caught by a bullet in the act of hurling a knife.

So to the group of men now roaring in through the open front doors was presented an almost unbelievable sight. Eight men with hands upraised in stunned surrender, among them Schmelding.

"Tie 'em up," Jennison ordered crisply without for a moment shifting his gaze from the hulking Schmelding. With the near agility of a dash man Jennison had sprinted the distance from the bashed-in door to the bar and covered Schmelding before he could fire even one shot from the heavy pistol which seemed to gibe him for his slowness as it lay there now discarded on the bar before him.

Jennison pushed the gun negligently aside as he said quietly, "No need to keep your hands histed now, Mr. Schmelding. Pull 'em down and rest a spell. You're goin' to need the rest."

"And why do I need a rest?" Schmelding demanded. "You're going to hang me. You always do, they say."

"That wasn't jest what I come a hundred and fifty miles to do," Jennison distinguished, "though I can see justice in that

pint of view. I come special to pay that Ribaut note."

"Hell," Schmelding shrugged in relief. "If that's all, I'll give it to you. Here!"

And that oddity among negotiable instruments fluttered its sordid length upon the bar. Jennison picked it up, read it slowly, then beckoned Steve Donaldson over. Now while Schmelding stared in wonderment, Donaldson produced a stub of pencil, turned the note over and laboriously sketched his name across the back.

"You see Mr. Schmelding," Jennison explained, "Mr. Donaldson has jest endorsed that said note. By so doin' he makes himself liable fur the payin' thereof. Mr. Donaldson hates debts and pays 'em prompt. If it's money, he pays in money. If it's coyote hides, he pays in coyote hides. This is in *service,* and in service she'll be paid, and that now. *Come on out frum behind that thar bar."*

Men saw it with delight. Schmelding saw it now without pleasure. No coward he, but he preferred knife or gun to the bludgeoning of sledge-hammer fists. Yet he had fought many a rough and tumble battle without referees, or rounds or rules. He had his preference but he had no choice. Fists and feet and knees it must be. As to size there was little to choose.

"And I reckon it's only fair to tell you, Mr. Schmelding," Jennison went on while the two stripped for battle, "that we found the gal under your cabin. You tied them thongs awful tight, and you hadn't oughta shoved that piece of a limb back so hard into her jaws. Mr. Donaldson seen them things and it ain't a goin' to feather bed his licks none. Also fur that we're givin' her that thousand dollars we took offen Smith at Buttercup. Damages so to name it. We're startin' her and Mr. Samson east tomorrow or day after. That thousand 'ill mebbe help her git started in life agin. And now I see you're both ready. Go ahead, Steve, and pay that said note."

"With interest," Scougal chipped in. "Damn! I wish it was me."

No blow by blow, knee by knee, gouge by gouge account of that battle will be given by this chronicler. For it was just that. Two powerful men fighting to a bloody finish. Without let and without hindrance. And odd as it may seem, in silence. For the spirit of chivalry ran and was glorified among those strange, stern pioneers. Even from the criminal, if dauntless, they would not withhold their need of praise. Yet their silence was an urge to Donaldson. For he too was a pioneer. He too had stood silent while a comrade battled. He had stood silent while his heart throbbed with the hope for victory. Had exulted when it came, as now, with a last trip-hammer blow.

Jennison clasped Donaldson's bloody hand, then while other men thronged him, Jennison drew Shaub aside.

"Mr. Shaub," he stated, "I reckon our job's done. I see your Vigilantes have arrove, and I figger you know what to do and how." Shaub glanced briefly up at the great cross beams of the saloon and nodded grimly.

"Yep," Jennison interpreted the significant glance, "them beams is jest nachurly set fur that rightous purpose. Easy got at and jest the right distance frum the floor. We'll be toddlin' along now up to the Wills' cabin. Kinda anxious about some people up thar."

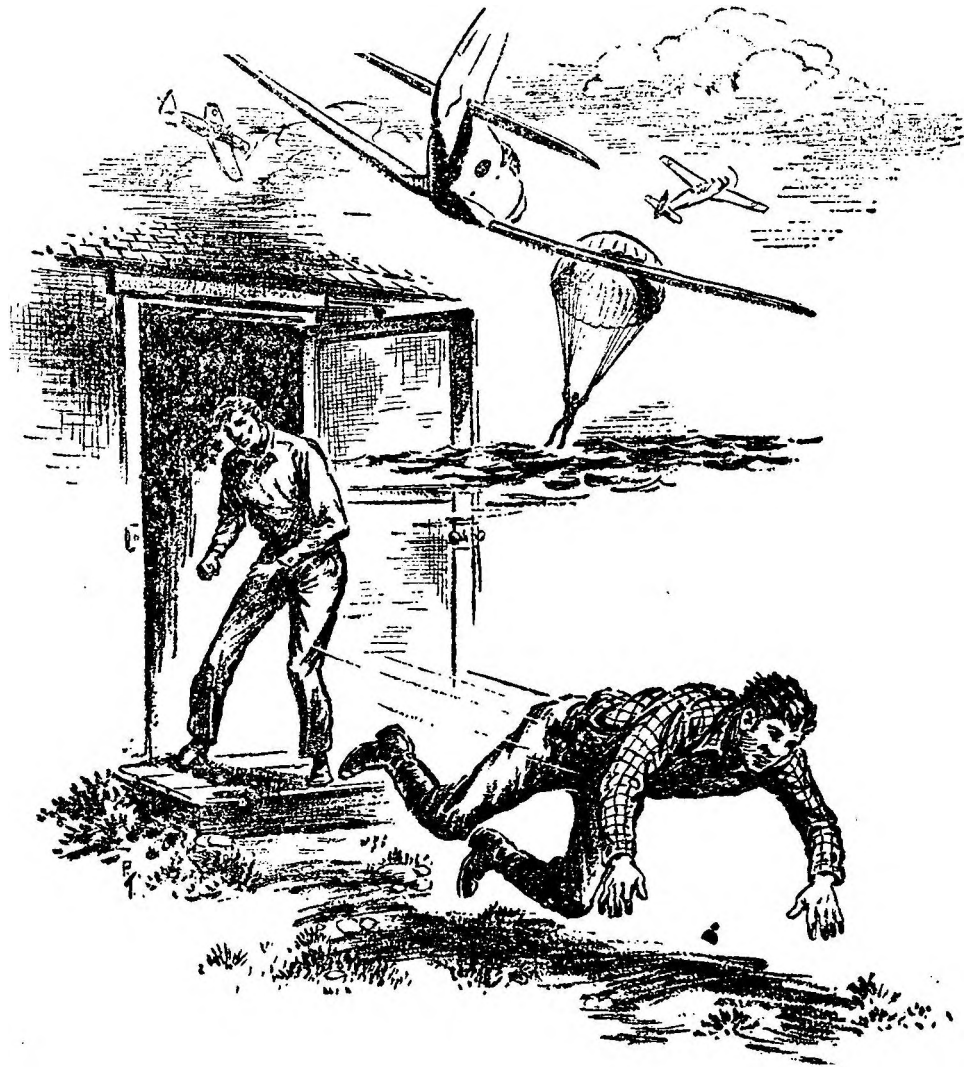
Again he glanced at the admirably placed cross beams.

"Fur she's only justice," he asserted, "fur it to be finished right here in the Dead Angel Saloon."

ARMY "ABOLISHED" WEATHER

"EFFECTIVE immediately, there will be no more weather," said Brig.-Gen. Thomas O. Hardin in India in 1943, and those words inaugurated the Army Air Forces' famous "all-weather flying." General Hardin's job was to get planes over the Himalayas "Hump" with war supplies for China. The Air Transport Command, ignoring weather conditions, did the job on instruments, radio direction beams, radar—and the traditional American courage and resourcefulness. Today new enlisted men in the peacetime Regular Army are sent to scores of Army schools for training as specialists who will get planes through the air, everywhere in the world, in defiance of all weather hazards.

. . . a Country Where Rumors Could Drift on the Winds from the Great Australian Bite to the Timor Sea



BUSH GAME

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG

DOC CARSE saw the figure, a tall, furtive, bare-headed shape attired in bush-tattered clothing, and Doc's first swift thought was, "Corporal Ketterly!" And then Doc took a noisy swig from the gin bottle clutched in the bony fingers of one hand, swallowed and waited a moment for the sting of it to bite into his shaky nerves, and had another look.

This time Doc's vision was sharply improved if only for the fact that the gin had momentarily checked the nervous way his head was shaking.

"Nope," he muttered. "It's not Ketterly."

Anyway, if any member of the North

Australia Mounted Police were this close, he would have long since known.

Nothing—not even the redoubtable skill and cunning of the Australia Mounted—had much chance of escaping the uncanny thing called bush-telegraph in this verdant and dark lush continent of the never-never.

Doc Carse felt safe enough; or at least as safe as a man might hope for with a murder warrant carrying his name stuffed in the pocket of Corporal Ketterly, an officer at Barrows Creek.

Doc was sitting beside a small table on the screened-in porch of his small log hut. The hut was located in the shadowed midst of a small grove of timber which grew gnarled and thick out of the red clay soil. The sun was half down the afternoon sky. Doc set the gin bottle on the table and rose gruntingly to his feet.

He stepped to the screen door, leaned with his nose denting the wire mesh, and called in his hoarse, froggy voice, "Hey, you! Come on in. You won't find anybody else for two hundred miles."

Doc's statement was a little bit on the white-lie side. The nearest point of habitation was Grant's Station, some eighty-odd miles south. But Doc forgot the lie quickly, remembering that it had been three weeks since he had talked to a human; and that had been one of the half-civilized black native aborigines.

When no reply was forthcoming, Doc felt the wry edge of a dull anger swelling in him. "Hey!" he yelled sharply. "I know you're out there. If you don't come out into the open I'll set my dogs on you!"

Doc had no dogs.

Silence. And Doc banging open the door and his dried and stooped figure moving jerkily along in its stained and shredded ill-fitting white duck suit.

WHEN Doc rounded the thick-butted cadjibut tree and glanced down, he said, "Hell!" hurriedly, and raced for the gin bottle at a tottering run.

He banged through the doorway, stopped to gulp down two short swigs, and hurried back with the bottle bouncing up and down in one scrawny hand.

Around the tree he whirled. He dropped painfully to his knees and slipped one hand under the blonde-thatched head and hoisted it a few inches, and dropping it onto his knees.

He pressed the bottle tenderly against a pair of shriveled lips and jiggled a few spoonfulls inside the mouth. When he saw the liquid oozing slowly out of the mouth corners, Doc grabbed the sun-burnt nose with his fingers and clamped the nostrils closed.

The young man lying with his head pillowed on Doc's knees coughed, gagged, and made two or three snorting swallows.

Doc Carse smiled grimly and poured in more of the fiery trader's gin.

There was a flicker to the eyelids now. A dragging open to let a pair of blood-shot blue eyes stare blankly up at Doc's worried face.

"One more swig," Doc urged. "That'll make you crack-hardy. Here."

The young man shook his head weakly. "No—I'm okay now. I guess I conked out." He struggled to a sitting posture. He was thin and leathery and young.

"You're a yank," Doc observed, pleased. "And an airman."

The young fellow's face was clear-shot for an instant with something vaguely suspicious and rebellious.

"I'm—" He stared at nothing.

"Who the hell cares," said Doc, for he had briefly sensed this youth's inward fear of something. "You look hungry. I got a pan of cold johnny-cakes and some jam. Come."

He helped the youth to his feet and led the way into the log hut.

THIRTY minutes of indifferent conversation, a few slices of cold mutton and half a dozen johnny-cakes smeared liberally with pungent jam, did wonders to Doc's stock of knowledge. The fellow's name was Jim Wilton, and he was from a place in the States called Nebraska. The deeper Jim Wilton got into the bush country the happier he'd be; as far as Nebraska was concerned, he'd never see that place again; said with a tight, catchy throat.

Doc said, "You're just sick in the body, Jim. That's all." There was the faint yellow traces of atabrine lying cloudy in Jim's skin. "You've been lost in this bush country so long you don't know what you're saying. Look at me. I'm damned near balmy—"

"I haven't been lost," Jim Wilton said quietly. He dug a compass and a map from his pants pocket. He laid them on the table. "I can tell you within ten miles of where we are."

"Yeah?" said Doc with an inane smile. "Well, anyhow, you ain't well. That's going to make a difference when you get to feeling good again."

"And I'm not sick." He dug in another pants pocket and extracted a kit filled with pill boxes. Doc glanced at the labels on the boxes and recognized them as cures and preventatives for malaria and fever and disorders of the respiratory and digestive organs. "I just got a touch of the sun. Lost my helmet in a windstorm last night."

"Yeah," said Doc perplexedly, again with his inane smile.

"You want me to tell you what's the matter?"

Doc said, "Sure! Oh, well—suit yourself. If you want to."

"I don't mind." The boy breathed through clenched teeth for a few minutes. His breath hissed oppressively and his steady blue gaze lay dull and tired on Doc's curious expression. "See that yellow color of my skin?"

Doc nodded, craning forward an inch.

Jim Wilton resumed, and bitterness drank the youth out of his tone. "That's my color, clean to the core."

It took a full minute for the impact to hit Doc. He kept his surprise hooded by the blank mask of his face. He reached in his pocket and dug out an old pipe. He crammed blackish cut tobacco into the bowl, tamped it slowly with a forefinger, and lighted up. Through the cloud of smoke he chuckled and said, "Who told you that?" He broke the dead match in two and tossed it across one shoulder to the floor.

"I never had to ask anyone."

"You ain't deserted your outfit, have you?" Doc inquired.

"I'm probably listed as missing. In a year they'll be notified I'm dead." He smiled bleakly.

Doc nodded somberly. "Them—back in Nebraska?"

Jim nodded. "The folks."

Doc sucked hard on the pipestem to jar loose a lodging. "And the girl?" He never looked up.

Jim Wilton's eyes flashed with a quick anger. "You don't know anything about a girl," he said flatly.

Doc glanced up, startled. "No—except a fella your age usually has one."

Jim's tongue came out and swiped at his parched lips.

"She'll marry some other guy. They always do."

"S'pose so," Doc admitted.

"You want to know why I'm yellow to the core?"

Doc shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Go ahead if you want to talk. I can't keep you from talking." Doc didn't need a picture drawn to tell him what was happening. This kid was sitting here selling a story to —Jim Wilton, of Nebraska, located someplace in the States. Doc swallowed and his wrinkled throat wiggled for a moment.

The silence in the timber outside was shattered while a kookaburra bird spat out its silly laughing crescendo. Doc waited. This kid's eyes were wrong. They didn't look out, they looked in—down at some deep chasm inside himself, self-dug with a bleak, unhoping exertion. A black hole where a stout heart should be beating instead of a broken muscle aquiver with some haunting devilment.

"Was you ever afraid, Doc?" Jim Wilton asked solemnly. And then his lips made an apologetic smile, and he shook his head. "No, no. Of course you never was. It takes courage to even live out here. Yeah. 'Scuse me, Doc."

Doc Carse laughed softly. He licked his lips and frowned. His fingers busied themselves with the pipestem. Should I tell him I killed a man? Should I tell him if I ever run out of gin I'll go half-mad, naked; be a native with a white body and a black mind?

It was true, Doc Carse had killed a man. Back at Barrows Creek a few years ago—a drunken white trader who had crossed the line. And Doc, who had tended these simple people, and who had delivered not a few of them into this world, had just taken one look at the frenzied young lubra. He did the thing as impassively as if he were dressing a simple wound, or delicately guiding a scalpel into the nerves of some organ—except that he was killing a man. The incident had caused murmurs of admiration from these simple and savage blacks. There-

fore Doc could spend the balance of his days in deep bush with impunity.

The rule book of the Australia Mounted said find him. The secret and mysterious code of the blacks said conceal him. And the warrant in Corporal Ketterly's pocket was turning yellow with age. Not that it worried the Corporal's conscience greatly; but the book of rules——

DOC waited, saying nothing for a few moments. And then he grunted. "There's different ways of being afraid. Some are part of what we're made of. Others—" Doc shrugged.

Jim Wilton licked his lips. "Yeah, but when a guy is flying as a buddy's wingman and takes a powder when the going starts to get tough—look, Doc, get me straight. I never meant to turn tail. I don't even seem to remember doing it. But all of a sudden my eyes sort of—well, there were shadows in front of them I thought. And yet now I can remember clear as hell that I could see those Nips coming down on us. First thing I knew I was hell-and-gone away from there. I don't know how. I don't know what happened."

"That must have been several months ago," Doc observed.

Jim Wilton nodded. "Yeah—it's over now. And I ain't got a chance to—"

"Was that your first scrap?" asked Doc.

"Yeah. That's what proved it to me. First time out."

"Eyes got hazy, huh?" Excitement, Doc knew, can play as many tricks with your eyes as fear.

"I tried to tell myself it was my eyes," Jim said hoarsely.

Doc shrugged. "Oh, well," he said, "take it easy here a few days. Maybe you'll think of something. I'll make us a spot of tea."

Doc stirred up a fire in the small wood stove in the small kitchen. He filled a dented tea-kettle with water from a barrel sitting outside the door. He placed the tea-kettle on the stove.

While waiting for the water to boil, Doc reached up in a cabinet and brought out a square, black, hand-case. He opened it and as his watery blue eyes glanced over the instruments he felt a passion churn inside him. There was invisible want staring out of his hollowed eyes. Here was the stilled and unused passion of his life. He glanced across one sagging shoulder toward the room where Jim Wilton was slumped down in a wicker chair. Doc wished for an instant that this youth's body was rent with some hideous wound so that these instruments could be used for a purpose other than the idleness that created a thirst for gin. Instead, it was no open wound that maimed Jim Wilton. It was something inside the skull that a scalpel would never touch. Doc's face was livid and pinched. He snatched a small bottle of whitish powder from the case and snapped it shut, tossing it back on the shelf.

He dumped some of the powder in a cup and stirred it into the tea. And when Jim Wilton gulped down the tea and in five minutes began nodding drowsily, Doc smiled. Sleep, and plenty of it——

DARKNESS pressed its elusive quiet across the red soil. The chill night wind whined across the mulga scrub and wallowed rawly in the frilled potholes of the bush. A dingo wailed lonesomely on some far knoll. The crooning Wah-ah-ah-ah—of a native song eased softly into the implacable silence.

Doc filled his pipe and lighted it and went outside. He paced back and forth worriedly. And when he heard the faint scuffing of something a few feet from the cabin, he turned and removed the pipe from his lips, calling softly, "Johnny?"

A short-legged grinning black emerged. "Me Johnny No-Teeth." His body gleamed. The boned curve of a hunting boomerang hung across one sinewy shoulder. He was naked save for his dirty loin cloth.

Doc stared morosely at Johnny No-Teeth. "You savvy white fella in this fella country?" he asked.

Johnny No-Teeth rolled his eyes and scratched his mop of fuzzy hair. "Me savvy," he confessed uneasily. "Me savvy him fella lost. Me good fella watch, huh? Him white fella good, huh?"

Doc nodded. "Yes, Johnny. You good fella watch?" The black proudly exhibited his bony chest and preened his fuzzy mop of hair. "You stay um damn close, Johnny. You make um help mebbe soon. Huh?"

The black nodded eagerly. "We make um close camp now. Twenty-'leven me fella black chum." And he slipped away, leav-

ing only the black emptiness where he had stood, barely stirring a leaf as he trotted through the timber.

Doc smiled. Twenty-'leven, he knew, was Johnny No-Teeth's way of saying half a dozen or so. The blacks were camped in a clump of gum trees about a mile away. They'd stick around, just in case he needed them.

NEXT morning Doc said, "You just make yourself at home here for a few days, Jim, while you figure out which way you want to go. You got to know something about bush country if you're going to live in it. You got to learn to live on something besides gin."

"How do people earn a living in this place?" Jim asked.

Doc stared at him a moment and then ran his fingers back through his thinning pale hair. "Well—some folks raise stock. Some raise sheep. Up around Broome the pearling luggers are going off-shore now that the Japs are whipped. Some people are swappers. Horses, cattle—swap anything for something better. You could grub out a living mebbe in the opal mines south of here. I dunno. You got to get the savvy of this country. Otherwise it's pretty grim for a new chum."

"I don't care how tough it is," young Wilton said crisply. And then as an afterthought, "How about these natives? They look pretty savage. They—mean or troublesome?"

Doc Carse frowned. It was a country where rumors drifted on the winds from the Great Australian Bight up across the parched gibber plains to the Timor Sea. Half-wild blacks silent about tribal killings. The weird spectacle of the corroborees, or native dances that might be harmless celebrations or a workings-up for a massacre. Prospectors, like as not half-crazy from gin-thirst or lonesomeness, stumbling out of nowhere. A dangerous country? Doc sighed.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "matter of fact I have had a few nasty times with the blacks. They're quite savage, y'know. They have their secret codes—and God help the poor white chum who breaks these codes. I dunno. They ain't easy to understand." He fell silent and puffed vigorously on his pipe.

"You never know when these blacks might take a notion to go on the war path. They don't make no more noise than their shadow at night. I've seen men with a tomahawk clean through their head into their pillow." Doc shrugged and eyed the other covertly. Jim Wilton sat quiet and unstirred.

IT WAS a week later that Ben Bradon dropped from his dusty horse in front of Doc's cabin. The big man dropped heavily to the ground, slapped the red trail dust from his sombrero and tramped toward Doc's door. Bradon's massive body perched on his short thin legs made him appear off-balance. He was a trapper and prospector, slow-thinking and vicious.

Doc Carse, sitting on the screened-in porch of his log hut, was not at all happy to see Bradon. Not that Bradon might report his whereabouts to Ketterly. Doc knew that Bradon, too, was on the corporal's wanted list for a little matter of stealing cattle.

But Bradon was nearly always out of gin when he appeared at Doc's on one of his periodic visits.

"Hello, Doc," Bradon thundered. "It's a devil of a long time since I seen you. What's new?"

Doc shrugged disgruntedly without rising to welcome Bradon.

Jim Wilton was out somewhere wandering through the timber in search of himself. Doc reached over and lifted the gin bottle from the table and placed it between his feet on the floor.

Bradon grinned. "I was just wondering if you didn't have a drink for me, Doc." And when Doc gave no reply, Bradon scowled. "Now don't be stingy, Doc. Honest. I got a belly ache."

"I got some pills for a belly ache," Doc snapped.

"You and your damnable pills!" Bradon yelled. "Gimme a drink of gin—" He came through the door and stood scowling down at Doc.

"Get out of here, Bradon!" said Doc. "This is my last bottle of gin. I need it."

Bradon grinned. "You gimme that damned bottle, Doc, or I'll—"

"Doc said to scram!" It was the soft voice of Jim Wilton standing in the doorway.

Bradon whirled, surprised. "Who's this?" he snarled at Doc.

"Friend of mine," Doc said mildly.

Bradon eyed the slim blond figure of Wilton. "Get the hell away, kid, before I hurt you."

Jim Wilton skidded forward two steps and swung with his right. Bradon's big head snapped back and his eyes blinked in hurt surprise. He roared a curse and plunged at Wilton, his thick arms flailing. Wilton sidestepped, locked his fingers on one of Bradon's wrists, and made a swift whirling movement with his lithe body.

Bradon's two-hundred pounds toppled to one side, tottering there an instant while Jim Wilton set his feet solidly on the flooring. When his body moved again, the big cursing hulk of Bradon crashed through the screen door and pitched headlong to the ground. He rolled over in the dust and sat up blinking.

Doc Carse meanwhile had hurried inside the house, and now reappeared. When he saw Bradon's hand fumbling at the heavy knife hilt at his waist, the small revolver in Doc's hand exploded and dust geysered up a few inches in front of Bradon.

"Better jump on that horse and beat it!" Doc snapped.

Bradon half-gratefully clambered to his feet whining over his aching wrist. "You're getting damned inhospitable, Doc," he grumbled. He stared at Jim Wilton for an instant then whirled and jumped on his horse and rode away.

"By golly!" Doc exclaimed. "You saved my life!"

Jim Wilton glanced at Doc and then at the retreating figure of Bradon. "I never thought—" he mumbled. "I just got scared he was going to hurt you."

IN BUSH circles, Doc Carse was called a man with a thinking brain. But it was not necessary for him to use more than one small cell of his brain to figure out the right kind of scalpel to use on Jim Wilton.

Late that night, when he could hear the steady breathing from across the room to tell him that young Wilton was fast asleep, Doc slipped from his cot and jammed his legs in his pants. He padded from the room in his bare feet, carrying his shoes in one hand. Outside, he sat on the ground and slipped on the shoes.

He moved away through the trees and had gone about fifty feet when the voice said, "Me Johnny No-Teeth. Me watch. Me here now."

Doc Carse stopped. "Good. Johnny No-Teeth plenty smart black fella. Me need um now." He patiently explained to Johnny a plan that left the little black man thoroughly baffled, but grinningly willing.

"Him white fella what you call um game?" Johnny inquired.

Doc nodded. "Yeah. You like play um game? Good fella. You make um sound like eighty-'leven black fella."

Johnny No-Teeth swelled his bony chest pridefully. "Me make um sound plenty like um hundred-'leven," he promised.

"Good!" Doc exclaimed softly.

"Me go now," chuckled Johnny No-Teeth. He slid away.

Doc Carse hurried back to the house, crawled in bed, and slept soundly.

It was during the first glimmer of a red musty dawn. There was the sharp rattle of a throwing spear on a bark shield. A pitched tense yelling from one voice, and then the blended weird shouting of a chorus of voices.

It awakened a flock of red parrots roosting in the trees which surrounded Doc's cabin. The parrots flew away, startled and screaming, their stiffened wings beating noisily into the foliage.

Silence dropped for a moment, and then the thud of stamping bare feet lifted into the trees. The rattle of dried turtle shells grated softly.

Dawn widened the reddish gap it was driving into the dark. Around Doc's cabin could be seen the skeleton-like bodies of weaving natives, barred with stripes of white and ocher, fantastically adorned with feathers and tufts of wool stuck on with mud and clay daubs, and the bare bodies showed with lacings of terrible scars some of which were the honest wages of intertribal warfare, others which were the pleasantries of tribal initiations.

In the background slunk a hungry horde of lean curs, half-dog and half-dingo. Back there, too, stood the women, grinning lubras clutching their suckling picaninnies.

Now the melee lifted into a high-pitched

chattering of excited voices. One native's pitched yell lifted above the others. Another black lifted an arm and sent a heavy-bladed boomerang whirring into space. It thudded noisily against the wall of Doc's cabin.

Now the black figures raced wildly around, yelling and stamping their feet and rattling their spears against the hard bark of shields. One native sent a spear whining into the cabin wall. It stuck there quivering, deeply imbedded.

DOC CARSE snored loudly. He came out of it as a hand shook him vigorously.

"What's wrong?" sputtered Doc.

"There's something going on outside," Jim Wilton whispered.

Doc jumped from the bed. "The damned blacks!" he said, cursing. "On the war path!" He jumped into his pants and shoes. "Get into your clothes, kid. We might be in for something."

"Where's your pistol?" Jim asked.

"Pistol." Doc's jaw dropped. "Hell! I remember now. I was cleaning it and left it on the bench outside. Can't go out after it now. They'll cleave your head open with a tomahawk."

Jim Wilton jerked on his pants and put on his shoes.

The yells outside were fierce now, and the thump of many boomerangs resounded against the cabin wall.

"We ain't got a damned thing to fight them off with," Doc said. "Just some chunks of firewood."

Jim Wilton peered from a small window. In a moment he jerked back. In the grayish dawn the high planes of excitement along his cheeks were aquiver. He swiped one hand over his eyes. Doc emerged from the kitchen carrying two heavy sticks of firewood. His grin was sickly.

"This is all we got," Doc confessed. "You take one. If they crash in we'll just have to do the best we can."

"I'll take the front door," said Jim. "You watch the back door."

"Too right!" Doc snapped. He stationed himself inside the back door. He could see the tall tense shape of Jim Wilton in the other room. Doc's hand slid onto the door knob and in another minute he was jerking the door open. He charged out into the open, yelling and swinging his club at the ducking shapes.

Jim Wilton shot through the back door. He saw a black shape driving toward Doc. He leaped forward and swung his club and it careened off a bushy head. The black went down, writhing a little. Doc was yelping in his froggy voice and swinging wildly.

Something whickered a few feet over Jim Wilton's head and banged into the house. Wilton charged and laid his club on another fuzzy head. In a few minutes the blacks began to retreat.

The lubras with their picaninnies closed their grinning lips and scuttled far back in the timber. The two blacks that Jim Wilton had clubbed struggled to their feet and sprinted for safety.

Finally Doc Carse lowered his club and turned around. Far out in the bush droned the "A-a-a-a-a-ah" of a retreating corroboree. Doc grinned weakly at Jim Wilton.

"I guess that changed their heathen minds," Doc gasped.

IT WAS late that night that Doc Carse was wrapping a bandage around the bruised fuzzy head of Johnny No-Teeth. Johnny's wide lips were split in a broad toothless grin.

"We play um white fella game all right?" he asked, wincing a little as Doc smeared salve across his bruised forehead.

"You play um like no black fella ever play um," Doc agreed. "Johnny No-Teeth plenty smart fella."

The black's grin widened. He rolled his eyes and scratched the calf of one leg with the toenails of the other foot. "Him damn good game fella white man's," he admitted somberly. "Him plenty rough game, too. What you call um, this white fella game?"

"Huh?" Doc Carse blinked. "Oh! Well, Johnny, it's not easy to explain. It might be called button-button-who's-got-the-button. Kinda like that. Somebody loses something, and then hunts for it. In this case, I doubt if you'd savvy. A man just lost his guts and found them. That's all." Doc chuckled and glanced out through the open doorway. Jim Wilton must be twenty miles along the trail by now, going back. "Okay, Johnny. That'll do. Send in the other fellas. I got lots of salve."

ON THE NIGHT OF THE BIG WIND

By H. M. S. KEMP

Author of Many Stories of the North

THE month was July; the setting the High North; the location, the veranda of old Dad Robbins' huge bungalow at Whitesand Lake.

Across the lake, the sun had gone down. It left the points, the islands and the headlands filmed in misty purple. Smoke rose lazily from the cooking-fires and the tepees in the Indian village. A dog moaned. A gramophone ground out tin-pan jazz.

But for the dog and the gramophone, there was silence. Deep in his chair, old Dad Robbins smoked broodingly. Irene

The High North Had a First Class Mystery in Its Very Lap

Robbins, sitting on the veranda railing, bent her dark head over some embroidery work. In another chair, Ray Sheldon, foreman and manager of Dad's trading- and fishing-empire, skimmed the pages of a detective magazine. Then, following a familiar pattern, the regular group of droppers-in began to arrive.

Herb Lawrence, the Mounted Police constable, was the first of them. He drifted up from his detachment in slacks, his Stetson and a crested, white sweater. The girl smiled her welcome; old Dad indicated a deck-chair beside the door. Lawrence sat down.

Next came Slim Beechman, lean, blond, hard-faced. Slim prospected; and just now he was engaged in blasting-out an old copper showing on an island a couple of miles from shore in Whitesand Lake. With Slim was the Game Guardian, Gene Cooper. They sat down on the veranda steps and rolled a smoke from Cooper's packet of fine-cut. The circle was completed when Ed Delorme, the Hudson's Bay trader but old Dad's very good friend, came up to sprawl on a couch on the other side of the door.

Conversation opened. It began with a timber-wolf, shot by an Indian near the village, veered to fur in general, and finally devolved into an argument over the value of fur that was nearly-but-not-quite prime.

Dad Robbins started it by saying that twenty years ago, when the fur-season opened earlier, furs must have been just as good or folks wouldn't have bought them. Ed Delorme backed him in his argument. And when Dad seemed about swamped by the counter-arguments of Game Guardian Gene Cooper and Constable Herb Lawrence, he called on his manager, Ray Sheldon, for support.

Sheldon was tall, dark, roughly handsome. Rumor had it that he'd be the old man's son-in-law before freeze-up rolled around. Now he smiled indolently.

"Go back twenty years, Dad, and I was still at school. I didn't know much about fur then."

"And you don't know much about it now," grunted the Game Guardian, Gene Cooper. "Not when you tried to tell me those fox-skins I caught you buying last fall were prime."

Old Dad grinned as he rose to his manager's defense. "That was business. Anyhow, prime or not, we bought 'em after the season was open. And it's what I claim—a fox caught just before he's prime is a better skin than he would be two-three weeks later. The leather may be dark, but it's tougher. And the fur's better. Ain't rubbed, like it will be later on."

"I dunno so much about fur," put in the prospector, Slim Beechman, "but I always figured that the color of an animal had something to do with the leather. You know—the leather of a real dark fox, say a black or a silver, would take longer to get prime than a red one would."

"Don't you ever believe it," broke in Ray Sheldon. "What about white foxes, then? I've trapped dozens of 'em—yeah, hundreds of 'em—"

"You have!" hooted Gene Cooper. "Where? Down in Manitoba?"

SHELDON frowned, but Constable Herb Lawrence was forced to smile. Jealousy had prompted the Game Guardian's remark, jealousy over Irene Robbins. Gene Cooper, who was short, thick-set and red-headed, had rushed the girl ever since he had come to the district a year before; and it irked him to see Ray Sheldon, a mere hired man of old Dad Robbins, pick up the marbles.

But Sheldon's frown passed. He said coolly, "Yeah, down in Manitoba. Or up in Manitoba, if you like. 'Way up. On the Bay, north of Churchill."

"Now, boys—please!" It was Irene Robbins speaking. She smiled from Sheldon to Cooper. "Let's not fight about it. If Ray says he has trapped white foxes, well, he must have done."

The Game Guardian forced a grin. "Sure. I was only kidding the guy. He could tell me he'd trapped 'em on Herschel Island or even Baffin Land, and I'd still believe him!"

But though there was that grin on Cooper's face, there was spite in his words. And for a moment it looked as though Sheldon might do something about it. His eyes narrowed as he looked back at Cooper; then he passed it off with a shrug.

"Too bad you don't like it, but it was still north of Churchill. Probably a mile 'r so further north than you've ever been."

Old Dad Robbins stirred. "Me, I don't know nothin' about white foxes; but I can't figure out why they don't start breedin' 'em. They breed silvers and platinums, but if they ever tried it out on the whites, I never heard tell of it."

Herb Lawrence shrugged. "Nor me. But comes a gent who may be able to give you some information. Big George." And the policeman inclined his head towards a figure heading up the pathway from the lake.

BIG George Herrick, they found when he came closer, was drunk. Drunk, that is, for him.

The liquor didn't show in his legs, which were steady enough, nor in his general manner. But there was a sneering hardness to his lips and a look in his eyes that was ugly and mean. Thumbs hooked in belt and spread-legged, he came to a stop a few feet from the veranda and allowed that mean and ugly look to travel over those present.

Herb Lawrence ran foul of it first. The policeman flicked his cigarette away and straightened a bit in his chair, but by that time Herrick was glowering from old Dad Robbins to Ray Sheldon and Ed Delorme.

Then he began to speak, in a voice that dripped with venom.

"Know somep'n, you guys? I'm pullin' out, see! Sellin' out and pullin' out and blamed glad t' go!" Herrick spat, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and glowered directly at Dad Robbins.

"So what?" retorted the old man at last. "You're sellin' out. Figure, mebbe, I oughta cry about it?"

Herrick's eyes crinkled. "But you birds ain't runnin' me out. Don't you ever think that. For three years you've bin buckin' me —buckin' me any old way at all. You tried payin' more for fur than you figured I could pay; you fixed things so's the Airways wouldn't fly m' freight in; and you hired any man I tried to hire. But you didn't make it stick, see! You betcha m' life yuh didn't!"

RAY SHELDON, jaw set, looked at Herrick coldly. Tall and rugged, Dad Robbins' manager might be a tough one to handle if words led to blows; and the policeman, Herb Lawrence, found himself wondering just how many of them Sheldon was prepared to take.

Herrick, however, seemed ready enough to spill them.

"You betcha you didn't make it stick!" he ranted. "I got a letter from town today, from a feller named Dave Ormand. This guy's bin tradin' on the Mackenzie somewheres but he wants to locate closer in. 'Send me a pitcher of your layout and your fox-ranch,' he says, 'and tell me what they're worth. Mebbe we'll make a deal.' And will we make a deal?" jeered Herrick. "I'll say we will! If he wants to live with a buncha double-crossin' sidewinders like they got around here—"

"Hold it!" broke in the policeman sharply. "No need for that stuff!" And to steer Big George into safer channels, he asked, "How did this guy know you wanted to sell?"

"How'd he know?" Herrick glowered at the constable. "He got it from Vic Andrews. Y' remember Andrews—the prospector that camped with me last week? He says Vic told him I was fed up with tradin' and fox-ranchin' and that if I got an offer, I might sell out. And will I sell out?" blared Herrick again. "Let him show th' color of his money and I'll blamed soon tell him!"

FOR a moment there was quiet, but with it went an atmosphere of strain. Big George rocked slightly, glowered at Ed Delorme, then turned to face Gene Cooper.

"You!" he snarled. "You're a camera-shark. How 'bout takin' a couple pitchers of the layout for this gink?"

The Game Guardian stared back. "Why should I?"

"Why should you?" Herrick seemed staggered. "Why th' devil shouldn't you? You fool around enough with pitchers of bugs and bees and dicky-birds. A couple more wouldn't break you." He added, "And it might help me out."

Cooper gave a thin smile. "And why should I help you out? I asked you to help *me* out last week, and you wouldn't. Remember—when my outboard went on the bum?"

Big George grunted. "I never lend outboards. Not to nobody."

"Uh-huh. And if Ed hadn't lent me his, I'd have had to paddle clear to Sucker River and back. All of thirty miles."

Big George seemed cornered. He glowered, looked from the Game Guardian to Slim Beechman. And Slim took him on.

"So you're sellin' out," the prospector observed. "Might be a good time to mention that fifteen hundred you owe me."

A blaze of anger leaped into Herrick's eyes. "That fifteen hundred—!" he howled. "I told you before, I don't owe you nothin'!"

"You don't, eh?" nodded Beechman. "I sink fifteen hundred into your cock-eyed fox-ranch and don't get a nickel back."

"Sure, you don't get it back! Them foxes you bought all died!"

"Mebbe they did," agreed Beechman. "But what about the pups? Or didn't they have any?"

"I don't know nothin' about no pups," swore Big George. "Yours was all dog-foxes. If they had pups—"

"Forget it!" sneered Beechman. "Just like I gotta forget my fifteen hundred."

Big George seemed to snarl; then with that ugly look on his face he turned to his audience collectively.

"Any wonder I want t' pull out and go live where white men live? Why, you half-bushed scissorbills, there ain't a white man amongst you!"

With a bounce, Gene Cooper was up. "By Judas! I'm not taking that!" And before anyone could stir, the Game Guardian had smacked George Herrick twice.

The first blow was a grazer, along Herrick's jaw; the second caught him high on the forehead. Then there was a flailing of Herrick's big arms, a soggy thud or two—and Gene Cooper went down, his head striking viciously on a corner of the veranda steps.

So swift had been the action that the onlookers were numbed; but Herb Lawrence was the first to come to life. The constable leaped from the veranda, shoved Herrick clear and told him to break it up or he'd mix in himself.

Big George hesitated. He drew back for a crack at the policeman; but Lawrence, who was young and lanky and hard, looked him in the eye and begged him to try it. Then as the man wavered again, Lawrence shot a glance at Gene Cooper.

The Game Guardian hadn't moved. Oblivious to Herrick, Lawrence turned, rolled him onto his back.

FOR a man who wasn't taking anything, Cooper had taken a lot. There was a bleeding cut over one eye, the cheek bone beneath it was raw and the upper lip puffy and split. And when the policeman lifted him to a sitting position, he found further damage. This was another cut on the back of Cooper's head.

"Not so good," grunted Lawrence. And to Slim Beechman and Ed Delorme—"Get him up there on the couch."

But Gene Cooper was tougher than the ordinary. While Irene Robbins doctored his cuts and abrasions, he came around again.

"Hold it!" counselled Lawrence. "We'll be done in a minute."

Big George shuffled a step or two closer. He seemed sobered somewhat, and awkward.

"I wasn't lookin' for no trouble," he averred. "Only he come at me—"

"Yeah," said Dad Robbins, sourly. "We know."

"Guess, mebbe," admitted Big George, "I talked too much. I get that way after two-three drinks."

"Then you'd best leave them two-three drinks alone," broke in Slim Beechman. "Big and hulkin' like you are, you're apt t' kill a guy and not know it."

Big George shrugged. "But if he hadn't come on at me—yeah, well—guess I'd better drag 'er." He turned and walked lumberingly away.

Gene Cooper sat up, winced, and watched him go. "That big ape sorta took me," he offered with an attempt at a grin.

"Sort of," agreed Lawrence. "But that's what you get for being ambitious."

"Somebody should tramp on him—and hard," growled the Hudson's Bay man, Delorme. "I'd try it myself, if he'd spot me fifty pounds."

"But you don't need to worry much longer," grinned the policeman. "When he pulls out, your troubles'll be over. Unless," he observed, "Mr. Dave Ormand proves to be a tougher proposition than Mr. George Herrick."

Old Dad Robbins rumbled in his chest. "You mean in business? Well, he don't want to try gettin' tough with me. I put up with Herrick, but I don't have to put up with no more of 'em. And if this Ormand feller figures he can step in here and start shovin' us around, well, me 'n' Ray'll take care of him. And it won't be by no half-way measures, neither."

"Legal measures?" suggested Herb Lawrence.

Old Dad shrugged, and his eyes seemed to gleam a bit. "Legal enough to get by."

An odd silence fell. Gene Cooper stirred, said he figured he'd go home and take a sleep; and a moment or so later the party broke up.

EARLY the next morning, though, Lawrence was favored with a visit from Big George Herrick himself. The man came into the Police detachment and began to apologize for the happening of the previous night. "The blamed booze, yunno—" he began; then worked around to a more personal angle.

"Remember me askin' Gene if he'd take a pitcher or two of the layout? Well, if he won't, will you?"

Lawrence said he didn't mind, but it would be better if Gene Cooper did it. "Gene's what you called him, a real camera shark. If he took the snaps, he could develop 'em and print 'em. I'd have to send

mine out to town. But don't be in a rush," Lawrence suggested. "I'll see Gene myself."

It was an excuse for calling on the Game Guardian, anyway; and Lawrence was looking for one. So a few minutes later he took the trail through the Indian village and up to Cooper's shack.

He found the man washing his breakfast dishes and looking not so good as he did the night before. The cut eye was discolored and his whole face seemed lopsided. Nor was his manner very sweet.

"Go on, laugh!" he snarled at Lawrence. "Get it off your chest!"

"Don't be an ass," retorted the constable. "Why should I laugh at you?"

Cooper gave a grunt, and returned to his dishes.

Lawrence felt awkward. He glanced around the room, and when his eyes fell on the camera enlargements of wild-life on the walls, he decided to get things over with.

"George Herrick was up to see me," he began. "Seemed sort of sorry for what took place." Cooper gave another grunt, but the policeman went on. "Asked a favor of me, too—would I take those pictures for him seeing that you've turned him down?"

"So what?" asked Cooper. He dried a bowl, set it on the table. "Hop to it. Don't mind me!"

Lawrence gave a snort of impatience. "Aw, come out of it! Just because he's a sorehead, have you got to be one? He was drunk, made a few dirty cracks. And you called him. Forget it, I'd say."

Cooper tried to smile. "Sure I'll forget it! Why sure! Only I don't have to run to the guy. You take the pictures if you love him so much!"

Lawrence's own short temper snapped. "For Pete's sake! You're acting like a two-year-old! Okay, then!" he barked. "I'll take 'em!"

But he didn't take them at once. When he returned to his detachment he found a note waiting for him. It was written in the Cree syllabics and reported a shooting accident at Crooked Lake, forty miles to the northeast. That meant a trip of investigation; and the trip took him two days.

It was a wasted trip as well. The original report, passed from mouth to mouth, had grown in the telling; and when he reached Crooked Lake it was to find the accident involved a mere .22 bullet and the fleshy part of a man's arm. He got back home at noon, and in the drive of a stiff northwester.

He was lucky that he landed when he did; for an hour afterwards, the wind turned to a young hurricane that whipped the waters of Whitesand Lake into whitecaps and flying spray. But the sky was clear and the sun was bright and the day was ideal for pictures; so before supper that afternoon he headed down for Big George Herrick's.

This time, he found Big George in a more mellow mood. Lawrence took the snapshots, then accepted Herrick's bid to stay for supper. Supper meant a dozen hands of crib afterwards; so it was getting along towards dusk when Lawrence finally came away.

It was more than dusk in the bush. And thus it was that when passing beneath the arms of a spreading spruce he failed to notice a certain damp spot in the trail. In daylight, even, he would scarcely have noticed it; for it was small and partially covered with leaves and spruce needles. But as the trail sloped somewhat to the side and Lawrence was wearing Indian moccasins, he skidded momentarily on it before he caught his balance.

The whole thing consumed less than a couple of seconds, and Lawrence was not aware that it had made any imprint on his mind at all. What he was aware of was that the wind was as strong as ever, and after the calm of the morning, he wondered if a storm would break.

But there was no storm; yet neither did the wind die down. If anything, it increased. It howled through the pines and the poplars tugged at the shingles on the detachment roof; and when Herb Lawrence finally went to bed it was with the steady surge of it in his ears.

But it wasn't the wind that wakened him at that dark hour just before dawn. It was the thud of running feet and hoarse, excited yells. He sprang out of bed, threw the door open and looked outside and around him.

At first he saw nothing save the stars, the swaying tree-tops and the dim-white line that was the crashing of the waves on the beach; then, suddenly, the tree-tops threw back a crimson reflection, and when he stepped out of the cabin and looked east-

ward, he learned the cause of it. Fire, a forest-fire, fanned by that raging wind.

FORTUNATELY, the village itself was in no danger. The Mounted Police detachment was the most easterly of its buildings, and the fire was raging east of that again. But well beyond the limits of the village, a half-mile away and directly in the path of the fire, was Big George Herrick's trading-post and fox-ranch.

Another knot of Indians went racing by. Lawrence swung into the house, located his clothing by sense of feel, dressed scantily and rushed out again. He contacted three more men, and one of them was "Flapjack" Perkins, squawman and handyman around the village. Flapjack was pretty well winded, but this did not muzzle him.

"You, Herb?" he panted as he ran. "Humdinger, ain't she? I seen her start—from my place—on the island."

They were following the main trail to George Herrick's, the one Lawrence himself had come home by a few hours earlier. But this trail seemed also to lead to the heart of the fire.

"Better take the shore for it," Lawrence suggested. "Only way we'll get through."

They swung; and halfway to the post they drew abreast of the fire. It was back in the bush about a hundred yards, but they could hear the sullen roar of it. They could hear, too, the thudding of trees going down. But above all and around all was that wind.

On shore, now, it threw spray in their path, drove at their backs and carried them along. Flapjack Perkins, immediately behind the constable, panted comment on it.

"She'll—clean out—George—for sure! Ain't got a chance! And what about—them foxes?"

Lawrence didn't reply. It took all his breath to keep running, and all his attention to follow the dim shore-trail and not break his neck over the boulders. But in a few minutes they rounded a point, cut into a bay and brought up at George Herrick's.

There were others there before them, and there was a light in store and house. Dim figures showed up in silhouette as they passed outside the windows. These were men with their arms loaded, packing what they could down to the shore.

The air was already thick and choking, and cinders and hot ashes fell or went overhead in clouds. Lawrence estimated that the fire could not be more than a few hundred yards distant; measured in time, not more than ten or fifteen minutes away. He called out, asking for Big George, and almost bumped into him.

The man was swearing like a muleskinner, urging his helpers to step it up. He recognized Lawrence by his voice, turned, and began cursing afresh.

"What started this?" he demanded. "You ain't tellin' me—"

"I'm not telling you anything!" barked Lawrence. "You've got about ten minutes. What d'you want me to do?"

"Pack stuff!" bellowed Herrick. "Store's open—"

"What about the foxes?"

"Nem'mind the foxes! They'll go underground!"

"They may," grunted Lawrence. "But you'd better tear down the netting and give 'em a chance." He added, "If they do go underground, you can pick the fence up later."

Big George hesitated. "Go ahead, then!" he ordered. "I'll save what I can here."

LAWRENCE knew the location of the Herrick wood-pile, and there found an axe. He ran to the far end of the half-acre pen and slashed down a section of fencing-posts. Big George might burn out, but the poor dumb foxes were not going to perish if Herb Lawrence could help it.

By the time he had finished the smoke was almost strangling. Those hot ashes, too, landed on him and burned his unprotected skin. He reached the store to find only George Herrick there.

They almost collided.

"For the luvva glory!" yelled Herrick. "I was just goin' lookin' for you!"

"The foxes!" coughed Lawrence. "Couldn't see 'em burned up—"

"We'll all burn up," barked Herrick, "if we don't get outa here!"

They struck for the lake and found the rest of the men standing around a jumbled pile of household- and trading-goods. But as the fire began to rip through the last fringe of timber, white men and natives raced around the bay and towards the safety of the unburned land beyond.

LAWRENCE, however, didn't pause there. The constable went on to his detachment, lit a lamp and threw on a fire. A moment later Big George Herrick walked in. A glance at him, and Lawrence said, "I know; I know, George; but keep it a while. We'll have a drink of coffee." He indicated a chair. "Sit down. It won't take long."

But almost at once two other men stepped in. These were Dad Robbins and Ray Sheldon.

Old Dad blinked at Lawrence. "What goes on down here? Tryin' to burn up the whole darn country?" Then, turning to Herrick and seeing something in the man's face, he frowned sharply. "What's the matter, George? It wasn't—wasn't your place, was it?"

Herrick's face was bitter and hard. "What else d'you think?"

Dad gave a weak, "Gosh!" and didn't know what to say next. But Sheldon spoke. "It looked to us just like a bush-fire."

"It was a bush-fire," put in the policeman. "To begin with."

Now Sheldon was frowning. "A bush-fire? At this time of night? What would start one?"

"You mean," grated Big George, "*who'd* start one?"

Sheldon squinted at the man. "You tryin' to say the thing was started on purpose?"

"I ain't tryin' to say nothin'," rapped Big George. "I'm sayin' it right out. Some dirty rat that had it in for me took this way of gettin' even. If I find him—*when* I find him—his soul won't be worth a slug nickel!"

Herb Lawrence broke in. He had the fire started and was setting the coffee-pot to boil.

"Don't be too sure it was set on purpose," he told Big George. "It might have been an accident. Old Peekosis and his crowd were camped halfway between here and your place till last evening. Maybe their fire wasn't out when they left."

Big George gave a scornful grunt. "They camped down near the shore; but this bush-fire didn't start near the shore. We come by Peekosis's camp a few minutes ago and the fire hadn't reached there yet."

Lawrence admitted the point. "Still don't go off half-cocked. It'll be daylight soon, and we'll shove over there and see what's to be seen."

Old Dad Robbins filled his pipe broodingly. He looked across at George Herrick. Herrick was hunched forward in his chair, rubbing his big hands slowly together. "Manage to save much, George?" he asked him.

Herrick looked up. Dad had to repeat the question twice before Herrick seemed to hear. Then, "Dunno what I saved," grunted Big George. "And I dunno what happened to the foxes. There was fourteen of them."

Daylight came creeping through the windows, and by the time the coffee was brewed, Lawrence was able to extinguish the lamp. None of the men was more than half dressed, and in the gray light their faces looked sober and hard. But the policeman set the table, opened a package of cereal and placed a dozen slices of bread to brown on the stove-top.

They drew in, but George Herrick took only coffee. In straggling twos and threes the native population of Whitesand Lake passed and repassed the windows; and when the silent meal was finished, Big George pushed back.

He glowered across at the constable. "Well?"

Lawrence nodded, but took time to roll a cigarette. Then he drew on an old sweater, took down his Stetson, and at the last, changed from moccasins to a well-worn pair of jackboots. Ready to leave, he told Herrick and the others, "Maybe for a start, I'll handle this better alone. If I need any help, I'll tell you."

Big George began to bluster. "Alone, nothin'! It was my place that was burned out; and I got every right—"

"Sure," agreed Lawrence, firmly. "Every right in the world to demand justice. And my job's to see that you get it."

He led the way outside; and there he noticed that the wind had swung. It was now beginning to blow from the east. Ray Sheldon noticed it too, and remarked on it.

"That'll kill your fire quick enough. And probably turn to rain."

"In which case," added Dad Robbins, "you don't want that stuff of yours, George, scattered all over. C'mon; we'd best rustle canoes and get her stowed inside. Use our warehouses," he offered; "if you want 'em."

Grudgingly, Big George moved off with Ray Sheldon and old Dad. They headed for the path along the shore, leaving Herb Lawrence to make his own decisions. And the decision was to strike down the main trail in the direction of the Herrick post and the backdrop of last night's devastating fire.

THIS was the trail he himself had used. It was the quickest way to and from Big George's. Hence, if there was anything to the suggestion that the fire had been set deliberately, the fire bug himself might also have used it.

So, moving with care and keeping his eyes opened, Lawrence struck off. He passed the spot where he and Flapjack Perkins had detoured for the shore during the night, and in time came to that damp spot beneath the spreading arms of the spruce tree. And what he saw caused him to stop dead.

Plumb centre of the damp spot and heading towards him was the imprint of a hob-nailed boot.

Lawrence studied it frowningly. The incident of the night before rushed back at him. Here in the greasy mud he could see where his own moccasined foot had slithered, but superimposed on the mark were those other marks of the hobnails.

The boot-track, he noticed, was pointed towards him, going in the direction of the village. That meant that someone else had come up the trail last night; and after he himself had passed over it.

Lawrence knew it would be a white man, for the Nitchies clung to moccasins. Furthermore, hobnails bespoke boots of the prospector variety. And when he broke that down, he realized that there were just two men who went in for that sort of footwear —Cooper, the Game Guardian, and the prospecting Slim Beechman.

For a moment or so longer he stood considering the track, then he hurried back for his camera and a fresh roll of film. Had he wished to wait, he could have cut out the track when it dried, and lifted it bodily; if he had had plaster of paris he could have made a cast of it. But he was certain that photographs would answer the purpose; so when he returned, he took three close-up shots that would show not only the boot-track but the setting of the hobnails as well.

He pocketed the camera, and moved on again. But there were no more tracks and nothing out of the ordinary to see. He passed a game-trail, leading down to the lake; and a hundred yards further on, the trail he was following suddenly opened up onto a scene of charred desolation.

There was a tangle of fallen tree-trunks; and other tree-trunks, black, stripped of their branches, stood like gaunt sentinels. Smoke still rose, and through the haze of it Lawrence could see the site of the Herrick buildings. He could even recognize the blackened, half-walls of the trading store.

But he noticed something else—that the burned-over stretch of country spread wider as it reached away from him; that he was standing near the base of a fan, or near the point of a ragged, flat-lying V.

He nodded grimly. "Set on purpose, eh, George? Maybe you've got something there."

Now he stepped out onto the burned part and followed the edge of it for a short hundred yards. This took him to the north of the trail, parallel to the lake, and somewhat in the direction from which he had come. He pulled up finally at the very apex of the V, and found himself in a low-lying tangle of twisted willows and dead grass.

Once again he stopped, once again turned and looked east towards the burned buildings.

"Yeah; this'll be it," he grunted. "Right where she started. Or right where she was started from."

He glanced around him, and at once saw tracks leading away from the burn. They ran through the dead grass, and if not actually tracks, they were the flattened depressions caused by a man's retreat. The grass was trampled, shoved aside; and twigs in the way were broken.

Lawrence struck off, following the tracks. They led straight west, towards the settlement. But where the grass ended, they petered out; and after circling for a few minutes in an effort to pick them up again, the policeman finally came out on the game-trail.

Here he paused, to take his bearings.

"I get it now. The guy sets his fire, heads straight west, and hits this game-trail like I did. Then he turns down it, comes out on the main trail from Herrick's, and legs it

home." He added, grimly, "And steps into that little wet spot on the way."

It was all very simple, all very much open-and-shut. He merely had to tackle the two men who wore prospector's boots, match the boots of one of them against the photographs he had taken, then ask the owner of them what he was doing down towards George Herrick's place last night after dark. It might be even simpler than that.

If Slim Beechman was still on his mineral-showing out in the lake, Gene Cooper would get the nomination. It would be tough on Gene; he'd brooded too long over the trimming Big George had handed him. But the law couldn't allow a man to turn into a firebug just to satisfy a grudge.

LAWRENCE went back to the detachment, left his camera there, then took off along the shore-trail for George Herrick's. He found the man superintending the loading of his salvage into four or five Indian canoes. Helping him were Ray Sheldon and Dad Robbins.

Herrick turned at the policeman's approach. There was glowering enquiry in his eyes.

"Well? You figure now the fire was an accident?"

"Dunno what to think just yet," countered Lawrence. "Got to look around a bit more."

Herrick gave a disgusted snort. "Look around, nothin'! Fires don't spring up by accident! Not in the middle of the night they don't!" He shot a glance at Dad Robbins, at Ray Sheldon; focussed again on the policeman. "And lemme tell you somethin'! I ain't goin' to set around while you stall off doin' what you oughta do!"

Lawrence's eyes went hard. "Thasso?" he said, coolly. "And what d'you think I ought to do?"

"Grab some of these guys and sweat it out of 'em!" Big George was thick-tongued with fury. "These guys here, and Gene Cooper, and that breed, Delorme! Oh, I know—they'll all help me now the damage is done! And why not? Makes it look good; they're sorry for me—"

Ray Sheldon took a step forward. His big jaw was set and his face was flushed. "I'm not sorry for you, y' slab-sided windbag! If somebody did burn you out, it was comin' to you. All I'm doin'—"

But Herb Lawrence got in the way. "Take it easy, now!" he counselled Sheldon. "We're all a little bit on edge." And to Herrick— "And you, George, cut out the dirty cracks. Sure, sure," he agreed, when Herrick began to bluster again; "you got plenty to be sore about, but hollering won't help."

Herrick's eyes narrowed, and for a moment it looked as though he might explode. Then he gave a harsh, bitter laugh.

"Don't make dirty cracks! Don't holler! Just get burned out, lose the whole shebang —and like it!"

Lawrence didn't feel like arguing; in fact, he now wondered why he had come down here at all. He turned away, to leave George Herrick to stew in his own juice. Then a thought occurred to him.

"How about the foxes? Did you lose them too?"

"All but seven of 'em!"

The policeman grunted. "Half of 'em, eh? Fifty per cent. If you'd saved fifty per cent of everything, you wouldn't have done too bad."

He walked off then; and within a few yards found that Dad Robbins and Ray Sheldon were following him. But nothing was said till they reached the detachment. Then, when Lawrence held right past the place, old Dad asked him if he didn't know where he lived any more. Lawrence said he was going down to the Hudson's Bay post; and let it go at that.

The post itself lay a few hundred yards west of the Police detachment and consisted of three whitewashed warehouses, a bungalow dwelling and a big log store. Beyond the Company property, the Indian village continued. As Lawrence approached the store, Dad Robbins said he'd see him bye-and-bye, and with Sheldon, went on past to his own establishment.

Delorme was inside the store, opening a case of canned goods behind the counter. But he turned the job over to his clerk and reached for a tobacco can.

"Lot of fun last night, eh?" he said to the policeman. "Though it probably wasn't much fun for Big George."

Lawrence nodded. "And he's not feeling like fun to-day. In fact, he's yelling that

someone burned him out on purpose and insists I do something about it."

"For gosh sakes!" grunted the trader. "Who'd want to burn him out?"

"Dunno. But that's his theory. So just for the record," said Lawrence, "my chore's to find out where everybody was last night. And I might's well start with you."

"With *me*?" Delorme seemed shocked. The trader was fat, chunky and swarthy, and the indignation on his face was almost pathetic. "That jughead figures—why, cripes-a'mighty, I wasn't near his place last night! I wasn't away from the post!"

"Of course," pointed out Lawrence, "by last night I mean *all* night. The fire started up a little before dawn."

"Before dawn? Then I was in bed and asleep!" declared the trader. "Where else you figure I'd be?"

Lawrence grinned, said he wouldn't care to hazard a guess, and glanced out of the open doorway to where a motor-driven canoe was swinging into shore.

THE CANOE was Slim Beechman's. It grounded; and a moment or so later, Beechman came up to the post. The prospector's hard face cracked in a grin at sight of Herb Lawrence, and his first words showed that he was pretty well up on current affairs.

"Seems like," he said, "Big George run into a little tough luck."

The policeman agreed. "And who told you all about it?"

"Pete Rat. The old man left here early to-day on a moose hunt. Comin' by my place, he dropped in for a shot of tea." Beechman added, "Accordin' to Pete, our friend Herrick got cleaned out right."

"Just about," Lawrence told him. "Bush-fire."

Beechman shook his head. "Yeah, tough." Then he seemed to brighten. "Coulda bin worse, though. Coulda bin you, Ed, or old Dad Robbins. Me," he said frankly, "I ain't sheddin' no tears over what happens to George Herrick."

"Then you didn't come in to sympathize with him?" suggested Herb Lawrence.

"I come in because I run out of tobacco and flour."

The prospector went on to say that now he was in, he might lay over for a day or so; but Lawrence paid him scant attention. His mind had suddenly switched to high boots, of the sort Slim Beechman was wearing.

Lawrence wanted a glance at Slim's soles, and he wondered how the matter might be contrived. But Slim himself settled the point. He bought a package of tobacco, rolled a cigarette, then struck a match on his boot-sole to light it. And in the brief moment that the sole was visible, Lawrence saw all that he wanted to see. No hobnails at all.

Slim himself, however, seemed interested in nothing more than his cigarette. For a moment or so he dragged on it hungrily; but as his lungs filled, his interests broadened.

"But this bush-fire—" he offered. "What started her?"

Lawrence grinned. "That," he pointed out, "is something Mr. Herrick himself would like to know. I'd like to know, too."

"But to start up at night! Leastways, that's what old Pete Rat was sayin'." Slim Beechman shook his head dubiously. "Seems funny, don't it?"

Lawrence agreed. "It's just so 'funny', as you call it, that I'm checking up to see where everybody was around that time."

"Well," said Slim, "if you want to know where I was, I was down the lake. Yunno, on that copper-prospect of mine." And when the policeman nodded casually, he added, "And if I hadn't bin there, old Pete Rat wouldn't have caught me home."

Lawrence nodded again; and when he spoke, it seemed to be of a matter entirely irrelevant. "Those foxes of Herrick's," he mentioned. "Some of 'em got away, but he saved seven of 'em."

"Yeah?" For a moment Slim Beechman seemed puzzled, then a certain hardness seemed to cross his features. "Seven of 'em, eh? He done well."

"I was thinking," went on Lawrence, "that right now you might be able to buy 'em cheap."

"And why should I buy 'em?"

The policeman shrugged. "You might start up again in the business yourself. Maybe get back some of your fifteen hundred."

The prospector spat in utter distaste at the thought. "I wouldn't buy 'em from him! No, sir; not if he sold 'em at a nickel apiece!"

"Well," sighed Lawrence, "that's your affair, I guess. Mine's to head up and have a talk with Gene Cooper."

But when he reached the Game Guardian's place, Gene Cooper wasn't around. The three buildings that comprised the ranger station stood on a small clearing a few dozen yards on this side of the Robbins' property. The cabin was not locked; and after rapping on the door of it a couple of times, Lawrence walked in.

The place was as clean and orderly as usual, but the policeman noticed that Cooper's hat and the light green sweater he generally wore were absent. The bed, however looked as though it had been slept in recently; for although it consisted merely of an eiderdown robe over a flannelette blanket, it wasn't made up. Lawrence decided that he would probably find Cooper over at Dad Robbins' place, so he went there.

Ray Sheldon was in the store with a couple of the clerks. In answer to the policeman's enquiry, Sheldon said he hadn't seen Cooper since the previous evening.

"Dad and I thought it kind of funny he wasn't down at the fire. But Ed Delorme wasn't there either. We figured, finally, they'd both slept through it."

Dad Robbins himself soon came in. His evidence was much the same as Sheldon's.

"Guess what happened," said Dad, "Gene didn't know nothing about the fire. So he got up this morning, et, then went off in the canoe some place."

"Then did you hear his motor?" asked Lawrence.

Dad frowned. "Never heard no motor at all. But he could of gone before we got back here just now."

Lawrence might have dismissed the matter as inconsequential. The Game Guardian was away on business that concerned him, and sooner or later he would return. But the crux of the matter was that after having viewed Slim Beechman's boot-soles, Lawrence was pretty well convinced that only Gene Cooper could have left that hobnailed track down near George Herrick's on the night of the fire. Hence, Gene Cooper had to be found.

DAD ROBBINS' theory that the Game Guardian might have gone away in his canoe was soon dissipated. The canoe lay keel-up on shore, with the tarpaulin-covered engine staged nearby. The obvious alternative, then, was that Cooper had gone somewhere afoot. And that, the constable decided, might be anywhere.

Going home, through the village he made casual enquiries from the Indians he met. He dropped into the Company post and asked after Cooper from Delorme. But nowhere could he glean the least bit of information.

For a moment Lawrence wondered if the Game Guardian, implicated in the fire, had cleared out to establish an alibi; but this didn't reason so well either. If Cooper had wished to establish an alibi, he would have begun it the night before. There would have been little to prevent him from pulling out in his motor-rigged canoe towards evening, paddling home after darkness to do his dirty work, then paddling away again. So left with the only explanation possible—that Cooper was away somewhere on ordinary business—the only thing to do was wait for him to show up.

But that did not mean a day of inactivity for Herb Lawrence. The mail-plane would be coming south the next morning, and it was up to him to send a report of the fire to Headquarters in town. Typing the report had the effect of quickening his urgency of getting the matter cleaned up; and he suddenly realized that even if he were able to prove that Cooper was over the Herrick trail on the night of the fire, he was still a long way from pinning him as the actual criminal.

The thought acted as a spur. He needed more evidence, evidence that was conclusive; but though he went over the actual starting-point of the fire with the proverbial tooth-comb, nightfall found him no further ahead.

But the morrow was to be a new day, and a day that started with a bang. An Indian came up to the Police detachment while Lawrence was at breakfast with the information that he had located Gene Cooper. The Game Guardian was lying in a tangle of willows a few feet from his wharf with his head bashed in.

Lawrence almost dropped the coffee-pot. The Indian went on to say that he had been paddling along the shore towards his fish-net when one of the dogs that had been

following him rushed out of the willows with a terrified yelp. The native, an intelligent, middle-aged man, said he thought the dog's behavior was actuated by a porcupine or a skunk; but when the dog, hackles up, was as loathe to leave the spot as he was to venture near it again, the man had come ashore to investigate.

Lawrence promptly forgot his breakfast. He put on his Stetson and with the Indian as his guide, struck directly across the village for Gene Cooper's wharf. A dozen yards short of it, the native ducked into the willows. Then he stopped, to allow Lawrence to crowd up behind him.

A figure was there, sprawled face-down in the leafy mold; and the figure was definitely Gene Cooper. The green sweater was Cooper's; so were the worn corduroy breeches and the high prospector's boots. The red hair was Cooper's, too, but the red of it was a deeper red than Lawrence had ever seen before. For the back of the skull was pulp—blood and splintered bone.

THE policeman's teeth set in distaste, but he stooped over and rolled Cooper onto his back. There was still a strip of adhesive plaster over the cut eye, and the Game Guardian's lips were not yet down to normal. These, however, were the result of his run-in with Big George Herrick, and the matter of a further examination could be left for the present.

The clothing was disarranged, and damp from the position of the body on the soggy ground. Bits of twigs and grass clung to the sweater and mixed with these were spruce-needles. The significance of this latter discovery did not strike Lawrence at first, but when it did he found more spruce-needles in the matted hair of the head.

"Spruce-needles—?" he muttered and looked around him. Down there on the shore amongst the boulders and the willows, there wasn't a spruce tree within two hundred yards.

"Spruce-needles?" he muttered again.

Nor, when he looked around him, could he find signs of a struggle of any sort. The ground was rocky and covered with dead willow-leaves, but for the most part the leaves were undisturbed.

The Indian was looking at him curiously. In Cree, Lawrence said, "See if you can find any tracks coming in here that weren't made by us."

The native nodded, began to hunt around.

A few feet shoreward of the body he pointed to a rock tipped on its side. It was only a small rock, but with the damp, underportion exposed. Further on, a dozen close-lying pebbles were pressed into the earth. Nearer the water, there were more of them. The Indian tested his weight on others. "A heavier man than me walked here."

"Or a man packing Gene Cooper," grunted Lawrence.

The last bit of evidence was the deep groove of a canoe-keel on the shore where sand and water met.

The shore was not wholly sand, else the man who had landed there would have left his footprints for all to see. But there was enough sand to show the keel-mark plainly; and this wasn't made by either the Indian's canoe or Gene Cooper's. The Indian's sixteen-footer was drawn up three or four yards to the side; Gene Cooper's lay near the wharf.

"So some bird fetched Gene here," Lawrence decided. "Hauled him here in a canoe and dumped him." Then he asked himself the obvious question. "But where did he haul him from?"

The evidence of the spruce-needles wouldn't help. There were spruce trees everywhere, clear to the Barren Lands. And the canoe couldn't be trailed.

"So all I got to do," grunted Lawrence, "is to snuff over every inch of the ground for a mile each way and keep my eyes open for bloodstains."

Sure; but in the meantime there was a job to do first. That was to move the Game Guardian's body. He dispatched the Indian to rustle half a dozen men and a canvas cover, then went back to the body himself.

The feet were towards him, and the first thing he noticed were the hobnails in the soles of the boots. To Lawrence, there was something grimly ironical in the sight. He had wanted a look at Gene Cooper's boots, if only to tie him up definitely with that muddy track. Well, he'd had the look now, and he knew that Cooper had made the track; but Cooper himself was in no position to be quizzed about it.

The body itself was cold and stiff, and Lawrence could form little estimate if the

Game Guardian had been dead for twelve hours or twenty-four. There was a wallet in the pocket of the breeches with a sheaf of bills and some loose change, so definitely the murder had not been one for gain.

Nor, save for the crushed-in skull, were there many other marks of violence. The shirt was torn and the breeches were muddy, but Lawrence decided that this was the result of the rough-handling Cooper had suffered after death. There was one mark, though, on the chin. It was a bruise, with the skin slightly torn. To the policeman it looked as though Cooper had connected with a healthy wallop and had been knocked out by the force of it. The crushed-in skull had come later, probably by a rock, a club or the back of an axe.

"And that didn't happen around here," muttered Lawrence. "Though just where it did happen is something the killer don't want me to find out."

But he had to find out. It was vital, imperative. The scene of the killing might yield the reason for it. It might even yield the weapon that had done the job.

But his musings were interrupted by the arrival of the Indian and the man's allies. In fact, there were a dozen of them and twice that many kids. Had Lawrence not already thought of tracks leading down to the water, he would never have found them now. For the new arrivals, awed and curious, swarmed all over the place.

But two of the men had brought tarpaulins with them, and in these Lawrence had the dead man carried to his cabin. He closed the door of the place and came out to find that the number of the curious had swelled. By moccasin-telegraph, the news of the affair seemed to have spread to the uttermost ends of the settlement. Dad Robbins, Ray Sheldon and the clerks and storekeepers from Dad's nearby post were on hand, but the newer arrivals included Ed Delorme, Slim Beechman, and Delorme's Scotch apprentice.

Lawrence was bombarded with queries. Some he parried, some he thrust aside, and finally he was able to take command of the situation.

"There's one thing certain—" he told his listeners. "Nobody leaves the village till this thing's thrashed out. And by nobody, I mean nobody. You get that?"

They did; said so. "Okay," nodded Lawrence. "Now we all understand."

Then out of a murmur of voices, he picked up something that Ed Delorme was moved to observe.

"Gettin' to be so's a man won't trust his own shadder. Fires, murders—and nobody don't know nothin' at all."

Yes, agreed Lawrence, grimly, to himself; that was the trouble—nobody knew anything. Or if they did, they wouldn't tell. Nobody knew how that fire started, nobody even saw it start—

He frowned, in sudden remembrance. Somebody *had* seen it start—Flapjack Perkins. He recalled the man's words, as Flapjack had panted them to him on the night of the fire: "I seen her start, from my place, on the island—"

Lawrence, unmindful now of those around him, squinted at the small island where Flapjack hung out. The island was less than a quarter of a mile away; and Lawrence knew that, right now, he must go over and have a talk with Flapjack. Perhaps he should have done it before—

He borrowed the Indian's canoe for the trip; and the trip was a short one. He landed at the island under the challenge of a dozen flea-bitten curs, but was escorted to safety by Flapjack himself.

There was a house, a log-and-mud shack. Before it, at a low fire, a fat squaw divided her attention between a baking bannock and an itchy scalp. Three of Flapjack's half-breed youngsters scurried for cover. But Flapjack himself was all a-grin.

"'Tain't often, Herb, you come over for a visit. Come on inside; set down. I'll have the old woman fix up a cup o' tea." And he yelled orders to that effect.

But Lawrence forestalled him. "Sorry, Flapjack, but I can't stay. Too busy, y'know. Just one thing I want to ask you—something you mentioned the other night."

"Yeah?" Flapjack blinked, and his long horse face set in lines of expectancy. "Yeah?"

"You said you saw that bush-fire start; said you saw it start from here on the island. That so?"

"Yeah, sure!" Flapjack nodded vigorously. "Sometime just before dawn. Wouldn't know exactly, 'count I ain't got no clock. But I don't need no clock. I al-

ways tells the old woman, 'Gimme a squint at the Big Dipper—' "

"I know," Lawrence agreed. "It was sometime just before dawn. But what d'you mean by saying you saw it 'start'?"

"Sure I seen 'er start. Right there!" Flapjack extended a grubby, skinny finger and indicated a notch in the hills of the mainland between the Police detachment and the site of the Herrick post. "*Whoof!* goes this explosion—and the fire starts right up!"

"Explosion?" echoed Lawrence, sharply. "What explosion?"

"The one I seen!" Then Flapjack's jaw sagged as he clawed at his yellow mustache. "By golly, I guess I didn't tell you about that?"

"You sure didn't," agreed Lawrence. "And I didn't hear any explosion either."

"No more did I," concurred Flapjack. "Because there wasn't one."

Lawrence scowled. "Just what is this—this double-talk? First you say there was an explosion, then you say there wasn't one."

"I m-mean," stammered Flapjack, "there wasn't no explosion to hear. 'Count of the wind, I guess. She just went up—*whoof!*—and I seen her. Yunno, like gunpowder or dinnamite will if yuh scatter her around loose and chuck a match at 'er."

"But you saw it?" persisted Lawrence.

"Sure I did! I get up two-three times in th' night—take a squint at th' Big Dipper—"

"Forget the Big Dipper," growled Lawrence. "We're talking about an explosion. You saw it—"

"Cert'ny I did! It ain't no distance over there. What'd it be—three-four hundred yards? Mind you," cautioned Flapjack, "it wasn't no very big one. What I mean, not what you'd set t' shift a ton 'r two of rock. But she was big enough t' start this fire. And b'lieve you me, she sure started 'er!"

The policeman failed to budge Flapjack in his story, and at last he clumped down to the beach and began to paddle for the mainland.

So it was an explosion that had started the fire. Not a big one; not big enough to shift rock, but an explosion just the same.

Lawrence frowned as he swung his paddle and went back over the story. There was no cause to doubt Flapjack's word. Flapjack was no intellectual giant, but he wasn't an utter fool. Moreover, he'd prospected in his time and would know what the flash of a powder-blast would look like at night.

All this offered a new theory for the start of the fire; possibly a new theory for the murder. Lawrence chewed it over from every angle; then, suddenly, blind inspiration struck.

It shook him, staggered him a bit. The paddle trailed in the water as he squinted at that notch in the hills ahead. He was very quiet for a moment, very still; then grim purpose hardened his jaw as he drove for Gene Cooper's landing.

There was grim purpose, too, in the way he strode ashore. He ignored the loafers who glanced at him curiously, and went straight to the dead man's shack. For a moment he studied the figure on the tarpaulin-covered couch, looked at Cooper's sweater, the pine-needles and the poplar leaves that clung to it. Then he made a search of the cabin and came out again, convinced now that he knew where the killing had taken place.

And within ten minutes he'd found it—a short stone's throw from the spot where the fire had first been set. It was on the game-trail that ran down to the lake. In fact, he had been within two or three yards of it the morning after the fire.

Here were the spruce trees from which the needles on the sweater had come, poplar leaves, and dead kinnikinnick leaves as well. And the splatters of red he found beside the trail weren't moss-berries or the leaves of the low-bush cranberry turned scarlet by the sun, but the darker, crimson red of blood.

There were rocks, too; small boulders, and plenty of them. One of these was also red. It lay a bit deeper in the bush, as though tossed aside when its purpose had been filled. The other details were a broken flashlight lens, a bit of gilling-twine hanging from a young poplar, and a deep, flat blaze in the trunk of a birch.

SCANTY though the details seemed to be, they satisfied Herb Lawrence. He pocketed the broken lens and the gilling-twine, glanced at his wrist-watch and struck off for the detachment. The mail-plane

would be along any minute now, and he had those reports to send out.

But the reports never went. Instead, the constable himself boarded the plane. There were many angles to the murder, many *why's* and *how's*. He had answered most of the *how's*, but the big *why* still hung in the air. Not so much the why of the murder, perhaps, but the why of the fire. And he suddenly realized that a trip to town might dispose of that last riddle as well.

There was little chance of conversation on the air-trip south, but plenty of opportunity for thought. So that by the time he landed he had his facts pretty well marshalled into line.

His stay there was brief. A charter-job flew him north again, and the pilot beat nightfall for a landing on Whitesand Lake by a scant thirty minutes.

They circled twice before they touched water; so that when they finally did get down, a fair sprinkling of the population of the place was on hand to meet them. At least, most of the white men were there.

Coming ashore, Lawrence noticed old Dad Robbins with Ray Sheldon. Slim Beechman was there, too, with the Hudson's Bay man, Ed Delorme. And the canoe heading over from the island would doubtless be that of Flapjack Perkins. Murder still was present in their midst; and the landing of a plane at nightfall before the Police detachment might mean the crack of doom for someone.

But Lawrence didn't see anything of Big George Herrick. He asked after him, and Ed Delorme said he'd probably be around somewhere.

"He run up a tent in the village to-day. Had been stayin' with Flapjack's father-in-law, old Tom Bear. Claimed, though, that if you were goin' to make him stay here forever, he might's well be comfortable."

"Get him down here," ordered Lawrence. "Or send someone after him. We're going to have a powwow, in the detachment." He added, "All of us."

THUS it was that within a very few minutes, the half-dozen men—including Big George Herrick—disposed themselves around Herb Lawrence's front room. The room was office and parlor combined. So a cabinet-radio jostled a steel-filing cabinet, and shelves on the wall carried magazines and novels, a copy of the Criminal Code and several issues of the Mounted Police "Blue Book." But it was the handcuffs, the leg-irons, the Service .45 on another wall that gave the place its grimmest character. Not even the pictures and the Varga girls could dispel it.

And there was grimness, too, on the faces of the men sitting around. They were looking at Herb Lawrence, waiting for him to start the ball to rolling.

He wasn't in slacks and non-conventional sweater now. Straight back from headquarters, he wore his scarlet serge, his polished jackboots. He was even wearing his Stetson, but shoved back from his forehead. And the gasoline lamp on the table showed a certain alertness in his face that wasn't there as a rule.

He was standing beside the table, fists on hips, and he opened the powwow with a blunt statement of fact.

"One of you boys is a firebug; one of you is a murderer. Before many minutes are up, we'll know who he is."

There had been quietness in the room already, but now it was a quietness that could almost be felt. There was not a sound of any sort, not even the whisper of a man's breath. And having attained the atmosphere he desired, Lawrence drove on.

"A few nights ago, someone burned out George Herrick. He chose a good night for it—the night of the big wind. Gene Cooper chose the same night, too, but for a different purpose. Gene thought it a swell night to set his camera for a wild-life picture—a night-shot of a bear or a moose coming down the game-trail for a drink. But the trouble was that our firebug and Gene didn't get together on the deal. So instead of taking a picture of a four-legged prowler, the camera automatically got a shot of a galloping, two-legged man."

Some of the quietness left the room. There were stirrings, the creaking of chairs.

"When the flash-bulb let go," went on Lawrence, "the firebug didn't know what to make of it. He hadn't seen the gilling-twine across his path, nor where it was fixed to the camera on a tree. All he saw was the blinding flash. And with a certain terror clutching at him over the job he'd just done, this new phenomenon chased him

harder than ever. It wasn't till he was near home that the explanation came. But by then the fire had been noticed, and he realized that if Gene reclaimed his camera, things would be tough. So he hit back, cross-country—only to bump into Gene when he got there.

"Now I figure," explained the constable, "that Gene took the same cross-country route, for I found his track on the Herrick trail when he had come back from setting the camera in the evening. Gene would go cross-country again the second time as it was the quickest way to save his camera from the fire. And as I say, the firebug bumped into him. He hadn't expected to find anyone there; in fact, he didn't want or expect to find anybody. In all his actions, our firebug had to keep off the trails; so to come out on the game-trail and find Gene ahead of him must have upset him pretty badly.

"Result was, there was a row, a fight. The firebug got in one wallop there in the dark, and knocked Gene cuckoo. Then, realizing that if Gene had recognized him, he was properly involved, he started in to do murder.

"He used his flashlight first, but bust it; so he hunted around, located a rock, and beat Gene's brains out with that."

The faces of Lawrence's six listeners were much alike. They were tense, hard-set, frowning. If the firebug's face was one of them, it couldn't be picked out now. So Lawrence went ahead with his story.

"We all know what happened about the fire, but we didn't know that all during that time, Gene Cooper's body was lying up there in the bush. But the firebug knew it, and he began to get scared. There was always the possibility—the bare possibility—that the crime of starting the fire might be hung on him; and if Gene's body was found right there, he might be involved. So the next night, under darkness, he packs it down to a canoe and dumps it in the willows right at Gene's wharf. He knows the body will ultimately be found there, and he hopes for one thing: that when it is found, I'll figure there is a different connection between the murder and the fire. He hopes that I'll step into it and decide that Big George Herrick murdered Gene out of revenge.

"Remember the fight at your place, Dad, between Gene and George? Well, what better solution to everything than Gene burns George out for revenge for the trimming, and George beefs Gene for burning him out? Nothing, I guess; only I didn't see it that way.

"But I did," continued Lawrence, "have a chore on my hands. I'd got to nail someone for the two crimes, and I had several to pick from. There was each of you guys: Dad and Ray; you Slim, and George, Ed and Flapjack. And who was to get the nomination? Well, right away I drop George. I'm concentrating on the fire, first; and I can't see you, George, burning up your own property. Then I drop you, Dad. You haven't grudge enough against George to pull a stunt on him like that; and I let Flapjack go into the clear for the same reason. So I'm left with you other three coots—Slim, Ray and Ed.

"I dwelt on you a long time, Slim," the constable told Slim Beechman. "Flapjack says he saw an 'explosion'—which, of course, was the flash-bulb letting go—and I began to wonder about you, a long fuse and a mess of powder. But then the weatherman came to your help. I suddenly realized you couldn't have done it. You weren't around the village the day of the fire, and you couldn't have come over that evening? Why? Well, because you were windbound. You didn't think of that as a defense, did you? But that seventeen-foot cockleshell of yours couldn't have crossed the two miles of rough water from your island even if you'd wanted it to. So that let you out. And with a starting string of six in the field, I'm now left with two. You, Ray; and Ed."

The two looked at him oddly. Ed Delorme licked his lips, and a fine dew of sweat broke out on his forehead. Ray Sheldon sat in his chair with arms folded, frowned, and waited for Lawrence to go on.

The constable did. He shifted his position, hooked thumbs in his tunic-flaps, spoke a bit more quickly.

"So I ask myself which of you two birds had the best motive for doing the dirty on Big George? Which of you stood to gain most by seeing him burned out? Well, to tell you the truth, I couldn't see any gain in it for either of you. You, Ed, are working for the Hudson's Bay, your job's secure, and what happens to Big George is no skin

off your nose. The same thing applies, Ray, to you. You're in solid with Dad, all set to marry into the family, and to give Big George the works before he leaves you doesn't make sense. Then suddenly, the other side of the picture hits me between the eyes. If the fire wasn't to rush George out, was it to stop someone else from coming in? And by golly, I thought I had it! This Dave Ormand, this chap who was buying George Herrick's store and fox-ranch—who was he? Did he have it in for either of you two guys? Were either of you trying to dodge him? I didn't know, and there was only one way to find out. That was to have Mister Ormand check you over."

Herb Lawrence paused abruptly. He looked towards the open door of the detachment, said, "Okay, Dave. Come in!"

THE MAN who entered was a tall, grizzled person of fifty-five or sixty. He was dressed in city clothes, but there clung to him an atmosphere of the open. It showed in the crows-feet wrinkles around the eyes, the wind-burned brown of his skin, the old frostbite scars on his high cheek-bones.

"Come in!" said Lawrence again. And to the others, "Okay, boys; meet Dave Ormand. Came north with me on the plane just now."

Ormand stood there a moment, glancing from one man to the other. Then his eyes fell on Ray Sheldon, and the wind-burned cheeks gathered into a bit of a smile.

"Why, if it isn't Jerry Peters! Haven't seen you since—well, when was it? Since about three years ago—when you skipped out and left your Dogrib wife and her two kids in the swamps of the Mackenzie Delta!"

Things happened with swift, kaleidoscopic abruptness. One moment Ray Sheldon was narrow-eyed, back-drawn in his chair; the next, he was a raging madman. But Lawrence had been watching him, closely, expectantly. When the man got over his first shock and bunched his feet under him, the policeman was ready. He pinned him as he left his chair; but it took the combined efforts of every man present to throw and hold him till Lawrence could reach down those handcuffs from the wall.

Later, when order had been restored, the furniture righted, and Sheldon dry-docked in the steel cage in the connecting room, Ed Delorme found his voice.

"You had me worried, Herb," he told the constable. "I was afraid you were goin' to prove it was me that set that fire." And he mopped his face in token thereof.

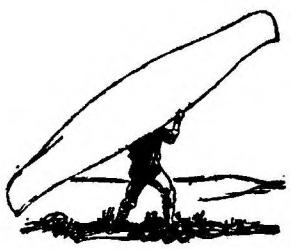
But Lawrence merely grinned. "You were safe enough, Ed," he told him. "You never shot your mouth about how far north you'd been or how many white foxes you'd trapped. And I don't think you've a Dogrib wife and a couple of kids waiting for you down in the Mackenzie Delta."

"Dogrib wife and a coupla kids!" Old Dad Robbins scowled, spat, shot a look of disgust towards the cage in the connecting room. Then suddenly he swung on Big George Herrick. "Want a job?" he demanded. "*His* job? I ain't rebuildin' your store; and I cert'ny ain't settin' you up in business to buck me all over ag'in. But if after all your tough luck, this job's any good to you—well, it's up to you."

George Herrick frowned; then his hard face began to soften.

"You're a white man, Dad. I—I dunno just what to say—"

"Then don't try to," grunted Dad. "But as for him—" His jaws ground as he shot one more glance towards the connecting room. "Firebug—murderer! What a honey of a son-in-law *he* turned out to be!"



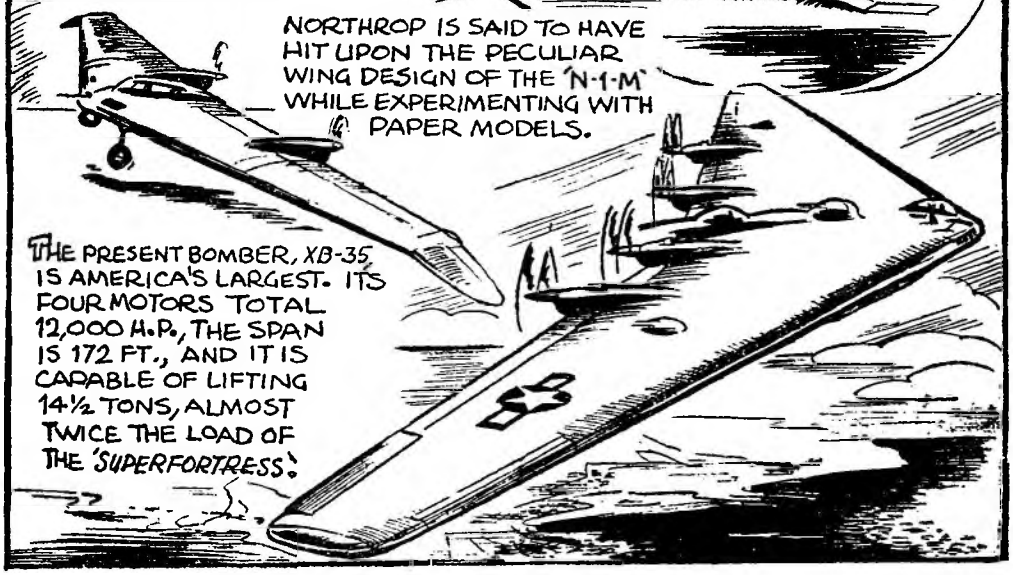
PLANE FACTS

BY Jim Tray

JOHN K. NORTHROP, PIONEER AMERICAN DESIGNER, FIRST BEGAN TO EXPERIMENT WITH 'FLYING WING', OR TAILLESS, PLANES IN 1923. AFTER SOME WORK ON GLIDER DESIGNS, HE FORMED A COMPANY IN 1929 AND BUILT A MODIFIED 'WING' TYPE, WITH THE ENGINE AND PILOT HOUSED IN THE WING AND THE TAIL CARRIED ON TWIN BOOMS.

THIS LED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE 'N-1-M', A TWIN-ENGINE ALL-WING DESIGN, AND THE PREDECESSOR OF THE MIGHTY 'XB-35' BOMBER.

NORTHROP IS SAID TO HAVE HIT UPON THE PECULIAR WING DESIGN OF THE 'N-1-M' WHILE EXPERIMENTING WITH PAPER MODELS.



THE PRESENT BOMBER, XB-35 IS AMERICA'S LARGEST. ITS FOUR MOTORS TOTAL 12,000 H.P., THE SPAN IS 172 FT., AND IT IS CAPABLE OF LIFTING 14½ TONS, ALMOST TWICE THE LOAD OF THE 'SUPERFORTRESS'.

The Story Tellers' Circle

Crime-Shy Sleuth

WE KEEP wondering how one of our favorite sleuths, the ubiquitous Inspector Ferguson, gets mixed up in so many intriguing cases, considering that he "hates crime detecting."

We asked Ray Millholland who ought to know, for he's the one who spotlights Ferguson's adventures.

"For instance," we said to Millholland, "what about this latest case you've called 'By Request of Inspector Ferguson?'"

This is the "what-about":

"About as good a rule as any in writing is never to forget any out-of-pattern sights or characters one meets, because one never knows when a character from one experience and a locale from another will suddenly dovetail—and there's your story.

"When I first settled in Indiana thirty years ago, people were still talking about the big oil and gas-boom days of the previous decade. As a youngster, I heard plenty of talk of the oil-well workers and especially those romantic figures, the men who handled nitro-glycerine. So I listened; then apparently forgot all about oil wells. . . . Of late years I have been doing my share of trout fishing in Lower Michigan. They have struck oil up in that country and I have been worried lest the oil seepage from the wells spoil my trout fishing. So, as the hot-shot advertising fellows would say, I got oil-conscious.

"Then this fiction character of mine, Inspector Ferguson—who at least has the long lanky frame of a retired Secret Service man I once knew but who is now dead—decided to go trout fishing. Now I knew that the Inspector hated like sin to be called in on any sort of crime case since his retirement from Government service (the old rascal actually can't keep away from a crime case, if you must know the gospel of it). So what could make a better story than to have the Inspector get mixed up in a murder case, with a bunch of hard-fisted oil pushers in the background insisting that the guilty party who knocked off a pal of theirs get what was coming to him? . . . But—as often happens in real life—'common knowledge' isn't always the copper-riveted fact it looks like to a lot of people, and if the matter goes too far an innocent man may suffer for another's act.

"Oh, by the way, once when I was doing some special work in chemistry, after regular class hours, another special student mixed up an entirely too large a batch of nitro-glycerine. There was a thermometer in his graduate, and as the acid started reacting with the glycerine the mercury column started climbing. It had risen close to the spontaneous explosion temperature when one or the other of us—we can't remember which—picked up the graduate of hot 'soup' and lowered it into a large trough of cold water. There was no sense in trying to run, then; so we both stood there and watched the thermometer climb toward that black-out point. . . . You guessed it; the stuff cooled down before it went off—otherwise Inspector Ferguson wouldn't be around either." Ray Millholland.

Horseback-Riding Wolves

JIM KJELGAARD who is off to fish the streams and lakes of Canada for a while (lucky, says us, looking at the office thermometer crowding 90 degrees) wants a few things to be known about Hoyt Magloon and "courtin' conditions" in those days.

Maybe the following'll come in handy if you're hankering to court an old-fashioned girl!

"The story really developed through historical research, and I've been doing a lot of that lately. In the good old days, when a man trekked to the great open spaces, he couldn't pick up a phone and call a cop if something went wrong. He couldn't call on anybody except himself, and if he didn't know how to help himself well. . . .

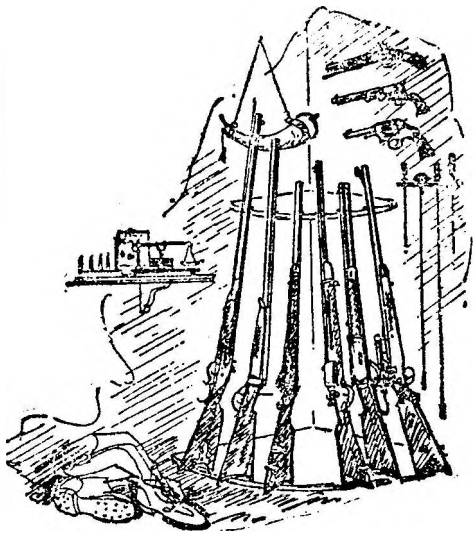
"Women occupied rather an interesting place in those days, and it's surprising how many of them just went right along with their men when there were new worlds to conquer. But by the very nature of things there were far more men than women. Women were actually something to see, and the horseback-riding wolves of that day would wear out a good horse, or a couple of them, just to ride over and talk with someone of the opposite sex.

"But a fair portion of these gents who went where things were wild were not exactly little angels from above. I think that they were not precisely the movie type of Western villain, but they took what they wanted when they wanted it.

"It's only natural to suppose that a good many of these men would want a girl like the one in my yarn. Ha! Just thinking about her! Those eyes! Such lips! What—! I'd better not say any more. My wife may read this!

"Anyhow, when the lady had six brothers who counted that day lost when they didn't have a fight, and a father who had taught the brothers, her maidenly virtue was as safe as it would have been in a convent. But that inevitable day when some young buck would wander along, see her, and like what he saw, had to be reckoned with. The father and brothers, being who they were, and knowing what they did, would just naturally try that young buck's mettle. There would be other men along, and the fact that the girl had entered the bonds of holy wedlock would make no difference. Do you see? The story just about plotted itself."

Jim Kjelgaard.



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
PETE KUHLHOFF

Why Shoot Yourself?

THE MAJORITY of shooting accidents are caused by carelessness rather than ignorance. This seems odd when a person considers the fact that everyone knows that a gun is a dangerous piece of equipment when improperly handled.

Every shooter should be eternally on the alert to avoid carelessness in handling any gun, for even the most experienced may relax his vigilance for a moment and thereby be responsible for a fatal accident.

I know a fellow who has hunted and safely handled firearms all his life—a very careful chap indeed. Yet several years ago on a hunting trip out in western Texas he was horrified to find that he had hunted for over an hour with the hammer of his Model 94, .30-30 Winchester at full cock. He tells

me that he gets cold chills every time he thinks of this incident.

Some of the fool things that bring about gun accidents are downright stupid and yet they happen over and over, year in and year out. A loaded firearm or even an unloaded one, for it seems they are the ones that do most of the accidental shooting, leaned against a tree, post or wall is one of the most common causes of shooting accidents. It may fall or be pushed over by a dog or other hunters.

Next on the list is this business of dragging a gun through a fence. This is so obviously dangerous that it seems silly to mention, yet it'll happen again and again.

Another dangerous piece of foolishness is resting the gun muzzle on the boot toe to keep it out of the snow. Every year a goodly number of feet are maimed in this manner.

Speaking of snow in the gun barrel brings up the subject of bore obstructions. Ice formed in a frosty muzzle from dipping it in water will often cause the strongest gun to blow up. A bit of mud, a twig, or rag or a piece of cleaning equipment will also do it almost without exception.

Somehow the idea has gotten around that the shotgun is less dangerous than the rifle and the handgun the most dangerous of all. They are equally dangerous, but it is a fact that the shotgun is responsible for the highest number of fatal or near-fatal accidents.

Nearly everyone has knowledge of some shooting accidents which happened to himself or to friends and acquaintances. The papers generally feature the gory details of such accidents and sometimes comment that there "otta be a law." And as far as making a law against gun accidents is concerned, it would do just as well to make a law abolishing rabbits, duck, pheasants, deer and other game. Education is the only thing that will minimize shooting accidents.

Incidentally, the percentage of accidents is far less among target shooters than any other class of shooters. This is due partially to stringent range rules, but mostly to the fact that the average target shooter is better informed about guns.

AS NEAR as I can figure, after studying a mess of statistics, there is one gun accident for every 10,000 hunters in the

field—this seems pretty high, but it also includes gun accidents in the home. The whole point is that almost 100% of these accidents are avoidable and unnecessary.

A gun (loaded or unloaded) should never be aimed or pointed at anything not intended to be shot at and I am a firm believer in keeping the safety on at all times until the instant before a shot is made. If a shooter makes this a rule, he will subconsciously throw off the safety as he brings the gun to his shoulder, and put it back on after reloading.

During many years of handling and shooting various firearms I have been involved in three gun accidents—all avoidable. Number one was getting shot through the foot by another hunter. This was no doubt just punishment for hunting with a fellow whom I suspected of being an idiot. Experience confirmed my suspicions.

Number two was a near accident that happened many years ago. I just missed shoot-

ing off the head of a favorite cousin during a crowhunt. We were hiding behind an old broken-down silo waiting for a flight of crows coming in to roost in a nearby woods. Our plan of action was for me to step out first and empty my 12-gauge automatic shotgun into the flight. My cousin, Hugh, was next with a doublegun. Everything worked OK till after my second shot, whereupon Hugh excitedly jumped up to start shooting. My third shot singed his hair and his ears rang for a week. Fortunately, no real damage was done.

Accident number three happened during some experiments in reloading. I was experimenting with a certain powder and various weight bullets in .30-'06 caliber. As the maximum powder charge was approached the weight was increased by 1/10 grain in each group of cartridges. There was

no apparent indication that extreme pressures were being developed, yet the first cartridge of one group (with only an increase of 1/10 grain of powder, mind you) the explosion was terrific. The head of the case enlarged and ruptured, dropping the primer, and hot gas and brass came back through the action. My eyes were saved by shooting glasses and the burns were minor —but believe me, I don't want it to happen again.

I might add that all known elements were checked before these experiments were started. The cartridge cases were measured for length and capacity, the primers were all checked and weighed and the bullets checked for uniform weight and seated friction tight to the same depth, etc. Since then, all heavy experimental loads have been fired by remote control.

Gun accidents will become practically unknown if the following ten rules are followed until they become second nature:

1. Handle every gun as if it were loaded.
2. Be sure of your target before you pull the trigger.
3. Never leave your gun unattended unless you first unload it, and don't carry a loaded gun in an automobile, or into camp or home.
4. Carry your gun so that you can control the direction of the muzzle, even if you slip.
5. Always make certain that the barrel and action are clear of obstruction—but be sure to look into the *breech* of the gun, *not* the muzzle.
6. Never point your gun at anything you do not want to shoot.
7. Avoid horseplay while holding a gun.
8. Never shoot at a flat hard surface; such as rocks or the surface of water.
9. Instruct your children in the proper use of firearms and explain the dangers of the weapons.
10. Do not mix gunpowder and alcohol!

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