

"The Herse Thief Trap"—WALT COBURN

"The Jade Bell"—DAN CUSHMAN "Unknown Partner"—E. P. WARE

Short Stories

August 25th

Twice A Month

25c

"Bush pilot, eh? Find it pretty tame after the war?"

**CLEAN
RECORD**
by
**H. S. M.
Kemp**

August 25th, 1947

SHORT STORIES

A Man's Magazine



How to get the most out of your Vacation

You're off on your vacation . . . for rest, relaxation and new and charming friends.

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The Story Tellers' Circle

Killer Whales

LYNDON RIPLEY, who tells us about "Two Kinds of Killers" in this issue of *SHORT STORIES*, wants us to know that sometimes those "big ones that get away" are both real and *really* big. Oh, say about 100 tons! Ripley has sent us a clipping about a whaling ship that harpooned itself fast to a huge humpback that remained most frisky when the whale-killing time bomb on the harpoon's head failed to explode! After pulling the sturdy vessel and its astonished and perplexed crew through Pacific waters for three hours, the whale did a quick about face, pulled the line out of its chock run, chafed and broke it against the metal side of the ship and made off—still digesting the unexploded harpoon time bomb.

What we don't know about whales (is plenty!) Mr. Ripley does know. For instance, Ripley speaking:

"From what I can gather, the Sulphur-Bottom Whale, as found in the Pacific—known as the "Blue" in the Atlantic—is the biggest mammal that ever lived and still lives with us today. It is so big that, for verification, the report of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service is interesting. One of these big game species may reach a volume of 150 tons, a weight "four times that of the largest prehistoric monster, such as the dinosaur, and equal to the combined weight of thirty-seven elephants, or a hundred and fifty fat oxen." Yet its throat is so small that it cannot swallow any marine food larger than a sardine! (But it makes up for that—by the ton.)

"One day out at Field's Landing Shore Station, which is again processing whales, I heard a plant superintendent say that a good hundred years prior to the Boston Tea Party, three 'plantations on eastern Long Island complained most bitterly against the well-known taxation without representation. The keynote which they set led direct to Bunker Hill. Thus it is apparent that whales and not tea were the cause of the first major difference between the American colonists and the Old World.'

"Sometimes Sperms and Finbacks, as well as Sulphur-Bottoms, are taken here in the Pacific, but the majority are Humpbacks. These latter are homely, black, ungraceful clowns of the clan. They breach, lob-tail and fin and collect a lot of barnacles. The Sulphur-Bottoms, on the other hand, collect no barnacles, being a sleek gunmetal or marbled black. When frightened they speed tway, I understand, at twenty to twenty-five miles an hour.

"As yet there has been no disaster hereabouts due to the Killer Whales, similar to those that

came near shore at La Jolla a few months back. These killers, as you probably know, fear nothing, stop at nothing and are good for nothing. They roam the deep in packs like wolves and eat the tongues out of living whales five to eight times their own size.

"A nice critter to meet on the high seas . . . if you're in a good, stout ship."

Lyndon Ripley

Never a Passenger Yet!

"*MOST of the stuff I write,*" points out Francis Gott, "School Ship Product" author, "is based on actual experiences at sea. I can't recall seeing the school ship angle given any treatment in the magazines; perhaps it is taken for granted. But when I started in seafaring for a living in 1927, school ship officers weren't common; perhaps an occasional one to a ship. At least, such was my experience.

"So, of course, having a youngster come aboard with mate's papers to take over a watch, and that youngster not even being old enough to have any whiskers to shave, used to bring some growls and black looks from the older officers who'd come up the hard way—through the hawse pipe!

"However, as the years went by, I sailed under quite a number of these school ship boys and was forecabin mates with others, and once they'd got the actual experience, they all stacked up as well in their way as did the hawse pipe officers in theirs.

"It was my experience that few men making a life work of the sea were born to it like I was; yet after ten or twelve years of the life—and a hard life it was in those days—they carried a brand as deep as any. In fact, one red-headed Irishman from Boston, a lanky, big-boned chap with whom I was shipmates for over a year on a cargo ship running to West African, Mediterranean and Black Sea ports, thought he could quit after some seven or eight years of the life and set himself up in business in Boston. He was a school ship product, a fine seaman and navigator and all around good officer and had a second mate's ticket when he quit the sea—for good he told me. Whether it was the business he went into

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Short Stories

TWICE A
MONTH

THE
BEST
OF
AMERICA'S
ACTION
ADVENTURE
MYSTERY

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LAMONT BUCHANAN

August 25th, 1947

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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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EVERY
AUTHOR'S
FINEST
AND
LATEST
STORIES
NO
REPRINTS



CLEAN RECORD

By H. S. M. KEMP

PETE ROLLINS stepped down from the truck, boosted a quarter of beef to his shoulder, carried it through the rear door of the restaurant and dumped it on a bench. He dug out his delivery-book and passed it to Yung Loc. "Here you are. Sign on the line."

The Chinaman scratched his signature; returned the delivery-book. Without any change in the impassivity of his features, he asked, "You want coffee? Cold day." And, nodding towards the swing doors, added, "Go tell gal."

Thus, with a cup of Java, a cigarette and



***Pete Rollins Once Had an Opinion. It Was That the Only
Difference Between Driving a Truck and Being a Bush Pilot
Was That on a Truck You Saw More Life***

a kindling of warmth towards all Celestials, Pete Rollins prepared to kill ten minutes of Ultra Packers' time; but before the ten minutes had elapsed, Johnny Greenlee took the stool beside him. Johnny, reporter for the *Northern Sentinel*, rubbed a half-frozen ear, ordered coffee for himself and asked Pete how went truck-driving.

Pete grunted, blew smoke. Truck driving, he allowed, wasn't bad if a feller couldn't get anything better.

"Yeah." Johnny Greenlee gave the ear a final stroke and took one of Pete's offered cigarettes. "Guess that's right enough." Then, with a look of crafty wisdom, he added, "But if a feller was lucky—real lucky, I mean—he might find that something better. Something like, well, like flying a plane."

"Thasso?" Pete squinted at the reporter. And after a moment—"I'm listening."

Johnny's coffee was delivered. When the girl had departed, the reporter went on.

"I get around, see? That's my business. And I just heard that Fred Medlar's quitting old Cree River Campbell. Dunno if it's true; but if there's anything to it, old Cree River should be looking around for someone to take Fred's place."

Pete nodded, slowly. "When did you hear all this?"

"Not ten minutes ago. And I thought of you right away."

Pete slid from the stool. He picked up Johnny's check as well as his own. "This," he said, firmly, "is on me."

Four minutes later, Pete ground his truck to a halt before the offices of Campbell Airlines. He walked in, faced a battery of

damsels at typewriters and adding-machines and smiled at the girl nearest the counter. When she came over to him he told her he'd like to see Mr. Campbell.

A frown puckered the ivory of her brow. "Mr. Campbell? You have an appointment?" And when Pete said he hadn't, she suggested he really wanted to see Mr. Moulson.

Pete wasn't so sure of it; and he was less sure of it when a tall and athletic gentleman in a double-breasted suit came out of a glass-doored office on the right.

This, decided, Pete, would be Mr. Moulson; and on looks alone he took a sudden dislike to him. Mr. Moulson was frowning, as though irked at being disturbed; and when he came to the counter, lifted his chin, looked down it and barked, "Something for you?" Pete Rollins decided that he and Herr Moulson would never hit it off at all.

So Pete answered in kind. "Sure there's something for me. I'd like to see Mr. Campbell."

Moulson's frown deepened. "Mr. Campbell, eh? Well, he's busy."

"So'm I busy," Pete pointed out. "How long will I have to wait?"

A sudden calm descended over the office. Six pairs of feminine eyes fixed themselves on Pete. Mr. Moulson of the double-breasted suit seemed aware of it. He said, stiffly, "If it's a job you're looking for, we've all the men we need."

"So?" said Pete. "Well, I'm not talking about 'men'. And what I do have to talk about, I'll say to Mr. Campbell."

In the calm, his voice had carried more

than he realized; for from another glass-enclosed office to the left came the creak of a chair. A second later, a heavy-shouldered, grizzled man filled the doorway, and Pete Rollins was having his wish fulfilled. Not only was he seeing Mr. Campbell, but Mr. Campbell was definitely seeing him.

There was the deep growl of a voice. "What's all this, Moulson? Somebody wantin' me?"

Mr. Moulson turned. "Yes—this gentleman here."

"Then show him in!" ordered Campbell.

So it came to pass that Pete Rollins, truck-driver, faced Dan Campbell, road-builder and northern airline-operator, in the latter's glass-and-walnut office.

Dan Campbell—"Cree River" Campbell to the old-timers of forty years before—tipped back in his chair, studied Pete Rollins from under tufted brows and asked him what he had on his mind.

"Somep'n about a job, wasn't it?" he suggested. "And somep'n about you bein' in a hurry. Well, if you're the hurryin' sort, mebbe I can give you a job and nem'mind what Moulson says." Cree River Campbell worked his heavy shoulders deeper into the chair and pulled out a thick cigar. "What kind of a job d'you want?"

Pete Rollins answered promptly. "A pilot's job—if you've such a thing to spare."

Cree River Campbell seemed to blink. His eye ran over Pete Rollins; and Pete knew just what he was taking in. It would be the rumbled blond hair, the worn, turtle-neck sweater; the mitts and the high-bib overalls. "Pilot, you say?" demanded Cree River. "You?"

Pete's eyes went suddenly hostile. "What's wrong about it?"

Cree River began to smile. At least, some of the harshness left his face and his mouth twitched at the corners.

"Hold yer shirt on, kid," he finally suggested. "And if you say you're a pilot, I guess mebbe you are." Then, curiously, he asked, "But where-at have you done your flyin'?"

"Overseas," stated Pete Rollins. "With the Air Force."

Old Cree River seemed to unbend. Something like warmth crept into his eyes. Then he sat up, grasped the arms of the chair and bellowed aloud, "Moulson!"

Mr. Moulson came in. He was still frowning, and the look he turned on Pete Rollins was one of ill-hidden scorn. But if he saw it, old Cree River passed it up entirely.

"Shake hands, Jack, with Mr. ——— what is it? Rollins? Yeah, with Mr. Rollins. Sort of a sidekick of yours. You were both in the Air Force together."

With no way out of it, Moulson extended his hand. He murmured something about, "A pleasure!" but Pete Rollins could almost hear him adding, "I don't think!"

"Moulson here," Cree River was informing Pete, "never got overseas like you, but there ain't much he don't know about flyin' a plane." And to the scowling Moulson, "Kid's lookin' for a job. See what *he* knows about 'em."

Moulson turned, tried to chew on his little black mustache, and squinted at Pete Rollins.

"Pilot, eh? What sort of planes can you fly?"

Pete shrugged. "What sort of kites you got?"

"The very best," rapped Moulson. "Three Norsemen and a Junkers."

"I don't know much about the Junkers," Pete admitted. "Flew a Norseman once."

"Did, eh? A Norseman?" Mr. Moulson glanced across at Cree River, then back to Pete again. "Any other aircraft you've flown?"

"Yeah; a few of 'em."

"What type?"

"Oh, I dunno," shrugged Pete. "Moths and Cranes and Lysanders; then, overseas, Hallies and Libs and Lincs. Fifteen or twenty different types, I guess."

A SHARP FROWN crinkled Moulson's eyes. He studied Pete with interest. But before he could speak, old Cree River slapped both hands on the arms of his chair.

"By th' jippers, that's a good 'un! Feller blows in here, Jack, lookin' like a tramp, and can handle more planes than you ever heard of!" He stared suddenly at Pete. "How old are you, kid?"

"Twenty-four," Pete told him. "I joined up when I was nineteen."

"Twenty-four!" breathed Cree River. "And all that flyin' behind you." In a tone

almost of reverence, he asked, "What were you on overseas? Bombers?"

Pete nodded. "Yeah."

"Make quite a few trips?"

"Quite a few," Pete told him.

"How many?"

"Forty-three."

Old Cree River gave a low whistle. "Forty-three trips!" He shook his head. "You've been around, kid. Yeah; you bin around. And what're you doin' now?"

"Driving a truck. For Ultra Packers."

"Drivin' a truck? You mean, after them forty-three trips, you couldn't land nothin' better than that?"

Pete shrugged. "It's a job."

Suddenly, he found himself explaining to the grizzled, tough-faced old-timer across the desk.

"I was raised on a farm; so when I got my discharge, I tried farming again. Bought a section of wheat-land on time—then finished up last Fall with a frozen crop and seven thousand dollars in the hole."

Cree River Campbell shook his head. "Tough break, eh, for a start?"

"You said it. So we had to get out till Spring came around and we could try it again. The wife got a steno's job here in town and I picked up what I could." Pete Rollins gave a bit of a grin. "We still had to eat, you know."

But Cree River was frowning. "The wife, you say? You married?"

"Sure. Got married overseas. Girl from London." Pete added, with pride, "But Kay didn't squawk. She pitched right in. I guess that way I'm lucky."

"You bet your boots you're lucky," echoed Cree River. Then he turned to the frowning Moulson. "Fred Medlar's head-in' up to Indian Rapids in the mornin'. Tell him to take the kid along." To Pete himself he said, "Fred'll give you a workout. If you get by Fred, the rest of it's up to you."

SO PETE had his workout. He not only got by Fred Medlar, but before the trip to Indian Rapids was finished, he had established himself in the older man's confidence.

"You'll do all right," Medlar told him. "And you won't have a thing to kick about in old Cree River. He's a man's man; and while he expects you to pull your weight, he don't ask you to take fool chances. His

airline's got a clean record so far, and that's the way he wants to keep it."

Pete nodded. He was in the pilot's seat, handling the Norseman himself. "He struck me as being a pretty square guy."

"He is!" averred Medlar. "But this Moulson—well, watch him. He's sort of Bull of the Woods around the office, and what he says goes a long way.

"Pilot himself, isn't he?" suggested Pete.

"Yeah. Ran a training school some place during the war. Squadron-Leader's rank. And he can't get over it. That's what I mean—he figures that the old man's business should be run along the same lines, with him being the Big Cheese. Well, be nice to him if you can, stand right up to him if you can't. But either way, don't trust him no further than you can throw a bull by the tail."

THE TRIP concluded, Fred Medlar reported to old Cree River. Ten minutes later, Pete himself was called in. What he learned there he confided to Kay when she walked into their two-room apartment that night from her steno's job.

"Call for your time-check, hon!" he told her. "We're back on the gravy-wagon!"

Her eyes widened. "You got it—that flying-job?"

"Duck-soup!" grinned Pete. "Two-fifty a month to start with, and another hundred if I deliver the goods."

She ran to him, hugged him. "I'm so glad!" And then she added, "For your sake."

"For my sake? Hey!" yelped Pete. "Whaddya mean?" He held her at arms' length, studying her critically.

She seemed embarrassed, awkward. "Well, it's what you want to do, isn't it?"

"Sure I want to do it! Why not?" He frowned. "Don't tell me you're going to start worrying again?"

"No—o, I won't worry. I did too much of that before. But when you go out, well, you know I'll always be thinking things."

He laughed aloud, swept her to him. "You don't need to fret about Pete Rollins! He knows the score and how to come out on top!"

So from that mid-December day until the first week of March, Pete flew the northern air-trails. He delivered freight for the Hud-

son's Bay posts, ferried trappers and traders in and out of the wilderness, hauled machinery and oranges, dynamite and eggs to the new mining boom-town of Radium City. Then one evening, his plane loaded for an early-morning start, Jack Moulson called him into his private office.

Moulson wasn't alone. With him was Carl Hapworth, manager of Radium City's branch of the Commercial Bank. Hapworth was a man of forty, thick around the waist but thinning a bit on top. He was breezy, sociable, free with his own money but cautious with the bank's.

Moulson said to Pete, "You know Mr. Hapworth?"

"Sure we know each other!" grinned Hapworth. "And Pete," he told Moulson, "is the only man up in that country who hasn't either hit me for a grubstake or tried to sell me a mine."

Moulson gave a grunt, ignored the pleasantries. He spoke to Pete. "Mr. Hapworth's going north with you tomorrow. Couple of other chaps, too; mining men. What time d'you want to take off?"

"I dunno," said Pete. "Around seven o'clock, I guess."

"Can you make it seven?"

"Guess I could. Any special reason?"

"Reason enough. Mr. Hapworth's taking a parcel of currency in with him and it'll be locked up here in the safe all night. I'll have to come down and give it to you before you go."

Pete nodded. "Okay. We'll make it seven."

Moulson turned to Hapworth. "That all right, Carl?" And when the banker nodded, he drew the desk-phone towards him. "I'll notify those other chaps. They're staying at the Empire."

DAWN saw the take-off, at twenty-two degrees below zero. Pete nursed the Norseman to five thousand feet as the farms and the homesteads slipped away beneath him. In half an hour the last of these had vanished, and the panorama changed to a checkerboard of forest, muskeg and lake.

At the end of an hour's flying-time Pete figured himself roughly a hundred and fifty miles from town. There was an hour and a half yet to go, then the smoke of another

town, that of the newborn Radium City would be showing on the skyline.

Pete turned to Carl Hapworth in the copilot's chair. He grinned.

"The only difference between this and a truck is that on a truck you see more life."

Hapworth nodded. "And a longer walk home."

Pete grinned again. "Ask old Cree River and he'll tell you that on a Campbell-planned trip no one walks home!"

There was a sudden laugh. It came from behind him; from one of Pete's two passengers. They had said little since the trip began, and Pete wondered if they were asleep—the tall, black-bearded man in the red-checked mackinaw coat or the smaller man with horn-rimmed glasses who seemed frozen in the depths of his gabardine, fox-fronted parka. The big man laughed again; then something hard jabbed into Pete's right ribs.

"This is it, chum!" said the voice. "You've had it!" Then, at once, "Swing east!"

Pete turned sharply. The black-bearded man was standing at his side, his eyes hard, his mouth—or what Pete could see of it—a thin tight line. Pete knew that look; it was cold-blooded, dangerous. It meant, "No fooling!" Pete swung east, following orders.

The smaller man was there, too. He was behind Hapworth, holding another gun in Carl Hapworth's ribs. Hapworth was wide-eyed as he shot a glance at Pete. For once, his breezy manner had left him.

Pete thought fast. This was a highjack; a hold-up. The two mining-men had turned out to be a couple of strong-arm boys. They knew about the currency aboard and were out to get it. And the only one who could thwart them was Pete Rollins.

Pete turned, with a sneer on his face. "That gun—" he asked. "Loaded?"

"What do *you* think?" Blackbeard grinned back at him.

Pete shrugged. "Probably is, all right. But you know what'll happen if you press the trigger?"

"Sure," Blackbeard told him, bluntly. "I'll have to haul what's left of you out of the way and fly the crate myself."

Pete stared at him. Blackbeard's grin had become more dangerous. A tiny white scar showed across the bridge of his nose.

"So you'd fly her, eh?" grunted Pete. "Of course, you wouldn't be bluffing?"

"Could be. Want to call me and find out?"

PETE turned slowly, stared through the windshield and the spinning prop. Something told him that Blackbeard *was* bluffing; that he wouldn't know an aileron from a tail-skid. But if it were a bluff, Pete was in no position to call it. The stakes were too high.

So he held the ship on course for several minutes, until a black-spruce island showed up almost dead-center of a fair-sized lake. Then Blackbeard nudged him with the gun.

"The island— Set her down at this end of it."

Pete obeyed. He banked, came up into the wind, landed as ordered. He was glad to, anyway. Down, he might have a fighting chance. In any event, he would soon know what the next play was going to be.

He was not kept long in suspense. Emphasizing with the snout of the gun, Blackbeard said as they taxied shoreward, "Head her into the wind!" Then: "Okay, cut her now—but keep her turning over."

As the skis grunted to a stop, Blackbeard spoke to his mate.

"The fat boy—chase him out of here!"

Hapworth turned, wide-eyed.

"Yeah," Blackbeard told him. "Outside, chum, and stretch your legs."

As Hapworth and the other man moved towards the door, Blackbeard stepped into the spot the banker had vacated. He now had the gun, a Luger, trained directly at Pete Rollins' heart.

"Now you!" Blackbeard told him. "Out with your sidekick!"

Pete stood up, and for a moment hesitated. He eyed the gun, the man behind it—and Blackbeard read his thoughts.

"Better not, Joe!" the man advised, softly. "I won't miss—at four feet!"

So Pete turned, backed away. The second of the pair seemed to be waiting for him at the door. There was another prod in the ribs, a shove and a laugh; and Pete jumped to save himself from falling.

He stood there in the snow beside Carl Hapworth. Blackbeard and his mate were at the open doorway of the Norseman; and

with the Luger in his hand, Blackbeard still controlled the situation.

"Okay, you guys; we'll be leaving you now." And as Hapworth let a sudden squawk, Blackbeard added, "You won't come much harm." He kicked out an axe, a bedroll and a teapail. "These'll do you till someone picks you up."

Pete Rollins, rage and frustration bubbling inside him, suddenly found his voice. "What happens, you dirty hijacker, if somebody don't pick us up?"

"I wouldn't know," laughed Blackbeard. "But we'll do what we can—watch the papers, and if you haven't been picked up in two or three days, we'll wire your company and tell 'em where we saw you last."

Pete shot a glance around him, from the squat, powerful Norseman with its engine ticking over to the snow-covered lake and its distant shoreline.

"You dirty rat!" he snarled through his teeth. "You don't get away with this! Right now, with the gun to back your play—"

"Aw, skip it!" broke in Blackbeard. "Get crackin'!" And when Pete Rollins hesitated again, he sent three slugs to kick up the snow beside him.

Hapworth grabbed Pete by the arm. "Don't be a fool! That guy means business!"

Pete shook him off, but backed grudgingly away. He saw the second man take Blackbeard's place at the open doorway, heard the sudden blast of power. Then the door was slammed, a miniature blizzard lifted; and in a moment or so the Norseman went streaking across the lake's frozen bosom.

THEY stood there together, Pete Rollins and Carl Hapworth, watching the plane dwindle bug-like against the sky. She started south, but gradually angled west. Back, almost, on the course followed coming up. Then, when she was a mere speck in the distance, they saw her swing more westerly still.

Finally she was gone; and Carl Hapworth turned to Pete with smoldering eyes.

"Swell dish—letting them get away like that!"

Pete seemed to come back to the present. He blinked, said harshly, "Mean me?"

Hapworth shrugged. "Well, what do I

know about a plane? But you could have done something—"

Pete gave a jeering laugh. "And you the boy that said the guy with the gun meant business!"

"That was when they'd kicked us out. I'm talking about when we were up in the air." And when Pete's eyes went suddenly hard, Hapworth added, "I mean, wasn't there something you could have done to stop them taking off again?"

Pete caught the change in Hapworth's tone. "That's better," he told him, coolly "I didn't see you trying for any medals yourself."

He waited; but Hapworth turned to stare off into the empty sky.

Twenty-five yards away, a tangle of spruce hung over the scarred face of a granite cliff on shore. Pete picked up the axe and the bedroll and made across to it. He slashed at the spruce, crumpled a handful of lichen for kindling and started a fire. With Hapworth's sweating help he laid a flooring of spruce-boughs with a log across it for a seat. The cliff-face, acting like a chimney, sucked the smoke and the sparks upward.

The two sat down, and Hapworth pulled out cigarettes. Pete said he preferred his own particular brand.

Hapworth looked at him questioningly. He said, "Better overlook that crack just now. I was, well, sort of jarred. Guess you were no more to blame than I was."

"Thanks!" said Pete, drily. "Glad you think that way."

"But who were those birds that held us up?" persisted Hapworth. "And how did they know about the money aboard?"

"Dunno who they were," grunted Pete. "But five makes you ten the big guy was ex-Air Force. Pilot, probably." When Hapworth frowned, he went on, "His talk—this 'Joe' stuff and the rest of it. I heard nothing else for five years. Know the type, too. Some wild baby that couldn't settle down. Then the Luger—" Pete's voice trailed off, as though he were talking more to himself than to Hapworth.

"But the money—?" Hapworth said after a while. "That's what beats me. Only the bank-boys and myself knew of it."

"And me," added Pete, shortly. "And Moulson. And probably half of old Cree River's crew."

"But fifty thousand dollars!" wailed Hapworth. "How'll we ever get it back?"

Pete gave an impatient grunt. "Forget the fifty thousand! It's the bank's loss and the bank can stand it. But what about old Cree River Campell—and the kite?"

"Yes, of course," admitted Hapworth. "That's another consideration. I was merely taking the banker's view."

He didn't look so much the banker just then. Fortunately, he was dressed for emergency, in felt boots, fur cap and a hooded parka. But smoke from the fire got into his eyes and tears began to stream down his florid cheeks.

"Tough," observed Pete. "But you'll get used to it after a while."

Hapworth stared through his tears. "After a while? How long d'you figure we'll be stuck in this godforsaken hole?"

"Dunno," answered Pete, laconically. "But we've a bedroll, anyway."

HE REACHED over, opened the thing up. The roll consisted of two cheap blankets, but inside of these was a large and bulky paper sack. On investigation, the sack yielded a couple of pounds of hard biscuits, butter, cheese, two cans of meat and a box of tea-balls.

Pete gave a grunt. "They were kind to us. So we won't starve—at least, for two or three days."

He fetched the pail, brewed tea with snow-water, opened one of the cans of meat. But he said little, and it wasn't till their skimpy meal was finished that the silence was broken. Hapworth did it by referring again to their chances of early rescue.

"I asked you just now—how long do you figure we'll be here?"

Pete told him. "A few days. They knew in the office I was heading for Radium, but if there were any side-trips, I was to take them on. They wouldn't think much of it if I didn't show up for a week."

"A week?" Hapworth stared.

"Yeah, a week. But there's another chance," Pete pointed out. "Remember that duck saying he'd wire the office if he saw nothing in the papers about us? He'll probably do that. He's taking a chance if he does, but maybe a bigger one if he doesn't. So far, he's only facing armed robbery and theft of a plane; but if we were to starve or

freeze to death, he'd be up for murder. He knows that, so he may send the wire after all."

The banker seemed to clutch at the hope. "Maybe you've got something there."

But Pete gave a short, mirthless laugh. "Bucks you up, eh? Well, I wish it bucked me up. I'm thinking of old Cree River Campbell—the yarn I'll have to spin him. And what about the papers, the ballyhoo? If it wasn't for the wife, I'd just as soon stay here forever."

BUT their stay on the island wasn't too protracted. It came to an end at three of the following afternoon.

Hapworth was dozing over the fire when Pete heard a distant, pulsating throb. When it came again he knew it for the sound of an airplane engine.

Despite his earlier pessimism, Pete realized this was a sheer piece of luck. The ten-minute, easterly swing they had taken before landing had carried them a good twenty-five miles off-course. Planes could shuttle between Rockville and Radium City and never suspect their presence on the island at all. This plane that he now heard was coming from the northeast; not on the Radium City run but from some other off-route trip.

He roused Hapworth, kicked the fire together and dumped on it an armful of slash. The plane was closer now; in a moment or two, both men saw it. If it held true, it would pass a mile or so east of the island.

"Grab the blanket!" Pete ordered. "We'll try the old smoke-signal stunt!"

They held the blanket over the fire, lifted it clear, brought it back again. The smoke billowed in a series of irregular blue-gray clouds. They continued their strategy for two or three minutes, watching the plane draw near.

Finally it began to swing. Recognizable now as a stubby biplane of the Waco type, it came straight towards them, losing altitude. Pete swept the blanket from Hapworth's fingers and waved it above his head. A moment or so later, the plane—and it was a Waco—slithered on its skis to a stop beside them.

A window opened, and Freddy Hobbs of Gray Goose Airlines stared unbelievably at Pete Rollins.

"What for the love o' Maggie are you doin' here?"

Pete explained, swiftly, pointedly. "And your chore, Freddy, is to skid us outa here quick! The mug that pinched the plane has to land somewhere and we gotta nail him when he does."

"And he hit west?"

"That don't mean a thing," discounted Pete. "Probably a blind to throws us off the trail. He may have swung east again and landed anywhere—The Pas, Lake Winnipeg, even Sioux Lookout if he risks coming down for gas."

"Okay, then!" Freddy Hobbs understood. "Let's go!"

They ran into a blinding snowstorm eighty miles south of the island, but Hobbs fought his way through it. Luck was with him, and though it was still snowing heavily, he inched his way down to a landing on the river at Rockville just as the lights of the city were coming on.

Five minutes later Pete Rollins walked in on old Cree River Campbell.

Carl Hapworth was with Pete, and Jack Moulson was with Campbell.

"You, eh?" granted the boss. "Heard you come in, but it didn't sound like no Norseman."

"It wasn't," Pete agreed. "It was a Waco. Freddy Hobbs'."

"Freddy Hobbs'?" Old Cree River stared his puzzlement. "Then—then where the devil's your own?"

This was the moment Pete Rollins had been dreading. "I don't know," he told Cree River, bluntly. "Couple of guys swiped it off us. Couple of guys with guns."

Cree River blinked. "With guns? They swiped it off you?"

"And not only the plane," broke in Carl Hapworth, "but the currency as well."

Cree River Campbell's strong point was never his patience. Now he gave all the signs of an immediate blow-up.

"Just what is all this?" he gritted. "Your plane was swiped, you say? The currency, too? For cripes' sake don't stand there like a dumb Nitchie! Say somep'n!"

Pete said it, said all there was to say. He who was trained to give a clear and concise report in ops. rooms overseas now presented Cree River Campbell with a vivid picture of just what had happened in Cree River's own

front yard. He spared neither himself nor anyone else, and when he was done, he waited for what would come next.

It came slowly. Cree River leaned forward, glowered at Pete from under shaggy brows. To his side, stood Moulson, silent, watchful. Finally, the old man spoke.

"You say these guys headed west?"

"At the start. But I figure it may only have been a bluff. They could swing again, go anywhere."

Suddenly, abruptly, Cree River grabbed the telephone. Without consulting the directory, he dialed "Information."

"Mounted Police!" he barked.

Another moment, and he dialed again. When a click came, he went all out. Pete's own story of the happening had been terse enough, but Cree River halved it. At the end of it, "Yeah, yeah!" he blared. "That's near enough. Her registration? C dash A H B! No! B! B for Buzzard! Yeah C A H B! A Norseman; white-and-red!" Came a moment of quiet, then, "So you'll snap into it, eh? You'll do that? Sure, sure—I'll be here—"

He hung up, sank back in his chair and glowered again at Pete Rollins.

"Never heard nothin' like it! Sounds like somep'n you see in a show." Then he called for a rehash of Pete's own story, told him to skip nothing and take more time.

But before Pete had concluded, there was, from out front, the rush of a motor and the squealing of brakes. Almost in the same instant, Inspector Hendrie of the Mounted Police hurried in.

THE inspector was a man in his middle thirties—big, blond, keen. Cree River waved him to a chair and told Pete to give with the story once more.

Pete did so, and Cree River turned him over to Inspector Hendrie.

"We'll leave the plane for a moment," the officer suggested, "and deal with the cash." He turned to the banker, Carl Hapworth. "How many people knew this money was aboard?"

"I can only speak for my end of things," Hapworth answered. "I knew about it, of course, and so did Evans, the local manager. How many of Evans' staff would know about it, too, is anybody's guess. Probably only the teller and the accountant."

The inspector turned to Cree River. "And down here?"

"Me," said Cree River, promptly. "And Moulson, and Rollins."

"Anyone else?"

Moulson broke in. "Nobody else. I knew Mr. Hapworth was flying north with Rollins, but I didn't know anything about the cash until the night before."

"And when was this?"

"About five o'clock. Just about the time that Rollins came in to the office. I told Rollins then, and arranged with him about getting the cash out of the safe in the morning."

Inspector Hendrie squinted. "If we rule out the bank staff—and they're used to handling money—who've we got left? I mean, who've we got left who knew about it? Apparently just the four of you: Mr. Campbell, Mr. Hapworth, Mr. Moulson and Pete Rollins." He asked Carl Hapworth, "And it's unlikely, being a banker, that you'd mention the matter to anyone?"

"Bank business," said Hapworth, "is always confidential with me."

The inspector nodded. "And you, Mr. Moulson?"

"You mean, did I talk?" asked Moulson, stiffly. "I did not!"

"What about you, Rollins?"

Pete shook his tousled blond head. "I never thought a thing about it once I walked out of here. I was flying the plane, that's all I knew."

The inspector mauled his chin. "And you can't form any impression as to who these men might be?"

"Hand this big guy a shave," said Pete, "and he'd probably be around twenty-six or seven. And I'd pick him as an ex-Air Force man."

"Ex-Air Force man?" It was Moulson who had echoed the words. He frowned, remarked to nobody in particular, "That's odd!" But he was looking directly at Pete.

Pete got it. He stared back coldly at Moulson. "What's odd about it? Or didn't you run into any tough babies when you were in the service?"

There was a sudden tension in the room. It lasted but a moment, for Inspector Hendrie was speaking again.

"Go on, Rollins. Anything more you can tell us about this 'big guy' of yours?"

Pete faced the officer. "Not a lot," he said shortly. "He stood about six feet. Dark chap. Used a Luger."

"How was he dressed?"

Pete told him.

"Any distinguishing marks?"

"Just a small white scar across the bridge of the nose."

The inspector reached for a scrap-pad on old Cree River's desk, made a note or two, then asked regarding the second man of the pair.

"Never paid him much attention," Pete admitted. "He was sort of ordinary-looking. Wore glasses and had his parka-hood up all the time."

"Did he carry a Luger?"

"No. Just an ordinary gun. Looked like a thirty-eight."

Hendrie then turned to Carl Hapworth. "Give me your version of the happening."

The banker's story was pretty much the same as Pete Rollins'; and after referring to his notes, Hendrie spoke once more to Pete.

"You never met these men before they boarded your ship?"

"Neither of 'em."

"And you're equally positive that you didn't mention the fact that you were flying this currency? Not casually, to anyone?"

Pete frowned. "You asked me that question before," he pointed out. "I mentioned it to nobody."

OLD Cree River sank deeper in his chair. Arms folded across his chest, he was studying Pete with scowling deliberation. Nor did his expression change as the inspector's questioning went on.

Pete suddenly felt as though he were on the witness stand. Hendrie took him over his previous statement as though searching for a chink in his armor. Then, abruptly, the inspector asked, "How long have you been in Mr. Campbell's employ?"

Pete stiffened. Color flooded his face. "Just what is this?" he demanded. "If you figure I had a hand in the hold-up, come out and say so! Or pinch me for it! I've told you three times what happened; and if I tell you three times more or thirty times more, the story'll still be the same."

Cree River wriggled, shot a glance at Inspector Hendrie. The officer merely shrugged.

"Cool down, Rollins. Just a routine question. I'm trying to get to the bottom of things."

"You've hit bottom already," Pete retorted. "Rock bottom. If I knew anything more, I'd tell you."

Then a door clicked, a man spoke and a girl answered. Almost at once a uniformed constable strode into the room. He caught sight of Inspector Hendrie, saluted.

"Phone call from Battleburg, sir. The missing plane's down on the river. Deserted in front of the town."

Again the telephone came into use. In three minutes the inspector was speaking to the sergeant in charge of the Mounted Police detachment at Battleburg. Finally he hung up, turned to Cree River Campbell.

"Well, there she is. Less than an hour's flight west from here."

"Damaged?" demanded Campbell.

"Not a bit. She landed there some time during the night. My man heard her come in but thought it was one of the A. and J. planes."

"And the gunmen?"

"No sign of them. Vanished."

Carl Hapworth had his own interests. "What about the money?"

"What d'you think?" countered the inspector. "At least, they haven't found it kicking around."

The tenseness of the room seemed to lessen. The inspector went on to say that the storm which had struck Rockville at noon began at Battleburg a full twelve hours before.

"They say it's blizzarding badly and all roads are plugged. That means the hold-up boys'll have to make their getaway by train. They can't do it by truck or car."

"I'll feel better when we get the ship back," grunted Cree River. "Can't fly down there now; but a feller could catch the seven-fifteen tonight and fetch her home when things clear up."

Pete asked, "You want me to do that?"

"Eh? Yeah—well, I guess so." Cree River seemed to hesitate. "Either you or Vic Roberts." He added, as though by afterthought, "Ain't you wantin' to see the wife?"

The statement was natural enough but it was a slap in the face for Pete Rollins. What Cree River meant was, "No; I don't

want you to go. I'm not too sure of you. But Vic Roberts I know I can trust."

He blinked, swallowed hard. Old Cree River was looking away from him, beginning to speak to Jack Moulson. Moulson was looking away, too. Pete felt a blind hurt. If they wanted to be honest, why didn't they denounce him openly, say what was in their minds? He could have stood it better than this drawing-apart of themselves.

Moulson said something to Carl Hapworth, and the banker said he'd have to go east and report the matter to his head office. Pete turned to Inspector Hendrie.

"Need me around here any more?"

The inspector raised an eyebrow at Cree River; and when the old man shook his head, Hendrie said he didn't think he needed any of 'em any more.

"If I do," he added, "I always know where to find you."

It was all Pete needed. He left the room, found it still snowing, so phoned for a taxicab. Five minutes later he walked in on Kay.

He surprised her. In a flowered apron she was setting the table for her solitary meal.

"Why, Pete!" She ran to him. "I didn't hear you come in!"

He kissed her. "That's what old Cree River said."

There was something in his voice that made the girl look up. A searching glance, and she asked, "What in the world is the matter?"

He shed his cap and flying-coat and tossed them on a chair. "A lobs the matter, hon. Mebbe I haven't got a job."

"Pete!"

"And mebbe I'm a criminal. Old Cree River thinks I am."

The girl's eyes went wide; and Pete was all contrition. He forced a smile. "Sorry," he said. "Shouldn't have given it to you like that. But things are pretty grim just the same." And in a rush he told the whole sorry story.

She heard him through, then dropped into a chair facing him.

"And now what happens? If the police can't find these men—"

"I'm not waiting for that," Pete said shortly. "I'm dealing myself a hand. I don't know where I'll start and I definitely

don't know where I'll finish, but in the meantime I want you to keep things going here and not fret if you don't hear from me for a while."

Quick concern flashed into her eyes. "Why? What do you mean?"

"I mean," he told her, "that right now I'm in a tough spot. Old Cree River wonders—and that slob Moulson wants him to wonder—if I didn't have a hand in this hold-up myself. That crack I made about one of the birds being ex-Air Force didn't help a lot. Oh, I know—" he said. "Reason should tell 'em I couldn't have planned anything! But the doubt's there in Cree River's mind. Moulson may even sell him the idea that these guys were genuine mining men and that the evening before the trip I showed 'em how to make some easy dough. But that's the picture; and with the old man knocked cuckoo over the whole screwy set-up, he's prepared to believe 'most anything at all."

Kay sighed. She said slowly, "Yes; I think I understand."

"So does the old man understand," nodded Pete with grim humor. "At least, he understands one thing—the good, clean record he's always bragged about seems to have been mussed up a bit. Clean record!" he jeered, bitterly. "What a laugh that is!"

AFTER supper he changed into his off-duty clothes. He packed a light valise, announced his sudden intention of catching the seven-fifteen for Battleburg and asked Kay how much money they had in the joint.

There was a matter of nearly a hundred and fifty dollars. His pay-check had been cashed the day before the trip, and the money had not yet been banked. There had been some talk of a down-payment on a good used car.

"The car can wait," Pete said grimly. "I'll probably end up on the truck again."

He kissed Kay good-bye, told her, "Chins up!" and hurried out. On the way to the railway station he dropped into the Empire Hotel and learned that the two hold-up men had registered there five days before under the names of "F. Hedges" and "A. Gray." Gray was the big man, Pete's Blackbeard.

But Pete was not the only Campbell Airlines man on the seven-fifteen. He saw Jack Moulson and Vic Roberts swing up

into the smoker; so he himself walked down the platform and boarded the day coach.

Apparently old Cree River hadn't changed his mind. Vic Roberts was to bring the Norseman back. Okay, decided Pete; so let him. But in his heart he could not bring himself to blame old Cree River. Vic had been with the company for years; he had been tried plenty, and never found wanting. Pete, though, was a mere recruit; and if the old man had burrowed into Pete's history, everything he would have turned up would only prove Pete's statements. That is, that Pete Rollins was worse than broke when he picked up this flying job and that he couldn't go back to farming until he got together a sizeable stake. Right now, Pete didn't care if he never saw the farm again; but old Cree River didn't know that. All he knew was that Pete was seven thousand dollars in the hole, and he might speculate on the lengths to which Pete might go to drag himself out.

Yeah, the old man had every reason to be suspicious—just as Pete Rollins had every reason for sweeping these suspicions away.

The long ride gave Pete an opportunity to sort out the facts of the case. So that when, at one in the morning, the train pulled into Battleburg, Pete not only had a few theories all lined up but he also had a tentative plan of campaign.

He found the storm had blown itself out and stars were showing. Vic Roberts and Moulson got off and turned up the town's main street, so he himself took another one to the west. He found a hotel a block away and as it appeared less pretentious than one Moulson might choose, Pete went in and registered.

Pete's signature made no impression on the desk clerk, but his home town did.

"Rockville," grunted the man. "Where this here plane was swiped."

"U-huh," agreed Pete. "Who told you about it?"

"Who told me?" The desk clerk seemed amused at the question. "Heard nothin' else all day. The radio's bin tellin' folks about these hold-ups; warnin' 'em not to take no chances on 'em."

"Then they haven't caught 'em yet?"

"They will. Roads are plugged, but the Mounties are watchin' all of 'em."

"What about the railways?" suggested Pete.

"No dice there. Till next Friday, there's only two trains a day: the ten-five east to Winnipeg and the four-thirty to Edmonton. And Jimmy Allen, the agent, says nobody like these hold-up guys bought tickets off him."

Pete asked, "What about planes?"

"You mean the mail plane?" The clerk shook his head. "She's grounded account of the storm."

"Then what do you think?" pressed Pete. "Where are these babies now?"

"Right here in town," averred the clerk. "Holed up some place, waitin' for the weather to clear. But that's what I mean—they'll get caught. In a town of five thousand, you can't hide out or sneak out without somebody seein' you."

This all sounded good to Pete; so he asked for his pass key and went up to his room.

But he didn't get to sleep right away. There was too much to think about; too many angles to this case. And the one big question was why Battleburg had been chosen for a landing.

Now if *he* had swiped the plane, Pete told himself, he'd keep going with it. Or keep going till his gas ran out. He would not have landed a short hop from the Norseman's home port. Almost, one might say, right under old Campbell's nose. The whole thing seemed to lack explanation. It just didn't make sense.

At least, that's the way he viewed the riddle at first. He took it to bed with him, worried over it, fell asleep with it. But when he awoke in the morning, he thought he had a possible answer. The answer might fit in with another riddle he had worked out coming down on the train.

THERE was no dining room in the hotel. Pete found this out when he descended from his room. But the day clerk recommended the Tip Top Café.

"Right next door, brother. And you'll find they don't soak you."

The Tip Top was also clean, and its food excellent. Pete was definitely a stranger in the place, but toward the end of the meal he had the feeling that somebody's eyes were upon him.

It was an odd feeling, as though the force of it came from over near the door. Pete was on a stool at the counter and he almost turned to verify the impression. But he caught himself in time. The same result could be obtained from a glance in the counter-length mirror.

Here in the restaurant or, for that matter, anywhere in Battleburg, he considered himself in enemy territory. So, before he glanced up, he set himself for any shock that might come.

He got his shock; for he found a thin-faced man of thirty in overcoat, hat and muffler staring at him in front of the cashier's desk by the door.

Pete looked casually away; but his heart was pumping. There were no horn-rimmed spectacles, no fox-fronted parka, but the sharp, thin features were those of the second hold-up man on the plane.

There was the click of a door-latch. Pete risked another glance and found the thin-faced man had gone.

Pete reached down his own overcoat and hat, picked up his bill. To the fat Greek at the cash-register, he said, "Seems like I ought to know the lad that just walked out of here. Johnson's his name, isn't it?"

The Greek frowned. "Johnson? You mean d' guy in d' brown coat? Feller dat bought ceeigarette? His name ain't Johnson. Eet's Bender. Les Bender. Travels around co'ntry sellin' insurance."

Pete picked up his change. "Guess I'm wrong. He looked like a chap I knew in the army overseas—Freddie Johnson."

The Greek shrugged. "Mebbe you know Les overseas, only he wasn't in army. He was in Air Force. R.C.A.F. Pilot, or some-p'n like dat."

Pete's nerves were singing as he walked out. "Air Force—R.C.A.F.—" That cinched it, then!

On the sidewalk, he glanced about him as though undecided which way to go. But he saw what he half-expected to see. Across the street stood Mr. Bender. He appeared to be waiting for someone. But almost at once the man wheeled into a cigar-store behind him.

Pete thought quickly. He walked back to his hotel, and well away from the windows, watched the cigar-store. In a moment, coat-collar up and hat low, Bender came out. He

seemed to hesitate, walked up the street a few paces, down a few. Then, as though drawn by some powerful magnet, he also strode over to the hotel.

Again Pete thought quickly. He nodded to the day-clerk and ran upstairs as though to his room. But he didn't enter it. Instead, he walked along the corridor, through the door to the outside fire-escape and down its wide steps.

He came out on a street at right angles to the one fronting the hotel. The nearest building was the post-office. He went in, pulled out and lighted a cigarette and contemplated what his next move should be. Then he crossed to the General Delivery wicket.

A middle-aged man was there, wearing a green eye-shade. Pete said to him, "Help me out; I'm a stranger in town. You know anyone by the name of Les Bender? Insurance man, I believe."

The postal-clerk nodded. "Les Bender? Sure, I know him. Used to get his mail here before he had it delivered. Newcomer himself."

"Then where's his office?"

"Don't think he has one. He's around the country too much. But if you want him, you might catch him home?"

"And where's home?" asked Pete.

"Down at the River Auto Court. They fixed the cabins up for the winter. Les stays in Number One."

"Batches there?"

"No. Eats his meals in the Tip Top—same as I do. And come to think of it, he may be in there right now. Greek restaurant, next door to the Aurora Hotel."

Pete thanked the man, walked out. He gave a little grunt of satisfaction. The talk with the postal-clerk had explained a couple of points. One of them was his meeting with Les Bender.

Pete had thought it accidental, a piece of sheer luck. Apparently it wasn't luck but the natural working of things. Bender ate his meals at the Tip Top; Pete had a meal there, too. The only element of luck about it was the fact that they both happened to be in there at the same time.

THE other matter to be cleared away was why Bender had risked registering at the Empire at Rockville and staying there for

several days when he might have been recognized. Well, Bender was a newcomer to Battleburg. There might be those in the town who had never yet seen him. And if he were still somewhat of a stranger in Battleburg, the chances were he was entirely unknown in Rockville, a hundred and forty miles to the east.

But Pete knew there was something else he must do. Things were clicking; his theory of the early morning was working out. There was a certain risk to it, a risk that could be eliminated by calling on the police for help. But Pete wasn't yet ready for that. Two things deterred him. One, he hadn't forgotten entirely the attitude of Inspector Hendrie in the preliminary investigation back in old Cree River's office; secondly, he had got into this jam himself, and, so far as able, he wanted to get out of it himself. If he could, there would be sweet satisfaction in it. He'd hold his head high. He might even crow a bit.

He struck for the river, asked a kid the location of the auto court. He learned it was less than three blocks away.

When he came to it, he found it to be a spruce-enclosed compound consisting of an office and six cottages. The office was definitely deserted, with untrodden snow on its veranda and its blinds drawn. Cottage No. 1 was a matter of mere yards beyond it; and in front of cottage No. 2 a buzz-saw was at work.

PETE liked that buzz-saw. At least, he liked its three-man crew. The crew might come in handy when he got to banging on the door of cottage No. 1.

But as things turned out, he didn't need them. There was no answer to his knock, no threat of a gun. Even when he tried the door-knob, he found the place locked securely.

But there was a window, looking onto the veranda. Pete cupped his hands around his eyes and stared in.

He saw one large room, a stove, couch, and accessories incidental to masculine comfort. Clothes hung from a rack nearby; but though he inventoried what he could of these, he saw no fox-fronted, gabardine parka. But he hardly expected to. Les Bender wouldn't have been fool enough for that.

But turning away, he did see something that interested him. This was a '40 Model Ford sedan with a newish-looking, high-numbered Saskatchewan license-plate affixed to the bracket on the trunk. Pete squinted at it, then noticed that despite the heavy snow that had fallen, somebody had been in and out of the car. And that very recently.

He squinted again. Intuition told him that if he raised the hood of the car he'd find the engine still warm. Not that it had traveled recently, but that someone wanted to be certain it would. He couldn't risk making sure of the point, for his tracks would be a giveaway, but he was smiling grimly to himself as he stepped from the veranda.

He came out of the court to hear the sudden roar of an airplane engine. He knew that sound. It was old C-AHB, filling her lungs, getting hot for the take-off. He crossed the road, stood on the riverbank and looked down. The Norseman was there on the ice with one or two figures standing around her. Nearby was a black-and-yellow ski-equipped Cessna-Crane; further on, a battered old Fairchild.

Pete stood watching. Five minutes went by. Came another blast of power, the testing of the tail-assembly, and the Norseman began to move ahead.

Pete felt queer, a trifle homesick as the red-and-white plane lifted, banked and struck east. He should be on her, handling her controls. Well, perhaps he would soon be doing that. Things were moving fast; faster, perhaps, than he had dared to hope.

Things were moving, too, at his hotel. Or had been during his absence.

"Couple guys lookin' for you," announced the desk-clerk as he walked in.

"For me?" asked Pete, and tensed a bit.

"Yeah. You know a feller named Bender?"

This time Pete chose to say he didn't.

"Thought you might of done," allowed the clerk. "He come in here, took a squint at the register and said you was down for the plane. Dunno what he meant, though, and he never said."

Pete gave a grunt. "And the other chap?"

"Tall, slim guy with a little black mustache. Big-shot, or acted like he thought he was. Asked if you was around, and when I said no, he beat it."

Moulson, decided Pete at once, and wondered how Moulson had got a line on him.

"Didn't say what he wanted?" suggested Pete.

"No," growled the clerk. "And when I asked him, he looked at me like I was some sort of a tramp."

That'd be Moulson, thought Pete, and again wondered how the Bull of the Woods had managed to ferret him out. Perhaps Moulson had seen him get on the train. If so, why hadn't he looked him up before? Perhaps Moulson was going to suggest that he fly back with him and Vic Roberts. But why should Moulson want to take him away from Battleburg just as he—Pete—had got here?

It was puzzling; Pete didn't know what it meant. And he was still mulling the matter when he walked out and over to the railway station, dropping in on the agent. The man was at his open wicket.

"Tell me," suggested Pete, "who was the conductor on yesterday's eastbound to Winnipeg?"

The agent squinted at him. "You lost something? Left it aboard?"

Pete said no, he merely wanted to see the conductor regarding a business deal.

"Oh." The agent nodded. "Then it's old Charley Morley. He just went out of here. Said he was going to the baggage room."

PETE found two men there. One was a youth of nineteen behind the counter, the other, a gray-haired, stoutish man of sixty with a florid face. To the latter, Pete said, "Mr. Morley?"

Mr. Morley said, "Yup!"

"I wonder could I have a word with you?" Pete added, "Outside."

Morley nodded, buttoned his overcoat and followed Pete through the door. Out of earshot of the clerk, Pete turned to the conductor.

"My name's Rollins. Pilot of the plane—the Campbell Norseman—that was held up a few days ago."

Morley's eyes narrowed a bit, but before he could speak, Pete went on.

"You know all about it. They say the radio's been full of the thing for the past twenty-four hours. Well, I'm interested; have every reason to be. I want to see those

hold-up gents get what's coming to 'em and I'm not leaving it all to the police. So I'm wondering if you can help me?"

Morley frowned. "Help you? How can I help you?"

"By using the old noggin. By remembering two or three little points." Pete went on to explain. "These mugs landed here night before last in the dark. The roads were already drifted, so they couldn't have got away by automobile. The mail-plane was grounded, too, so they didn't take to the air. But I'm wondering if they went out by train—your train, the Winnipeg one, yesterday morning."

The conductor shook his head. "Couldn't have. Jim Allen never sold tickets to fellers like them, and I'm good and sure there was no one on the train who answered their descriptions. The police," he pointed out, "have grilled me about that already."

Pete smiled. "Sure. They asked you if you'd seen a big, bearded man in a mackinaw coat or a skinny guy in a fox-fronted parka. Well, forget all that stuff. With brains enough to hold up the plane as they did, these mugs weren't running around with billboards hangin' on 'em."

"Well, what'll you have?" asked Morley.

"I'll have just one man," Pete told him. "A tallish, good-looking chap in ordinary clothing traveling east to Winnipeg on the unexpired half of a return ticket."

The conductor was squinting. "How do you figure all that?"

"Figure?" Pete gave a wry smile. "Don't know if you'd call it figuring or fancy guessing. Lucky guessing. But the way I've doped it out is this: These two birds decide to hold up the plane. Quite some while before; the little guy buys a return ticket from some place in the east. He comes 'here, settles, and his chum, with a full beard on him, lands in a few days ago. Drove in by car. Later, the two of 'em took the train to Rockville. They register at the Empire, fly north with me, swipe the plane and get away with it. Naturally, they come back here. They stay at the little guy's place for the balance of the night, then the bearded one takes a shave, puts on civilized clothing and boards the Winnipeg train on his pal's unexpired ticket."

Morley stared off towards a row of grain elevators.

"That's guessing, you say? What made you guess like that?"

"Sheer desperation," Pete told him. "There are those kind souls who figure I had a hand in the hold-up. I've got to clear myself. And I want to keep one jump ahead of the police. Not that I've anything to fear personally," Pete pointed out, "but for another reason. That's the reason I've given—so that I can clear myself. The police aren't fools, they'll go over the ground I cover; but I want to beat them to the draw.

"So I figure the how-come of the actual theft, then I wonder why the plane lands at Battleburg instead of hitting for the far horizons. I can't figure just why it did—till I get a break. And that came when I ran into one of the hold-up guys. Right here in town."

MORLEY stiffened. "What? You ran into him? Here—in Battleburg?"

"Less than an hour since," said Pete. "And he's alone—the little guy."

"Then go to the police!" argued Morley. "Let 'em grab him! Make him squeal!"

"Not yet," said Pete, stubbornly. "The way I am, I'm doing all right. The police want the men. I want both the men and the money. It's a personal matter with me. I want to set those kind souls who doubt me back on their heels."

There was a cold tang to the air. Morley turned up his collar.

"But how did you dope out this return-ticket angle?"

"Simple. It's the only trump left. The big, bearded bird has vamoosed. I'm sure enough of that. If he were still here, he'd be hanging out with the little guy where he'd be moderately safe. And as he didn't go by road, didn't go by air and didn't buy a railway ticket, what's happened to him? You can bet your life," argued Pete, "that these eggs figured all the angles. The bearded man probably intended driving away again in his car—the one he came up in—and later on the little guy would return east on the unused portion of his ticket. But the storm spoiled all that. The upshot is that the bearded gent uses the ticket and the shrimp is left with the car."

Morley's face broke into a smile. "Pretty smooth stuff. I wouldn't be surprised if you haven't hit the jackpot. But about this

ticket—" the conductor pondered. "There weren't many passengers on the train and only two or three return-fares on the sleeper. And it would have to be the sleeper. Men like yours, in the big-money class, wouldn't want to sit up for a couple of nights. "Would he," asked Morley, "this big guy of yours, be about twenty-eight, with dark hair, nice white teeth and a bit of a scar on his nose?"

Pete almost jumped a foot. "Would he? I'll say he would! Why? You saw him?"

"Sure. Sat in the seat and talked with him. Nice sort of a boy, too, if you like 'em hard and a bit reckless-looking. And that scar—it's only a tiny one, but it shows when he smiles."

"And he had a return ticket?"

"Issued a month ago in Winnipeg."

Pete had trouble standing still. "That train left here—?"

"Ten-five yesterday. My run's to Archer-ton, but the train gets into Winnipeg at three-thirty this afternoon."

Pete's wrist-watch showed it to be already mid-morning. "I gotta get down there—" he muttered desperately. Then, to the conductor, "When's the plane due here?"

"Eleven sharp. And pulls out again in fifteen minutes. Gets into Winnipeg around five. Or at least the TCA does."

Pete groaned. "Not before that?"

"Well, this is only a feeder line, and there's stop-offs along the way. The first is at Florence. Another feeder line comes down from Rockville and connects with it. You ought to know that."

Pete nodded gloomily. That means I'll have to swing south to Regina on this mail-plane and connect with TCA there. More lost time." But he brightened, offered Morley his hand. "Thanks for what you've done. I couldn't have got anywhere without you." He hesitated a moment, added, "Will you do me a favor—after I've left? Drop around to the Mounted Police and tell 'em to keep an eye on Les Bender. Les is just waiting for the roads to be opened up. If Bender makes a break, tell 'em to nail him."

"Bender?" frowned Morley. "Who's he?"

"The little guy. The police can lock him up. Tell 'em there's no hurry about it and that Bender'll be better on the loose for a while. And if they ask you who told you

all this, say it was a guy you ran into at the station. A feller you'd never seen before in your life."

Morley gave a tight little grin. "At least, you don't make a liar out of me. I'll sure be telling the truth!"

PETE went back to his hotel. To becloud the issue for Mr. Bender, he paid a week's rent on his room. Then using the fire-escape again, he left the place, learned the location of the airline office and booked passage on the eastbound mail-plane. But out at the airport, the good luck that had nudged him along so far now threatened to desert him. As he stepped from the taxi, a man in civilian clothing but wearing a revolver and a "Police" band on his arm, came forward.

"Your ticket, bud," he suggested, scanned it, and asked Pete if he had any means of identification.

Pete felt sunk. If this guy was as much concerned with the pilot of the ill-fated plane as he was with the two who had held it up, things might not go so good with Pete Rollins. Especially if old Cree River had broadcast his suspicions. But he dug into a pocket, hauled out a miscellany of papers and found a letter addressed to "Christopher P. Rollins." It contained a receipt for his farm taxes, paid into the municipality office little more than a month before.

The policeman gave a grunt. "Christopher, eh? Got a cousin with that name." Apparently the deputy was centering more on the given name than the surname; or, possibly, thought Pete, he was just a stooge who hadn't been told the full story of the affair. In any event the man merely scowled at the receipt and gave a grunt.

"Farmer, eh? What's the location of your land?"

Pete supplied it, section, township, range. He gave also the amount of the taxes and the date of payment.

Satisfied, the deputy passed the paper back. "Goin' out for a spell?"

"Winnipeg," agreed Pete. "For a holiday."

"Okay," grunted the man, moved off; just as from a distance the mail-plane skimmed into view.

Pete boarded her; and once they were in the air again, he breathed more easily. He

wondered what would have happened if the deputy had recognized the name of Rollins. The deputy looked like a tough man to get around. The least he would have done was grab a phone, call up headquarters and tell them the pilot of the hijacked plane was down at the airport and heading east. He would have asked if it was all right to let him go; and at that point, complications would have set in. Pete would have been interviewed both by the town police and the Mounted; and if he had succeeded in clearing himself of suspicion, the mail-plane would have pulled out without him. Already doomed to land in Winnipeg an hour after the arrival of the eastbound train, a further delay would have proved disastrous.

So he settled himself in the chair and waited for the brief stopover at Florence. Here the feeder-line came down from the north and Rockville. He didn't know if any of the home-town folk would board the plane at that point, and rather hoped they wouldn't. Home-town folks of the wrong sort could still set his plans awry.

But he needn't have worried. He heard at Florence that the Rockville airfield had not been cleared of last night's snow and the plane from the north had been delayed. Any passengers on her would have to connect with the second of the mail-planes, the one that went east in mid-afternoon.

Eased in his mind, Pete settled back again to a trip that proved uneventful. At Regina he transferred to one of the Trans-Canada planes, and little more than two hours later the big ship was skimming Stevenson Field at Winnipeg.

But before she touched down, he saw something that brought a scowl of puzzlement to his face. Out in the infield stood a ski-equipped, black-and-yellow Cessna-Crane.

He stared at her while they were landing, and he was still staring at her after he had got out. There was something about her that was familiar. If she wasn't the kite he had seen on the river at Battleburg, she was her twin. Then there were her markings—C-MEQ—blazoned on her hull. Pete couldn't recall the markings of the Battleburg ship but he was very definite there had been a "Q" in them.

He turned at length to the airport buildings and went into the waiting room. He

stood there for a moment, looking over those present. None he recognized, none seemed interested in him; so he went on through, outside, looking for a taxi.

There were several of them, as well as a private car, late-model Hudson. The Hudson was the nearest, standing there with its front windows down. Pete took it for granted the car was waiting to pick up a passenger off the plane, till he suddenly noticed the driver of it studying him intently.

The driver was a youngish man, dressed in a light fawn overcoat and a brown felt hat. His features were regular, his jaw heavy and firm. Black eyebrows almost met above his eyes, and the eyes were crinkling at the corners.

Suddenly, Pete's own eyes began to crinkle. His heart stepped up a beat. Then the other man slid a gear, bore down on the accelerator of an engine that was already turning over and eased away from the curb. In five car lengths, he was in high and going fast.

Pete turned, ran to the nearest of the taxis. The driver was outside, doing something to the catch on the hood.

"That car!" Pete pointed. "The gray Hudson! Follow it and don't let it get away on you!"

THE driver swept a glance along Pete's pointing finger. He nodded, banged down the hood; then swore softly and banged again. By the time they were both in their places and had started to roll, the gray car was far in the lead.

Pete called for action, and the speedometer started to climb. They swung around a big transport, missed an ancient jalopy by inches, then had to brake down suddenly as a farm truck began to swerve.

"Can't keep this up for long," grunted the driver. "I don't want no ticket."

They passed the farm truck, passed another car, but there were more cars in front of them. The taximan edged out for a moment, then had to drop back.

"Can't see the Hudson," he grunted. "Anyways, this is plenty. I ain't keen to end up in court."

Pete resigned himself. "At least, you tried." Then he said, "Better take me to some decent hotel."

At lowered speed they held on and came into the business section of the city. The driver squinted into his rear-view mirror and pulled up.

"We bin followin' the Hudson," he remarked, "but somebody's followin' us. There, quick—the green Chevvy passin' us now!"

Pete's glance was momentary. The man at the Chevvy's wheel he couldn't see at all, and the passenger showed only as a turned-up coat-collar and a turned-down hat. Then the car had swept on past and was lost in the traffic's stream.

"You sure they were following us?" Pete asked.

"I saw 'em at the airport," averred the taximan, "and they were right behind us when we first pulled out. We've bin cuttin' and dodgin', but I noticed 'em still on our tail when I pulled into the curb."

"Know the car?"

"Know her again if I see her. She's got twin aerials and a couple big fog lights."

Pete pondered for a moment. "Wouldn't be a police car?"

The driver turned casually, but there was dawning interest in his eyes. "Expectin' 'em?"

Pete managed a smile. "Not particularly. I was wondering if they were clocking you for speeding."

"Not them." The driver grinned. "If they were, I'd have had it by now."

Pete studied his surroundings. They were in front of a three-story building with the name "Riverview Hotel" done across it. "This where I get out?"

"You asked for a hotel," observed the taximan. "This place ain't bad." And as Pete stepped to the sidewalk and handed him his fare, the man gave a grin. "Here's luck, Bub—whether you get the Hudson or the Chev gets you!"

PETE entered the place at once, but instead of going to the desk he stood to one side of the windows and watched the crowd passing to and fro on the sidewalk.

If the taximan hadn't been imagining things, somebody was interested in Pete Rollins' movements. Who it was, Pete couldn't hazard a guess. One man, certainly, had been interested, the heavy-jawed, hard-faced man in the gray Hudson. But this

bird could be eliminated. Not only was he ahead of Pete in the taxi, but he wasn't driving a green Chev.

So Pete continued to scrutinize everyone that passed by.

But after ten minutes of this he gave it up. If someone really was dogging him, Pete couldn't expect him to show up in plain sight. He might be across the street, in one of the stores; might even be sitting in a different car and keeping the hotel under observation. He could—and Pete's nerves tingled at the thought of it—have entered the hotel by some other way and be here, in the building, waiting for him.

Suddenly, Pete began to feel the strain of it all. Since leaving Rockville, his nerves had been on edge. He had accomplished a lot, but he began to wonder if he hadn't taken on more than he could handle alone. He had located Les Bender, the minor one of the pair, and he was pretty certain he had located Blackbeard. Blackbeard didn't look the real thing now, for he was wearing good clothing instead of a red-checked mackinaw and he was at the wheel of a Hudson instead of handling a gun. But he'd be Blackbeard, all right. There were the hard eyes, the straight, black brows. More, there was the haste with which he had shot the Hudson away from the airport after one good look at Pete.

But Blackbeard had gone, vanished again. Unless things broke right, Pete had had his last glimpse of him. In a city of over two hundred thousand, he could be harder to find than the proverbial haystack needle. And on top of it all was this new threat—the threat of the man in the green Chev.

From the Chev, Pete's mind suddenly switched to the black-and-yellow Cessna. If the Cessna of Battleburg and the Cessna of the Stevenson infield were one and the same, an explanation might be forthcoming. Les Bender had certainly recognized him in Battleburg; and now, a Cessna being here in Winnipeg, things might become more involved. Pete might have two men to deal with instead of one. Or three men instead of two.

For a moment, he considered the advisability of calling it a day. He knew a lot, but not quite enough. Perhaps after all he should hunt up the police, turn his information over to them. But the moment passed

and the stubborn streak in his nature asserted itself. He wasn't ready yet for the police. He'd go it alone a little further. And when he did call them in, it'd be to pick up the marbles, to be there with the strong-arm stuff.

So he turned, walked over to the hotel desk. "When's the next plane due from Regina?" he asked the clerk.

He was told, "Nine-thirty this evening."

Four hours to put in. Pete walked out and had a meal at a restaurant. Afterwards, he turned up the Mounted Police number in the telephone directory, made a note of it, came out of the restaurant and took in a show. He didn't want the entertainment, but he did want to get his mind off the job in hand and what the future might hold for him. Then at a little before nine he flagged a taxi and rode out once more to the airport.

THE driver of the cab was a youngish chap, snub-nosed and sandy-haired. He wore a discharge button and Pete learned he had served overseas with the engineers. When they reached their destination, Pete told the vet to pull up fairly close to the main doors.

"I'm hiring you till after the plane comes in," Pete told him. "Expecting a party. Very hush-hush."

The vet shot him an oblique glance. "Lady friend?"

Pete grinned. "A tougher assignment than that." He explained that the party to arrive wouldn't be a passenger with them on the return trip to town but that Pete would be interested in his movements. "So when I get in the cab, I want you to follow him."

They sat, talked and smoked for fifteen minutes, but all the while Pete had his eyes open for the green Chev or the gray Hudson. He saw neither; and at last the approach of the TCA plane was announced. In a few more minutes it slipped in.

Pete entered the building, crossed the floor of the waiting room and took his place in a telephone booth. His heart was beginning to pound. There should have been no need for this second trip to the airport if the Rockville feeder plane had run on schedule. But perhaps if it had, things would have been even more complicated. Maybe this way was the best. So he watched

the door from the runway, checked the passengers coming through.

But somebody else was checking them, a boy in a colored sweater. The lad was holding a paper or a letter of some sort, and as each man came through he spoke to him. There were shakes of the head, no luck for the kid, till one man in a beaver coat stopped abruptly, took the letter and ripped it open.

Pete Rollins huddled deeper in his booth. The man was Carl Hapworth.

Pete saw him draw a slip from the envelope, read it and glance sharply about him. Then he crumpled the paper in his pocket and hurried straight ahead.

Pete left the booth and fell in behind. There were a man and a couple of girls between Hapworth and himself, and once he was in the open air, Pete saw Hapworth glance about him and make across to a taxi. Pete ran to his own.

The sandy-haired vet threw open the door. "The Yellow Cab!" rapped Pete. "Follow it!"

This time here was no race to keep the lead car in sight. Hapworth could have had no thoughts of being followed, for when the cab pulled up at the Wellington Hotel, he got out, paid his driver and openly crossed the sidewalk.

Pete slapped his own man on the back. "Good show, chum! Here's a ten for you. Take a squint at the papers tomorrow. They will answer all the questions you didn't ask!"

Then he too crossed the sidewalk and followed Hapworth inside.

But he didn't crowd him. He stood in the shadow of a big potted palm, watched the banker at the desk. Hapworth did not seem to be registering, received no key to a room, but in a moment he nodded and moved across to the elevator.

Pete waited till he heard the elevator whine upward, then he pulled out his wallet. The hundred-and-fifty bucks were getting down, but time was passing fast. He selected a twenty, pocketed the wallet and crossed to the desk.

He laid the bill on the counter, covered all but its denomination with his spread fingers.

The bald-headed desk clerk regarded it, then glanced up at Pete.

"Yours," Pete told him succinctly. "Where did the fat boy go?"

The clerk frowned, shot a look around him, looked hungrily at the bill. "Room 105," he murmured. "First floor."

Pete slid the bill over the counter's far edge and took to the stairs.

There was a long, wide corridor. Room 105 was the third on the left. Light came over the transom.

Pete's steps were muffled by the thick carpet, but for once his nerve almost failed him. He remembered the scene on the Norseman, felt the gun in his back, recalled hot bullets plowing cold snow. But he had to move ahead, had to learn things, had to be *sure*.

At the door of Room 105 he paused. He could hear voices, spoken in low tones and the sound of a window shade being drawn. He strained his ear against the door jamb, trying to make out the mumbled words. He could distinguish nothing, but he suddenly heard a laugh.

The laugh sent little shivers up his spine. It was subdued, repressed, but there was a hard, reckless tone to it. Pete would have known it anywhere. The last time he heard it was on a nameless lake midway between Rockville and Radium City.

There was a moment of quietness, then the almost whispered conversation took up once more. Pete turned his head, tried his right, his better ear, up against the jamb—Then from the inside the door was flung suddenly open and Pete almost fell on his face.

HE CAUGHT himself. Still holding the inner doorknob and not three feet from him was the citified Blackbeard. Carl Hapworth was sitting forward in an upholstered chair, his fingers grasping its arms. On the bed was an open satchel.

The best thing about Pete Rollins were his reflexes. He knew he was on the spot, knew he was sunk, but his brain worked lightning-fast. He flung a jolting right to Blackbeard's jaw and sunk his left in his belly. Then he made a dive for the satchel on the bed.

But Carl Hapworth wasn't so slow himself. The banker grabbed the satchel and swung a vicious kick. The kick missed, but he collided heavily with Pete and spun him

around. And just in time; for Blackbeard was dragging the Luger from the inside pocket of his coat.

By luck it caught in the lining. Pete reached forward, grabbed a heavy porcelain lamp on the bureau and flung it. The lamp caught Blackbeard's fingers, now coming free, and the gun thudded to the floor. Pete had no time to reach for it, but he kicked it far under the bed. Then the Donnybrook broke loose.

Blackbeard came in swinging. Three inches taller and forty pounds heavier than Pete, everything was in his favor. He sent Pete reeling with a smash in the cheekbone, followed it with another that grazed his jaw. Pete grabbed him, heaved; they fell together. And Carl Hapworth sailed in.

The banker was too soft for a rough-and-tumble, too flabby to fling a real punch. But his weight on Pete was suffocating, and Pete thought it was curtains when Blackbeard grabbed him by the throat.

They kicked him, kneed him, smashed him in the face whenever his face stayed long enough to offer a target. Pete knew it was but a matter of moments. He was doing his best with his heels and his clawing fingers, but things were beginning to fade from gray to black. Then he heard a yell that came from neither Blackbeard nor Hapworth; and when for a second he blinked the mists away, he saw Jack Moulson's face swimming above him in the room.

Moulson! Pete gulped. This is it, then. The "three instead of two" he had reflected upon. With Moulson to aid the others, Pete was as good as dead.

But then, the weight above him lifted. Moulson's fists were flying and one of them connected suddenly with Carl Hapworth's jaw. Moulson was in Pete Rollins' place—jabbing, hooking, landing a solid blow, taking others. Pete didn't understand it, but Moulson was definitely on the Pete Rollins' side.

Pete tried to get up, succeeded only in getting to his knees. Hapworth was momentarily out of things. The banker was sprawled in the big chair, gasping, wiping smeary blood from his face. Blackbeard and Moulson were carrying the battle.

And Blackbeard was winning. Blood-streaked though he was, he was working

Moulson over toward the window by the very weight of his blows. Pete risked everything in one great effort. He held to the bed-end, grabbed the heavy bureau lamp from where it had fallen, heaved it at Blackbeard as the man's back was towards him.

There was a crunching sort of noise. Pete didn't know whether it was the porcelain of the lamp or the thin part of Blackbeard's skull. For just at that point in history, Pete Rollins keeled flat on his face.

AND the next ten hours were a blur for him. He had absorbed a lot of punishment, but most of the hangover was the result of a sleeping-draft given by the doctor after ministering to Pete's battered countenance and taping up his three cracked ribs.

But Pete was wide awake enough when, at nine the following morning, Jack Moulson came into the room. The room was the scene of last night's battle, though most of the debris had been cleared away. The Bull of the Woods regarded Pete dispassionately and asked him when he'd be ready to travel.

"Travel where?" Pete wanted to know.

"Home, of course," Moulson told him. "We can fly back. In a Crane I borrowed to fly down."

"You borrowed?" echoed Pete. "A black-and-yellow one—sitting out at the airport?"

Moulson said that might be it. "I borrowed her off Art Crocker at Battleburg. Wanted to get here before you landed off the TCA." And when Pete frowned in mystification, Moulson said with the coolest of smiles, "Wanted to be around when you split that fifty thousand."

Pete's head was still too fuzzy for riddles. "Don't savvy."

"I figured," said Moulson, "and I'll admit it, that you were involved in that hijack job. You can take a round out of me when you're fit again to satisfy the injured honor; but that's the way of it. And you've only yourself to thank. The Old Man called me up at Battleburg that night and told me you'd ducked. Said he'd found out from the agent at Rockville that you bought a ticket to Battleburg and that I'd better find out what it meant. So when you grabbed the plane for Winnipeg, I moved fast. I didn't want to tell the police of my suspicions, so I flew down here ahead of you. And I kept you under observation."

"From the front seat," hazarded Pete, "of a green Chev."

"Check! Belongs to a cousin of mine. I saw you go into the Riverview and I know pretty much all you did from then on. And when you took a taxi out to the airport last night, I trailed you. But when you began to trail Hapworth, I figured I'd slipped somewhere. So when we got back to town and you followed Hapworth upstairs, I put in a hurried call to the Mounted Police and hopped upstairs myself. And for a fact," confessed Moulson, "I'm rather glad I did."

"Yes," agreed Pete. "You could have done worse."

"It was a bit of a shock to me to find that Hapworth was the brains behind the thing. But I might have suspected it. He's been dabbling too heavily in mining property on the salary he draws, and he probably drew more than he legally should have done. Then when you mentioned about one of the hold-up men being ex-Air Force, I should have seen the rest of it. Hapworth used to speak quite often about a nephew of his in the service. Said he was a wild duck and was trying to get into the China civil war. Commercial flying at home was too tame."

"He should have gone to China," grunted Pete. "And taken Les Bender along."

"Who's Les Bender?" Moulson asked.

"The second of the pair. I've arranged for his future with the Mounted Police at Battleburg."

Moulson gave a cynical sniff. "Big-shot, eh? Taken care of everything."

"Well, somebody had to."

"That so? You're lucky somebody didn't take care of you. I'd have put the police on your tail if you'd made one more funny play."

"And passed up Hapworth! Well, it didn't take me long to get wise to him," Pete offered. "He put on a good act when we came down on that lake, but the rest looked sour. He was the only one who knew about the money going north—at least, he was the only one who knew about it far enough in advance to lay the plans. The night clerk at the Empire back home told me that the two hold-up guys had been

there for several days. That meant they passed up a couple chances to fly to Radium so they could take this particular trip with me. And how would they know about the money, five days ahead of anyone else, if Hapworth didn't tell them? Then at the last when Hapworth said he had to go East to the head office of the bank, I knew the rest of it. I went East myself."

Moulson pulled out his cigarette case, offered it. "Oh, yes," he remembered. "The Old Man just rang me up. I called him last night, but he came back at me again today. He feels pretty bad."

"He does!" hooted Pete. "What's he got to feel bad about? His ship's okay, the good old record's still nice and clean—"

"He feels bad about you," explained Moulson. "Says you shouldn't have gone into this thing like you did and hopes you're coming along all right."

"I'll live," predicted Pete. "And if it's his conscience, there's a little matter of a couple hundred bucks expense money—"

"Got a phone call, too," broke in Moulson, "from your wife."

Pete frowned, then brightened. "Thasso? What'd *she* have to say?"

"Seemed worried a bit, till I set her mind at rest. She knows you were never much for looks and I told her the trip hadn't improved you any. Then she said to ask you—now how did that go?—to ask you if you still thought you knew the score and how to come out on top."

PETE frowned, gave a slow smile. He recalled those words of his, those cocky words of a few months ago. And he looked at the imperturbable Moulson.

Moulson was pretty much a stuffed shirt; the chances were he'd never forget the old Brass Hat. But he wasn't a bad egg, not so cheesy in a pinch. And if you got to know the guy, really scratched that chromium surface, you might find him one of the best.

So Pete grinned again. "Kay said that, did she? Well, mebbe I didn't know the score like I thought I did, but with you along as an ace-in-the-hole, I guess I came out on top."

*Oakleg McQuarrie Knew the East; at Least the Ways of
the Oriental Were No More Devious Than His Own*



THE JADE BELL

By DAN CUSHMAN

OAKLEG McQUARRIE paused to look across the terrace of the Hotel Saltazar, city of Lourenço Marques, Portuguese East Africa.

He stood with head high and shoulders thrown back accentuating his size which was considerable. His face was cut on rugged lines which a sculptor of the Cubist school would admire. He was fifty although he looked younger.

The tropics had been good to him. Sometimes you find a man like McQuarrie who thrives on atabrine.

Only a few of the tables were in use at that evening hour. There were four white-clad Portuguese colonials eating koos-koos, a couple of Englishmen from the

Rand, and some others who had no particular identity of race or employment and hence might be lumped together as flotsam of the tropics—flotsam cabin class, for the Saltazar was a good hotel.

Somebody clapped his hands and McQuarrie responded with a slight inclination of his massive head. He clomped his artificial foot as was his habit, and with a ponderous limp crossed the flagstones and seated himself at the grand piano.

He stared down at the keys, then his right hand fell solidly, bringing to life a major chord.

It is doubtful whether the chord was from anything in particular, but it inspired him to go on, and he played a Chopin étude. His hands were thick, and their thickness

made them seem short, yet he negotiated the keyboard well enough, even accomplishing a certain heavy-handed brilliance, though with too great accentuation of the treble notes.

At first sound of the piano a slim, deeply tanned man of middle years who had been almost hidden by the high back of a rattan chair laid down his month-old Lisbon paper and stood up. By habit he touched his right forefinger on each side of his mustache, and smiling a little walked across on silent, rope-soled shoes.

He stood behind the piano, watching McQuarrie beneath its raised top. McQuarrie knew he was there, for after a time he spoke without glancing up.

"Yes, Senhor Alvarez."

Alvarez kept smiling as though in contemplation of some knowledge which was his own and quite special. He said in a rather too-velvety voice, "So you are still waiting."

"What else does one do in the tropics besides wait?"

Alvarez lifted one bony shoulder. "One drinks. If he is fortunate he loves. He grows rich, or poor. And he dies. Don't get me started on all that again, my American friend."

"I drink," said McQuarrie, bending as he negotiated a difficult arpeggio. "And that I may drink, I play."

"I am not a fool."

"No, Senhor of the police, I could name several things you are not, and you are not a fool."

"Why are you in Lourenço Marques?"

"I assure you that my papers are in order."

"Ah come, as friend to friend."

McQuarrie for the first time looked up. "Stop playing cat and mouse with me, Alvarez. Why were you over there waiting? Surely not to hear my piano."

"It has come to my notice that you are an agent of Hong Gim Tong."

FIERCELY cut and massive though McQuarrie's face was, it took a smile readily enough. He repeated a simple phrase in the treble clef, letting his left arm hang at rest.

"Well now, sir. You have some excellent sources of information. Yes, indeed. The

ears of the Portuguese Colonial Police are becoming unexpectedly acute."

Alvarez went on, obviously enjoying himself and wishing to extend his pleasure as much as possible.

"It has been reliably reported to me that you are here for Hong Gim Tong looking for a jade statue called the Ku Chi. I also understand that another of your operatives failed to find it aboard the steamship *Mary Gaddes*, enroute from this port to Calcutta by way of the Mascarenes. After that fat American spice buyer, Weston T. Watson, was killed—Ah, forgive me. After he 'died under mysterious circumstances' as the reports stated."

McQuarrie spent some time blending bass and treble in a satisfactory rubato.

"Indeed, sir—your tone when you mention the Hong Gim Tong! Forgive me if I smile. But your association of it with mystery and intrigue! The inscrutable Chinese, the East and its well of mystery!" McQuarrie breathed heavily through his nostrils, and finding the *étude* ill suited to his emotions modulated the key and launched forth on the last movement of Beethoven's *Appassionata*.

"Damn it all, sir, I am in fact scarcely more than a private detective. Had I the same job with West Coast Associates in San Francisco you would not give it a second thought. But move the address from San Francisco to Canton, change the—"

"Oh come, McQuarrie," said Alvarez smoothly, "I'll wager you don't even know the identity of your immediate superior. Say you were dishonest with your American detective agency, what would they do? They'd discharge you. But if you dealt double with Hong Gim it would mean the deep sleep with a knife inside your ribs. And that business out on the high seas. If an American concern found murder necessary they'd at least be considerate enough to leave some clues lying around so the port authorities could make a positive report and save their skins, but a Chinese—"

"Bosh!" McQuarrie finished playing. He stood, clomping his artificial foot, a big man made to seem even bigger by his wrinkled whites. He bowed in acknowledgement of scattering applause, sent a cognac and soda that somebody accepted him, and walked ponderously to a side table,

seating himself in a manner which made him inconspicuous, yet kept the terrace, the salon door and a strip of dusty pavement visible. "Your health!" he said, downing the drink, wiping thick lips on the back of his hand.

He went on talking, "Hong Gim Tong is as reputable as the Chinese government itself. It is, in fact, a quasi-official organization, supported by the Kuomintang. I am certain it is considerably less sinister than the secret police of a half-dozen countries, including your own, Senhor Alvarez."

Alvarez laughed, showing his strong teeth. The blackboy brought a plain *stengab*. Alvarez turned it in his long, brown fingers and drank a little. He drank with his head tilted far back, his pointed Adam's apple rolling up and down, but with eyes never quite leaving McQuarrie's face.

"Our 'secret police,' as you call it, would not think of hiring a foreigner to secure a jade treasure inside the territory of another country. For pure ruthlessness the organizations of no nation exceed the Chinese. Tell me, McQuarrie, isn't the Hong Gim Tong going to a great deal of trouble just to recover this Ku Chi statue?"

"Statue indeed! It is not merely a statue. Nor is it the Ku Chi or anything like it. Oh, I know, you merely called it the Ku Chi so I would put you right and in that manner tell you more. You are clever enough in your Iberian way, Alvarez. However, there is no reason that I should not tell you what I am looking for. It is a jade bell, the Shih Hua—stone of splendor. Frankly, I have never seen it. Only a color photo in 'Abbott's Catalogue of Chinese Jade and Nephrite.' The Shih Hua is about a foot high, carved from multicolored white and green jade, the stylized figure of an elephant in the coils of a dragon serpent, with a ringing piece of jade suspended on two chains. And chains, bell, everything carved from a single unbroken piece.

"I will enlighten you further, Senhor of the police, so you may discuss the Shih Hua intelligently with your acquaintances after I have obtained it and left this rotten, malarial port of yours. The Shih Hua was carved in A.D. 809 by an unknown craftsman, and presented to Luang Monkol, prince of Bayab up where the old Cathay

caravan route crosses from the Mekong valley, by some Chinese merchants who wanted—"

"Your bell must have great value, McQuarrie."

"Eh? Indeed, sir, so it has. In sentiment, which means much to those who employ me, and in escudo pieces, which is more of the language you understand."

ALVAREZ kept smiling as though he knew a great deal more than he would admit, "Your countryman, that spice buyer named Watson, might easily have hidden the jade here in Lourenço Marques, eh, McQuarrie? Perhaps in this very hotel, for it was here that he stopped. He tried to sell it in Cape Town, and yet it was gone when he was found aboard the *Mary Gaddes*, mur— But excuse me. How would you prefer having me speak of his demise?"

"I don't mind having him called murdered, as he most certainly was, so long as it is not laid at the door of Hong Gim Tong."

"I see your point." Alvarez lighted a long, blue-paper cigarette of Dar es Salaam craftsmanship. "You see," he said, inhaling and talking his lungs empty of smoke, "I took the bother of investigating Mr. Weston T. Watson, and everything seems to indicate that he hid the jade here, intending to return for it as soon as he shook Hong Gim from his trail."

McQuarrie slammed the table with a heavy hand. "Out with it!"

Alvarez looked surprised.

"Yes, out with it! What sort of proposition do you have?"

"It merely occurred to me that the steamship *Rathcliffe* is in port, having arrived from Calcutta by way of the Mascarenes, thus duplicating poor Watson's course except in reverse. Furthermore the *Rathcliffe* will go from here to Cape Town, thence to Recife, Brazil, and after that to New York. The ship would be convenient for anyone wishing to pick up the bell and carry it on to America, wouldn't it?"

"It would."

"So tonight you are particularly on your guard."

"Get to it, Alvarez."

"There is this fact, Senhor McQuarrie—I have failed to see any declaration made to

our customs relative to the jade bell. Therefore, it must be considered contraband. We have every right to seize it, and hold it for instructions from the Ministry of Colonies at Lisbon."

McQuarrie spoke with slow enunciation, "How much do you want?"

"Money? You should know me better."

"I do *not* know you better."

"On this occasion, I'll be satisfied with an exchange of favors."

McQuarrie lifted his eyebrows.

"I have an ambition. I have always wanted to be Chief of Investigators for the Mozambique Company. Today I received a wireless from His Excellency Rear-Admiral Ricardo Mateus, Company governor, telling me that Carl Mendel, who has proved himself too vocal a refugee, and his sister had both escaped.

"Afterward I received an anonymous message indicating that the sister would visit you tonight."

"Indeed!" There was no change in McQuarrie's expression.

"You knew nothing about it?"

"No."

"Oh come, now. I know the part you played in the S. S. *Carlotta* fiasco when you were trying to help smuggle those refugees out of Europe by way of Good Hope and the Red Sea."

McQuarrie chuckled, "Damn you, Alvarez, your ears are too good."

"Then you'll admit knowing of her visit."

"No. I do not. Anyhow, what favor can I do? You can wait for her, arrest her, haul her away to your inquisition and make her tell where her brother is. That's what Mateus will want to know."

"It's not that easy. I don't know what she looks like, while undoubtedly she knows quite well who I am."

"Then send one of your men."

"Can't you see—it's important that I accomplish the task single-handed. So you must help me. You must inform me when she comes, I will make the arrest, and in return I will forget ever having heard of your jade bell."

McQuarrie nodded. "Where can I reach you?"

Alvarez pointed to a tiny sidewalk cafe across the street. "I'll be there, watching. If she comes before dark, signal by shaking

out your handkerchief. If it's after dark, turn the table electric light on."

Alvarez rose and bowed with a slight inclination of his head. McQuarrie watched him walk with wiry swiftness between the tables and descend the five marble steps.

AN ELECTRIC tram went past, half speed like everything else in that tropic town. Two men, one in whites with sun helmet, the other in whipcords and a wide felt hat walked from the salon and found themselves a table. Englishmen just arrived on the airliner from Johannesburg. McQuarrie settled back, drinking slowly, half listening to the overtones of their British speech.

Darkness came, leaving a vague, phosphorescent glow above roofs of buildings in the direction of the bay. A night breeze, rare at that season, rustled the leaves of a panga-panga tree overhead.

A blackboy approached to ask if Senhor would have the dinner.

McQuarrie slid his glass over, "Stengah. And inquire of the clerk when the *Rathcliffe* weighs anchor."

"Yes, Senhor."

A row of concrete buildings built by Rand money blocked view of the wharf, but McQuarrie could see a smudge indicating the position of the *Rathcliffe's* funnels. The boy returned, setting down an ice-tinkling glass.

"It sails with the tide."

"Tonight?"

"Yes, Senhor."

"A young woman will be looking for me. Tell her where I am."

He drew out a heavy gold watch, snapped open its moisture-proof cover, put it back and slowly sipped his stengah. There were mosquitoes around and the multi-colored lights which bowered the terrace remained off.

He was now alone. There was little traffic, and through the night air came the sounds of dance music from the Palona Hotel. It was a swing piece which the violin player was giving a Strauss waltz treatment, making it sound somehow obscene.

He watched the sidewalk cafe. Nettings had been let down against insects, and electric lights glowed behind amber parchment shades. No sign of Alvarez. McQuarrie's

own position was marked only by the coal of his cigarette.

The insect-proof salon door slapped shut, and the blackboy hurried over, barefoot and silent, visible only by his white stengah-shifter.

"Is she here?" asked McQuarrie.

"Yes. And a man with her."

"That's all right. You can bring them."

The blackboy retraced his steps, and a few seconds later reappeared, holding open the door for a man and woman.

By the momentary light from inside McQuarrie could see they were both young—about twenty-five. The man was a trifle under average height, well muscled, and carried himself with assurance. He had a small, rather snubbed nose, a rusty freckled complexion, deeply cleft chin. His eyes were probably blue. The girl was slim, pretty, and dark. Her hair had no wave, and was drawn tightly to a knot atop her head.

They walked across the terrace with slow wariness, the man whispering to the girl, their shoulders almost touching. McQuarrie squeezed out the coal of his cigarette and stood, clomping his artificial foot, and for the first time they saw him.

"You're McQuarrie," said the man.

"Indeed, sir. Oakleg McQuarrie, I am called—"

"The blackfellow said we would find you here."

McQuarrie moved one of the rattan chairs for the girl, but she remained standing, waist pressed against the table, looking up at him. Her eyes were dark and intelligent. He could smell the ginger blossom in her hair.

She said, "Yes, you are like my brother described you."

"Indeed. And who is your brother?"

"Carl Mendel."

"Then he didn't come with you?"

The young man answered for her, "Carl is dead."

McQuarrie exhaled and seated himself. "I'm sorry. A tragedy, my dear. How—But perhaps you would rather not discuss it."

She said, "It doesn't hurt me—not any more. Carl and I both knew our chances when we escaped from that terrible camp up at Mozambique. They were sending a ship to take us back to Europe, you know. Carl was wounded, and died four days later.

I made it to a village on the coast, and a prau picked me up and brought me here. That was more than two months ago. I couldn't leave. I had no passport."

"And so we have come to you," said the young man.

McQuarrie peered at him. "You are not a refugee. You're American. Western, by your speech. Let me guess it—Wyoming."

"California."

McQuarrie smiled, extending his hand, "San Francisco." He leaned back again, lifting his glass. It was warm and empty. "I don't know why you came to me. I'm a poor man. Humble, and suspected."

"But you know your way around this hotel."

"Perhaps."

THE girl sat down, and the young man pulled up a chair for himself. He leaned across the table, watching McQuarrie with forthright intensity. There was a scent of soap-scrubbed cleanliness about him which made McQuarrie think of America after his years spent among the more exotic races which rely less on soap than on the olfactory counter-irritant of perfume.

The young fellow grinned and said, "Sure, there's no doubt that I have my nerve, asking you to risk your neck."

McQuarrie didn't deny it. "Who are you?"

"Lee Collison. But I guess I'd better start from the beginning."

McQuarrie squeaked back in his chair, peering across the street, watching a waiter serve chilled wine to a man and woman behind the milky mosquito nettings of the sidewalk cafe.

Lee Collison was speaking. "I was a junior at Stanford. Then the war. I enlisted—air force. Shot down, Stalig Luft, then freedom and I met Rachel. We were that way from the first moment, but old Uncle Sam had something to say about taking German brides back to America. I tried to return to Germany, but no dice. Then word came that she, along with her brother Carl and six hundred others had left on the *Carlotta* trying to get away to Africa, but I guess you know enough about that piece of business. When I heard that the skipper had got cold feet—or deliberately double-crossed them—and dumped them on the

tender mercies of Rear-Admiral Mateus up in Mozambique, I knew I had to get there, so I entered the merchant marine. A cablegram bounced back from L. A. and found me in Manila. I jumped ship and got passage on the *Rathcliffe*. That's the old *Penang Maru* of the N. Y. K. lines, and she's—"

"I know," said McQuarrie.

"Anyhow, here we are together at last. But I can't get her aboard the *Rathcliffe*. No passport."

McQuarrie was thoughtful. He placed a cigarette in his lips without lighting it. "There are ways, of course, to secure passports. But it takes time."

"With your help there's a way of getting one tonight." Collison leaned farther across the table, speaking earnestly. "We're strangers here, but you're not. You know the ropes, and knowing—"

"Yes, and knowing the ropes I strongly suspect that the police may be on your trail."

The girl moved suddenly. It was too dark to see McQuarrie's face, but his voice went on.

"Oh, you're safe enough for the moment. But look at it through my eyes—the police suspect that you have visited me, you escape through my connivance. Then how will it be for old McQuarrie?"

"But nobody knows!" she said.

"Indeed?"

She went on, "Mr. McQuarrie, both of us have waited so long! If I could tell you of the months and years of longing. If you ever wanted someone, Mr. McQuarrie, wanted them until it seems like some part of your body was being torn from you! And at last having found each other, to be kept from happiness only by the little strip of water that separates us from the *Rathcliffe*! If you've ever had a home, Mr. McQuarrie—"

"I never have."

His tone made her stop abruptly. "I'm sorry."

He went on in a voice deliberately aggressive, "I must confess that such sentiment means little to me. My life has not made me soft. You need not explain how haphazard tragedy is in this world. The affairs of men are not planned like a Hamlet with the tragedy inevitable. Rather we bumble through a Comedy of Errors with

the hero inexplicably shuffling off in act four. I assume that the world is so, and thus your problem does not move me. On the other hand, certain things are important to me. My word, for instance. The things I have agreed to do. I sit here on this terrace in L. M. with a mission to accomplish. If I helped you it might place that mission in jeopardy."

McQuarrie finished by slamming the table with the palm of his hand. He sat still, listening to the deep vibration of a boat whistle. He glanced at his watch, put it back.

Collison was still not dissuaded. "But nobody would know. It's such a little thing."

"Damn it all. Well, out with it. To satisfy my curiosity, tell me this tiny thing I can do."

"It's this—there's a passport right in this hotel that Rachel could use. It belonged to an American girl named Winnie Walker. Maybe you knew her?"

"I did not."

"Well, she was a singer. Left high and dry in Cairo by the war. Went to Cape Town and then here. The Governor-General in Mozambique wanted her to perform at one of his big shindigs, so he sent a plane for her. The plane never got there. Rachel's jeweler friend found out that her bag is still here, and her passport in it." He took a fragment of newspaper from his pocket. "Here's her picture. She's a ringer for Rachel, isn't she?"

"And just exactly where is this bag?"

"In Storeroom A." Collison's eyes were eager. He talked rapidly, "It's a fabric-covered aluminum bag with her monogram on one side. Two W's in a circle."

McQUARRIE banged the table, "Gad, sir, I'll do it. It may mean a bout with the Governor-General, but I'll do it."

Collison seemed almost in tears as he squeezed McQuarrie's hand.

"None of that, fellow. Indeed, as the philosopher said, it is later than we think."

"Storeroom A—you know where it is?"

"So I do. Through that door. You can't see it. The sidewalk leads to it through the jasmine. Locked, of course. We'll get the blackboy to open up. Oh, but the devil—Why not just have him bring it up

openly by way of the freight elevator! The bold way is the best way, eh, Collison?"

The blackboy must have been standing close to the salon door, for he appeared at almost the second that McQuarrie called him.

McQuarrie appeared at ease, leaning back, still puffing the unlighted cigarette.

"Lad, there is a storeroom here where baggage is kept in trust."

"Yes, Master."

"You will bring me a suitcase. One of those new airplane bags, metal with a fabric cover. On one side is the monogram WW in a circle." He reached to press a silver ten-escudo piece into his palm. "Bring it, and there will be two more like this for you."

"But, Master—"

McQuarrie's face became fiercely lined, "No questions."

"But Master, I do not know this 'WW.' I do not read."

Lee Collison wet his finger in McQuarrie's glass and drew on the table, but it was too dark for the boy to see. Collison snapped on the light.

McQuarrie quickly turned it off. He stood, clomping his artificial foot.

"I wish you had not done that."

"Why?"

"I had not intended to tell you, but now I must. Alvarez, the policeman, has set a trap. The light was to be his signal. But you have time to escape. Go that way, turn right behind the hotel. There is a door with Chinese characters. Go inside and mention my name."

Lee Collison stood with feet spread, a bulldog expression on his snub, freckled face.

"No. Damn it all, I won't run. Not without that suitcase."

"Very well. If you want to chance it there may be time enough." He swung to face the blackboy. "Go inside. Don't speak to anybody. Open the door to the basement."

The blackboy just stood there.

"Do you hear me?"

He fled, looking over his shoulder at McQuarrie's angry race.

"Get away from here, both of you. Hide in those jasmine bushes until he gets the door open. I'll keep Alvarez somehow. Do

you know a piece called 'Jingle Bells?' Whistle it when you're safe in the alley."

A man was climbing the marble steps. Alvarez. He walked warily among the tables, one hand thrust under his white suit coat.

"Hello, Alvarez," said McQuarrie from his chair in the deep shadow.

"Where are they?"

"Who?"

"You know damned well who!"

McQuarrie laughed. "Mendel's sister, I suppose. I called you over to ask what kind of a fool's watch you put me to."

"They were here!"

"Indeed?"

"I was watching. The light went on and a man and woman—"

"We of Hong Gim are adept at making people disappear. Now, Senhor—"

"You're trying to win a couple of minutes to—"

"Sit down, Alvarez. Have a brandy."

"Where did they go?"

Alvarez crouched over the table. His hand came up, and a ray of distant street light shimmered on the chrome-plated barrel of an automatic.

"Where are they?" he hissed.

McQuarrie threw away his sodden cigarette, found another, snapped a lighter. The little, petrol flame seemed very bright after the long darkness. It brought his face to life in deep-cut prominence. He puffed the cigarette, inhaled, and dropped the lighter back in his pocket. All of his movements were deliberate, and their total consumed twenty seconds of time.

"I can't tell you how immature your histrionics seem to me, Alvarez."

Alvarez gripped the pistol so tightly it trembled. "You've hid them."

"Then why would I signal you to come?"

There was a sound of feet hurrying along cement. Alvarez spun around. He took a step, but McQuarrie moved forward, clamping down on his wrist.

Alvarez twisted from side to side, breath hissing through his teeth. McQuarrie calmly kept twisting, he shook the man's arm, making the pistol fall.

Distantly someone was whistling "Jingle Bells."

"I'll have your neck for this!"

"No," said McQuarrie, "you will not. And I'll tell you why. It is because I have

just saved you from making a very great ass of yourself."

Alvarez stood, caressing his wrist, keeping his eyes on McQuarrie.

"You see, my friend of the police, the girl was not Mendel's sister. I don't know whether he even has a sister. Nor has he escaped. You can prove that by sending a wireless to Mozambique."

"But His Excellency the Rear-Admiral said—"

"The message you received was a forgery. Tell me, Alvarez, do you have some competitor for the post of Chief Investigator who would like to make you a jackass?"

ALVAREZ exhaled through pinched nostrils. He dropped to a chair and sat silently giving thought to his enemies.

McQuarrie spoke softly, "I think you at least owe me a *stengab*, sir."

"*Stengab!*" shouted Alvarez.

Distantly came the strains of the jazz band with the fiddle player still confusing it all with Johann Strauss. They drank, and McQuarrie ordered another. As they sat, an airplane made a half circle of the city and winged southwest, its colored lights appearing and reappearing through branches of the panga-panga tree.

McQuarrie glanced at his watch. "On time." His voice had a smile in it. "The *Rathcliffe* also left on time. Have you ever noticed, my friend, how many *little* things have to be remembered when one starts out to trick another?"

Alvarez had not spoken ten words in half an hour. He finished his *stengab* and left. McQuarrie clomped inside to the hotel manager's office.

"Have you ever had a guest here named Winnie Walker?"

The manager ran his fingers through a

file and shook his head. It seemed to be what McQuarrie expected. He telephoned Transafrican Airlines concerning last-minute passengers on the Johannesburg plane which had just left. Fifteen minutes later he handed a code message to the wireless clerk at the Palona.

The clerk counted it. "To Johannesburg. That will be forty-one escudos, Senhor McQuarrie."

McQuarrie paid, and turning, saw Alvarez.

"Did you inquire?"

"It was a plot, McQuarrie. A plot to make a fool of me. I radiophoned a friend in the head office at Mozambique. He advised me no such message had been sent. Now as to that piece of jade, of course—"

"The jade? We can both forget about it. It occurs to me that the jade is no longer inside the city of Lourenço Marques."

Alvarez left him at the door, and McQuarrie paused until he was out of sight. He then felt through the pockets of his wrinkled white coat, drawing out the paper on which he had scribbled his wireless message before transcribing it to code. He read it over before tearing it in bits—

Mr. C. L. Sung,
Empire Hotel,
Johannesburg, Union of S. A.

The Shih Hua jade will arrive in your city aboard Transafrican Airlines plane No. 356 at 2 a.m. It will be inside a fabric-covered aluminum bag, monogrammed WW in circle. You will please remove it from the possession of the young couple as courteously as possible for their plan of retrieving it was most ingenious, and moreover they saved me the expense of bribing local police.

W. T. MCQUARRIE.





THE HORSE THIEF TRAP

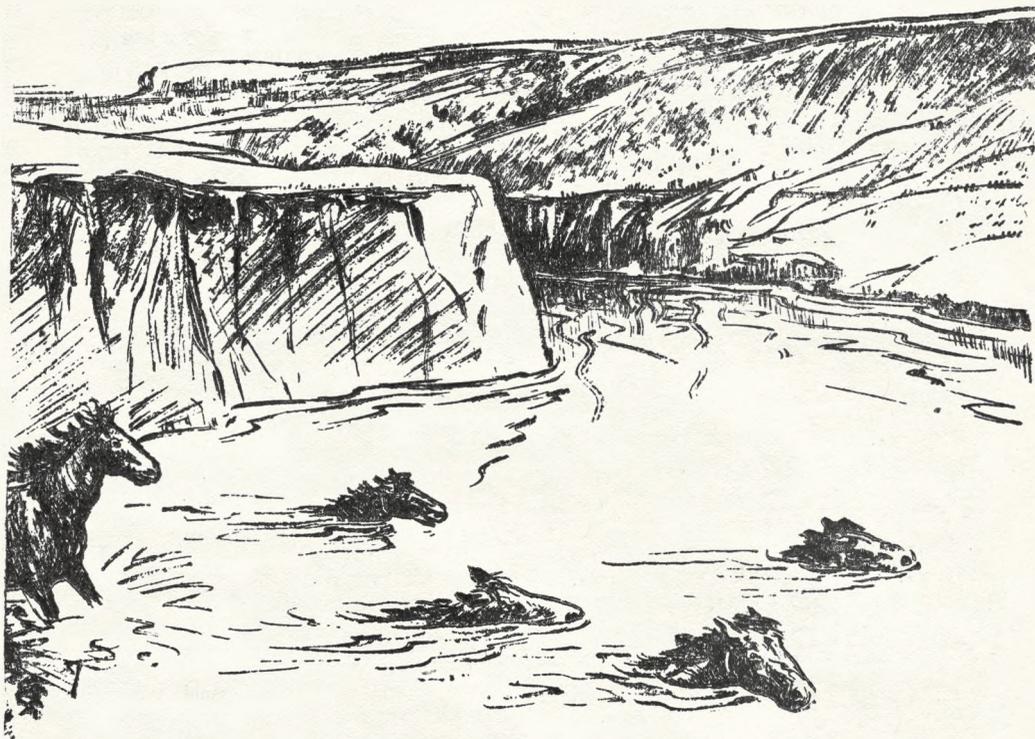
By WALT COBURN

I

FEAR crawled through the guts of young Johnny Dillard like a cold, slimy snake. It broke out in a cold sweat that beaded his face and his forced grin was stiff lipped, and he was using that grin to mask the fear that filled his empty belly with nausea. His sky blue eyes mirrored it.

It wasn't so much the fear of what the five horse thieves were going to do to him. Danger was something you had to get used to when you'd been punching cows and riding broncs since you were old enough to make a hand. A man has to die, Johnny had been told. And when you're twenty-one and you've worked hard at being tough, you play your string out so that whenever men gathered around campfires or in bunkhouses or

. . . *Down the Dim Horse Thief Trail into Wyoming*
There Was a Market for Stolen Horses



lined up at the bar and his name came up they would say of him that Johnny Dillard died game.

So it wasn't fear of death that bothered Johnny Dillard. It was the shame and disgrace of it that made him sick inside. Letting these five tough horse thieves run off the Cross UP remuda. And the way they were treating him like he was some two-bit, bald-faced, white-livered, know-nothing-button of a kid.

Especially that youngest one of the horse thief gang. Not much older than Johnny. But tall and slim and black-haired with gray-green eyes. Handsome and swaggering and jingling his silver-mounted spurs and packing a pearl-handled six-shooter. Acting tough and trying to taunt Johnny into a fight. The older men called this tall slim spur jingler "Dude." And they egged Dude on with grins and some hoorawing about the little schoolmarm at Rocky Point.

Dude lapped it up and kept prodding

Johnny with barbed insults about the purty little sorrel-maned schoolmarm. And Johnny Dillard had to take it because the sign wasn't right for him to match a fight with this Dude thing. So he kept that frozen grin till his face ached. His face hot and red and sweaty and he was sick enough to puke.

Johnny Dillard had paid ten dollars for a black-and-white pinto Injun pony when the Cross UP outfit worked along the Fort Belknap Reservation on the spring calf round-up. And when the round-up was over and Old Man Sam Benton had sent Johnny down to the horse camp with the remuda Johnny had felt like he was riding his luck high, wide and handsome. Because the Cross UP horse camp on the north side of the river was only a few miles horseback ride from Rocky Point Crossing. And Johnny could ride to Rocky Point on some pretext or another like getting a caddy of tobacco or a can of baking powder from the store.

And he'd take along the paint pony. And when the sign was right Johnny would give the paint pony to the little red-headed schoolmarm whose name was Lorna Turner.

Johnny had shaved and put on his new blue-flannel shirt and his town pants and a new pair of shopmade boots and a brand-new Stetson hat. Saddled the top horse in his string and led the paint. His heart pounding with excitement. Timing his arrival for sundown supper—

HE HAD had his first let-down when he saw four saddled horses standing at the hitchrack at old Tex Alvord's log-cabin saloon, on the north side. Johnny hadn't stopped, like he'd planned, to hoist a drink with old Tex and mebbysso sort of get around to hinting to Tex to put in a good word for him with the little schoolmarm on the other side of the Rocky Point Crossing where she stayed with the storekeeper and his wife and kids.

Johnny hadn't bothered to use the ferry-boat. The river was low enough in July so that there wasn't much swimming water out in the channel. And he hoped Lorna Turner would be watching when he swam his horse across and led the paint with the horsehair hackamore lead rope dallied around his saddle-horn and Johnny was a good river man and he'd make a show of busting that big Missouri River wide open.

But the little schoolmarm hadn't even taken notice of Johnny Dillard and his crossing. She was sitting out in under a giant old cottonwood listening to some cowboy playing a battered old guitar and singing cowboy songs to her. Squatted on his hunkers with his hat tilted back on his handsome black head and a pearl-handled six-shooter hung on his flank in a carved Mexican holster. A rank stranger. And he strummed his guitar and sang his songs to her and she was listening and smiling into his black eyes like he was the only man in the world.

Johnny would have turned back without being seen only this handsome range-dude guitar-thumper had sighted him and his white teeth had bared in a sort of amused contempt and he changed the tune of his song to something derisive about a bald-faced, tow-headed button who wrangled the horses and rode along admiring his shadow.

Lorna Turner had looked up and caught sight of Johnny. And he wasn't as dashing looking as he might have been because out in the channel the paint pony had sulled and before they got out Johnny had been ducked and he was sodden and dripping wet and a sorry-looking sight to behold. The little schoolmarm had looked up and sighted him. The range-dude guitar-thumper had said something that had made the red-headed schoolmarm laugh.

Johnny had reined his horse and led the paint pony and he'd busted the river wide open again and all the way back to the Cross UP horse camp he could still hear in his ears the gay mocking laughter of the red-headed schoolmarm whose name was Lorna Turner.

To top it off, Old Man Sam Benton was there at the horse camp waiting for him. And the Old Man was on the prod. The Old Man never praised a man. But he could skin the hide off you with mighty few words. And he'd proceeded to skin Johnny alive. He said the Cross UP wasn't paying out wages to damn fools who spent their time lollygaggin' around on Cross UP time. If Johnny just had to go leadin' paint ponies around of an evening to make calf eyes at some schoolmarm, he'd better take a week off or a month off or quit his job altogether because he, Old Man Sam Benton wasn't hard-hearted enough to keep one of his hired hands from their pleasures. And if this horse camp job was interfering with Johnny's courtin' and sparkin', then the Cross UP better pay him what he had coming.

Old Man Sam had saddled a fresh horse and pulled out for the home ranch at the foot of the Little Rockies, still ringy and on the prod. With final orders for Johnny to get the damned nonsense out of his towhead and not to leave the horse camp. Or by the hell there'd be a man here to take his place. And the Old Man had ridden off on that. And leaving Johnny wondering if he still had a job or not.

And last evening the five tough-looking horsebackers had ridden up out of the dusk. Six-shooters buckled on. Packing saddle guns. And that range-dude guitar-thumper with 'em. They had changed horses. The boss of the five was a surly man with iron-gray hair and whiskers. Big as a skinned

mule and tough as a boot. He'd told Johnny to corral the remuda and they'd helped themselves to their pick of top horses. While they made Johnny cook them a big supper and then they sat around on their hunkers outside the cabin while Johnny washed and wiped their dirty dishes.

THE big man they called Black Ike Bassett kept asking Johnny questions. They were questions about the outfit and the horse camp, the habits of Old Man Sam Benton and how often he got down here to the horse camp and when he'd been here last and when was Johnny expecting the Old Man again and how long did Johnny reckon it would be before the Old Man found out his whole damned Cross UP remuda had been drifted plumb out of the country and a lot more questions of that kind.

Johnny had started to lie about it. Until this big iron-gray whiskered man walked over to where Johnny was wiping the stack of tin dishes and Johnny got a look at Black Ike Bassett's eyes. They were gray-green and cold as old winter ice and merciless. You couldn't look into that pair of eyes and tell a lie. So Johnny said Old Man Sam Benton had been here and gone. And like as not it would be weeks before he showed up here again at the horse camp where the Cross UP summered the big remuda.

"But I half-way look for another man," Johnny told the big horse thief boss, "to take my place. From what the Old Man told me, I reckon I'm fired."

"Fired fer what cause?" Black Ike Bassett wanted to know.

"I wasn't here at camp when the Old Man got here—" Johnny's face had reddened under its tan, "I'd bin to Rocky Point."

A taunting, mocking laugh had turned Johnny around. The tall black-haired Dude stood in the cabin doorway.

"Did you tell him where you'd bin, Tow-head?" grinned Dude. "You'd a busted a gut laughin', Ike, if you'd sighted this tow-headed horse wrangler ride up, soppin' wet, leadin' a two-bit paint Injun pony he'd fetched to the little sorrel-maned schoolmarm. She'd taken one look at him and busted out laughin'. Did you tell Sam Benton that Dude Bassett had beat your

time with the purty little sorrel-maned schoolmarm?"

"Did you tell Benton," Black Ike Bassett spoke too quietly, "that you'd run into five strangers at Rocky Point?"

"I told the Old Man nothin'," said Johnny Dillard. "He never give me an openin' to say anything. He was too busy rakin' me over the hot coals."

"So you lost your gal," grinned Dude Bassett, "and you lost your horse-wrangler job—now, ain't that just too damn' bad. You're a sorry sight, button. I got a mind to put you outa your misery—" Dude was fondling his fancy six-shooter. His eyes were gray-green like the eyes of Black Ike Bassett. They were father and son, Johnny figured.

The iron-gray horse thief boss finished asking his questions when he learned all he wanted to know.

But Dude kept up his nasty prodding. While the other three tough-looking horse thieves passed the jug they'd fetched from the Rocky Point saloon and egged Dude on.

They were pulling out at daybreak. As soon as there was enough daylight to cross the remuda. And from then on they would drift their stolen Cross UP remuda far and fast. Down the dim horse thief trail into Wyoming where there was a market for stolen horses.

But before they pulled out they would fix Johnny Dillard so that he couldn't talk. Johnny knew too much for the good of his own health. They made that plain enough in their talk. It was whiskey talk. And it had an ugly sound.

THE one they called Soapy was shifty-eyed, with dank dirty hair and dirty yellow whiskers. Lantern-jawed, with a Missouri nasal twang. He kept paring his fingernails with the big whetted blade of a barlow knife he claimed had spilled the guts of a few men on the ground.

The short, barrel-chested man who went by the name of Heavy was swarthy-skinned and sullen and the drunker he got the less he had to say. But his hard beady eyes never lost their glitter and he kept his thick back to the outside log wall of the cabin.

The horse thief named Speck had a skin that was pitted by old smallpox scars and the dirt grimed into the pits made his face a

repulsive mask. Speck was tall and raw-boned and his eyes were pale gray and bloodshot and slitted and the mouth under his jutting nose was a lipless slit. He was foul-mouthed and his jaw bulged with a cud of tobacco and he sprayed the ground around him with tobacco spit.

The shifty-eyed Soapy and the foul-mouthed Speck kept hoorawing Dude about the red-headed schoolmarm. Dude liked it. Speck's lewd remarks seemed to please and flatter Dude.

Black Ike Bassett paid no attention, apparently, to the foul-mouthed talk. He had the remuda tally and a list of the top horses in the Cross UP cavy and he studied it. And then he began marking the Cross UP brand in the dirt with a willow stick he'd whittled to a point. And he would work the Cross UP brand into some other brand and study it awhile, then rub it out with the heel of his big black-tufted hand and work the Cross UP into something else. And he kept it up and paid no apparent attention to the whiskey talk that dirtied and soiled the name and reputation of the red-haired schoolmarm at Rocky Point Crossing.

Johnny Dillard owned a six-shooter. And the Cross UP had furnished him with a .30-30 saddle carbine and cartridges to shoot coyotes and wolves. He kept his six-shooter in his warsack. The saddle carbine on wooden pegs set inside the log cabin wall. The warsack was on his bunk under his bed tarp. But Johnny dared not dig into it to get his six-shooter. Not that any of them would try to stop him. On the contrary, that was what Dude wanted him to do. So that Johnny would have a gun in his hand when Dude shot him.

THEY passed the jug and the talk got looser. Black Ike did not drink any whiskey. But he told Johnny to make a fresh pot of coffee. With whiskers on it. And he drank one big tin cupful after another.

Dude spiked his black coffee with booze. But he didn't get drunk. He would pull his fancy six-shooter and hook his long forefinger in the trigger guard and spin the gun. Keeping it pointed at Johnny. Thumbing back the gun hammer on each spin. Lowering it without pulling the trigger. And all the time he kept up his fight talk. And his gray-green eyes were bloodshot and slitted.

While Soapy and Speck tried their foul-mouthed utmost to out-do the other with their whiskey talk, Johnny Dillard felt sick enough to die. He called himself everything Dude named him. A white-livered, gutless coward. A damned cottontail rabbit.

It was the swarthy sullen Heavy who finally put a stop to their dirty talk.

"Didn't any of you foul mouths ever have a mother?"

The blued steel of the six-shooter in Heavy's thick hand glinted in the moon light.

They eyed the squat bulk of Heavy, his back against the log cabin. The gun in his hand. Even Dude's grin died. The silence was tense.

Black Ike rubbed out the brand he had made in the dirt. And looked up from under the low-pulled brim of his sweat-marked Stetson, his eyes cold and hard and merciless.

"Bust, that damn' jug, Dude. You fellers better grab what sleep you kin. It's the last you'll git till we reach Wyoming. And let the tow-headed kid alone, Dude. We're takin' him along."

II

WHEN Black Ike Bassett spoke, they listened. When he cracked the whip, they jumped.

Even his swaggering son, Dude, obeyed the horse thief boss' orders. But there was murder glittering in his bloodshot gray-green eyes and he voiced a question that the others wanted to ask.

"That tow-headed rabbit-hearted thing will be underfoot." Dude's upper lip lifted in a snarl. "What the hell good will he be to us?"

"That white-muzzled ol' Tex at the Rocky Point saloon," said Black Ike, "told me this Johnny Dillard kid would do to take along. Tex claims this towhead here was born an' raised along the Missouri River and he can't be beat for a river cowhand. He's got muskrat blood. Fu'thermore, this tow-headed Johnny knows every trail and blind trail in the badlands—which is more than we know. And so this towheaded Johnny is goin' to swim this Cross UP remuda for us in the mornin'. And he'll pilot this horse thief outfit down through the

badlands on the south side of the Missouri and on down the Outlaw Trail as far as we need his help—plumb to the Hole in the Wall country in Wyoming. He knows every damned foot of the Outlaw Trail, unless that ol' Tex Alvord is the biggest liar in Montana. And that's why we're takin' along this tow-headed Johnny."

Johnny Dillard stood there listening. His heart pounding like a drum. The blood pulsing through his veins warmed the chill of fear and melted the icy lump in his heart. Though he should have been all the more scared.

Because old Tex Alvord had really poured it on. Slow-spoken old Tex was shrewd and tough and wiser than a tree full of owls. And he knew every real outlaw who rode the dim trails. The Curry Gang. The Wild Bunch. The Hole in the Wall Gang. The really big-time outlaws who robbed banks and held up trains and rode their hard fast way. Tex's saloon at the Rocky Point Crossing on the Missouri was marked down on their map that they marked in the dirt, as Black Ike Bassett marked his worked brands. And those real outlaws with big bounties on their tough hides passed the word along that old Tex at Rocky Point Crossing was a man you could trust all the way. And Tex Alvord had never let them down.

By the same token that easy-going, slow-spoken old rascal who had quit punching cows to run his saloon, a place marked on the Outlaw Trail as a way station, could size a man up and seldom be wrong. And he could weed out the counterfeit renegades from the real outlaws who lived up to their own hard-bitten code.

And now Tex had thrown a big load into this Black Ike Bassett. Tex had strung out a long lie and fed it to this big cold-eyed iron-gray horse thief boss. And had dealt Johnny Dillard a hand to play.

Johnny Dillard had never been down the Outlaw Trail. To be sure, he had been born and raised here on the banks of the big, old, wide Missouri and he had been swimming horses and cattle across in high and low water since he could remember. He had worked for big outfits on both sides of the river, wrangling horses, nighthawking, riding the rough string, punching cows. But he had never ridden beyond those well-

known ranges. Once he got beyond the skyline he could see from the head of the brakes, he was going to be plumb lost. And no man knew that better than old Tex Alvord, who had known Johnny since he was a yearling.

So grizzled, tough, loyal, old Tex was dealing Johnny a dangerous hand to play. Tex must have seen him the other evening when he rode past the log cabin saloon where Tex was peddling his river booze to Black Ike Bassett and Soapy and Heavy and Speck—while Dude Bassett played his guitar and warbled his love songs to the red-headed schoolmarm across the river. Tex had watched him take the paint pony across—and fetch the gift-paint back and Tex had seen what a sorry sight he made and if Johnny came back alive that slow-spoken old hellion would crinkle his blue eyes and grin his slow grizzled whiskered grin and he'd horaw the pants off Johnny about the paint pony deal. But that would be when and if ever Johnny came back.

OLD TEX was dealing 'em from a cold-marked deck and he was gambling on Johnny being quick-witted and game enough to play out his hand. It was a man's job Tex was giving him. A tough man's job. It would require all the guts and brains and savvy Johnny Dillard had. And even if he was lucky the odds were stacked against Johnny. One little mistake and these horse thieves would kill him. But right now Johnny Dillard welcomed the chance to redeem himself. All he wanted was a fighting chance. A thousand-to-one gambling chance to clean his slate. Even if these renegade horse thieves murdered him in cold blood when they found out he had doublecrossed them.

Death itself was a small thing now. All Johnny asked for was the thousand-to-one chance of getting his job done before they killed him. And if Tex had been here now and called him off to one side and given Johnny his orders, the old rascal couldn't tell him any plainer than Black Ike told it right now. Tex was giving Johnny Dillard the job to piloting this horse thief gang and their stolen Cross UP remuda into the badlands and to delay them as much as he could along the trail and that would give Old Man Sam Benton and his Cross UP cowhands

time enough to ride out and around and get in ahead of the horse thief gang and set a gun trap for the horse thieves. That was the game and Tex had dealt Johnny his cards. All Johnny wanted was to get that job done. Then they could murder him and be damned.

And Tex Alvord and Old Man Sam Benton would say of Johnny Dillard that Johnny had the guts to play his string out. And Lorna Turner who had laughed at him, would feel almighty shamed and sorry, and if Johnny needed anything to spur him on, the memory of her ridicule did it. And when she stood there beside the grave of Johnny Dillard she wouldn't be mocking him with her laughter.

Johnny Dillard was, after all, just a cow-country tow-headed kid. With a kid's capacity for suffering.

"All right, Ike," Johnny heard Dude saying as they got ready to bed down for a few hours sleep on the ground with their saddle for a pillow and a sweaty saddle blanket for cover.

"All right, Ike. But when we're done with him, when this tow-headed horse jingler with mushrat blood has wore out his usefulness, lemme have 'im."

"He'll be yourn, Dude." Black Ike Bassett's voice was toneless. It matched the bleakness of his gray-green eyes.

Well, that was the final verdict. Put into words for Johnny to overhear where he squatted now on his bootheels with a cup of coffee. It was what he could figure on, regardless. It didn't throw any scare into him. Johnny had 'er made.

Mostly the songs of the cow country, songs never written, but composed and sung by some cowboy troubadour riding night guard or squatted on his hunkers beside a cow campfire, handed down by other cowboy singers, those songs were sad and plaintive. Songs that came out of the big lonesomeness of a cowhand's life. Songs that told of brave death. Sagas of outlaw deeds and the tragic end of an outlaw's unmarked lonely grave.

As these renegades took to the brush with their saddle blankets to sleep lightly, each apart and alone from the others, mistrustful, a gun gripped in the sleeper's hand, Dude Bassett prowled off alone in the night and his song drifted back out of the darkness.

Dude had a good voice for singing those range songs. And Johnny, squatted alone with his tin cup emptied, listened.

"Ob, bury me not on the lone prairiee—"

Johnny conjured up the picture of his own lonely grave. With perhaps a wooden slab to mark it. And on that slab, put there by Old Man Sam Benton, would be branded his epitaph:

JOHNNY DILLARD
HE DIED GAME

And Lorna Turner would come there alone, on the black-and-white paint pony she had once scorned and now reclaimed and rode and kept and would forever keep to remind her of Johnny, and she would be all in black. And her dark red hair would shine like polished copper in the moonlight. And she would kneel there beside Johnny's grave and the tears would well in her dark-brown eyes and those tears would fall unchecked on his grave. On the falling petals of the wild rose bush she had planted there with loving hands. And there alone in the moonlight Lorna would mourn with breaking heart the brave young cowboy who had died so bravely for the greatest cause a cowhand knows, a dying deathless loyalty, to his outfit. And Lorna would vow never to wed. Because the brave young cowboy whose love she had scorned with heartless laughter was her one and only love and he lay dead, wrapped in his bed tarp shroud, buried in a badlands grave. And off in the night a gray wolf would howl at a cold white moon.

"Rattle your hocks." Black Ike Bassett's toneless voice behind him in the night's black shadows jerked Johnny up onto his feet. "Git in the cabin and start rustlin' breakfast. And pile the grub high. It's the last square meal we'll eat till we reach the Hole in the Wall. Git in there and git at it."

III

THE Missouri River, there at the Cross UP horse-camp crossing, was wide and out in the channel there was about a hundred-yard strip of deep swimming water and the current was swift and a man could get into trouble out there if he was a green hand at swimming a horse. Or if he was cowardly.

None of the horse thief outfit were exactly green hands. They had swum horses before. But Heavy claimed he couldn't swim a lick and he asked Johnny to pick him out a good river horse. And Johnny told Heavy to dab his ketch rope on a big flax-maned sorrel.

"Flaxy will take you acrost," Johnny told Heavy, "without wettin' your saddle skirts."

"Then Flaxy will do," grinned Dude Bassett. And he roped the big flaxy-maned gelding before Heavy got his loop built.

Heavy spat in the corral dust and his beady, black eyes glittered wickedly in the early dawn. But he let it go at that.

Black Ike Bassett stood there in the middle of the round corral where they had the remuda, his loop back across his big shoulder.

"Gimme a water dog," he told Johnny.

Johnny pointed out a big, brown gelding. "Brown Jug," he told the horse thief boss, "will pack you acrost if you got a loose cinch an' don't try to rein him."

And he told Heavy to ketch a blue roan gelding. He said Blue was a river hoss and a good 'un.

Johnny was sorely tempted to give Soapy and Speck each a horse that would turn belly-up out in the channel. But he thought better of it because this wasn't the time or place to gum the cards and a ruckus of any kind when the sign wasn't right, would spoil the plan Johnny had figured out for trapping the horse thief gang. So he mounted Soapy and Speck both on good river horses.

Johnny Dillard grinned a little when he caught and saddled a big line-backed buckskin. Buck was Old Man Sam Benton's top river horse. Johnny had broken Buck and had begun swimming the Missouri on him when he was a green bronc and the big buckskin swam high in the water and you could turn him around in mid-channel and handle big Buck in swimming water like you'd handle a top cutting horse on dry land.

The water looked wide and muddy and cold as a gambler's heart there in the gray dawn. There were two hundred and eighty-five head of saddle horses in the remuda and Johnny knew every one of them by name and by habit and he knew the faults and virtues of every gelding in the Cross UP

remuda. And he told Black Ike Bassett and his horse thief gang that once he got the leaders into the water all they had to do was set back and not crowd the rest of the remuda too close, just keep 'em headed for the river and not let anything break back. To not holler and yell or slap their quirts or doubled ropes. Just take it easy.

"I'll take the lead," said Johnny. "They'll foller me plumb acrost."

Black Ike had produced another jug. To warm their guts and make 'em water-brave. Swimmin' likker, he called it. Borrowing the name old Tex Alvord had coined for the booze the ramrods of big outfits fed their cowhands when they crossed their cattle at Rocky Point.

Johnny needed no rotgut booze to tackle the river. He rode in ahead of the remuda and Black Ike and Heavy pointed the leaders in after him and the rest of the remuda took the water without too much bother.

RIVER work is dangerous and it calls for cold nerve and guts and level-headed thinking. You can't rein a horse up in deep swift water or he'll come over backwards. You use your hat or splash water alongside the head of a swimming horse to change his course and you don't want to get water in your horse's ears. And if he sulls and quits swimming you'd better slide off and grab his tail. And if your horse commences to tire and paw water you'd better quit your saddle and grab his mane or tail. He'll swim out if it can be done. But he'll paw you under if you get in front and he'll climb you down in under and cave your skull in or drown you. You go into water like that with your cinch loosened enough to give your horse all the best of it. And if you can't keep from tightening your bridle reins you'd better throw 'em away. Jerk off the headstall. And you'll stand a better chance. Those are the kind of instructions an old river hand will give a pilgrim. Johnny wasn't wasting his breath on these horse thieves. If any of 'em drowned, there went one less horse thief to shoot or hang when Johnny Dillard piloted this horse thief gang and their stolen Cross UP remuda by a roundabout trail through the broken badlands to the old DHS horse camp at the head of the brakes on the south side of the Missouri.

Johnny swam big Buck across the swift channel and looked back across his shoulder and across the heads of the swimming remuda. He never had tired watching the sight of swimming horses or cattle. The water soaked him to the thighs of his faded denim Levi overalls. He felt the cold hard steel of his six-shooter he wore tucked into his waistband. And there was a .30-30 carbine in his saddle scabbard. He could reach the south bank and get across the sandbar and into the high thick willows and line his saddle gun sights and shoot every damned horse thief out of his saddle before they got across. That thought milled wildly in his brain. Then he discarded it. Johnny wasn't a gun-slinger. He wasn't any killer. He didn't have cold blood in his veins. He hadn't the guts for murder.

Johnny Dillard discarded the bushwhacker idea. But he could not resist the urge to show off a little in front of these men who had made him suffer so much humiliation. Old Tex Alvord at Rocky Point had called Johnny the best river cowhand along the big old wide Missouri. All right, then, Johnny would show these tough sons how it was done and add a few fancy curly-queues of his own.

The lead horses were lunging into shallower water and headed for shore and Johnny reined big Buck around and headed back along the wide mass of swimming horses. He kept upstream and big Buck was hardly blowing and liked the swimming water and it was no trick at all and a sort of game between the big buckskin gelding and the young cowhand who had river-broken Buck for Old Man Sam Benton. Johnny's saddle skirts were still dry. He'd pulled off his boots and tied them together by the bootstraps and hung them from the saddle-horn. He pulled a sack of tobacco and cigarette papers from his shirt pocket and dropped his knotted bridle reins over the saddle-horn. He rolled a cigarette and shoved it in a corner of his mouth.

Heavy was doing all right. He had sense enough to let his bridle reins slack and his horse was taking him across. But there was a grim set look on his face and his swarthy skin had yellowed a little and when Johnny swung big Buck a little downstream when they met and passed in mid-channel Johnny read the fear of drowning in the man's

black eyes. And Heavy's grin was forced. Johnny took off his hat and took one of the matches he'd shoved in under the leather sweatband and scratched the match on his thumbnail and lit his cigarette.

"You kin wade ashore from here," Johnny couldn't help but pour it on for the benefit of Dude and Black Ike Bassett who were right behind Heavy and upstream from the swimming remuda, "without gettin' your boots damp."

THEY were in mid-channel when Johnny met Dude. Dude's white teeth were bared and his grin was flat-lipped like a snarl and his eyes were glass green and he was drunk and scared of the water and Johnny headed big Buck straight for the big flax-maned sorrel Dude had taken away from Heavy at the corral. It was a game Johnny and other river-raised kids had played when they were young. Rassling on horseback out in the swift current. You headed your horses straight at each other and then swung to one side in passing and you grabbed at each other and the rider who came unseated was the loser. It was played barebacked, without saddles. It took expert riders and swimmers and good horses. Johnny had no intention of grabbing Dude. He just wanted to see what the spur jingler would do when you rode at him out in the channel.

Dude's face whitened and his eyes went glassy and his forced grin was gone and he was slack-jawed. When he stared at Johnny the hatred that had glittered there in his gray-green eyes was wiped out by stark fear of the swift, deep water that swirled around him and his eyes were green-glazed. Johnny grinned and the cigarette smoke drifted out through the grin and he watched the panicky Dude do just what Johnny figured he would do.

Dude yanked on his bridle reins. The big Flaxy gelding had been swimming high and easy. But the best river horse in the world will come over backwards in deep water if you yank back on a wicked spade bit.

Dude let out a wild terror-stricken yell when the big gelding came over backwards on him. Horse and rider went under and the water swirled and Dude's yell choked off and bubbled.

Johnny leaned from his saddle and

grabbed the back of Dude's shirt collar. He had his saddle rope coiled in his right hand. He yanked Dude's head and shoulders up out of the water and shook a loop in his rope and dropped it down over Dude's sodden shoulders and under his flailing arms and let go of Dude's red-flannel shirt. Johnny swung big Buck around downstream and took his dallies around the saddle-horn. Looking back across his shoulder and grinning with the half-smoked cigarette hanging from a corner of his grin, he gave Dude just enough rope to drop him behind Buck's rump and hind legs and headed for the south bank. Dragging the half-drowned, sputtering, gasping, struggling horse thief through the water like he was dragging a bawling bull calf to the branding fire.

There was only a short strip of swimming water and then Buck's front feet hit bottom and then his hind feet found it and the big buckskin gelding lunged ashore and Johnny dragged Dude through the shallow water and up onto the sandbar and across the sand for a ways and Dude was vomiting water in gasping sobs when Johnny leaned down from his saddle and jerked his loop free. Leaving the range-dude horse thief lying there sick and half-drowned his fancy range-dude clothes sodden.

The Flaxy horse had swum ashore and stood blowing on the sandbar.

Johnny rode away and around the bulk of the remuda that had crossed and he went about his job of handling the remuda as if nothing had happened. Coiling his saddle rope and strapping it back on his saddle.

Every man in the horse thief outfit had watched it. There was a hard-lipped grin on Heavy's swarthy face. Soapy and Speck, who had followed the drags across, were coming ashore. Black Ike Bassett had ridden up to where his big Dude son lay sodden and sick on the sandbar and the horse thief boss sat his saddle and looked down at his son with a black scowl.

Johnny started the remuda on. And when he had the horses started he took a quick look back across his shoulder and they didn't seem to pay any attention when Johnny cut the black-and-white paint pony out and hazed him off through the high willows and out of sight and dropped the pinto where the grass was good. Then he rode back and picked up the remuda again.

Black Ike Bassett had got Dude back up onto his horse. Dude was soaking wet and his face was a grayish yellow and his eyes were still glazed with fear and he was shivering and shuddering with chill and nausea and when he took a drink of booze from Soapy's bottle he puked it up before it got time to warm his belly.

"If that little red-headed schoolmarm could see yuh now—" Soapy took a drink and corked the bottle.

"Sing us a song, Dude," leered Speck, who grabbed the bottle from Soapy and pulled the cork with his yellow teeth and drank, "Sing us that 'un about Where the Silv'ry Colorado Wends Its Way."

Black Ike's heavy, shaggy, iron-gray brows were tufted in an ugly scowl. He gave Johnny a hard look and his grin was mirthless.

"You better keep outa Dude's gun range," Black Ike told Johnny.

Johnny had managed to slip his six-shooter out of his warsack and he packed it in the waistband of his overalls. And no-



body had tried to stop him when he slid the .30-.30 carbine into his saddle-scabbard. He was armed now. And he'd keep an eye on Dude. And if Dude crowded him, Johnny had his mind made up to take the gamble and pull his gun.

Black Ike Bassett could have read Johnny's thoughts. Because he told Heavy to help Johnny point the remuda yonderly. For Speck and Soapy to button up their damned hoorawing and ride the swing when they strung out the horse cavvy.

"Me'n Dude," Black Ike Bassett growled like a surly silver-tip grizzly, "will fetch up the drags. And take care we ain't close-trailed. You Towhead, point the trail out. And don't make no mistake."

Johnny pointed the strung-out remuda along a wagon trail the round-up outfits used and he followed it a mile or two and then swung the point off the round-up trail and it was a winding dim trail that led nowhere.

IV

JOHNNY DILLARD had wondered why this horse thief gang traveled as light as they did. No pack horses carrying grub. No beds packed on pack-horses. Black Ike Bassett's horse thief gang traveled light as a feather. Johnny didn't ask why. But he could figure out the reason. The Law must have given them a close hard run of it somewheres along their back-trail. So that they'd had to leave their camp outfit and tarp-covered bedrolls behind.

It was noon when Johnny piloted them to an abandoned trapper's cabin in the heart of the badlands. There was a creek there. Water and feed for the horses. But no grub for the empty-bellied horse thieves.

Soapy and Speck were complaining about the wrinkles in their bellies. The rotgut booze had died out in them and they were hungry. And they were saying how good a pot of black coffee would go down.

Heavy said he had a sack of salt tied in the slicker on his saddle and a butcher knife. And he aimed to have beef for supper. And if a man couldn't live off the country he dodged through he hadn't no business being a damned horse thief.

They changed horses at the noon camp and Black Ike asked Johnny where they'd camp for the night and how long they could afford to roundside here.

Johnny said they'd camp on feed and water around sundown. They could take an hour or two here and make it to there before dark without crowding the remuda too hard.

"It's an outlaw hideout," Johnny lied glibly without meeting Black Ike's gray-green probing stare. "There should be a grub cache there—if a man knew where to look for it."

"Then you better look," said Dude, "till you find it."

"Wait till we git there," suggested Soapy. "Anybody got a crock rolled in his slicker? A man kin travel on likker if he's got it."

Dude was eyeing Johnny from under the low-pulled brim of his hat. He was dried out by now and no longer sick but he wasn't doing any singing or spur jingling and he was sullen and ugly tempered. Black Ike had given him hell and he was itching to take it out of Johnny's hide. But Black Ike had told him to lay off the Towhead till they got

to the far end of the trail where they wouldn't need this Towheaded Johnny any more. Then Dude could kill the Towhead any way he damned pleased.

Black Ike untied his saddle slicker and produced a bottle. He twisted the cork out with two knife blades and told them to go light on the booze and one drink apiece was the limit and he didn't mean a hog guzzling drink, either. But Dude tipped up the bottle when it came around to him and he drank half a pint of the raw whiskey without lowering the bottle from his mouth. And his bloodshot eyes were ugly when he corked it and shoved the bottle into the deep pocket of his chaps.

Black Ike glared at his Dude son. Then shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Mebbyso," he said tonelessly, "you need it for a brave-maker, Dude."

Dude flushed darkly. But he didn't give Black Ike any argument. He stared at the remuda that was scattered out and grazing. After a while he looked up and stared at Johnny.

"Where's that paint pony, Towhead?" he snarled.

"Dropped out somewheres back yonder," said Johnny. "You couldn't expect a li'l ol' Injun pony to keep up."

"Damnit to hell," Dude grabbed the excuse to pick on Johnny, "I wanted that paint pony."

"You shoulda put a bell on the spotted thing," said Soapy.

"Bell, hell! That damned Towhead cut that paint back a-purpose."

Black Ike had made Johnny take the bells off the half-dozen horses that were bunch quitters. Leaders that were apt to stray off with a following of other horses. The horse thief boss didn't want their location noised along the trail or at night by horse bells.

Black Ike put a quick brake on the argument before it got under way. He told them to quit their damned yapping and grab what rest they needed. They'd be standing horse guard tonight.

They holed up then in the brush and slept. Black Ike told Johnny to stay awake and keep his remuda from scattering like a shepherd's brains. To have the remuda bunched and ready to drift in an hour. For Johnny to tell time by the sun.

Johnny was tired and sleepy and he

wanted to bush up and get an hour's shut-eye. But he stayed in his saddle and dozed while he kept any of the bunch quitters from drifting back. Tonight they were bound to spill a few horses. Bound to. Johnny had nighthawked this Cross UP remuda too many nights to be fooled. There were half a dozen bunch-quitters. Unless you belled 'em they could slip off in the dark and head back. Taking a few of their horse-cronies along. And that was what Johnny figured on when he so-willingly took their bells off. Old Man Sam Benton could follow their trail by the horses they were bound to spill.

Six men in the outfit. Four guards to stand. Two hours to each guard. Two men on guard. The two men on first guard would be called to stand last guard.

There was no horse pasture where Johnny was camping this horse thief outfit. Only a log cabin and a barn and a cattle shed and fenced-in haystacks and it wasn't any outlaw camp. It was one of the DHS line camps. Deserted except for the winter months when a couple of DHS cowhands stayed there to feed cattle that needed hay to get through the winter.

Tonight a few of the Cross UP horses would slip away and drift back the way they had come. Grazing back towards their home range. And they would be sighted and picked up by the Cross UP cowhands.

Johnny used thoughts like that to keep him awake in the mid-day sun as he day-herded the remuda. He was doing all right—so far. Riding his luck along. Not crowding it. He'd got halfway even with Dude Bassett. He hoped to pay Dude off in full when the sign come right.

IT WAS the first time in his life that Johnny Dillard had ever given any real thought to using a gun on a man. He'd had his share of rough-and-tumble fights. He'd won a few. He'd been licked as many times as he'd come out on top of a ruckus. But he had never seriously thought about shooting a man. Until now. And he knew that when the showdown came he would have to shoot Dude Bassett or be shot. Shoot first and shoot to kill. And he had a notion that, for all his whiskey talk, Dude Bassett was a fast gun slinger. He'd bragged about killing a man or two and nobody had called him a

liar. They seemed to know about Dude having done some killing along the back-trail somewheres. And now when Johnny got to thinking about shooting Dude he commenced sweating. And it wasn't sun sweat. It felt clammy and cold and he wiped his moist palms along his overalls. And he covertly practiced pulling his six-shooter and he wished he had a cartridge belt buckled on and the big single-action Colt .45 in an open holster. Because the gun barrel kept hanging up when he pulled it.

He was riding along at a walk past a thick clump of buck-brush. Practicing. When a barely audible voice came from the brush.

"Knock off that front sight, Towhead," it was Heavy's voice, "and it won't ketch in your pants."

V

JOHNNY DILLARD piloted the horse thief outfit to the DHS line camp without any further jangling or argument or trouble. Every man of them was hungry and weary and the whiskey died out in their guts and they were ornery and had a horn drooped and it wouldn't take much to start a fight. What they needed was a big bait of hot grub. But they were going empty-bellied, so far as Johnny was concerned.

"Where's that grub cache you was talkin' about?" growled Black Ike Bassett when they reached the line camp a little after sundown.

"If it ain't in that dugout cellar," Johnny told the horse thief boss, "I wouldn't know where to look for it."

Johnny was lying. He had camped here last spring with a DHS cowhand while they were hunting strayed horses. And the DHS man had showed him where there was always a supply of grub cached for just such occasions. But the grub wasn't in the dugout where camp robbers would be bound to look first. It was down in a trap-door cellar out behind the cabin in the lean-to shed and the trap-door concealed by stove wood piled in the lean-to. You pawed aside the stove wood and lifted the trap-door and there was enough grub to feed a man for a month.

Johnny was as hungry as ever he had been in his life. But he wasn't feeding this horse thief outfit. He'd led them to believe there would be real grub for supper. And at

the time he probably meant it. But as the day wore along he got to thinking it over and by sundown he'd made up his mind. He'd enjoy starving to death, Johnny told himself grimly, and enjoy the pangs of hunger, just watching and listening to this horse thief gang gripe about the wrinkles in their bellies.

Dude rode up in time to overhear. "If there ain't grub in that dugout, you Towhead, you'll look till you find it. Or I'll make you wish you'd bin born dead."

Johnny grinned flatly. He ignored Dude. And spoke to Black Ike. He was getting bolder, more sure of himself. He looked the horse thief boss square in the eye and lied like hell.

"This is a hideout camp the Wild Bunch use. Kid Curry and his gang wintered here once. You seen how we got here. But unless you know the trail out you'll spend a week on the wrong trails, backin' your tracks outa blind canyons. Better tell Dude to postpone it unless you got a lot of time to waste huntin' a trail outa here."

A .30-.30 carbine cracked a few hundred yards away. Black Ike and Dude jerked their saddle guns. And they did it quick.

Heavy's voice sounded, quiet-toned, mocking, from beyond the brush. From where the sound of the shot had come.

"Grub pile! Come an' git it when it quits a-kickin'."

There had been some cattle watering there at the creek when they drifted the remuda in on water. Heavy had picked out a fat yearling and shot it. And he had stuck it and had commenced skinning off the hide by the time the others got there.

Speck and Soapy had gone into the dugout and found no grub and came out cussing and bellyaching.

Heavy told them they wouldn't need salt on their meat. Just lean over and shed their damned tears on beef.

They changed horses and built a campfire and broiled the freshly butchered beef and washed it down with crick water.

Black Ike put Heavy and Johnny on first guard. That meant they would be called to stand last guard, when the others had stood their second and third guards.

"You'll call Soapy an' Speck," Black Ike told Heavy when he handed him a big, silver watch with a whang leather string tied

in the stem-ring. "Me'n Dude will go on third guard. We'll call you an' the Towhead for last guard."

Heavy asked Black Ike if it had occurred to him that by stretching each guard from two to three hours and two men to each guard shift, nobody would be getting the dirty end of the stick.

Black Ike Bassett said yes, that he'd considered it and then sluffed off the notion.

"It better occur to you right now, Heavy," Black Ike Bassett had his hand on his gun and his eyes were bleak, "I'm ramroddin' this outfit. When I need your advice I'll let you know. And don't shoot a gun no more till you got it pointed at a man. Now take this Towhead thing and git out there on horse guard. And another thing, don't be settin' that watch ahead to cheat yourself a half-hour's sleep."

Heavy grinned. "There'd be no average in it. Me'n the Towhead would still be gittin' the worst of it if we set the guard watch ahead half an hour. That half-hour would be rode out on last guard. Let's go Johnny—"

Heavy was the only man in the outfit who called him Johnny. The others called him Towhead and splattered it with profanity. Heavy was tough as a boot and sullen-mannered and he had all the earmarks of a killer. He hadn't spoken more than half a dozen times to Johnny but when he did, he had something to say. And he wasn't cussing Johnny out for a Towhead.

THERE was good feed here. And the remuda scattered and grazed and even the bunch quitters were getting their bellies full before they took a notion to drift back. Johnny had nighthawked this Cross UP remuda long enough to savvy the habits of every horse in the cavvy and he told Heavy they might as well take it easy because the long day's drive had emptied their bellies and they'd graze till long past midnight and they'd be a little leg weary to travel far.

Heavy told Johnny to get himself an hour's sleep. That nobody could go on forever with his eyes open. And a kid needed more sleep than an older man. And that when the showdown came Johnny would have need to be wide awake. Clear-eyed, Heavy grinned, and bushy-tailed.

Johnny was surprised when Heavy

grimmed like that. It wiped off that sullen look and put a sort of grim twinkle in his opaque black eyes. Heavy seemed to be in a better humor for some reason.

When he used a gun to kill his beef, Black Ike had raised hell. The noise of that damned gun, said the horse thief boss, could be heard clear to hell and gone. No telling who it would fetch a-runnin' to see who had shot what. And if Heavy wanted to butcher why hadn't he roped and hogtied his beef and cut the critter's throat. And the big iron-gray horse thief boss had growled a-plenty and Heavy had taken a cussing without saying a word. But he's sulled and bowed-up and his opaque black eyes had glittered dangerously.

Now, alone with Johnny, the burly, swarthy Heavy shook off his sullen habit. And he told Johnny to bush up and get some sleep.

"You ain't the only one that Black Ike's got marked for killin'. It'll be me'n you, Johnny. Back to back. But don't let on like I said so."

Johnny wanted to ask questions but those opaque black eyes stopped him. But Heavy wasn't lying and it bolstered up Johnny's courage to know that he had some kind of a friend in this horse thief outfit.

Johnny rode in behind the brush and got off his horse and lay down on the ground. He was sound asleep almost before he had his towhead pillowed on one arm and his gun in his hand while he slept.

His sleep was torn by nightmares. He jerked awake, bathed in cold sweat. He was on his feet, gripping his six-shooter, pawing the heavy-lidded sleep from his eyes with his free hand.

The remuda was grazing. Pretty much in the same shape they'd been when he went to sleep, he didn't know how long ago. But there was no sign of Heavy. Heavy wasn't in sight.

Johnny stood there for a few seconds, every nerve taut, his senses alert. And some instinct warned him of danger. The horse thieves had gone off separately to bush up and get their sleep. Not a man, not a saddled horse in sight—the remuda scattered and grazing in the moonlight—peaceful as you'd want it—but something was wrong and Johnny sensed it. He mounted and rode out from behind the brush and around the

grazing remuda like a nighthawk would. His bridle reins in his left hand. His right hand gripping the six-shooter he laid across his saddle between the saddle fork and his lean belly. Somewhere off in the night an owl hooted. And after a few moments another hoot owl gave answer. There was no sign of Heavy who should be sitting his horse somewheres—

Johnny circled the grazing remuda. Counting the bunch-quitters—tallying the horses that were off-colored for markers. A flea-bitten gray—an apaloosa—a bald-faced gelding—a strawberry roan—the big bay with the gotch ears that belonged in Old Man Sam Benton's private string. The Cross UP remuda was all there.

"Where in hell's that damned Heavy?"

It was Black Ike's growl and it came from behind some heavy buckbrush and then the horse thief boss rode out a little but not into the light of the big lopsided white moon. Black Ike Bassett sat his horse back in the dark shadows of the brush. Not fifty feet from where Johnny had pulled up, startled by the big man's growling challenge. Johnny saw the saddle gun gripped in Black Ike Bassett's big hands. Its blued steel barrel glinted.

Johnny had to think fast. And make his lie sound natural. He lifted his voice with the desperate hope that Heavy would hear him.

"Heavy thought he heard somethin' off yonder. He slipped off to kinda scout around—"

"Damnit to hell, you needn't holler. I ain't deaf. Whichaway'd he go?"

"Kinda circlin'." Johnny made a wide gesture with his arm.

"Can't you open that mouth of yourn," growled Black Ike, "without squawlin' like a panther?"

"I reckon I must be kinda spooked," said Johnny. He was clammy with cold sweat.

"What's the rip?" called Dude from behind another brush patch. "That Towhead bin up to somethin'? Where's that there Heavy from the Cypress Hills?"

"The Towhead claims Heavy heard somethin'," Black Ike's growl was ugly now, "and he rode off to prowl around. I give him and the rest of this outfit strict orders to call me if he heard or sighted anything that wasn't right."

Then they heard brush crack and the sound of shod hoofs and they sighted Heavy. He was riding up out of the scrub pines in the broken badlands and he was alone, his saddle gun in the crook of his arm.

"Them badlands cattle," Heavy said carelessly, "water at night."

If Heavy was aware of the fact that Black Ike and Dude were there in the brushy shadow with their guns in their hands, he gave no sign of it.

"Black Ike and Dude," Johnny voiced a warning to Heavy, "yonder. They're uneasy."

"Yeah." Heavy reined up. "A horse thief's nights is full of spooks thataway. You kin bed down again, Ike—them badlands cattle water at night."

Heavy struck a match and took a look at the guard watch.

"Lacks only ten minutes till second guard time. How does a man go about callin' Soapy and Speck? They're holed up somewhere like coyotes."

Soapy and Speck were awake. A horse thief sleeps uneasy and lightly. They rode up out of the brush complaining about the racket that robbed them of a good quarter-hour's shut-eye.

Heavy said it was only ten minutes too early by the guard watch but he wouldn't make a liar outa any man for a lousy little old five minutes.

"Here's the guard watch, Soapy," Heavy handed him Black Ike's big silver watch with its whang leather string. "Call Dude in plenty time to let him brush his hair an' shine his boots. Come along, Johnny, before we git talked outa our night's sleep."

Heavy led the way. He rode off about three hundred yards and then reined up and dismounted and slipped the bridle off his horse and used his saddle rope for a picket rope. While Johnny slipped a pair of raw-hide hobbles on his night horse and pulled off the bridle.

"You're doin' all right, Johnny." Heavy spoke in a low tone.

That was all Heavy said. But Johnny knew that Heavy had been up to something and Johnny's loud voice had called him back and it had been some kind of a close shave for Heavy.

Heavy was awake and he shook Johnny awake before they were called to go

on last guard. They met Dude when the latter rode out to locate them.

"How'd you know it was time to go on guard?" asked Dude.

"My gardeen angel woke me, Dude. 'Santo Diablo.'" Heavy grinned flatly. "Patron saint of the horse thief."

"You part Mex?"

"Nope. Black Scot. Me'n Johnny's got the remuda. Git your beauty sleep, Dude."

VI

JOHNNY DILLARD did a thorough job of losing himself and the stolen Cross UP remuda and the horse thief gang that next day. The outfit wound up in a blind box canyon where the only water was brackish and bitter and the ground was treacherous with soaphole bogs, white-crusts like lime on the surface and depthless black bog beneath the inch-thick alkali crust.

The grass was rank swamp grass and where the alkali crust was broken the black bog stank of sulphur and decay. And where they had come into the wide canyon there was a wide strip of barren alkali where the horse hoofmarks showed up like so much black print on a sheet of white paper.

It had taken an hour to get the remuda into the blind box canyon. And they would waste at least another hour back trailing out of it. And if the horse thieves were close-trailed they had left plain sign to follow and this box canyon could be a natural trap.

Soapy and Speck were uneasy and ready to coyote. Dude had lost all of his spur jingler swagger and his horse had bogged and he'd had to quit his saddle and flounder out and drag his horse out and the stinking black mud plastered him and he was a mess. He was still cleaning the sticky black mud from his silver-mounted pearl-handled six-shooter.

They were empty-bellied and ugly-tempered. Black Ike Bassett was in a murderous frame of mind. He cursed Johnny in a flat-toned voice.

"If I figgered you'd done this a-purpose I'd hogtie you, by the hell and drop your live carcass into that bog hole. You got us into this blind canyon. Now git us out!"

"I reckon," Johnny repeated, "I got lost—"

"Git us out!"

"These canyons," said Johnny, "look too much alike. Only way out I know, is the same way we got here. It'll be dark if we don't git started. It'll be moonrise anyhow by the time we git the remuda back to where we come into the canyon. Mebbyso we better dry camp here."

"Git us out." Black Ike growled. There was a saddle gun in his hand.

Black Ike Bassett was like some big silvertip grizzly that smells danger. His eyes were cold gray-green and murderous. His growl saw-edged. He sat his horse like he was bunched and taut-muscled and his nerves keyed like fiddle strings. The horse thief boss was deadly and dangerous. Ready to kill. In his big, black-haired paw the saddle carbine was handy as a six-shooter. It pointed at Johnny's slim belly.

"Dude!" Black Ike's low growl had carrying power. Dude heard it and rode up, mud-plastered, foul-tempered.

"Ride close herd on this Towhead. You bin rarin' to kill him. Mebbyso you'll git the chance. We're takin' this remuda out the way we come. If we git held up on the way out, gut shoot the Towhead."

"It'll be a pleasure," Dude bared his white teeth.

"Soapy!" Black Ike's growl sounded again. "Speck!"

They rode up with their guns in their hands. Uneasy, they acted and looked for all the world like a pair of coyotes. Black Ike pulled a bottle from his saddle pocket and bit the cork out and spat it on the ground. He was handing it towards Speck when Dude spurred in between and grabbed the bottle and tilted it. He drank the rotgut booze like it was water. Then handed the bottle with is badly lowered contents to Speck and Soapy. Black Ike glowered at his big son but said nothing.

Heavy rode up alongside Johnny. Looking sullen and ugly. His hand on his six-shooter. Black Ike eyed him narrowly.

"I ain't trusted you too far," Black Ike told Heavy, "since you throwed in with us. When the damned Mounties jumped us and we had to leave our pack outfit and gatherment of stolen horses back yonder in the Cypress Hills acrost the Canadian line. I got no more reason to trust you now than I had when you throwed in with us in the

Cypress Hills. This Towhead has piloted us into what might turn out to be a damned gun trap. You bin halfway sidin' the Towhead. I give Dude his orders to gut-shoot the Towhead if anybody is layin' in behind the brush at the mouth of this blind box canyon to stop us. I'll take care of you, personal, at the first sign of trouble. Understand?"

"If you was to put it in writin'," said Heavy, "you couldn't make it no plainier." His opaque black eyes stared back. Then deliberately he looked at the gun in Black Ike's hand. And his grin was twisted, flat-lipped.

BLACK IKE BASSETT looked like he was in the notion of gut-shooting Heavy right then.

Dude's thumb was on the hammer of his fancy six-shooter.

Speck and Soapy shifted uneasily in their saddles.

"Mebbyso," said the big iron-gray horse thief boss, "me'n Dude better git the job done right now. You know ary reason why we shouldn't?"

Johnny Dillard was listening to every word. But his eyes watched Dude. And the silver-mounted, pearl-handled six-shooter in Dude's hand. This was as close to sudden death as he'd ever been. But Johnny wasn't scared. Perhaps he was borrowing courage from Heavy. Working on the wild hope he'd got from a remark Heavy had made hours ago when Johnny had piloted this horse thief outfit into the blind box canyon.

"You're doin' all right, Johnny."

"You know ary reason," repeated Black Ike Bassett, "why we shouldn't kill you an' the Towhead thing?"

"Nobody wants to die," said Heavy, "but that ain't the point. The noise of a gun right now would shore spring the trap on you. If there is a gun trap set. Nobody's beggin' off. You're ramroddin' this horse thief outfit—have at it!"

Speck and Soapy were cold-sweating. The booze was warming their guts. Soapy threw the empty bottle away.

"Let's git the hell outa here!" Soapy's voice whined.

"Yeah." Speck's pock-marked face was a vicious mask. "Quit this damned augerin'. Let's drift yonderly."

THE remuda had been bunched and started back. The horses didn't like this box canyon with its soaphole bogs and stinking water and rank swamp grass. The leaders were already strung out and headed out of the high-walled canyon and the drags needed but little hazing along.

Black Ike Bassett cocked an eye at the lowering sun. It was dropping behind the badlands skyline. In an hour it would be dark. Black Ike shared the uneasiness of his horse thief gang. The canyon walls were closing them in and a hunted man wants a trail out and away.

"All right," growled Black Ike. "Soapy, Speck. You wanta git goin'. Start movin' them horses to hell outa here. Heavy, take the damn' Towhead, an fall in behind them drags and haze 'em along. Me'n Dude will be close behind you two gents. Anybody holds up them horses down the canyon an' tries to stop Soapy an' Speck, me'n Dude will shoot you an' the Towhead where your galluses cross. Rattle your hocks, you two!"

The remuda was drifting down the canyon. Speck and Soapy, anxious to get out of the box canyon, were riding up in the lead. And the remuda was close-bunched and traveling at a trot and fanning out across the wide white alkali strip at the canyon's mouth. The sun was down. Shadows thickening in the canyon. Somewhere beyond its high walls and from the buckbrush and scrub pines flanking the alkali strip, came the sound of a hoot owl. From the other side of the canyon's flat bare alkali mouth the owl hoot was answered.

Heavy rode alongside Johnny. His grin twisted. His opaque black eyes glittered.

"That's it, Johnny. Your Cross UP outfit's about to spring the wolf trap on us. You'll need all the guts you got, boy. See that brush yonder just this side of the alkali flat? That's where me'n you make our stand—if our luck holds. Ride into them drags, when we git close to the brush. Lay along your horse's neck. Spur into the brush. I'll be with you but don't bother lookin' for me. Watch Dude. I'll take Black Ike. We'll be in the middle of the drag end of the remuda and laid along on the far side of our horses' necks; Injun ridin'. Won't take ten seconds to hit the brush. Quit your pony. Take your saddle gun. It's me'n you. And Black Ike Bassett and Dude Bassett. Shoot to kill. You

bin doin' all right, Johnny. Keep it up. Here we go—duck!"

Johnny and Heavy had crowded the drags close. Now they spurred into the bunched horses and Johnny grabbed his saddle-horn with his right hand and swung himself down and forward along the neck of his horse and all of him that was exposed was his right leg and he hooked his spur in the cantle of his saddle and all around him were loose horses and his horse was headed cross-wise and then the brush raked his head and shoulders and tore off his hat and he quit his saddle and landed sprawling in the brush, his saddle carbine gripped in his right hand. His horse spooked off with its empty saddle. And it was all done in a few seconds. He heard the crack of gunfire and felt a stabbing burning rip along his thigh as a .30-30 bullet plowed a long shallow furrow along his saddle-muscled thigh. Then he was crouched in the brush and his saddle gun gripped in both hands and the box canyon crashed and echoed with the roaring explosion of gunfire.

JOHNNY caught one brief glimpse of Heavy's riderless horse as it stampeded on down the canyon in the midst of the remuda. But there was no sign of Heavy.

No time to look around. Dude Bassett was charging the brush. Crouched low in his saddle and ducking his head like a kid dodging rocks in a schoolyard rock fight as the bullets whined and snarled. Then Dude rode Johnny down. Rode the hated Towhead down without even seeing him crouched there in the buckbrush. Because Dude was dodging the bullets of the Cross UP cowhands bushed up fifty yards away down the canyon where it flattened out.

Johnny saw the horse almost on top of him. And dove into the brush. He had his saddle carbine gripped in his left hand. A shod hoof struck his arm and the bone cracked and the carbine dropped from his hand. No pain. Just a split-second feeling of numbness, and his left arm dangled uselessly, broken between the shoulder and elbow.

Dude's lunging horse tangled in the thick brush and went down and over in a somersault and Dude was thrown clear. He landed almost on top of Johnny and Johnny caught a brief glimpse of Dude's face. Black-stub-

bled, sweat-beaded, yellowish. Dude's eyes slitted and bloodshot and glassy green.

Johnny's teeth were bared in a ghastly grin. He wasn't scared of Dude. Not now. Not ever. He felt only hatred. A hatred that was hot-blooded and cold-nerved. He wanted to kill. The memory of Lorna Turner's mocking laugh was echoing in his ears and all the shame and humiliation he had suffered swept over him and it was feeding explosive fuel to the burning hatred inside him. He had the flash-picture in his mind of a black-and-white pinto Injun pony.

Johnny didn't know he had his six-shooter in his hand. That he was on his feet, bowed legs spread, a grin on his face and his sweat-matted towhead bared. His face brush-ripped and bleeding. His eyes, icy blue and bloodshot, his grin a snarl.

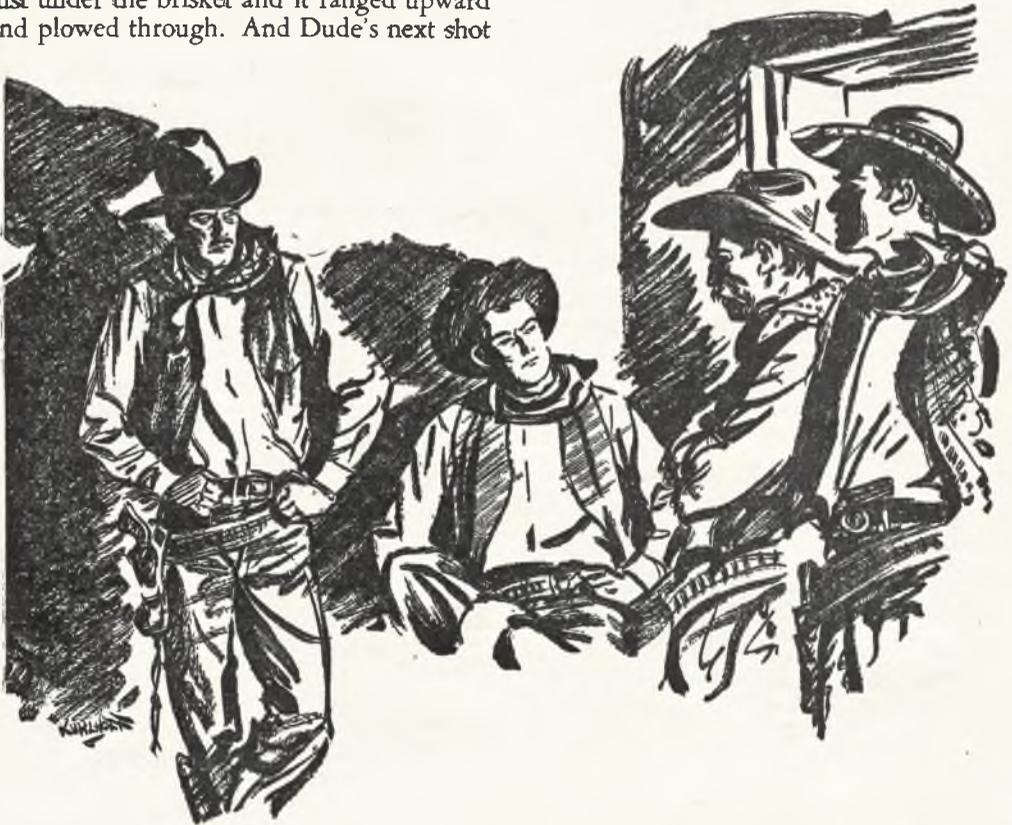
Dude saw him. And shot at him point-blank with his fancy gun and the heavy .45 slug creased Johnny's ribs and threw him sideways and off-balance on his wounded leg. He thumbed his gun hammer and pulled the trigger as he lurched and stumbled. The .45 bullet hit Dude in the belly just under the brisket and it ranged upward and plowed through. And Dude's next shot

grazed Johnny's ear and he thumbed back his gun hammer and pulled the trigger without aiming. He was staring at Dude's face and his gun was pointed at that face and like in some horrible nightmare Johnny saw a round hole pop open just above the bridge of Dude's hawk-beaked nose and square between the slitted green eyes and Dude's black-haired head jerked and then lobbed over sideways and the back of his skull was a mass of blood and hair and smashed bone. Dude's gun exploded with the reflex pull of his trigger finger and the heavy slug plowed into the ground and then Dude Bassett toppled over and went down with a crash.

Johnny was sweating and he was blowing like a spent runner through gritted teeth.

Then he saw Heavy. Heavy was down out there on the open ground. There was a gun in Heavy's hand and he was lying twisted like he was badly hurt.

Black Ike Bassett spurred out from behind the brush and towards where Heavy lay like a dead man. The big grizzled horse thief boss was bent low across his saddle-horn and



he was making a desperate bid for freedom.

He was riding Heavy down and almost on top of him when Heavy came up onto his feet, lurching like a drunken man. Black Ike's horse shied off and the six-shotter in Heavy's hand was spewing flame and the bullets struck Black Ike Bassett and straightened him up in his saddle and he was shooting point-blank at Heavy and Heavy was weaving on thick bowed legs and his six-shooter was spitting jets of flame and every bullet that left his gun was thudding into Black Ike's huge frame and just as the big spooked horse shied and stampeded past Black Ike Bassett toppled sideways and headlong and he landed on his head and shoulders and his big legs kicked and he went down and lay motionless and dead so close to where Heavy stood that he was grazed by one of the flailing boots.

The Cross UP remuda was on down the far end of the canyon now. Being rounded up and held by the Cross UP cowhands.

Old Man Sam Benton came riding across the wide flat alkali strip. Hunched in his saddle, chewing his drooping tobacco-stained gray mustache. His leathery skin grayish in the early dusk.

"You Tow-headed Johnny! You damned Tow-headed Johnny!"

The Old Man's voice had a strange tight-croaking sound. His puckered eyes bright and hard.

Johnny lurched out from the bush and into the open. Old Man Sam rode up and swung from his saddle and he grabbed Johnny just as Johnny's wounded leg gave way. Johnny reckoned he was dreaming because there were tears in the hard bright-puckered eyes of tough Old Man Sam Benton and the tears were trickling down his leathery face. And he was cussing softly into his ragged-drooping mustache. Cussing Johnny for a Towhead.

Then Johnny passed out. And all the utter exhaustion and fatigue and strain of the past days and nights moved in and laid claim where there was no waking willpower and sheer guts and nerve to fight it off and it was a long, long time before the eyes of Johnny Dillard blinked open.

Johnny was in bed and his wounds bandaged and his broken splinted arm in a sling. There was the taste of cold

water. A cool hand smoothing back his damp stray-colored hair. He blinked open his eyes and thought he saw the face of Lorna Turner, her copper-colored hair, her dark eyes misted. Then she kissed him. Kissed him on the mouth and her lips stayed there and he felt her lips move and heard her voice, low-toned, with the hint of a sob in it.

"I've got the pinto pony. I'll never laugh at you again, Johnny."

HEAVEN had come down to earth here at Rocky Point and this girl was a ministering angel with red hair and freckles across her nose and tears in her dark-brown eyes. That was what Johnny Dillard wanted to tell Lorna Turner.

But he grinned against the movement of her lips and his voice sounded strange and faraway in his own ears.

"I musta bin—a shore comical sight—soppin' wet—enough to git a laugh outa anybody."

Then Old Man Sam Benton came in and old Tex Alvord and Heavy. Heavy was limping on a pair of home-made crutches and his face was bruised and skinned up but he was grinning and his opaque black eyes were bright as black agate.

"If ever you want to wear the red coat of the Northwest Mounted," said Heavy, "come to Calgary. Ask for Inspector Jim MacLaren—that's me."

But Old Man Sam Benton said he had other plans for Johnny Dillard.

"I got no livin' kin," said the Old Man. "Even if I had a son, he'd never be the man this Tow-headed Johnny turned out to be."

Tough old Tex grunted and said it was Johnny's big love for horses that had a lot to do with it. That Johnny was and always had been a natural-born horse lover. And Tex's sky-blue eyes crinkled at Lorna.

"Don't be su'prised if his horses come first."

There were questions Johnny wanted to ask. Those questions showed in his eyes and Heavy seemed to understand. Lorna was taking over the job of doctor and nurse and she was almighty efficient and there was no doubting her love for this tow-headed Johnny.

Lorna saw the questioning look in Johnny's puckered eyes and she nodded to

Heavy. But she sat on the edge of the bed and hung onto his hand. And Heavy said he'd make it short and to the point.

"Black Ike Bassett and his son Dude are dead now," he began. "So are those two renegades called Soapy and Speck, who got shot down making their coyote getaway.

"Black Ike Bassett and his son Dude and whatever renegades they could enlist from time to time," said Heavy, who was Inspector Jim McLaren of the Northwest Mounted, "have operated for too long in Canada.

"They had a big bunch of stolen horses gathered when the Mounties jumped them in the Cypress Hills. The horse thieves got away. But they had to drop their stolen horses and their pack outfit. And travel hard and fast and light to get across the Border into Montana.

"Black Ike Bassett was cunning as a wolf. He could sight the red coat of a Mountie when one of my men topped the skyline miles away. And once across the Border my Mounties had no real authority.

"The Black Ike Bassett gang had murdered a few of my men. I changed into the clothes I've got on and made it a one-man job and without the official backing of the Dominion law. Officially, I'm on vacation—" He grinned faintly.

"I managed to catch up with 'em at the edge of the Cypress Hills. I knew Black Ike Bassett and Dude Bassett by sight. They were horse thieves. But without stolen horses for evidence, I had no case against 'em. No actual proof. I threw in with the gang and managed to get accepted at my tough-face value. Even Tex Alvord at Rocky Point Crossing had me figured for a horse thief renegade.

"The rest of it, you saw happen, Johnny. I could trust you, but I played it cautiously. What you didn't know wouldn't be there in your eyes for Black Ike Bassett to read.

"I saw you drop the pinto pony. And I knew Tex Alvord had tipped you off how to play your string out. And when I heard the owl-hoot signal I knew somebody had found the pinto pony on the south bank of the river and had picked up the horse thief trail.

"I slipped back that night on last guard. Heard the owl hoot. And knew somebody

was close-trailing us. And when Black Ike and Dude showed up you saved my hide, and when they went back to finish their sleep I saw you let a couple of the bunch quitters drift off into the night along the trail back to their home range.

"I had a hunch it was Sam Benton and a few of his Cross UP men who were trailin' us. And when you piloted the outfit into the blind box canyon I knew that was the trap. I had to risk bein' shot by the Cross UP men who had no way of knowin' I wasn't one of the horse thief gang. So I quit my horse and took the risk of bein' tromped to death and got run over some before I got my chance to shoot it out with Black Ike Bassett. You showed more real courage and cool-headed thinkin' than most seasoned manhunters, Johnny. I'd be proud to take you back to Calgary, Canada, enlist you in the Northwest Mounted. But you're gettin' married. And you're goin' to ramrod that Cross UP outfit. That's a better deal than I can offer you."

WELL, that was the first Johnny Dillard knew about his getting married and taking over the Cross UP.

Old Man Sam Benton had a grin on his leathery face and Lorna was blushing.

"That's the size of it, son," said the Old Man. "I'm givin' the bride away. Inspector Jim MacLaren is goin' to stand at your back as best man at the weddin'. Tex is furnishin' the refreshments for the show."

Tex nodded and herded Old Man Sam and Heavy out through the door. And closed it softly.

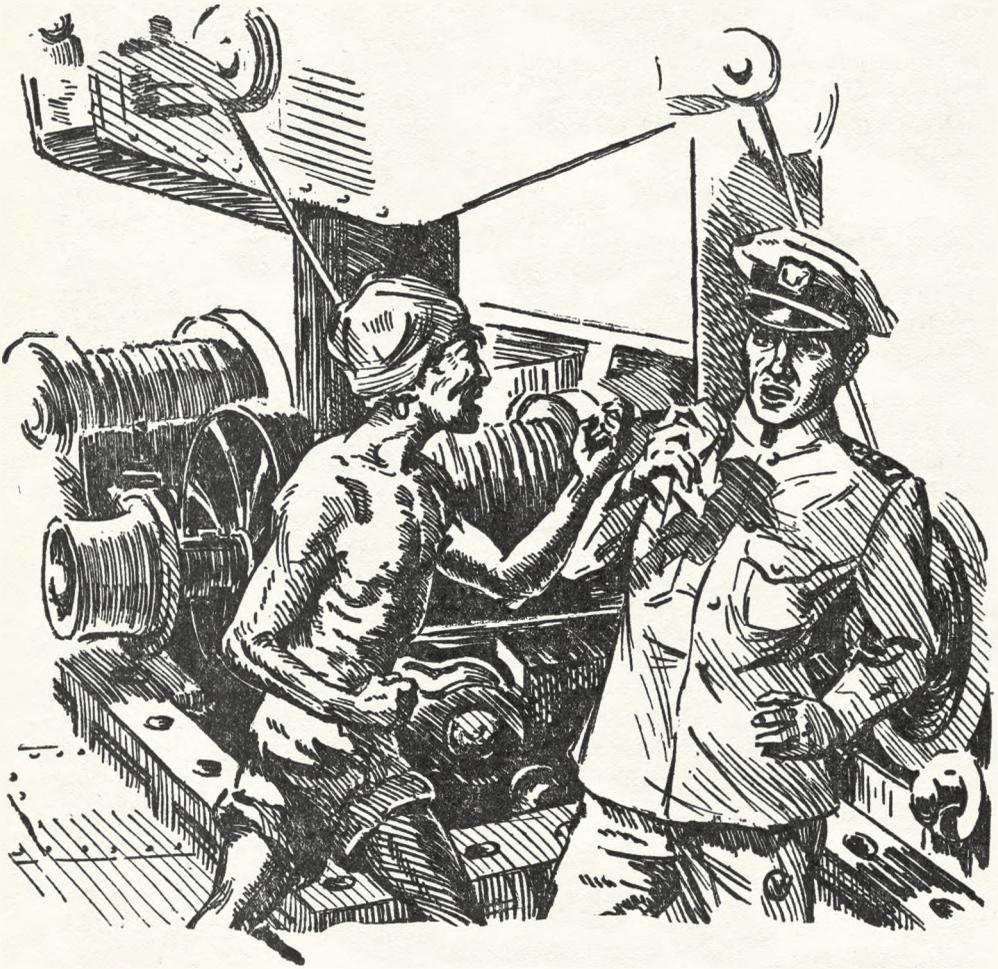
"I'm a bold, brazen red-headed hussy, Johnny." Lorna's face was flushed and her eyes were starry.

Johnny reached up with his good arm and pulled her head down closer and kissed her.

"Once I git over bein' so awkward, Lorna. I'll try to tell you—I mean I can't play no guitar or make purty love talk, but you ain't any bold brazen hussy. And your hair ain't red—it's kinda chestnut sorrel. First pony I ever owned had a mane and tail that color—shore purty."

Later Lorna said it was the most beautiful compliment any girl ever had had paid to her.

Fire Aboard a Death Ship, All the Jinxes of the Seven Seas at Work



SCHOOL SHIP PRODUCT

By FRANCIS GOTT

I LIKED the boy even though he was so blame stuck up. I even got a kick out of seeing him primping before his mirror, slicking back his red hair, setting his hat at the right saucy angle so as the gold braid would burn a man's eyes out, restitching his epaulettes so's they would ride square as chips on his trim shoulders.

Chips? Yeah! Fighting chips.

I chuckled. "Takes a hard man to carry all that shine, my boy."

He flushed. "An officer has to set an example for his men."

I leaned back in the bunk, hands behind my head.

"I wouldn't know, son. I crawled aboard through the hawse pipe. That was a long time ago—before the First World War—and I've forgot a lot."

"A school ship man is an asset to any ship," Coster said.

I studied the young squirt's lean face in the mirror. His blue eyes were cold sober;

blamed if he didn't mean it. Well, he'd learn—or would he?

I'd seen a lot of 'em come and go, nice boys on the whole, but almost every blame one of 'em had to learn sooner or later that a tramp freighter wasn't a school ship. Some of 'em learned fast. Some learned the hard way, as when, during the depression, they'd cleaned bilges, chipped rust and worked ship as A.B.'s for a year or two just to get a break to go cadet. Some never learned. They climbed, sure. They all climbed; for what was there to stop 'em? They all had tickets—the school ships seen to that.

Now, for contrast, take Ed Brill. Like me, Brill had once been a green kid of a deck boy. An oldish man, inclined to be sloppy in his personal appearance, there was nothing left of the boy in him now, however. He was a first-rate navigator and seaman, though, a man who knew his profession thoroughly.

Coster couldn't see him, of course, standing there in his cabin just a stride across the officers' alleyway. Brill was listening to Coster's puerile talk, a scowl riding his broad face, hairy shoulders hunched against the cooling breeze kicked out by his electric fan. Brill didn't know that I was watching him as I lay there in Coster's bunk, taking life easy, and egging the boy on to shoot off his fool mouth. A devilish habit? Sure! But I ain't no angel, and sometimes a bit of talk helps to clear the smoke away.

"Have you got any suggestions, Coster, as to how we can run the ship better?" I asked, tongue in my cheek.

He nodded his sleek head. "To be sure. A vessel is the reflection of her personnel, especially of her commander and officers. An officer should present a neat appearance at all times, especially when on duty. Shoes shined. Uniform pressed and buttoned. Face cleanly shaven—"

"In your opinion, then, Mr. Brill isn't a good officer."

IT WAS shortly after the noon mess. Soon we'd have to face the blistering heat again, stand by the hatches to check cargo and keep an eye on the pilfering stevedores. I wondered how long Coster's neatness would last under the infernal conditions ex-

isting in these North African ports. Perhaps for life, although I hoped not; he was a pretty nice boy. Some men are born martinet, though. There was the possibility that Coster was one, due for a lifetime of lonely and unappreciated rectitude.

The surface of the mirror rippled as a puzzled frown creased his smooth forehead, knitting together the boyish freckles. "Well, sir, I can't help believing that Mr. Brill should be further along. Why, the man's old! He must be all of forty-eight or fifty. Perhaps, if he'd kept up his personal appearance—"

I winked at Brill. After four hours of yelling at crumby Arab stevedores Brill was in a vile humor.

He stepped across the alleyway, poked his bushy head inside the doorway and growled at Coster's back. "Kid, you're just plain school ship stupid."

Then Brill padded out on deck in his sloppy clogs, in trousers and singlet, a dirty cap pushed to the back of his head. I feared the stevedores would catch hell that afternoon.

Coster, considerably taken aback, caught my eye in the mirror. "What did Mr. Brill mean?"

I shrugged. "You'll have to ask him, Coster."

Well, I'd had my after-dinner fun. I'd got a rise out of Brill. So I stepped up to the pilot house to check the temperature and take a reading from the barometer: 135 degrees F. in the shade. Phew! It was likely that Brill, coaled to the bursting point by the heat and the sight of those shiny epaulettes riding Coster's shoulders like chips, would blow a good head of steam before we left the dock. I chuckled. Anything to break the monotony.

THE winches began rattling. So I went down to the forward well deck to keep an eye on number one hatch. Brill had number two. The Arab winchmen, trying to find protection from the sun, were crouched under pieces of old canvas strung to the mast table.

Well, the winchmen couldn't see too well, working under those awnings. Suddenly, one of them, in whipping a heavy crate ashore, let the end of it graze the bulwarks. I heard the nails in the crate

squeak a shrill protest above the sound of the crash. Then it passed on over the dock, the boom quivering, preventer guy strained taut and the hauling guy slatting. Sheaves raced in their steel casings to the tune of the shrieking winch drum when the stevedore tried to drop that crate, fast. But he wasn't quick enough. An eighteen-inch flywheel tore through the broken boards of the crate, fell like a plummet, cutting an Arab's cheek to the bone.

There was works then, I teil you, Arabs being such excitable devils. The winchman responsible craned his skinny neck to see better, the turban on his small head making him appear top-heavy. He had to add to the turmoil, of course, by shrieking, in Arabic, "Allah, be merciful!"

I stepped to the bulwarks. The injured stevedore lay moaning in a welter of blood, the broken crate beside him. His mates picked him up and, long rags flapping, whisked him away; where, I don't know.

I heard Coster's cool voice above me at the break of the 'midships deck. "Mr. Brill!"

Brill was sitting on the edge of the hatch combing, rolling a cud of tobacco in his cheek. I don't think he'd more than glanced at the injured Arab on the dock. I knew he hadn't moved. Yes, Brill was callous in some ways, but then, the fool Arabs always succeeded in killing each other off, no matter what we told 'em. We'd learned that, on the whole, 'twas best to leave 'em alone. After all, getting the cargo in and out was the main thing.

Young Coster's face tightened under a flush. "Mr. Brill!"

Brill looked up, dislike moiling in his muddy eyes. "Yeah!"

"Have your winchmen take those awnings down before further injury is done."

Brill's thick lips quirked in amusement. "Tell 'em yourself, kid."

Shoulders square, spine stiff as a belaying pin, gold braid gleaming like an admiral's, Coster stepped down the ladder to the well deck. He marched up to those Arabs, pointed at their makeshift awnings and made a rolling motion with his hands. The winchmen shook their swarthy heads furiously.

Coster knit his red brows in exasperation, whipped out a pocket knife and slashed at

the lashings holding up the awnings. They came down about the Arabs' heads.

Well, inside of sixty seconds not a piece of cargo was moving aboard that ship. Fifty-one Arabs squatted on their skinny haunches, some sullen, most just plain listless. I could have ordered Coster to lay off, of course, but the kid had to learn.

A roar came from the skipper's bridge. "Mr. Mank, what's the trouble? This cago has to be kept moving; we're due for the pilot at three o'clock."

I glanced up along those high bulwarks. There, silhouetted against the deep blue of that Mediterranean sky, glaring down at me, was Captain Jeffers, beefy jowls and white hair gleaming above a hastily-flung-on bathrobe.

"Just a little accident, sir," I assured him. "I'll have things moving in thirty seconds."

Captain Jeffers turned to re-enter his quarters, satisfied.

I crooked a finger at the head stevedore, shook out a couple of American cigarettes for him, and pointed at the cargo. He pointed a tobacco-stained finger at the awnings. I nodded. Even before the winchmen had their awnings up again, the cargo was moving. Then one of those crazy Moslems, shoulders bunched up truculently, eyes gleaming nasty-like, jumped in front of Coster, screaming obscenities, and spat full in the boy's face.

Well, as I say, 'twas Coster's first experience with these birds. He just stood there, kind of flabbergasted, wiping the spittle from his face with a crisp handkerchief.

Brill growled, grabbed that stevedore by the seat of the man's half-pants, took a turn about the scrawny neck with the end of his dirty turban, and swung him over the hatch combing. Then he let go. The Arab let forth a frightened yowl, even before he landed on a pile of tobacco mattings two fathoms below.

Brill turned on Coster, deeply tanned face working in disgust. "You ain't only school ship stupid, kid—you're just plain yellow. First time in thirty years at sea I ever seen an American officer take a dirty swabbing like that from one of these crumbly lice."

I got to admit I was disgusted with Coster, too. However, I gave him the benefit of the doubt; after all, he was just a green

kid, making his first trip at sea despite his second mate's ticket.

"You'd better hustle aft, Coster," I ordered. "Main thing to watch is to keep them light-fingered monkeys from stealing cargo. Last trip a bunch o' Gypos in Alex got afoul of a case of cathartics made up in tasty milk chocolate bars. The ignorant buggers thought 'twas candy. Damn nigh kilt the poor devils and took us a week to clean out the holds."

"Yes, sir," he said, not crackin' a smile.

AFTER he'd gone, I grinned at Brill. Give the kid time. He'll loosen up."

Brill's black brows clawed at his eyes in a scowl. "Imagine, him comin' for'ard here, givin' orders right under your nose! Well, that Arab made him swim in his own juice, eh! Ha! Ha!"

"Don't mean a thing," I retorted, surprised at finding myself defending Coster.

"Hell, man!" Brill exploded. "Did you ever take an insult like that?"

"No," I denied with conviction. "But when you'n me started wearin' brass, we'd had four or five years at sea back of us. To all practical purposes, this is, in reality, Coster's first trip; chances are, it's the first payin' job the kid ever had in his life."

"Brass, ha!" Brill snorted. "No wonder he likes that color so much. Imagine, in this blisterin' heat, wearin' a dress uniform buttoned clear up to his neck."

"Coster don't know any better. His license ain't even dry yet, dated only ten weeks ago."

Brill spat a stream of tobacco juice at a stevedore trying to sneak a small snatch block down his pants. "Some of them school ship trained seals never learn. I sailed under one fifteen years ago who went from cadet to master in six year—"

"They get a good grounding in navigation," I remonstrated. "They get more'n we ever got, what with gyro licenses and all. Think the company'd chance hirin' Coster as navigatin' officer if they wan't pretty sure his ticket was sound? True, he got a lucky break.

"We needed a second and a third to make pier head jumps, and young Coster just happened to be in the office at the time, lookin' for his first berth. Otherwise, the best he could've hoped for was third, de-

spite the inspectors givin' him a second mate's ticket after his examination."

"Ar'r!" Brill growled. "Bet the kid never even got his feet wet aboard that school ship."

I smiled tolerantly, baiting Brill so's some of his rancor would pass off in small talk. "That kid might even show us both up before the voyage is over."

"I doubt it like hell," Brill rasped.

Well, I doubted it, too; but I'd learned that it sometimes takes more'n one trip in which to judge a man fully. Just because Brill was making a trip as third mate, Coster thought the man was little better than a tramp, Brill who'd sailed as master. And just because Coster liked gold braid and let an Arab spit in his face, Brill thought the kid was yellow. Well, time would tell—or would it?

That afternoon at six bells we slipped past the breakwater, dropped off the French pilot, and started clawing a course across the Mediterranean in the teeth of a stiffening breeze. Personally, I was glad to leave that filthy port behind our blistered fantail. I guess we'd carried half the dust and stench of Africa to sea with us, the old *Empire State* was so crummy, but the flying scud soon washed us clean, aided by the spitting fire hoses.

I TURNED in early that evening, 'bout two bells, I guess it was. At seven bells of the next watch I felt the sheet being pulled from my body, slow like, from the neck down. I woke in a hurry.

"Mr. Coster's compliments, sir," the A. B. said. "Seven bells, sir. Fresh coffee in the pantry."

"Eh?" then I grinned. "Thank you! My compliments to Mr. Coster, Blake."

Blake's snag tooth showed in a mirthless laugh. He went out, leaving the light on and the door hooked back. Coster sure was a heller for etiquette! I wondered if he'd learned it all aboard that school ship. Well, he'd get over it—or would he?

I began dressing, my mind on that coffee as the ship rolled me against the bunk. A cheering thing, hot coffee in the dead of night, at sea. The old girl was shuddering from main truck to keelson as if a shipyard full of mad riveters were hammering air guns against her rusty hull. The Mediter-

ranean sure can kick up a nasty chop at times and by the sound and the feeling this was once when the ancient sea of the Romans were throwing all her weight against us.

I slipped into seaboots and oilskins, grabbed a quick cup of scoff in the pantry and hustled up to the navigating bridge. A glance at the compass rose showed it whirling to beat all get out. The helmsman was to one side of the wheel, overhanding the spokes like a mule.

"Where's the second mate?" I asked.

The A. B.'s leathery lips pinched tight in the rosy light splashing up at him from the open binnacle; he flicked his head to starboard. I grunted in both disgust and a grudging sort of admiration. Yes, that young fool would be out there on the weather wing, taking the brunt of the storm.

I set a shoulder against the door, cussing Coster. I got it open, the wind hags shrieking their fury at me through the crack. I slipped out, the door banging to behind me. The old girl took a deep list to port, throwing me back against the pilothouse. Despite nigh having my breath knocked out, I started climbing the stanchions toward Coster, a blob of darkness against the greater darkness of the sky.

I yelled into his ear. "Turn in, youngster—if you can stay in your bunk."

He followed me into the pilothouse. Eight bells struck, twinning off their musical notes from the ship's clock against the bulkhead. An A. B. on my watch took the wheel. Coster's face was strained, haggard, the faint light from the binnacle showing the anxiety that lurked deep in his eyes. I thought I caught a hint of fear there, also. Well, maybe Brill was right; maybe the boy was yellow. With trembling fingers he shoved the night order book into my hands.

"Weather's been growing steadily worse the last hour," he croaked, face whitening as the ship took a sickening roll. "I've whistled down through the tube three times for the old man, but I can't arouse him. I don't see how anyone can sleep through this terrible storm, sir."

"Yes, it's a bad night," I agreed. "But you'll likely live to pound through far worse ones on the Western Ocean—or my name ain't Oscar Mank. Well, grab a sandwich

and a mug o' coffee, boy, and try to get some sleep."

He took hold of my arm, diffident like, as if he was afraid I'd laugh at him. "I've thought I smelled smoke, sir. Pretty hard to tell, what with the wind blowing so, and maybe it's just my imagination, but I sent Blake around to check the ventilators. He said he couldn't smell a thing, other than the cargo dust being shook up in the holds."

A chill passed over me. Fire! No seaman likes to hear that dread word.

"You'd better check, Coster," I ordered.

"Yes, sir," he agreed. "That's why I wanted to get the skipper up here, to stand by while I went over the ship."

"Might be just the smoke from the stack," I muttered hopefully. "Sometimes it gets caught in a backdraft and whips forward. If you don't find anything, come back and I'll take a look. We can't take a chance. I doubt, though, if we have fire in the holds; I checked 'em all pretty carefully before we battened down."

INSIDE of ten minutes Coster was back, panting. "Fire, sir! Number One hold." I steadied him. "You positive?"

He nodded, Adam's-apple working in agitation.

I turned to the brass speaking tube leading down into the old man's quarters. I blew. No answer. I blew again. Still no answer. Well, that wasn't like the old man and I began to get worried.

"You stand by, Coster," I ordered, turning to the spiral ladder leading down into the officers' quarters. "I'll rouse the skipper and go double check on that fire. You sound the emergency alarm."

I expected to hear the shrill ringing of the alarm system sounding from various parts of the ship before I got to the deck below, but it didn't come. Damn, I thought, either that alarm's on the blink again or Coster's so scared he can't move.

Pushing aside the swaying curtain, I entered the master's quarters. I didn't think he was in the saloon, for he wasn't one to wander around any, especially at night. He wasn't in his outer cabin. So I poked between his desk and settee on into the sleeping quarters. Yes, he was there; I splashed the beam from my flashlight up the length of his rotund body.

With his bejeweled face limned there in the pool of light spilling down upon him, I thought at first that he was awake. Then a chill crept through me to the very marrow of my bones. Captain Jeffers was dead!

I took off my sou'wester, stood there a few seconds with head bowed. Then I turned away, catching sight of my bony face in the mirror above the closed wash basin. Lord! Was that face mine, sweat beading the bald spot at the top of my head, wetting the thinning wisps of my hair? I was well along in middle age, and showed it. I had waited a long time to go captain of a ship. Now I was master. Poor Captain Jeffers! That the fulfillment of my life's ambition had to come to me across his dead body.

I plodded from his cabin, took the ladders down to the forward well deck, and clawed my way to the ventilators of Number One hold. The ship was heavily laden.

PULLING myself up to the lip of a lee vent, I took several cautious sniffs—and let go, gasping. Yes, there was fire in that hold. Several days before, in Sfax, we had loaded eleven bales of old rags, jamming them into the 'tween decks. Although dry outside, doubtless they'd been wet inside. I'd had trouble with baled rags before. Likely, in the confined space of the hold, and the heat, they had burst into flames, spewing forth slow fire that was even now insidiously eating its way down into the bowels of the ship toward a highly inflammable miscellaneous cargo.

Ducking a sheet of spray carried past me by the howling wind, I raced to the pilothouse, clawing my way up the series of ladders in my haste. Coster turned from the compass, thin face paling at sight of me.

"Fire?"

"Right! The fire alarm?"

"Out of commission, sir."

"Have the lookout rouse the crew. Take fire stations."

Just then Brill came swinging up the inside ladder. He was untidy, a three-days' growth of beard on his face, hairy paws lashing buttonless oilskins about his thick waist with a piece of marline; yet he was fully awake, competent, not the least bit excited. I called both mates out upon the lee wing of the bridge, out of earshot of the A. B. at the wheel.

Placing my lips under the rims of their sou'westers, in turn, I said, "The old man's passed away, in his bunk."

Coster's long fingers dug into my arm, hurting me. "How—?"

I shook him off angrily. "His heart just stopped, son. Got tired and stopped. It happens to even the best of us, sooner or later. Now, keep it quiet! I've locked his door. The crew have enough to think about, without the added jinx of a dead skipper to ride 'em."

I heard a shout from the boat deck, turned to see the brawny form of the Greek bosun heaving his bulk up the ladder. "The fire hoses, she all run out, sir."

"Well done! Stand by Number One, Kyriagis. That's where the fire is. You, too, Mister Brill, and you help them, Coster. We may have to smother it, but we'll try it with water first; it can't have gotten much of a start."

The bosun gave me a weighing look, the olive skin of his broad face expressionless in the wet light that splashed over him from a chartroom port. "The capectan—?"

"Never you mind the captain. Lively, now!"

He turned his immense back, but not before I'd caught the scowl that rode his almost hairless brows. An old hand, a man who had tasted all the joys and ills that the sea can dish out, he was no fool. Here was a case of emergency, and the chief mate was staying on the bridge, the captain nowhere to be seen. Logically enough, to that suspicious and sea-canny mind, the captain was very ill—or dead.

I cursed silently. Kyriagis was a superstitious cuss.

Entering the pilothouse, I blew down through the engine-room tube. "We're ready for water now, Chief. Number One hold."

"Much of a fire?" Higgins' nasal twang floated up along the brass tubing.

"Don't know."

I rang for slow speed. "Steer south by a quarter west."

"South by a quarter west," the helmsman repeated, lank body moving to ease the wheel.

Gradually, we swung around on the new course, our starboard quarter taking the brunt of wind and sea, giving the men

working on the forward well deck more protection and lessening the dangers of the fire getting out of control and sweeping the ship. Then I turned on the cluster lights, beamed to shine down from the foremast upon the forward hatches and deck space.

I looked down, saw that Brill and a couple of A. B.'s had the tarps lifted from the after part of Number One. Fingers of smoke curled up from the opening, only to be caught by the wind and whipped away. Brill had a line about his waist, one hand holding the nozzle of a limp hose. Coster was lowering an electric lantern into the hold by means of a heaving line. One A. B. was getting ready to enter the hold with Brill, another standing by the valves to turn on the water.

Just then I espied the bosun, big arms swinging, as he stumbled through a lashing mantle of spitting scud towards the little group of men tensed about the opening to that smoking hold. Kyriagis began shouting rapidly, greatly upset, pointing towards the captain's quarters. Brill, heavy features working with exasperation, turned on the bosun, one knotted fist raised.

Coster stepped in, lean face a mask of authority, his lips moving. The bosun pushed him, suddenly, in the mouth. Coster sat down, an incredulous expression softening his lips. Then the bosun, followed by the A. B.'s, started running. Brill shouted after them angrily. I leaned over the weather stripping, saw them scramble up the ladder.

I TURNED then, to look down upon the boat deck. I was astonished to see men rushing towards our four lifeboats, fastening on lifebelts. Most of them were coming from aft, past the radio shack. The bosun appeared under me, directing the crew members. The misguided fools were preparing to abandon ship!

"Bosun!" I shouted. "Leave those boats alone! Get back to your fire stations, all of you!"

Kyriagis looked up, face sullen in the flashlight. "This is a death ship!"

"No such thing!"

"Ha!" He raised a bunch of keys which gleamed against the immensity of his thick hand. "She is a too! I unlock the capetan's door. The capetan he dead, stiff like a the marling spike."

I should have remembered that the bosun carried a duplicate set of the ship's keys. So the rascal had gone over my head, had prowled in to find out why the old man was not on the bridge.

"A death ship!" an ordinary seaman wailed. "Captain dead behind a locked door. Fire blazing in the holds. To the boats men! To the boats."

I jumped into the pilothouse, swayed past the undecisive and nervous helmsman and on into the chartroom. Unlocking a drawer, I yanked out a revolver and a fist-full of cartridges and raced back to the open bridge. My first shot kicked up the splinters under a wiper's heel as I aimed flashlight beam and revolver together.

"Back to your fire stations, men!" I shouted. "I'll give you ten seconds to get off the boat deck, except for two men beside Number Three hose. Now, get!"

They went fast, in a wild scramble, including the bosun. Then I looked down upon the forward well deck only to see my two mates in vehement argument there. Brill was trying to get down into the hold; Coster was holding him back. Both of them were coughing from the smoke. While I watched, Coster broke away, started running towards the 'midships superstructure.

Brill shook his fist at Coster's back, voice flailing thinly against the wind. "You damn yellow-bellied cur!"

My heart sank. So Coster had turned yellow, too. Brill was right, then. My heart went out to Brill facing that fire.

I entered the pilothouse. I hated to do it, but I whistled down through the tube. "Can you spare one of your officers, Chief?"

"Sure," came the prompt reply. "Purdy. I'll send him up, immediately. Old man's dead, eh?"

"That's right. Heart."

I let the brass lip fall back into place. Outside again, I saw with relief that the bosun and a handful of seamen were clustered about Number One hatch. The smoke was thicker now. I couldn't see anything of Brill. So he'd gone down in that hold, eh! The man had guts. Then an A. B. moved aside and I saw with a pang that they were pulling at Brill's lifeline—and the stout manila wouldn't give.

"What's wrong?" I shouted through cupped hands.

The bosun turned, arms spread in a gesture of despair, shame riding his wet face. "Mr. Brill—he caught—hold, sir."

"Well, go down after him!"

The bosun's voice beat against the wind in hopeless despair. "She's a—too—dangerous—hold, sir. We must a—close—heem up."

"No! Wait! Spray with your hose!"

Then I saw Coster's tall figure running forward. He reached the hatch, turned to clamber over the hatch combing. I leaned out, gripping a jackstay. What had the boy done to his face? He looked like a monstrosity spewed up from the bottom. I nodded weakly; a gas mask, of course. But where'd he get it? To my knowledge there wasn't one on board.

He disappeared down into that smoke-laden hold, dragging a fire hose with him. The realization struck me like the impact of one of those snarling seas that the boy hadn't taken time to make fast a safety line about his waist.

Purdy, our first assistant engineer, came up behind me. Against that wet pall of blackness his face was lifted, questioningly.

"Give them a hand at Number One, if you will, Mr. Purdy," I bade.

By the time Purdy got forward, I thought the smoke was lessening. Purdy shouted down into the hold, again and again. He turned, looked up at me, shrugging his narrow shoulders and spreading his hands. Then he knotted a line about his waist, preparing to go below.

He didn't need to, however, for Coster's grotesque mask slowly rose out of the smoke. The boy jackknifed over the hatch combing, dead beat, a monstrous hump on his back. Brill! Insensible, limp as a coil of much-used hawser.

Well, Brill had killed that fire, and nigh killed himself doing it. If it hadn't been for Coster, he would have died; a few minutes more would've fixed him, tough as he was. Coster passed out, too; he wasn't a fire eater like Brill, and his mask was faulty. How he'd managed to pull Brill over that cargo and up that steel ladder with the ship plunging and rolling, I don't know.

So I had the two of them to work on, and, in between times, get the *Empire State* back on her course. I sent a cablegram off to our

agent in Marseilles, telling of Captain Jeffers' death.

Next morning, as a pallid sun tried to burn away the sea mists to the eastward, a wire came through from the main office. I crumpled that message up in my fist, sick and disappointed. No wonder Sparks had shoved the yellow piece of paper into my hand and then got back to his shack in a hurry. Orders were to have Captain Jeffers' body taken care of in Malta, and that Brill was to take over his duties as master. Well, Brill was a good man and topped me in seniority with the company.

I shoved my own hopes and ambitions out of the picture, feeling glad for Brill. The man deserved it. So I heaved myself up from the chartroom settee to go below to pass along the good news. Just then Sparks rushed in with another wire. He shoved it into my fist and slapped me on the back, his brown eyes dancing through his heavy-lensed glasses. I read that second wire, fast.

"What do ye know, Sparks!" I smiled, starting below to tell Brill.

Brill heard me out; then, speaking through a throat made raw by smoke, "Ain't that a sweet note, now! Me—Cap'n Brill, once more. And I thought I was a has-been. Well, I'm keepin' Coster. 'Nother year and he can get a raise in grade. Yuh know, Oscar, them school ship men make damn good officers. I've got to have one officer who knows how to carry brass like a gentleman. Imagine him knowin' so much about fires at sea, luggin' his own fire apparatus, and all—"

Next, I passed into Coster's room. I felt like a sawbones, blamed if I didn't. "What do ye know, son? Brill's goin' skipper o' this hooker."

Coster looked up, wan-faced from spewing in a bucket. "That's fine! You know, I misjudged Mr. Brill. He's a fine man. You can't always go by the outside of a man, sir."

"Sure glad you think well of him, son," I said, dryly. "Because he's wantin' you for his chief mate one of these days."

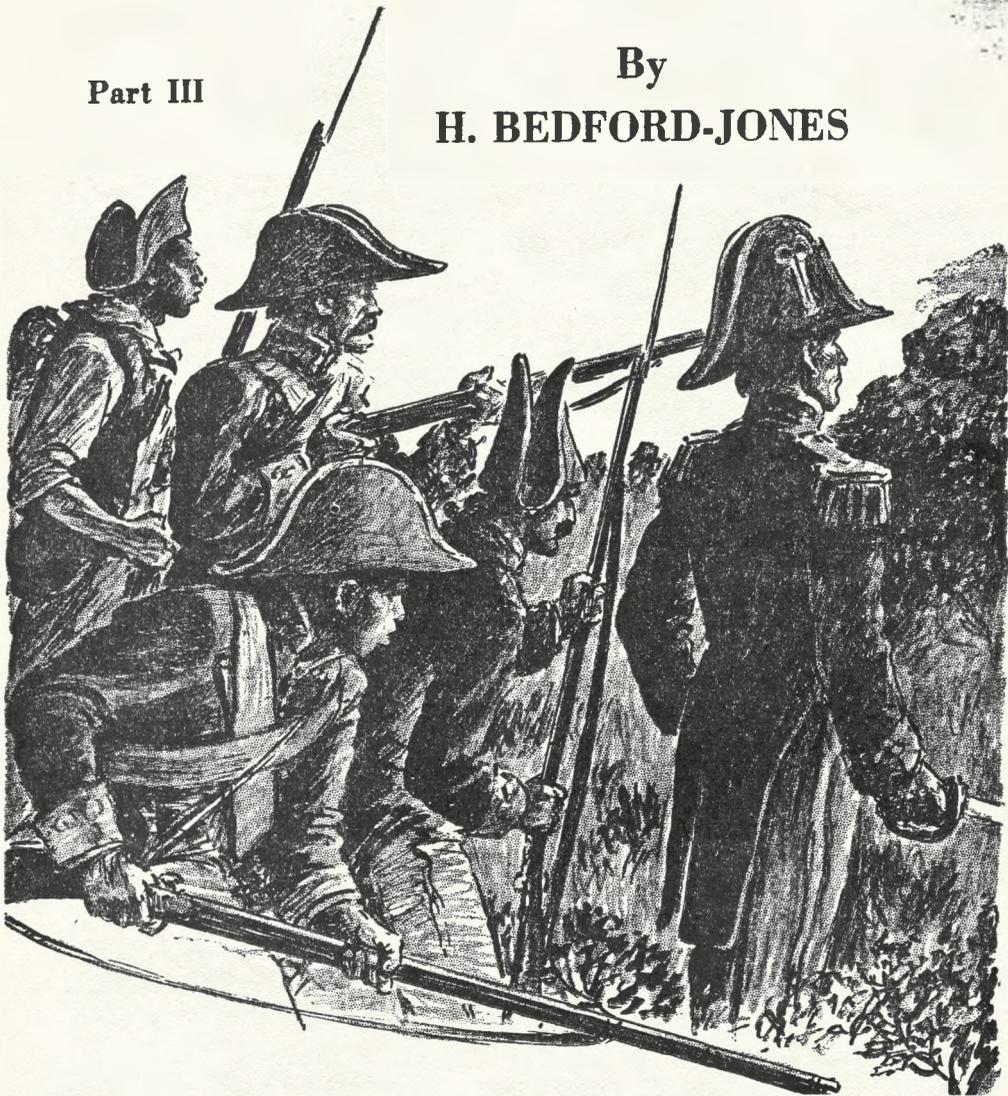
Coster looked real pleased. Then his face fell. "What about you, sir?"

"Oh, me?" I hauled out that second wire. "I've been placed in command of a new ship. She ain't even launched yet. Don't this life beat all, son?"

FREEDOM HAS A PRICE

Part III

By
H. BEDFORD-JONES



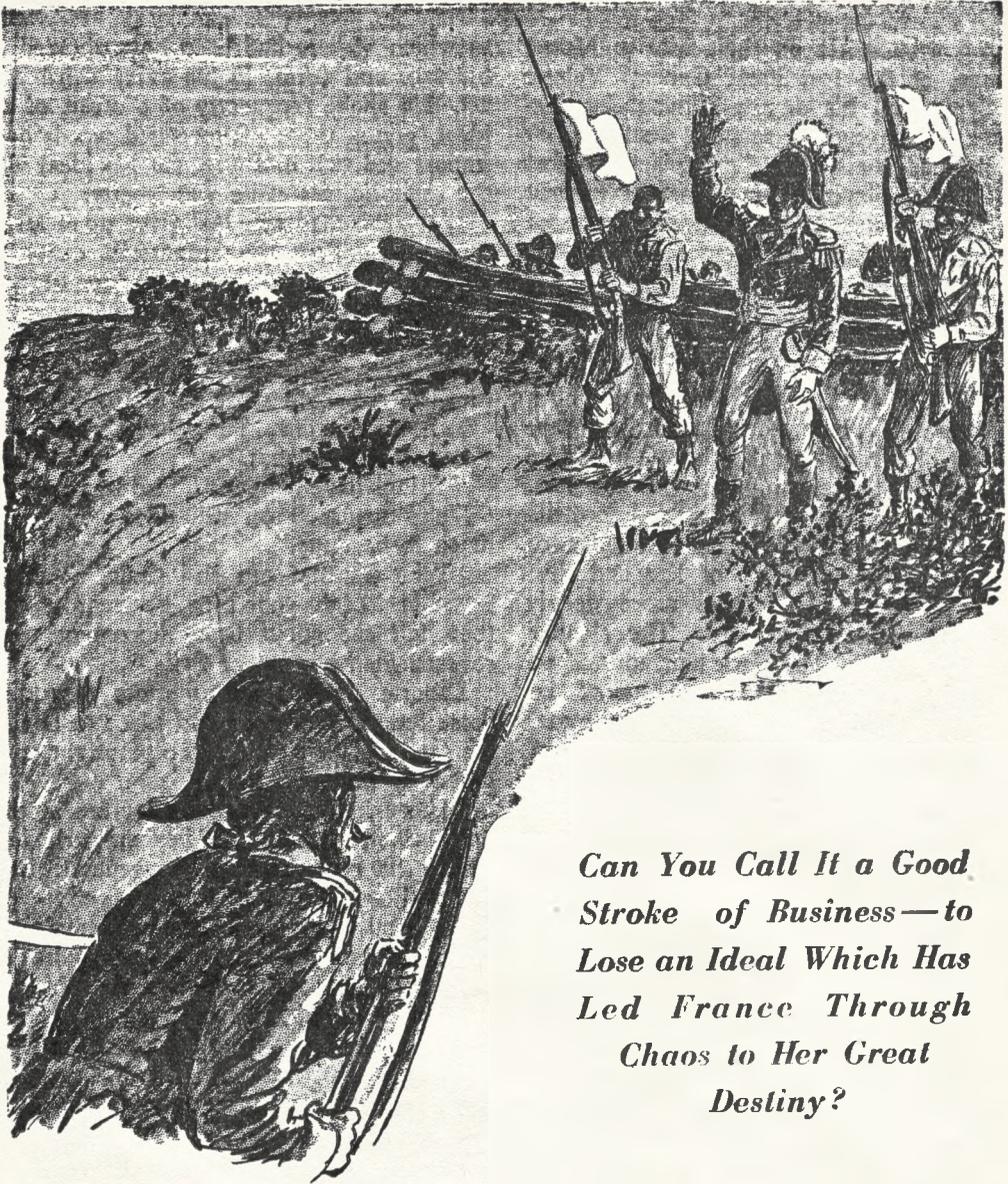
THE STORY SO FAR

THE sweltering city of Cap Francis on the Island of San Domingo in the year 1802 was the nerve center of the gigantic shadowy grip whose claws had stretched from the Old World to sink into the New—the grip of Napoleon.

Bonaparte's deputy was General Leclerc whose secret terror of revolt in the Island every day made him more ruthless. His rule was upheld by black troops and the disease-ridden remnants of the old Army

of the Rhine, and his secret orders would reimpose slavery on the country once Napoleon felt strong enough. There was word of a secret cache of arms on the Island, and the French knew that these would be used against them by the native armies if they enforce their idea of the return of slavery. So one of Leclerc's greatest missions was to discover the hiding place of the arms.

They were supposed to have been supplied by a firm in Philadelphia, and a member of this firm, young Langlade, whose



*Can You Call It a Good
Stroke of Business—to
Lose an Ideal Which Has
Led France Through
Chaos to Her Great
Destiny?*

family were former planters on the Island, comes to the general's headquarters. Leclerc is very suspicious of him, but Langlade insists his visit is purely a personal one and that he wants to visit a Colonel Friquet who is in the hills with the army of General Valette. Leclerc finally agrees if Langlade will carry some papers to General Valette, so the American finally makes his way to Morne Rouge where Valette's forces are surrounded, Valette himself fatally wounded. Sylla and his mulatto bandits have cut off Friquet in a nearby fort, and Langlade was

startled by the suggestion that Friquet would never be rescued.

The American is sent back to Cap Francis to escort the daughter of General Valette to her dying father, and does so, bringing Marie Soulastre, a young plantation owner as Mademoiselle Valette's companion. After he has left Cap Francis, Leclerc comes down with cholera, a ship arrives from Guadeloupe and news leaks out that slavery will once more be imposed in the French colonies. This can only mean horror and bloodshed.

Meanwhile, while Langlade and the two

young women are on their way to Morne Rouge, at the fort itself General Valette is dying and his deputy commander, Laporte, is turning out to be a weakling. A mysterious priest, Pere Simon, is at the fort and has displayed a great deal of interest in young Langlade, even trying to trace his ancestry back to France during the Revolution.

X

TO THOSE who knew him, Valette, lying here in bed, wore a different air, a new air. Here the effect of height was lost. The thinly curved nostrils were sharper. The bloodless features were waxen, the fine chiseling of lips and chin more pronounced, the eyes more deeply sunk, yet brilliant as ever. The slender fingers lay quiet. The black hair, untouched by any gray, heightened the pallor of the features. Only the voice remained the same, the musical, resonant voice that expressed so much.

Morning had arrived, the morning of Wednesday.

Valette appeared quite at ease. Monnier had held back nothing; he understood his situation perfectly. Never an excitable man, always in restraint, Valette now more than ever showed his calm poise.

"If you desire to ask questions," said Monnier, after telling him the truth, "be brief."

Valette smiled faintly. His face was indescribably warmed by a smile, as by some inward illumination; it brought out a singular gentleness, a tenderness—the more profoundly striking, because it sprang not from weakness but from strength.

"Admit any who seeks me," he said. "One question. When will Julie arrive?"

"We don't know," Monnier replied. "Today, tomorrow, anytime. Laporte is waiting; do you want to see him?"

"I want to see everyone. My snuffbox, please."

The silver snuffbox, a plain little thing adorned only with a Mameluke crest, was given him. His slender, beautiful fingers caressingly with it.

"One of those men who remain what they are born," Gouget had said. The destiny

to which Valette had been born showed in his face and form, in his every word and act. He spoke frequently of a cause, of an ideal, giving those oft-mouthed words new import and rich meaning, for his ideal was the republic, his cause was liberty.

Upon this man who had given up material things to follow the immaterial cause to which his life was devoted, had been heaped the vilest abuse. He was known in royalist quarters as Valette the regicide, Valette the traitor, and worse. Yet to those who knew him, he remained what he had been born.

Laporte entered. He saluted stiffly and stared at the general.

"Things have happened," he said gruffly. "We're menaced on all sides. There is much to be done."

"Take off that cap and tunic," Valette broke in. "Light your pipe, be comfortable; then tell me about those documents discovered in the camp of Sylla."

Laporte started, having quite forgotten those letters. It was a good place to begin. He sat in his shirt-sleeves, pipe alight, and gradually became himself.

"Those letters that worry me are in the iron casket," he said. "They are love letters to this mulatto Sylla, my general. Letters, you comprehend."

He swallowed hard. It was tragically ludicrous that he should be intent upon the love-letters of a mulatto when the life and death of them all were at issue.

"They are from white women, many well known names," he went on awkward. "I don't know what to do about them. It's terrible!"

Both men's reflections were the same. Unspeakable incidents had cast a shadow of horror upon Leclerc's first days in the island. Behind the deportation of white women lay pitiful and awful tales. Many a planter had been spared, many a child or husband had been saved from death or torture, by the bitter bargain their wives or sisters had driven. Yet the orders of Bonaparte were that these women be deported and branded for life.

"You have read the letters?" asked the musical voice.

"One or two, no more." Laporte brushed great drops of sweat from his forehead. "The orders, of course—"

"I believe you take your orders from me.

Kindly go at once, this moment, and burn those letters; then return here."

Laporte stared. His face lighted up.

"Sacred name! I never thought of that!" he ejaculated. Seizing tunic and cap, he rushed from the room.

"No," murmured Valette. "You'd never think of that, or of anything. Name of God! That I should lie here like this, at such a moment!"

Pere Simon, who had been waiting outside, came into the room. With calm greeting, he drew up a stool, pressed Valette's fingers. The general addressed him quickly.

"You know these blacks. Is there danger in disarming them?"

The face of the priest lighted, as though at unexpected opportunity.

"That question is entirely secondary," he rejoined. "It depends on another matter. Will any further attempt be made to help Friquet? You heard of his message?"

"Yes. When Friquet sallies from L'Etang des Platons on Friday, we shall be there to meet him. There's no reason to think otherwise."

"No one here cares whether Friquet is relieved, unless it be Laporte."

"I understand Laporte perfectly. Worthless by himself, but superb when under orders. Why is the disarmament secondary?"

"Upon it hangs Friquet's rescue," the priest responded. "To effect this, requires every available man; yet the fort must be garrisoned. Why disarm the blacks, then? Rather, use them, let them all march against Sylla. They hate him bitterly, they're devoted to General Noyer; in his behalf, they'll fight like heroes!"

The eyes of Valette shone with delight.

"Excellent! And when the column returns with Friquet, the disarmament will then be easy."

"No. Then it will be impossible."

"Why so?"

"They'll outnumber us. They're bitterly afraid we're going to restore slavery."

"Absurd!" Valette smiled and relaxed.

"On March 24, 1792, the Jacobins passed the law giving mulattos and free negroes the right to vote. On the 16th Pluviose, Year Two, the Convention abolished slavery in France, of which this island was declared an integral part. The decree, indeed, was

expressly aimed at this island; Pétion, the mulatto leader in the south, was a member of the Convention. The whole power, the whole effort, the whole integrity of the Republic stands behind that decree!"

Pere Simon did not argue. "To disarm and disperse the colonials when they're flushed with triumph will be difficult."

"It must be done. Otherwise—"

"Exactly. Otherwise, trouble!" said the priest, as Valette paused. "However, let it wait. Other things come first."

Valette, who detested any temporizing, frowned.

"Jourdal, of course, is the man to lead the column," he said.

"Naturally. At the same time, I understand that Jourdal and your daughter—well—"

"It's no secret." Valette's charming smile flashed out. "I'm very glad of it."

"Then it may not be wise to risk him."

"He's the proper man. We're here to serve France, not to consider who can best propagate the race, my friend."

Pere Simon regarded the other man with a certain wonder. Valette's unflinching pure spirit rose above every consideration save that of the ideal he served. In another person it might have been termed a slavish devotion to duty, but the very nature of Valette rebuked such an aspersion. Rising, Pere Simon departed; he was satisfied.

When Laporte returned, Valette welcomed him with a smile. There was no further mention of the letters; they had been ordered burned, therefore they were burned.

"Come, Laporte, tell me the exact situation regarding the colonial infantry. I've sent for some of the other officers; I want to know everything, before they come."

LAPORTE summarized all that had been learned from Langlade about the situation at Le Cap, both as regarded the blacks and the French. He was still speaking when Cripet arrived, then Gouget, Jourdal, Lcrvaut and several others. A flash lit the luminous eyes of Valette as he swept their faces.

"My friends, I rejoice to see you. We've given our best in the cause of liberty; there's another who has never faltered. To him, Liberty and the Republic are the two burning torches of his entire existence. Even if

he has injured some of us, no matter; he has never failed the Republic, and we must not fail him now."

Cripet nodded. Gouget fingered his mustache. Jourdal's eyes flashed in anticipation.

"Before I die," went on Valette, "it is imperative that I speak with Colonel Friquet. Tomorrow a column departs to relieve him. You'll not disappoint me?"

Lervaut fell on his knees, seized one of the slender hands, and pressed it to his lips. Gouget bit his mustache, tears brimming over his red cheeks.

"My General," said Cripet stiffly, "he will return with us."

Valette smiled. "Since you say so, I believe it. You'll be second in command. Jourdal, take the column. You were with me before; you know the trails, the difficulties. Leave fifty men here to hold the fort. Take all the rest, with every man of the black troops."

Jourdal came to the bedside, took Valette's hand, and pressed it.

"At sunrise on Friday, we shall rescue Friquet. You may expect him here on Friday night; you have my word."

"Thank you, my son." Valette's eyes closed, and he sighed. "Until Friday night, then, I shall live."

The interview was ended.

"And, by the good God, he'll do it!" swore Gouget, once outside. "Why the devil Jourdal didn't say Sunday, instead of Friday night, I don't see! Friquet would have to kill a horse to get here Friday night. Whereas, if the general had resolved to live until Sunday, neither God, the devil, the angels nor all the saints could kill him before Sunday!"

Cripet's jaw fell in astonishment. It was the first time in years of campaigning that he had heard anything so resembling blasphemy from the lips of this morose but very devout man. Then, comprehending the emotion behind it, he nodded.

"Right. Tell me something. You've heard about his son having been betrayed to the guillotine by that pure and holy Judas. Is this why Valette wants to speak with him? He's soldiered for years with that reptile. Why not curse him long ago, instead of now?"

Gouget scowled. "Who said anything about curses?"

"Valette wants to lay a dying man's curse on Friquet; I'm sure of it. His daughter shivers every time she encounters Friquet; she's taught Jourdal to hate the fellow. Valette, in his heart, must hate him."

"It's all too deep for me." Gouget shook his head. "One thing's sure; Friquet will get here Friday night or we'll all be on the devil's griddle!"

"Not for Friquet's sake, though. No disarming the colonials until after this job is finished, eh?"

"I suppose you'll grouse about that," Gouget growled. "You can find bad luck in anything, evil in the rainbow, grief in Paradise itself! Grouse and bawl, all day long, turn your tongue into a spiked spur—bah! Your brains are fried."

"No doubt," agreed Cripet amiably. "But imagine these victorious blacks, their general rescued, Sylla destroyed, three of them to one of us—imagine them being told to hand over their muskets and disperse!"

"Go to the devil and complain to him," snapped Gouget, and strode off.

Cripet glanced after him and chuckled, the shadow of a smile upon his thin, dried lips. Gouget was almost as good a victim as Lervaut.

XI

THURSDAY; ten in the morning. The advance scouts had just departed. The main column was to get off in a few moments, marching light, without carts or baggage.

At this moment, the outpost announced the arrival of Langlade's party.

Jourdal met the party at the gate, his officers surrounding the two women. Langlade was taken in charge by Laporte and led directly to the hospital, in order to give his despatches to Valette immediately.

"There's only a short letter from Leclerc," he stated. "Well, Laporte? This column is off to relieve Friquet?"

"As soon as the general has your despatches. A messenger got through. Friquet sallies out in the morning, we meet him. What news from Le Cap?"

"The worst possible. Who's commanding the column?"

"Jourdal. It's a forced march. We don't expect to surprise Sylla, but we can destroy him. We shall do so."

Langlade was amazed by the change in Laporte, who now spoke with energy, with decision and firmness. With responsibility gone and no confusing complications, this man was truly a different person.

Once in the presence of Valette, all else was forgotten. Langlade was instantly conscious of the serenely steady regard of those luminous eyes. It was difficult to believe that here lay a doomed man—his features alert but quiet, his slender fingers toying with a silver snuffbox, his voice composed, musical, richly vibrant.

"You are welcome, Citizen. Langlade, I think, is the name? You bring dispatches?"

"Only a letter from the captain general," said Langlade, and handed it over.

Valette broke the seal, scanned the brief missive, and let it fall. He looked up at Langlade.

"You are aware of the contents?"

"I am, Citizen General."

Valette's eyes went to Laporte. "Citizen Colonel, the column should be back here with any wounded by Saturday morning or before. At noon on Saturday, the colonial infantry will be paraded, disarmed, and dispersed. This done, our troops will leave for Le Cap. You will spike the guns, fire a train to the ammunition, and blow up the fort."

Laporte saluted. "As ordered, my General."

"The Captain General says you're informed of the situation," Valette looked again at the American. "Kindly describe it, I beg of you."

"On the day we left Le Cap," Langlade replied bluntly, "the big *Cocarde* arrived from Guadeloupe with troops and prisoners. Two of the prisoners swam ashore and escaped. They brought word that General Richepense, in Guadeloupe, has published a proclamation of the First Consul. This proclamation decrees that slavery shall be once more established in these islands."

A slow, dreadful pallor worked across the countenance of Valette. He half came to his elbow, then fell back. Were he not already dying, Langlade would have thought a mortal wound had reached him.

"But that is impossible!" he gasped in

a voice of agony. "It denies everything—the Revolution, the Rights of Man, the very Republic! Are you certain?"

"The news spread fast. General Belair and his wife have been shot. At St. Marc, on the way here, we learned that the revolt is general. The rebels have burned Port-au-Prince and captured the ammunition depots of the army. The captain general has only a few hundred men left at Le Cap and is calling in all outlying forces."

"A few—a few hundred!" Valette spoke with effort. "Slavery—slavery! Then everything is over. Citizen, I owe you thanks for escorting my daughter here. Is there any way in which I can show my appreciation?"

"Yes. By permitting me to join Jourdal's column."

Valette regarded him in astonishment.

"You're not a soldier! You've just arrived. You need rest. The column is to make a forced march!"

"I'm not tired, Citizen General. I have urgent private business with Colonel Friquet; rather, I desire speech with him. I had far rather accompany the column than be sitting idly here. Perhaps I can be of use somewhere."

Those deep, luminous eyes rested upon him as though striving to discover what strange business could drive him to such extremes. Then the stricken look came back into Valette's face, and he gestured wearily.

"Permission is granted. Laporte, arrange it! And tell them that now I must see Friquet. I must, I *must!*" Valette's tones rose in almost agonized accents. "Laporte, tell them, tell Jourdal—at all costs—"

The voice failed. Valette fell back on his pillow, pale and exhausted. Langlade left the room with Laporte.

"The column leaves at once?"

"At once. I'll get a horse for you."

Langlade nodded. In the outer corridor were waiting the two women, with a group of officers. Jourdal took Julie on in to the side of her father, but Marie Soulastre turned to Langlade.

"Take me outside, please. I want a word with you."

Disregarding the astonished officers, she took Langlade's arm. Out in the open air, she turned and confronted him.

"What do you intend doing?"

"I'm leaving with the column, at once."

"So you've lied to me!" Her eyes flashed. "Going with the column, indeed! Merely to see him, to ask a question—after all you've done and been through? Bab! I'll not let you cheat me, understand? I know perfectly well that you mean to kill him—"

Langlade caught her wrist, gripped it, looked angrily into her eyes.

"Are you a woman or a hysterical child?" he said harshly. "I've told you the truth; make the best of it. Don't make trouble; two can play at that game. I've warned you not to interfere. You talk like a fool; don't act like one!"

Her bosom was rising and falling in quick agitation.

"And you pretend to love me!" she breathed. "Am I of less importance than this errand of yours?"

"Yes."

He had anticipated fiery defiance. Instead, she drew back, and her dark, lovely features became suffused with color.

"You're right; I'm sorry, comrade," she said softly. "You're afraid I might tell them that you want to kill him. I'd not do that. Forgive my words."

A sudden light leaped in Langlade's eyes.

"Ah, it's you who must forgive and believe, and then all's well!"

He glimpsed tears brimming her eyes. He drew her close; she clung to him blindly for an instant, a sob in her throat, then turned and was gone, as Jourdal appeared.

HE came to Langlade with his quick, nervous step, clapped the American on the back, and laughed eagerly.

"I owe you thanks for bringing her. All ready if you are! Laporte spoke of a horse for you; I'm taking none. Heaven help you if you've never marched! I'm cutting straight over the hills by trail, for the first stretch, to save roundabout roads. Our blacks can lead us. You and Pere Simon will have tough going, I fear."

"The priest? Does he go?"

Jourdal pointed to the gates. The lean priest stood there watching the column file out, a wide-brimmed hat shielding his scarred and puckered features.

"I understand he's an old friend of Colonel Friquet," said Jourdal. "Well, I must leave you. Cripet will look after you and

the priest; you'll come along with the rear-guard. *Au revoir!*"

He strode away. Langlade frowned at the black figure in its faded soutane. An old friend of Friquet—this priest who had been in the island for years? He had no time for puzzled wonder, however. Cripet approached him briskly.

"Welcome back, my old one! I hear you're going with us. Has the Army of the Rhine crossed the Styx yet?"

"Nearly over, yes." Langlade gripped the adjutant's hand.

"You've met the general?"

"Just now! A remarkable man."

"Remarkable?" Cripet wrinkled up his nose in disdain at the phrase. "He said two words to us, and we swore to bring Friquet back to him. That's not remarkable; that's a miracle! How's Le Cap? Is the captain general still dallying with Pauline while the army perishes?"

Langlade's hand closed on the shoulder of Cripet. His eyes blazed suddenly.

"You may hate everyone and everything, but you'll kindly show respect for that lady, Cripet."

"So!" Cripet sneered. "I suppose she had you brought in while she was bathing, as she does with most of them, so you could admire her."

"Silence! I saw her picking up senseless men, common soldiers stricken with cholera and lying in the sun." Langlade spoke hoarsely, his face white with passion. "I saw her put them in her own carriage and take them to the hospitals, careless of herself. And you, sun-dried old swine that you are, seeing no good or beauty anywhere, you dare to slaver your obscenity on her? You, here in the fine mountain air while your comrades die in that hell by the hundreds?"

The brown features of Cripet turned perfectly livid. He suddenly jerked the hand of Langlade from his shoulder, not in anger but in amazement.

"Is that the truth? You saw her, Pauline, do that?"

"Yes. Common soldiers, vomiting, cholera-smitten."

Cripet seized his hand, pressing it convulsively. The withered cheeks reddened again; he caught Langlade by the shoulders in a warm embrace.

"Do you know, I like you! If it does you

any good, I'm sorry for my words; that evens us up on apologies, eh? I never dreamed there was such kindness in the beauty. I'm a damned old fool, and that's the truth. To think of her doing that! I suppose you'll tell us next that the Blond Bonaparte has become a man instead of being a mimic."

Langlade knew that this nickname was generally applied to Leclerc.

"I think," he replied, "that by this time he has become a ghost."

"Good!" Cripet clapped him heartily on the shoulder. "Ha! I forgot the despatches you brought for Friquet—"

"I brought none."

"On the previous trip, I mean. Valette refused to open them. I was to take them—but they can await him here. The rear-guard's departing; come along, quickly!"

The mention of those despatches meant nothing to Langlade. He joined the priest at the gate, they swung in among the files, and the column was away at last.

XII

EVENING found the troops halted beside the bed of a mountain torrent for a two-hour rest. There had been a frightful scramble along jungle and hill trails, but now they had once more come into the road which led directly to L'Etang des Platons and promised a quick and easy march for the remainder of the way.

It was, however, one of those military *caminos* cut by Toussiant L'Overture with the express purpose of defending the island against invasion. At each of three points, farther on, and close together, this road narrowed into a deep defile with a sharp up-grade; thus it was commanded from either side by higher ground. Once blocked by fallen trees, these points could be easily defended. At the third defile, almost at L'Etang des Platons itself, General Valette had fallen after breaking his way through the defenses.

Jourdal's arrangements were admirable in their simplicity. The colonial infantry, marching against Sylla to rescue the general they loved, were superb. Stalwart, bare-foot, hardened by years of campaigning, the black troops carried their heavy muskets and eighty-pound knapsacks like feather pillows.

Two hundred of these men under Cripet were sent ahead to outflank and reduce the first two defiles, now reoccupied by Sylla, and mutters of gunfire announced that this work was under way. When the column came into the road and halted at sunset, a messenger brought word that both defiles had been taken. The third and most formidable remained. Jourdal planned to reach this by sunrise, and sent all the rest of the blacks ahead to join Cripet.

The little captain was to divide this black force and penetrate by hill trails, during the night, to either flank of the last defile. Jourdal, with his fifty Frenchmen, would drive straight ahead and attack at sunrise, counting upon Cripet's force to attack Sylla from the flanks, while Friquet would sally forth to hit the enemy's rear.

At the halt, Langlade slept heavily for an hour or more; then he rose, lit his pipe, and sat by one of the tiny bivouac fires. The moon was already up. On every hand ghostly peaks reared into the silver-black sky; there was no rain tonight. Trees towered around; the babbling rush of the torrent came from the ravine in ceaseless reiteration. A tall shape appeared, came close, and sank down beside Langlade.

"You never sleep?" Pere Simon inquired.

"Later. We'll halt at midnight and again at dawn."

"The mind is hard to control, eh? I, too, find it restless. The body must be very weary before the brain becomes dulled. And so much lies ahead for us all!"

Langlade felt an air of friendliness, almost intimacy, which surprised and gratified him. The priest's profile was sharp and finely drawn against the glow of the embers.

"Does so much lie ahead for you, Pere Simon? In what way?"

"Service. At the morning halt I say mass for those who wish it."

"Someone was telling me," said Langlade, "that you're an old friend of Colonel Friquet."

"A friend? Why no," responded the priest. He turned toward the American. "One hears strange things in the gossip of inactive men. I, for example, have heard that you might lay claim to a title of nobility."

"Empty words." Langlade was amused and irritated. That fool Lervaut must have

been babbling. "No, I claim only what I earn for myself in the world."

The priest mused, then abandoned the subject.

"I have met Friquet once or twice," he said. "But that was many years ago, in France. He holds many curious secrets in his head. I desire to learn from him the fate of men I once knew, for I believe he can tell me."

Langlade stirred. "Why, that's odd! I'm seeking him for the same reason; he can set my mind at rest regarding the fate of my father, who disappeared in the Vendean troubles."

"You think he may be alive?" Pere Simon's voice was suddenly sharp. "You have some reason to think so?"

"No direct reason. He was sent a prisoner to Paris. It is certain, from a letter he wrote home, that Friquet either saved him or sent him to the guillotine."

"Oh!" The priest relaxed, as though there could be only one answer to such a query. "I suppose you have thoughts of avenging him?"

"Come, come; let's be intelligent, at least," said Langlade, irritated.

"Intelligence is a curious thing. You think your father may be alive, but you have slight hope. Where hope lacks, there is no faith."

"I'm not talking about that," retorted Langlade. "If you knew that a man had caused the death of your father, your brother, your son, long years ago—would you seek to kill that man? The idea is absurd."

PERE SIMON was silent for a moment. "Thoughts and actions are different things," he said slowly, gently. "Are you a person of such marvelous restraint that you could face the murderer of your father, and do nothing? Or do you shrink from admitting the truth?"

"You're not a very polite man, monsieur," Langlade said testily.

"Let's be intelligent, as you yourself say. You don't answer my question."

"I don't intend to argue with a priest."

"Before I was a priest, I was a soldier. You dare not face the question?"

"Confound you! What's your interest in my private affairs?"

"Oddly enough, they might in some sort govern my own."

"I don't comprehend," said Langlade, frowning.

"None of us can understand the actions of another. We see them, not their motives. We judge the deeds, when we should judge only the motives."

"Well, I have not the least intention of murdering Friquet, if that's what you're driving at," Langlade said drily.

"I'm sorry for that," said the other.

Langlade was startled, perplexed. "What the devil! Sorry? You'd want me to murder a man?"

"No, no! I'm sorry that's not your intention; because then, if it were, we might talk intelligently. As it is, anything is possible. You do not yourself know what you may do; you don't know your own mental reactions. The future is with God."

Voices began to sound in the obscurity. Figures drifted about the fires. The camp fires stirred with sound as men waken and made ready. The morose Gouget came up to the two and peered at them.

"So it's you! Well, there's work ahead. I suppose Cripet will see his croakings justified. Not all of us will return by this road."

"So you're croaking too, are you?" retorted the priest.

"Bah! What matter where we rot? Hello, Jourdal! When do we leave?"

"At once." Jourdal joined them, with brisk reply. "Call up the men."

In five minutes the march was under way again. Talking was forbidden.

It was certainly very singular, reflected Langlade, how the purposes of so many persons seemed to converge upon the solitary and shadowy figure of Colonel Friquet. He could guess accurately enough at the impulsive motives and intentions of Marie Soulastre; she meant to relieve her mind of a weight, probably tongue-lash the man, free herself of bitterness and old loathings. She was a woman of initiative, resolute and capable, too well balanced to entertain thoughts of actual vengeance; at the same time, a spark might carry flame to her mind.

"Certainly, I love her," he told himself. "But, aside from Marie, there are others, though their reasons don't matter particularly. This priest, who cloaks his own motives behind a mask of words, is one.

General Valette, it appears, is equally determined to have speech with Friquet before he dies; they've all been talking about it, but no one knows his reasons. Perhaps Jourdal seeks the man. And so Lervaut has been babbling about my family, eh? Well, no matter. Nothing matters tonight."

Midnight saw long leagues behind them, and the weary men dropped like dogs for another snatch of sleep. Two messengers returned from Cripet, grinning, jubilant blacks. The adjutant had sent out his flanking detachments; he himself, with a few men, would join Jourdal at dawn. All was well. A little desultory firing, nothing of moment. Sylla was evidently going to make a resolute stand at the third defile.

Langlade slept heavily, and was awakened to a hasty repast. Each man bore his own food, ammunition, arms. Langlade and Pere Simon, even with no muskets to carry, were barely able to keep up with these swinging, iron-legged veterans.

On again, but now the ban of silence was lifted, for no surprise was to be attempted in this frontal attack. The men joked, sang, told anecdotes, as their spirits rose. Langlade strode on in the van with Gouget and Jourdal; the latter, who best knew what to expect up ahead, was impetuous and eager to be there.

"The rascals are well posted. The road has clearings to right and left, but the flanking jungle is impassable for us. That's why I've sent the blacks to work around for miles by the hill trails. If they don't arrive in time to lend a hand, Lord help us! This Sylla is a clever, tricky, merciless scoundrel."

"How far is that defile from L'Etang des Platons?" Gouget inquired.

"Less than a mile. We attack at full sunrise, not before. Friquet will hear the firing and be on their backs in no time. He should have a hundred men left."

"No," said the gloomy Gouget. "He sent that message days ago. Now his force will have shrunk to twenty whites and fifty colonials, at the outside."

"Keep your croakings to yourself, lest the men overhear," said Jourdal impatiently, and turned to Langlade. "You seem to be keeping up well after all."

"My legs were made to use," said Langlade.

"You're a good one." Jourdal lowered his voice. "I owe you a good deal. Julie had a word with me before we left; she praises you to the skies. Pity you're not a soldier!"

"Pity you're not an American."

"Well, who knows? I've thought about it," said Jourdal, with a sudden surprising earnestness. "If this news is true, if slavery has been re-established, queer things will happen. The Corsican has few friends in this army. I could name certain high officers who have talked much about it; many of us will look forward to America now, not back to France. That is, if we survive."

"Are you serious?" demanded Langlade. "In the face of war—"

"In the face of the devil!" Jourdal's voice was stirred by gusty passion. "The Corsican sent us here to die, wanted us out of his road one way or another. If he proclaims slavery, that means a kingdom again for France. The Republic has perished, the Consulate is a farce. Bonaparte is supreme. Let him deny liberty, equality, and fraternity—then what about the veterans of the republican armies? France is lost to them, America remains."

"We'll welcome you, assuredly," said Langlade, astonished by the possibility, but instantly recognizing its logic. He remembered, now, how General Humbert and others had questioned him about America, with such intent interest.

"You don't love Friquet, I gather?"

"My feelings toward the man are no secret," replied Jourdal. "He's detestable. He inspires one with repugnance. But we're not enemies, if that's what you mean—ha! trouble ahead! A bridge was gone down there, I recall. See you later."

He melted into the darkness ahead, and their talk was at an end.

ON, interminably on, with the night now creeping toward dawn. The rains had ceased, but the ground was soft and soggy in places, in other spots so sharp with flinty rocks as to cut the boots to ribbons. How the barefoot blacks could pass untroubled by roads or thorny jungle, was a mystery to all.

An occasional shot began to sound in the distance. The pace quickened. Came a sharp and sudden challenge somewhere ahead, and then a ring of voices. Pere Simon

joined the American, and together they came to where Cripet stood with the vanguard around him. The adjutant was jubilant.

"Everything is in shape for us," he reported. "Barely a dozen men killed so far. Sylla holds the heights and defile ahead, and in force; some hundreds of them. I've kept fifty of our colonials here, to exchange shots and keep Sylla occupied; the rest are gone on the flanking march. Dawn is 'an hour away."

Journal glanced around, and spoke loudly.

"This, my friends, is the exact spot where our general was hit."

The calculated words were repeated and passed back among the files of men, to the accompaniment of growling oaths. The march was ended. Dead ahead, a few hundred yards only, were the barricades and the enemy.

Clouds veiled the moon now and the terrain was hidden. Reflections of fires showed along the higher ground opposite; occasionally the red spat of muskets broke forth. Command was given to break ranks, eat and sleep. Langlade, dead tired, joined a group huddling together for warmth, and was asleep in two minutes.

Later, an exhausted black arrived from one of the two flanking parties, to dispel the anxiety of Journal. His party had gained Sylla's right, unseen, and would be ready to attack in flank when the firing began. At this news, even Gouget, sitting over a pipe with Cripet and Journal, allowed himself to become optimistic.

"But look out for Sylla," he added. "He's clever, full of tricks, the blacks say."

"Right," said Journal. "How do the blacks talk, Cripet? We can rely on them?"

"Absolutely," the adjutant replied. "They're all for Noyer, of course. Luckily, they don't know the news our American brought with him. When they learn it, look out! Once they find out about the return of slavery, they'll smash us. They'll not disarm, either; if we obey those orders, it means our destruction."

"We'll obey them," Journal said calmly.

"In that case," said Gouget, "prepare to fight Noyer."

"That's understood. We'll lose half our force. Those who remain, will reach Le Cap. It's simple."

"A pleasant prospect!" and Cripet

chuckled ironically. "But you're wrong, Journal. I predict that not half our force will be lost in that struggle, but nine tenths. Those colonials are tigers, and their officers are no fools."

"Well, all that's for the future," declared Journal. "It can take care of itself."

"The future," put in Pere Simon, "belongs to God."

"Bah!" spat out Cripet. "It belongs to those who make it theirs! You're talking to men, not children."

The priest rose. "I'm going to say mass. Will you join us?"

"Thanks, no," said Journal. The adjutant refused with a gesture. Gouget silently came to his feet and disappeared in the obscurity with Pere Simon.

Dawn crept down from the sky. Langlade was roused by scattered musketry, by the stir of the camp waking around him. Cold food was washed down with cognac and water. The breaking daylight gradually disclosed the objective before them all.

Ahead, the road ascended a sharp rise and passed between two low eminences, thickly covered by trees. On the upward slope, all the growth had been destroyed by fire, leaving only blackened ground and stumps. Thus, to right and left was cleared ground; any attack must be made without shelter, against a hidden enemy. At the top of the rise, a barricade of felled trees blocked the road itself. To Langlade, a frontal attack seemed sheer suicide, without artillery to smash the enemy.

The hundred men, half white, half black, broke their fast together: while outflung scouts exchanged shots with the foe. Halfway up the cleared slope, beside the road, was a large white rock, more sharply defined as the daylight grew clearer.

At an order from Journal, a drum rolled. The troops formed up and prepared for the advance. Sunrise was still half an hour distant. Journal was examining the slopes ahead when a movement became visible at the barricade. Three figures appeared there, walking out, striding down the road; a uniformed officer, a gorgeous splash of color, and two soldiers who carried white rags drifting from their muskets. A yell of recognition and hatred arose from the blacks of the column.

"Sylla! The accursed Sylla!"

It was the mulatto leader himself. The shots died out. Drums rolled along the hill and voices rang from the trees. Numbers of figures, unarmed, hands aloft, left the shelter of the brush and trees, and approached a little way, toward the French line.

"Sylla, by God! Sylla himself!" exclaimed Jourdal. "Can we trust him?"

"No," broke in Cripet. "But your place is here. I'll go out and meet him."

"Very well. No truce, mind! Best take a loaded pistol, Cripet."

"Here's one, freshly primed," spoke up Gouget. With a nod of thanks, Cripet took the pistol and thrust it under the breast of his tunic.

SYLLA halted his two soldiers and advanced a few paces beyond them, to the white rock. He shouted something to the group of French officers and waved a hand. Cripet strode out briskly to meet him.

Jourdal snapped an order. The troops, black and white, deployed to right and left, advanced a little across the open space, and then halted. A glitter of light ran along their thin line as bayonets were fixed. Then they waited. The drummer watched Jourdal, the men watched what was passing by the white rock. Sylla's troops likewise halted, out in the open. Many, as their uniforms testified, had deserted freshly from the garrison at Le Cap.

As he strode on, Cripet observed that the two soldiers behind Sylla were renewing the priming of their muskets. Sylla himself appeared unarmed. His very tall figure was startling, for he seemed entirely white. His features were powerful and intelligent; the gaze he fastened upon Cripet was steady and unflinching.

He saluted, a gesture which Cripet did not acknowledge. The adjutant halted half a dozen paces away, and spoke curtly.

"You show a flag of truce. Well?"

"I am General Sylla, in command of these forces," said the mulatto, not in the island patois but in perfect French. "I desire to speak with an officer in authority."

Cripet gave his name, as second in command of the column. Sylla's face cleared, as though with satisfaction.

"I have news for you," he said, speaking slowly and carefully. "The colonial generals

at Le Cap have revolted; Clairvaux, Des-salines, Christophe—all of them. The First Consul has proclaimed slavery in the islands. Yesterday an attack was made on Le Cap. The outer forts were carried, but the city itself was saved."

Something in the air of this man announced that he spoke the truth. Cripet held his peace. Sylla went on, with the same deliberation.

"What is more, something else happened yesterday. All the blacks incorporated in the French regiments at Le Cap, men who served your leaders devotedly, were put aboard ships; fifteen hundred men in all. During the assault, they were massacred to the last man. If you desire proofs, I have several men here who witnessed it and joined me with the news. Thus, you comprehend, a war of extermination has begun."

Tiny beads of perspiration bedewed the brow of the adjutant. He did not doubt this information. It was, indeed, perfectly true.

"Well?" he demanded. "Do you desire to surrender?"

"None of your *blagues*," Sylla rejoined in cold disdain. "Colonel Friquet and the remnant of his force are blockaded. Any advance on your part gives the signal to attack without quarter. You cannot break through here. I desire to offer you certain terms."

"I," said Cripet, "am empowered to act for my commander. Name them."

AT THIS moment, Cripet became conscious of a confused medley of voices to right and left. There was no movement; but those of Sylla's men who had advanced, were shouting, calling out. Cripet's entire attention was fastened on the tall mulatto.

"Surrender your arms," said the latter. "You'll be permitted to retire. Friquet and his men will be allowed to join you. Refuse, and no quarter will be given."

While speaking, Sylla half turned his head as though trying to hear something. The two soldiers behind him were also in an attitude of listening. For the first time, an acute suspicion of treachery seized upon the adjutant; glancing to right and left, he could see nothing menacing. But abruptly, he

caught a few words in the island patois, from one of the rebels closer to hand.

"All of them! Assaulting and looting Le Cap, now!"

"What does this mean?" burst out Cripet, as an inkling of the truth shot across his brain. Sylla bent upon him a smile, coldly cruel as it was crafty.

"My men are giving your blacks the news I've just told you, naturally."

FOR an instant, Cripet stood absolutely frozen, a paralysis of horror gripping every nerve. The flag of truce was a pretext. Sylla's men were shouting the news to the black troops, inciting them to turn on the whites. And those Negroes were wavering. He caught frantic shouts from behind, heard the excited voices of Jourdal blaring something.

"Careful, Citizen Adjutant!" Sylla warned him sharply. "These two men are here to watch you. If you dare threaten me, you die."

True. The two soldiers had leveled their muskets, were watching him attentively. With a nod of comprehension, Cripet looked into the face of the tall mulatto.

"I shall not threaten you," he replied with perfect calm. "You've used the flag of truce as a cloak for treachery. Therefore I shall kill you."

He whipped out the pistol, thrust it against the chest of Sylla, and the explosion burst upon the morning stillness. A puff of white smoke billowed around. From Sylla broke one wild scream of fury and agony, then he put both hands to his chest, staggered a step away, and collapsed.

A yell of rage came from the two soldiers. Their muskets vomited smoke. Like wild animals, they leaped, bayonets flashing in the first rays of the sunrise, lifting red from the motionless clay that had been Cripet. All happened in the flash of an instant. The powder-smoke of the three shots was still drifting, when a dozen French muskets crashed. The two soldiers, riddled, fell beside Cripet.

Without a drumbeat, without a single yell, the whole French line swept forward at a dead run, whites and blacks together. The rebels, many of them still unarmed and in the open, were stupefied by the death of Sylla. Frantic, frenzied voices burst forth

from their ranks, from the brush behind; it was drowned in a ragged discharge of musketry from the advancing French.

This discharge was echoed, to right and left, by sharp volleys from an invisible source. From the mulattos on the eminence, arose terrible screams, as they perceived that they were being assailed on both flanks. A moment later, from their rear, from the height where L'Etang des Platons was concealed by intervening trees, came a sound of sustained and rapid firing.

Friquet had moved out to the attack. The forces of Sylla were now being assailed upon four sides.

They were surrounded, and their sole hope was to select the weakest point and break through. To do this, however they needed a leader. They had none.

The wave of assault pressed on. The black troops were grimly silent. The French were cursing, weeping, laughing in frantic rage, hurling the name of Cripet in the air.

THEIR bayonets no longer glittered, but were reddened. The screams moved farther back upon the slope, as the sound of firing increased to right and left.

Langlade halted beside the white rock. As he was lifting the head of Cripet, Pere Simon came running up. The adjutant was not yet dead; bullets and steel were slow to rob this veteran of his life. His eyes opened, and a smile touched his thin lips.

"*Vive la Republique!*" he gasped. "*Salut mon general!* You and I alike—that Englishman—the paths of glory—"

His head sagged over. Langlade gently laid him down, straightened, and met the gaze of the priest. He spoke bitterly.

"To save Friquet, this man died!"

"No, no! He saw what was happening!" broke out Pere Simon. "Another moment, and those colonials of ours would have turned upon us. Cripet knew this; therefore, he killed Sylla. There's the result." The priest gestured toward the slopes ahead. "To the last instant, he was a soldier. May he rest in peace!"

After all, Pere Simon had once been a soldier himself.

"Shall we follow?" said Langlade.

Pere Simon seated himself on the white rock. "No. You hear the volleys! That

means it's over. No use witnessing executions. This is the focal point; Jourdal will bring Friquet here to witness how Cripet died. You'll see."

"You're a shrewd man," Langlade observed.

He sat down and lugged out his pipe. Then he remembered that, a little while ago, Cripet had begged some of his tobacco. He gave up the thought of smoking. The two men sat there in the morning sunlight, silent. Suddenly Pere Simon jerked up his head.

A figure was coming down the road, staggering toward them. A horrible figure, a mulatto clad in shreds of uniform, blood pouring from half a dozen wounds, in his hand the barrel of a shattered musket. He shambled along, eyes fastened on the two. Obviously, one of Sylla's men; no doubt, from his uniform, one of those who had just arrived from La Cap. He came to a halt, staring, gasping.

"I know you!" he exclaimed, pointing to Langlade. "You're the man bullets don't harm. They knocked you off the bed, that's all. You American—"

His eyes rolled wildly. Pere Simon moved, but he plucked up his musket-barrel with so furious a gesture that the priest hastily stepped back.

"You American!" cried out the dying man. Foam slobbered his lips, and red froth. "I know you. Hernan Dupuche has sworn an oath. Dupuche will avenge us all—and will finish you—will finish all whites!"

THE speaker toppled over; blood gushed from his mouth, and he lay quiet. Pere Simon leaned over him and then rose, frowning at Langlade.

"Dupuche? A monster, not a man. What did he mean, about Dupuche finishing all whites?"

"I don't know," said Langlade. A burst of comprehension flashed upon him. He recalled the forgotten cellars on the Paradis plantation, the enormous stock of powder and arms somewhere—somewhere! Then something else caught at his attention. He turned and pointed. Instantly, the frenzied words of the dying man were forgotten.

The man whom each of them had come here to find, was approaching.

XIII

A GROUP of officers were coming down the road toward the white rock.

Friquet, General Noyer, Jourdal and Gouget walked together; they were followed by two black aides of Noyer, who led three horses.

For the first time, Friquet was hearing all that had happened while he had been blockaded, and about General Valette.

In the appearance of the four officers from L'Etang des Platons was full evidence of their sufferings. The two aides were gaunt shadows, haggard and half clad. General Noyer was a tall, splendidly formed man, his ragged uniform still aglitter with bits of gold lace. A bandage about his head was dark with dried blood. His left arm was in a sling. His massive features were alive with energy, and were imbued with a certain lofty nobility that lent him a heroic air.

Friquet said nothing, seemed not to hear what the others were saying. His uniform was rent and ripped. He carried no weapon. A musket, recently discharged closely, had splattered his right cheek and jaw with powder-stains, had burned and blackened his right shoulder and epaulet.

The man himself was not tall but extremely erect, and his head was firmly set upon his shoulders. Sharp-boned features, high brow, long aquiline nose; an almost straight gash of a mouth, thin-lipped, sat above a square chin. His cheeks angled back from the nostrils as though pressed from either side, giving his face a wedge-like appearance. This caused his vague resemblance to Robespierre.

Friquet gave no answer to a question from Jourdal; he had not heard it. Nothing made the least impression upon him except the fact that General Valette was dying, had sent for him, wanted him immediately. He did not glance at the body of Cripet or the two men beside it.

He halted. Under knitted brows, his pallid blue eyes were fastened on the horizon. General Noyer, watching him anxiously, touched his elbow; Friquet seemed unconscious of the contact. His attitude was strained, fixed, intent elsewhere.

"Of our whites, twenty remain," one of the two aides was telling Gouget. "There

were seventy-four of us in all, this morning. No other officers are left."

A morose satisfaction appeared in the countenance of Gouget. Twenty whites, fifty blacks; his prediction to Cripet had been fulfilled precisely.

Now, over the lip of the eminence, came the first of the returning flood; the extermination was finished. The black troops were in wild and clamorous uproar, Jourdal's men were emptying canteens with their rescued comrades of the 90th, bawling out lusty talk and oaths. As though all these voices had penetrated his abstraction and wakened him, Friquet suddenly moved.

He looked at Noyer, at Jourdal, quite blankly. Without a word he swung around to his horse; one agile movement, and he was in the saddle. His spurs struck in. The astonished animal leaped, and then darted wildly away at full speed, down the slope. Friquet urged him, spurred him harder.

"Name of the devil!" cried General Noyer, in astounded dismay. He turned, waved his unhurt arm at the two aides. "Quick! Follow him! Guard him with your lives!"

The two black officers mounted and galloped after the already lessening figure of Colonel Friquet.

The latter, deaf to everything except the voice of Valette, sent his horse on at mad, senseless speed, unchecked. He paid no attention to the shouts flung after him, to the two riders behind him. He was entirely deaf to caution or discretion, to his own folly in maintaining this murderous speed. He had forgotten that not seven miles, but seven leagues, lay ahead.

Time passed, until mid-morning was at hand. The blinding, white-hot radiance of the sun beat down. The winding, yellowish streak of road was steaming and dancing with shimmering heat. Friquet rode on; he felt nothing, saw nothing, heard nothing. But, to one who knew him intimately, the whole tenor of the reflections flaming within his brain would have been clear.

Valette—dying! The one man in all the world!

That is, the one man like himself. The others were all dead now. All of them, even Robespierre, had either betrayed their ideals or had been betrayed. Not so Valette. Not so Friquet. They, perhaps, were

not deemed important enough to be struck down by destiny.

All through the chaotic years of revolution, Valette had held the same vision cherished by Friquet, had fought with him for the same cause, had uplifted the same ideal; not weakly, but with a spirit of steel. Mourning his own son, Valette had admitted the stern necessity of that execution; Valette was the last of the Romans, giving his son as he had given title and estates, reputation, his past and future, to liberty.

Liberty was his cause, the Republic was his ideal. Valette had shattered the foes of both, on the frontiers, as Friquet had shattered them in Paris. Then Friquet's genius for artillery work drew attention from Valette and Bonaparte alike.

This man who was so inhumanly terrible in his own lonely life, who disdained to explain or excuse himself, who had pitilessly inspired the destruction of self-seeking and corrupt patriots, bowed humbly to the pure flaming spirit of Valette, knowing it finer than his own. Valette had become his model, his god.

And now Valette lay dying.

FRIQUET could imagine what Valette had to say, for they had often discussed such a possibility. One was passing, but the other must carry on the work of both, without compromise. Others would arise to serve the cause and uphold the ideal, raising the divine reason to the altar of outworn creeds. Valette, dying, would desire to confide this trust to his hand, thought Friquet. The work must go on.

Paris was still France; so, at least, both Valette and Friquet imagined. Paris would rise again to overwhelm any who threatened her liberty, the Corsican or any other. The aristocracy, the various revolts and plots and intrigues, had all gone the same road of blood, and the Republic stood supreme, invulnerable, ineffable. Bonaparte might send the Army of the Rhine to the New World, but it would come back with vision renewed to work his ruin! So had the talk run, always.

Now, of a sudden, Friquet's reflections were broken off; he returned abruptly to consciousness of himself and his surroundings.

To his alarm, he was soaked with sweat.

His horse was flagging, foam-white, exhausted and staggering pitifully. Aghast at his own incredible folly, Friquet drew rein and, dismayed, flung himself to the earth. His poor beast stood with legs wide apart, head hanging.

A groan of actual torment escaped Friquet. His insane riding had now destroyed its very object. From here on, he could only make haste slowly.

A tempered sound of hoofbeats reached him, and he perceived the two black aides closing in from the rear. Their horses were in slightly better shape than his own for they had ridden more moderately. When they came up, they saluted cheerfully, dismounted and fell to work rubbing down the horses; gradually the animals recovered.

Presently all three rode on again, but it was impossible to make any speed, and Friquet was forced to a desperate patience. His attention was attracted to the two aides, as one spoke to the other.

"What was that? What was it you just said?" he asked. Those were the first words he had uttered.

"It was what he heard back there, Citizen Colonel," said the aide. "That the captain general is dead, that there is no more army."

"No more army?"

FRIQUET'S voice bit. Oddly enough, it was a thin and sibilant voice; in moments of emotion it became shrill and almost ridiculous. This peculiarity had kept Friquet from becoming an orator, a tribune of the people.

"What do you mean by this nonsense?" he went on calmly.

"Citizen Colonel, we do not know. They said it was plague. The army is gone."

Friquet rode on, inexpressibly alarmed, feeling the clutch of a cold hand at his heart.

The army annihilated by plague? It was possible, of course, but he could not conceive the possibility, or visualize it. If such a thing were true, if all the finest troops of France were rotting here, then the Republic was gone. There would be no bulwark left against the ambition of the Corsican, against anything. With anxiety growing upon him, he began to regard himself as gripped in an inexorable current of futility and failure, in

a stream of events which swept him and all others before it.

Meantime, at Morne Rouge, Laporte and the fifty men remaining with him were making preparations for evacuation. The fort was to be blown up, the cannon spiked, everything destroyed; consequently, carts had to be loaded with powder, baggage, provisions, other carts prepared for the wounded. There was plenty to do.

In the midst, an outpost brought in a sealed letter, addressed to Langlade. A black had left it and gone again, without explanation. Laporte examined it curiously, and took charge of it. As he observed almost plaintively, the arrival of a letter for a visitor at Morne Rouge was probably the most singular thing that had ever happened here; but no one paid any attention.

Monnier hung over his chief patient like a mother over her child. On this Friday morning, General Valette dictated a few letters to his daughter, who stayed constantly with him; but toward noon it was evident that the dying man was sinking.

Sending Julie from the room, Monnier examined Valette carefully. When he had made an end, Valette looked up at him calmly.

"How long?"

"It is impossible to say."

"I cannot die until Friquet arrives. If I sink, then you must keep me alive."

"General, something outside my province has happened to you," Monnier said impulsively. "You're not the same. Something has happened, not to your body, but to your mind."

"True." The eyes of Valette closed as under some weight too crushing to be longer endured. He sighed faintly. "Two frightful things have happened. One is that the Army of the Rhine has finally perished."

"Other armies have gone the way of all flesh," Monnier said cynically.

"There was no other army like this one in the whole world. The second thing is still more terrible. When slavery was established again under the Tricolor, it was a blow at the very soul of France."

"That? Bah! The colonies can't make money without slavery. To restore it, was a good stroke of business."

Valette's eyes opened, and flashed.

"The work, the blood, the progress of a

nation during ten long years, counts for nothing? The cause which brought a people to the forefront of the world, the ideal which led France through chaos to her great destiny—all is gone. A good stroke of business! Yes, for that accursed Bonaparte."

MONNIER was in anxious sweat. "My General, I do not argue. I don't know what it's all about. If you wish to be alive when Friquet comes, drink this medicine I've prepared. It'll cause you to sleep an hour or two, but you'll waken strengthened and refreshed."

Valette smiled, and reached up the little silver snuffbox.

"You're a good fellow. Take this; it's too heavy for me. Keep it as a memento of me, old friend. Even in Egypt, we were freeing a people, or some of us thought we were. The same cause, the same idea—well, well, give me the dose."

He swallowed it. His head sank back, and his eyes closed again.

Monnier sent Julie to get some rest, left the hospital, and sought his delayed noon meal. He found Marie Soulaistre awaiting him alone. Monnier frowned at her.

"No time for pretty speeches, little one."

"No, you're a practical man," she retorted. "There's something I want you to do for me, and keep your mouth shut about it."

Monnier did not know whether to be flattered or suspicious. "What is it?"

"First tell me how the general is."

"By God, how should I know?" snapped Monnier. "Why ask fool questions! He can't last many hours. Something has happened inside him, a blow more deadly than his wound."

"A blow? What was it?"

Monnier shrugged. "About slavery being revived. It's broken him."

"Oh! Yes, I can understand that." The girls dark eyes were slight with speculation. "I've heard so much about him; he has lived for only one thing, the Republic, and that is doomed if slavery returns."

"Nonsense. The revolution's over long ago, the Republic's done with," and Monnier grimaced. "Bonaparte's in power now. Well, what is it you want?"

Marie regarded him thoughtfully.

"Laporte tells me that the evacuation, the disarming of the black troops, will mean dis-

aster. It will be done, he says, if Friquet returns. Is that true?"

"Absolutely, and God help us all! Orders are orders, Deleclerc says to disarm them, so they'll be disarmed though all hell opened under us—as it will."

"Then you should understand," said the girl quietly. "Sometime today, I want you to give me a loaded pistol, a small one I can carry under my dress. Loaded, primed, ready to use if the necessity arises."

Monnier's brows went up.

"By God, you're the right sort! Of course I'll do it. I've a brace of little ones, devilish small, good only at close quarters, but deadly then. They're chased brass; I got them after Marengo, took them from an Austrian noble. You can carry one up your sleeve or in your bosom. One will do the work; I'll get it for you later. Remember, put the muzzle into your mouth and point up. Better to spoil your beauty than fall into black hands."

"Precisely," Marie agreed. "There must be no failure."

Monnier regarded her with admiration.

"Trust me; I'll put in a load that'll leave no room for failure. Yes, you're wise to be prepared. I hope Friquet returns; then the job won't be bungled. Most of us may go down, but the work will be done."

"You like Friquet?"

"Nobody likes him. One hears stories about him, meets him, finds him repulsive. But he's efficient." With this, Monnier attacked his meal. "Usually people are not nearly so bad as other people say."

"That's one viewpoint, at least," said Marie, and left him.

THE afternoon dragged on. General Valette slept longer than foretold, and did not waken till the afternoon was nearly spent. Monnier was summoned at once; after he had visited Valette, he joined Julie and Marie outside the general's room.

"Go in; remain with him," he said to Julie. "I shall be frank. He may last an hour or two. Time draws short."

Julie nodded quietly. She gave no evidence of grief, but went smiling into the room of her father. Monnier frowned after her.

"Why, she's smiling!" he muttered. "Has the girl no heart?"

Marie Soulastre laughed softly. "Ah, you republicans! How little you know of the aristocrats whom you hate!"

"Devil take it, am I supposed to understand women?"

"If not, keep your comments to yourself. Where's the pistol you promised me?"

"Here."

They were alone. Monnier produced a beautiful little weapon of the most exquisitely chased brass, so small as to appear almost a toy until one observed the size of the bore.

"Freshly loaded and primed. Here's a twist of powder; each morning, renew the priming. When there's no further need, I shall ask you to return the pistol, as I value it."

"But if I'm compelled to use it, how can I return it?" she asked gravely.

Monnier looked astonished. She burst into laughter, and with a dry chuckle he pinched her ear.

"You've a devil in your eye, my little one! Don't use that pistol on anyone else, by accident. See you later."

The time allotted by Monnier wore away; General Valette still lived, though his ivory features had become leaden.

"No need to examine me again," he said, when Monnier came in. "I refuse to die until Friquet arrives. No news of any kind?"

"None." Monnier frowned at the flood of sunset light. "Shall I bring screens?"

"Surely the dying should have the sun?" A shadowy smile touched Valette's lips. "Give me a drink; put a good slug of cognac in it."

Monnier shrugged. Julie held the cup for her father; as he drank, he jerked up his head. A confused sound of voices came from the parade-ground.

"It is he!" murmured Valette. "Jourdal succeeded!"

The boots of a soldier clumped outside, bringing the news. At a gesture, Julie Valette stooped and embraced her father.

"Adieu, my dear!" he said. "Go, both of you. I desire to be alone—with him."

Two minutes later, Friquet was ushered into the room.

He was dust-covered, his garments dark with sweat, his thinned face further thinned by fatigue, but his features were impassive. He advanced to the bedside, dropped to one

knee, and laid his hand upon that of Valette. The dying fingers tightened convulsively.

"Friquet! I must—I must tell you—"

Valette paused. He gasped faintly. Then his voice came, almost with its old strength.

"Friquet! The ideal is destroyed. There is no longer a cause. The Corsican has revived slavery. Do you hear?"

"That is impossible," Friquet said coldly. "I heard it. I did not believe it. You say it is true?"

"It is true; I'm about to prove it," went on Valette, lifting himself a little. "All these years I've held the cause, the ideal, above everything. Now they're gone, and gone for good. Once more I become myself, I revert to myself. Yes, Friquet; I've returned from the dead for this word with you. You had my boy guillotined; I forgave you. But now I—I kill you. Die, you scoundrel!"

His hand slipped a pistol from under the covers. It was primed and cocked; he thrust it against the breast of Friquet.

The latter did not move.

But, with the very action, Valette's eyes widened suddenly. His arm fell, and the unfired pistol escaped from his fingers. The glow died from his staring eyes. His head fell back, and life escaped him with a soft sigh.

The pale blue eyes of Friquet dwelt impassively upon the peaceful relaxed features. His straight lips twitched in a grimace. He lifted the pistol, uncocked it, and laid it aside. Then, with a deep breath, he came to his feet and went to the door.

There he turned. Something like a flash of despair and terror flickered in his eyes as he looked back at the dead man.

"The ideal is destroyed; there is no longer a cause!" he muttered. "Slavery! Then that—that means the end of everything."

Abruptly, he thrust at the door and left the room.

XIV

DURING two hours, Friquet slept like the dead.

At eight in the evening he wakened and sent an orderly for food. He shaved, bathed, and changed into a fresh uniform. When

he had eaten and drunk, he summoned Colonel Laporte. Friquet was now in command at Morne Rouge.

Laporte came, bringing all despatches. These Friquet disregarded, while Laporte told briefly what had happened here and elsewhere. Friquet sat like a carven image; his face showed no trace of emotion, his pale eyes glittered calmly, until Laporte mentioned the name of Charles Langlade. Then his eyes dilated in surprise.

"Langlade! No matter. Go on."

His astonishment was drowned by deeper emotions. Pallor crept over his countenance at hearing of conditions in Le Cap; when he comprehended that the army was actually gone, that rebellion rioted through the island, that slavery was again a fact, a sort of facial convulsion contorted his features. It checked Laporte.

"Eh? Are you ill?"

"No." Friquet was himself again, cold, inhuman, dominant. "Proceed."

"That is all. Here," and Laporte touched a sealed packet, "are despatches for you personally; Langlade brought them on his first trip. Here are those for the general."

Friquet riffled through Valette's orders and despatches rapidly. He tore open the sealed packet from Leclerc. He started, looked more closely; for an instant his jaw actually fell.

"You say that Langlade brought this—Langlade himself?"

"When he first arrived."

Friquet nodded, shrugged, laid the papers aside. His eyes fell upon the letter.

"What is this?"

"For Langlade. A messenger brought it yesterday. I put it there by accident—"

Friquet deliberately tore open the letter, to the amazement and horror of Laporte. He read it. His pale eyes flashed. He caught his breath and glanced up.

"Where is this man Langlade—with the column, you say? By whose permission?"

"That of the general."

Friquet sat in thought. He was quite indifferent to the hostile aloofness of the other man; this had long since become an old story to Friquet. At least he looked up and nodded.

"You have done well," he said with decision. "The column will reach here sometime tonight, perhaps toward dawn. When

it comes, arrest this man Langlade and place him in solitary confinement until I'm ready to speak with him in the morning. He is to communicate with no one—no one, do you understand?"

The stolid features of Laporte expressed amazement.

"Arrest? Him, our American—"

"Did you hear me or not?"

LAPORTE stiffened. "As ordered, Citizen Colonel."

"Let the men rest until noon. An hour before noon, thirty of your fresh men here will depart with the carts and the wounded, under Major Lervaut. Precisely at noon, the colonial infantry will be paraded and disarmed. Ten minutes after their dispersal, the force will depart for Le Cap."

Laporte became paler and paler. "Impossible!" he ejaculated dully.

"When Moreau commanded the Army of the Rhine," Friquet said coldly, "the use of that word by an officer would have meant court-martial."

The desperate Laporte stirred, moved, spoke out with blurring impulse.

"The Army of the Rhine no longer exists! Listen, I implore you!" An expression of agony twisted his face, sweat stood out on his forehead. "Thirty of our men with the carts; that leaves twenty. Suppose seventy return with the column. We have ninety men. General Noyer has three hundred of his brigade. By this time they know everything—that Belair was shot, that the insurrection is general—"

"That Le Cap is besieged, and Leclerc dead," Friquet added impassively.

"Above all, that the First Consul has revived slavery, and the Republic has ceased to exist for them!"

"Not for them alone," murmured Friquet.

"With ninety men, we disarm and disperse three hundred victorious colonials!" Usually so slow and vague of speech, Laporte was now bursting with impassioned words. "They'll butcher us all. What can stop Noyer from turning the guns on us? You know how they cherish their liberty and regard their arms as the very breath of life; when their freedom is threatened, these men become demons! Citizen Colonel, I beg you, I warn you solemnly. Remember the two women here. If this madness must

proceed, first seize and make sure of all the black officers."

Friquet regarded him with an impassive, disdainful air.

"The worst possible folly is to threaten desperate men," he said.

"Leave the fort and all in it to General Noyer—"

"In which case, his men would follow the column and annihilate it."

"Good God! I know it! I've thought of nothing else! There's no way. There's no compromise!"

"Correct." Friquet's pale eyes glittered. "At the moment when destiny gives us an apparently impossible task, she also shows how to perform it. Here are our orders; we obey them. There's no compromise; you are right."

"But I tell you—I don't understand—"

"Silence! You're not required to understand." Friquet's voice thinned and shrilled, checking Laporte like a blow in the face. "How long, Citizen Laporte, have you been a soldier?"

"Three years as a private, six months as under-officer, two years as captain, one year as major, a year and a half as lieutenant-colonel."

"Eight years; you should have learned obedience. What other officers are here?"

"Monnier, Captain von Hartman, three lieutenants."

"Kindly summon them."

Laporte gathered himself for one supreme effort against this inflexible man.

"God forgive you! The blood of the innocent, of the women, of these men—"

"I don't believe in God." Friquet's cold eyes carried the suggestion of a sneer. "Will you kindly obey my instructions?"

Laporte drew a deep breath, turned, left the room. For a space Friquet sat quite motionless. His head sank, and he stared into the candle-flame.

"The ideal is destroyed. There is no longer a cause," he murmured. "Ah, Vallette! Now I begin to understand you. What remains? Nothing. Nothing."

Presently Laporte came back into the room followed by Monnier and the others. They saluted stiffly, regarding Friquet with hard, implacable eyes; all, that is, except Monnier, who watched him rather with curiosity. Friquet spoke with slow finality.

"Citizen Monnier, when the troops arrive, you will see that all the wounded are ready to depart with the carts at eleven in the morning. Citizen Colonel Laporte, at noon, precisely, you will beat 'to arms' and parade our remaining men inside the main gate. I myself will attend to disarming and dispersing the colonial infantry. Captain von Hartman will serve as adjutant. Citizen Colonel Jourdal will be given the task of firing the buildings and magazine, as soon as the troops have marched out; see to it, Laporte.

"That is all."

No one spoke. The five officers saluted and departed. After a moment, a knock sounded, and Monnier put his head in at the door.

"Pardon; the burial of General Vallette—"

At the foot of the flagpole, at sunrise."

"His daughter, and the other woman?"

"Let them depart with Lervaut and the carts, at eleven."

Monnier retired, and the door closed.

FRIQUET laid aside his tunic. He caught up a long dark cloth, enveloping himself in it, and went out into the open air. Crossing the parade ground, he vanished into the darkness; at intervals his obscure figure might be seen, coming and disappearing like a shadow with its nervous, unfaltering stride.

The two black aides of Noyer, arriving behind Friquet, had been swallowed up by the garrison, who were avid for news of the column. Crammed with food, plied with cognac, they vented barbaric rhapsodies in telling of the blockade, of the fighting, of the final struggle. One of them was surrounded by an eager throng in the starlight, beside the barracks. He had told of Cripet's death, of everything; now he plunged into what he most wanted to say, his voice earnest and impassioned.

"Comrades! I tell you the greatest man alive is this Friquet of ours!"

"You're welcome to him," growled someone. The black officer took no heed.

"He's ten times a hero, always ready for anything, careless of bullets. And in action—ah, ah! You should have seen him at the outer defenses, before they drove us back on our barricades!"

"That's where he shot the wounded men, eh?" lifted a snarling voice.

"Of course. It was the only thing to do, since we could not move them," cried the black. "Friquet saved the rest of us. Twice he preserved the life of our general, and with his own hand, at the risk of his own life. That was when Sylla's men had broken in among us. He leaped into the midst of them. They looked into his eyes and were frightened. His sabre shattered and he fought with a musket. They could not stand before those eyes of his, whose glitter turned men's hearts to water!"

"Not for the first time." Someone broke in upon the exultant paen with a laugh of virulent hatred. The black did not hear. He was swigging more cognac.

"And always, night and day, Friquet was everywhere!" he went on. "What he did for us colonials, how he looked after us! All men are brothers, says he; there's true fraternity for you, comrades! He disdained nothing. He worked with his own hands, tending the wounded, showing us how to do things. But for him, we'd have been dead long ago. As it was, we did not die slowly. No wonder we regard him as a hero, no wonder our general loves him as a brother!"

"Let your general have him as a brother, then," lifted an angry mutter. Then a new voice broke in upon them all, that of Marie Soulastré.

"Hello, comrades! Has anyone seen Colonel Friquet? Nobody seems to know where I can find him."

They greeted her with quick warmth; several men set off at once to find Friquet. No one observed a dark shadow leaning against the barracks wall, immobile, invisible, listening. It detached itself and was lost to sight.

Presently one of the men came with word that Friquet was in his own quarters and would see Citoyenne Soulastré at once. She followed, and found the commandant writing at his table. He finished sealing a letter with a wax wafer, and rose to receive her.

"I am Marie Soulastré," she said. "I came from Le Cap with Citoyenne Valette."

Friquet bowed and motioned to a stool. She refused.

"Thanks, I can talk better standing. I beg of you, resume your place."

Friquet inclined his head and resumed his

place at the table. She stood opposite him, regarding him steadily, her dark gaze intent and lurid with emotion; yet her face was like carven marble.

"You have business with me, Citoyenne?"

"Yes."

Friquet met her look with cold serenity, though he must have caught some hint of her mental agitation, for a change crept into his features. He took on the precise expression of that ghastly caricature on the wall in her plantation house, a sardonic and quizzical leer, that might have come from the dancing candle-flame. She shivered slightly and let fall the cloak that was about her shoulders.

"Ten years ago," she went on, "my father was in Paris."

FRIQUET leaned back. A trace of resignation flitted across his countenance, as though he recognized some old story heard many a time.

"Well, Citoyenne? And did I know him?"

"You knew him. You had been his commercial agent, before you became a professional patriot and informer."

No mistaking her hostility now. Friquet shrugged slightly.

"A patriot, perhaps; a professional, no. His name?"

"Naturally, the same as mine, Soulastré. Henri de Soulastré."

"Ah, yes; I recall it. A *ci-devant*, eh?" His voice was quite uninterested. "A planter here in the island, was he not?"

"Don't pretend. You met him in a Paris street." A fierce note of accusation and menace crept into her voice. "You denounced him, you had him guillotined. You murdered him!"

"And you, no doubt, desire to reproach me."

At the calm disdain of these words, passion flamed in her eyes.

"No!" she exclaimed gustily. "He was my father. I intend to kill you!"

Her hand snatched the little brass pistol from her bosom. It pointed down, steadily, at the man. A wild, rapt ecstasy of hatred contorted her features.

But Friquet, with a sigh, relaxed and lowered his gaze. His hand, outstretched on the table, gestured as he spoke.

"If it will afford you any satisfaction, by all means kill me."

Sharp amazement dilated her eyes. He seemed lost in his own thoughts, quite ignoring her; his unconcern was genuine. Strung to high tension as she was, every nerve quivering and taut, his indifference evoked a sharp cry from her.

"Do you understand? Because you murdered my father, because you betrayed him, I'm about to kill you!"

"No, Citoyenne."

Friquet looked up again. He actually regarded her with faint amusement; his lips curved in a smile that was singularly sweet, almost gentle, as he might have looked upon a child who interested and attracted him. This singularly unwonted smile lent a certain dignity to his high-angled features.

"No. You mean to kill me because that intention rules your life. Why lie about such things? You have hated me, my name, for a long time. You've dreamed and planned this action, this moment, as an actor on the stage plans each word and gesture. Well, why delay? I have nothing to live for; you will do me a service, Citoyenne."

The words staggered her.

His keen, sure thrust into her motives, and his complete passivity, astounded her; she stared, nostrils quivering. To doubt his sincerity was impossible.

Her finger tightened about the trigger. The pale blue eyes, so tranquil and unexcited, sent a riotous upthrust of hatred surging across her face. It was followed by an abrupt and sudden pallor. She bit at her lip.

"I—I cannot—I cannot do it," she said unsteadily, and laid the pistol down on the table, with a gesture of repugnance; dismay and horror struggled in her eyes. "It is not as I thought. It—it is murder."

Friquet nodded slightly. "To any normal intelligence, it must be a remarkable, difficult thing," he observed thoughtfully. "I've often wondered whether I could deliberately take the life of a fellow creature. To me, even the shooting of a bird, a beast, has always caused inexpressible agitation. How much more, that of a human being! In the heat of battle, or when one has an ideal, a cause, to serve, is one thing. But to be the actual executioner—well, that's very different."

He spoke impersonally, seeming forgetful

and absorbed in his own meditations. The girl drew back, shrinking from him, from the pistol.

"You can say such things—you!" she muttered, staring.

"It is quite true," Friquet said calmly. "Tomorrow, or rather tonight. I must order the arrest and execution of a man, because it is my duty; I have no choice. I am merely an agent through whom the Republic acts. If I were compelled to hold the musket that takes his life, I should be helpless to do it. Belief in an ideal, a cause, has forced me to do many things that have caused me sorrow, but not even this could force me to become a murderer."

Horrified comprehension widened her eyes.

"You, who have murdered so many, to draw such fine distinctions—"

"I have never murdered anyone, Citoyenne," he broke in quietly.

She uttered a low, wordless cry, and turned impetuously toward the door.

"Wait!" The thin, shrill voice caused her to glance back at him. He leaned forward, picked up the pistol, and carefully uncocked it. "You have forgotten to take this."

She pulled open the door and fled.

Friquet was alone again. He laid the pistol on the table, and with his finger followed the volutes and curves of the beautiful chasing in the brass. Thoughtful words escaped him.

"Yes, it must be very different to be the actual executioner! For that, it is not enough to have a cause, an ideal, a sense of duty. One requires something more. One must have something more concrete and definite." He was silent for an instant, then nodded his head as though he had found the answer to some unspoken question. "One must have a motive."

He fell into silence again. The right side of his face, flecked with the bluish powder-marks, looked livid and ghastly in the candlelight.

XV

AN HOUR past midnight, Langlade, afoot, reached Morne Rouge. He did not come with the column, but ahead of it. With him came a few men spurred by anx-

ity to reach the fort before Vallete died; Jourdal, Pere Simon, and a dozen veterans of the 90th. Guided by a black, they came by way of jungle trails.

The column followed by the road, Major Lervaut and General Moyer in command. Gouget remained behind, at rest with Cripet; a wounded mulatto, after the fighting was ended, had shot him in the back.

When the weary group staggered up to the gate, and learned from the sentry that Valette was dead, the tension snapped. Langlade, stiff and exhausted, started for his own room. A haze had covered the stars. A few lanterns glimmered; otherwise, everything was dark, silent, chill.

Reaching the officers' quarters, Langlade discerned a figure against the whitewashed wall and thought it that of a sentry.

"Stand aside," he muttered impatiently.

"Ah, Charles!" The soft voice thrilled into him. "I heard you had come. I hurried here—I'm so glad you're back again, so glad!"

His arms went around her. He held her close; she was sobbing a little against his breast.

"My dear, it's all ended."

"What, Marie?"

"I've seen him, comrade—talked with him. Friquet, I mean. I went to kill him, let me admit it." Her swift words flagged, and she drooped again. "Something crumpled inside me. All resolution died. I could not do it. The queer thing was that he didn't try to prevent me; he would have been glad. I never understood him, never tried, or wanted to understand him, before. He is a monster; and yet—and yet—"

Langlade hushed her. He kissed her again, finding her lips this time.

"We're together again now, Marie; we'll stay together. He doesn't matter to us. You and I and the future—that's all to concern us now. We're of each other for always."

"For always," she echoed, and her lips found his again. "And so goodnight, Comrade."

She was gone. Langlade stumbled to his own room and found a man there, half-dressed, lantern in hand. It was Laporte.

"Welcome, Citizen American," said Laporte with a gloomy look. "I am sorry; but I must put a sentry at your door. I have

to place you under arrest, do you comprehend?"

"Arrest? Me?" Langlade stared at him. "No, damned if I comprehend! Are you joking?"

"No." Laporte gestured vaguely. "I do not comprehend myself. But you are under arrest, at least until Colonel Friquet talks with you."

"Oh! Well, I want to talk with him. Arrest? No matter. I'm too tired to care about anything. Do as you like."

Boots and all, Langlade flung himself on the cot and was asleep even as he struggled to understand, vainly.

HE DID not stir until after sunrise. Then a sudden rolling volley of musketry, a second, a third, came crashing in upon him to banish sleep, and bring him to the window.

In the dawn, quiet men had gathered in silent ranks before the flagstaff at one side of the parade ground. The first streaks of crimson day were fingering the curtains of the sky, above the eastern peaks. A low beat of muffled drums brought the ranks to attention.

A cortege appeared, the drums black-draped, followed by the bareheaded Friquet and the guard of honor under Laporte. Behind came the litter with its burden. Last came Julie Valette, with Pere Simon; she showed scant trace of grief; her head was held high, her gaze upon the Tricolor that covered the litter.

A grave was ready, not far from the half-loaded carts. The East brightened steadily. The first rays of sun touched on the western peaks and insensibly drew down until they embraced the tip of the flagstaff. A stir came in the ranks. At command, the Tricolor was run up and then lowered to half mast. It dragged listless in the sunrise, for there was no breeze.

The ranks presented arms, as the litter halted and was lowered into the grave.

Friquet stood alone on the far side of the dirt-heap, in front of the wall. At one side stood Julie. Pere Simon came forward and his deep voice broke the silence. Friquet lifted his head as though startled, then resumed his stony attitude; the priest was not saying the burial service, but a prayer.

Unknown to any of the officers present,

and unobserved by any of them, a singular and remarkable thing was in process of transpiring.

Opposite the erect, solitary shape of Friquet, and facing him across the grave, was drawn up the guard of honor. Laporte had chosen this squad from among the veterans who had followed Valette so long and so far. They were gaunt, grizzled men, supremely capable of acting on their own impulse and volition. Upon lining up they had exchanged one swift glance among themselves; then they stood with eyes front, their gaze focused upon the commandant. In that steady gaze glittered an unrelenting hatred; mutely, they accuse this man of having caused the death of their adored leader.

THE voice of the priest ceased. As though this were a signal, the level rays of sunlight descended upon the persons grouped around. Friquet was illumined with a sudden radiance. A low order sounded from Laporte. The first rank of the guard knelt, and their muskets came up.

At this instant Friquet, disturbed by the sun-dazzle, turned abruptly. With a salute to the dead, he passed swiftly to where Pere Simon stood with Julie. The first volley crashed out.

One sufficiently observant would have seen tiny specks fly from the white wall. Bullets had certainly struck there. Had not Friquet moved so suddenly, he would have been directly in the line of fire.

No one, however, noticed this curious fact. A second and third volley exploded. The ceremony was at an end.

Upon the dispersal, Pere Simon came up to Friquet.

"Citizen Colonel, I'd like to speak with you in private. Can you grant me a few moments now, or later?"

"Now, if you like," Friquet replied calmly. "Come."

The priest accompanied Friquet back to his quarters. Once in the little room, Friquet took the stool before his table and motioned to another. Pere Simon refused.

"You do not remember me, Citizen Colonel?"

"On the contrary, I remember you perfectly despite the scars that have disfigured your face," said Friquet, gazing at him steadily. "You are, or were, Raoul Langlade,

brother of Charles Langlade. We met several times. Later you were supposed to have been killed. In Savoy, I believe; in a duel."

The emotionless precision of these words was startling.

"Perhaps you can imagine why I wish to see you?" Pere Simon asked.

"I haven't the least idea."

"Then permit me to enlighten you. Before the revolution, I went to Italy. I had certain troubles; for a year I lay close to death. Upon recovering, I turned from my former life and entered the Church; I was sent to this island, and have been here ever since. I had always supposed my brother to be alive, but three years ago I heard that he perished under the Terror and that you denounced him."

"He was no longer my friend Charles Langlade," Friquet said calmly. "He had become the Comte de Courtois, taken in arms against the Republic."

"So I've learned. Well, I came here; you had gone. From one of the soldiers, since dead, I discovered that when my brother was captured he appealed to you and was sent to you in Paris."

He paused. Friquet had ceased to look at him and was staring fixedly at a brass pistol that lay on the table. Putting out his hand, Friquet fingered the pistol absently.

"I presume you desire to call me to account for the past."

"Not in the least," said Pere Simon.

Friquet looked up at him with lifted brows. "Eh? What is your purpose, then?"

Pere Simon showed a trace of impatience. "After so long turning my back on my family and the world, is it likely I would now grasp at the empty thing called revenge? No. My sole motive in seeking you is one of fraternal interest. If you can inform me of the fate of my brother, I should like to know it. That is all."

Friquet looked astonished. "This is singular," he said. "I've never had much regard for priests, but you—well, never mind. Do you know an American named Charles Langlade is here at the fort?"

"Yes. The son of my brother."

"Perhaps he sent you to see me?" The pale eyes, the voice, held a sneer.

"He doesn't know who I am. I believe that he also seeks information from you, but my errand is my own."

"Very well. What you heard was the truth," Friquet said coldly. "I denounced the Comte de Courtois. He was guillotined."

Pere Simon slightly inclined his head. "You have answered me. I thank you."

He turned, but Friquet's voice stopped him. "Wait! No doubt you hate me bitterly?"

"Why?" Pere Simon regarded him with stern gravity. "The past is dead. So far as your past touches me, I forgive you."

"Even under the priest's robe, the aristocrat lingers, eh?" observed Friquet acidly. "But in the future—"

"The future belongs to God," Pere Simon said curtly, and departed.

ALONE once more, Friquet looked down at the brass pistol. The shadow of a bitter smile touched his thin lips.

"The future belongs to God!" he said softly, meditatively. "I think he really believes his own words. But Valette did it better. At least, Valette was no blind idiot who prated solemnly about a dead God! Valette served a living, vibrant ideal."

It was clear that this man, for all his keen ability, understood only vaguely the motives of either Valette or Pere Simon. He made a gesture of contemptuous disdain, shoved the pistol away, and rose.

At this instant a knock sounded; the priest reappeared.

"Something I forgot," he said hastily. "I hear that the colonial infantry is to be disarmed today."

"The column should return in an hour or two," replied Friquet. "At noon, the black troops will be disarmed and dispersed."

"As you may know, I was once a soldier," Pere Simon said with gravity. "I have a thorough acquaintance with these men and know General Noyer intimately; oddly enough, he's a very devout Christian. I am positive that if you attempt to disarm these blacks, they'll attack us instantly."

"And what would you suggest, Citizen Priest?" demanded Friquet sarcastically. "That we abandon the fort to them, and its contents?"

"Certainly. It would mean wealth. Noyer would occupy the fort and—"

"Enough of your childish nonsense. My orders shall be obeyed," cut in Friquet with shrill anger.

Pere Simon straightened. "There is much more to be said! If you do this thing, knowing what it entails, then what's the reason? Is it because you know yourself universally detested and you wish to destroy everyone here? Do you visit your lust for blood upon all those around you?"

The calm poise of Friquet was suddenly shattered. A rush of blood suffused his face; the veins on his high forehead swelled. His pale eyes dilated with a sweep of anger past all control.

"You damned priest-aristocrat! If you could only know it, this means life to them!" he exploded in shrill vehemence. "Have you no atom of the most ordinary intelligence? Have you no imagination? Do you comprehend nothing of the human heart, of the human mind, you religion-ridden imbecile? I shall do my duty. I shall also save the lives of all here—something no one else can do!"

A touch of foam flecked his thin lips. "Second-rate men, fools like you, numbskulls who can't see a foot beyond their noses—all of them, all of you! I, and I alone, now that Valette's dead, can do what I'm ordered to do. I can do it safely, securely, without trouble, without a shot except the possible execution of one man who's not even a Frenchman."

"You refer to General Noyer?"

"No, no!" fairly screamed Friquet, in a torment of impassioned words. "None of your business, you insufferable mockery! You, to rant about spite and hatred and blood-lust—when I, and I alone, am able to do my duty and save every life here! Get out of my sight, you damned aristocrat—"

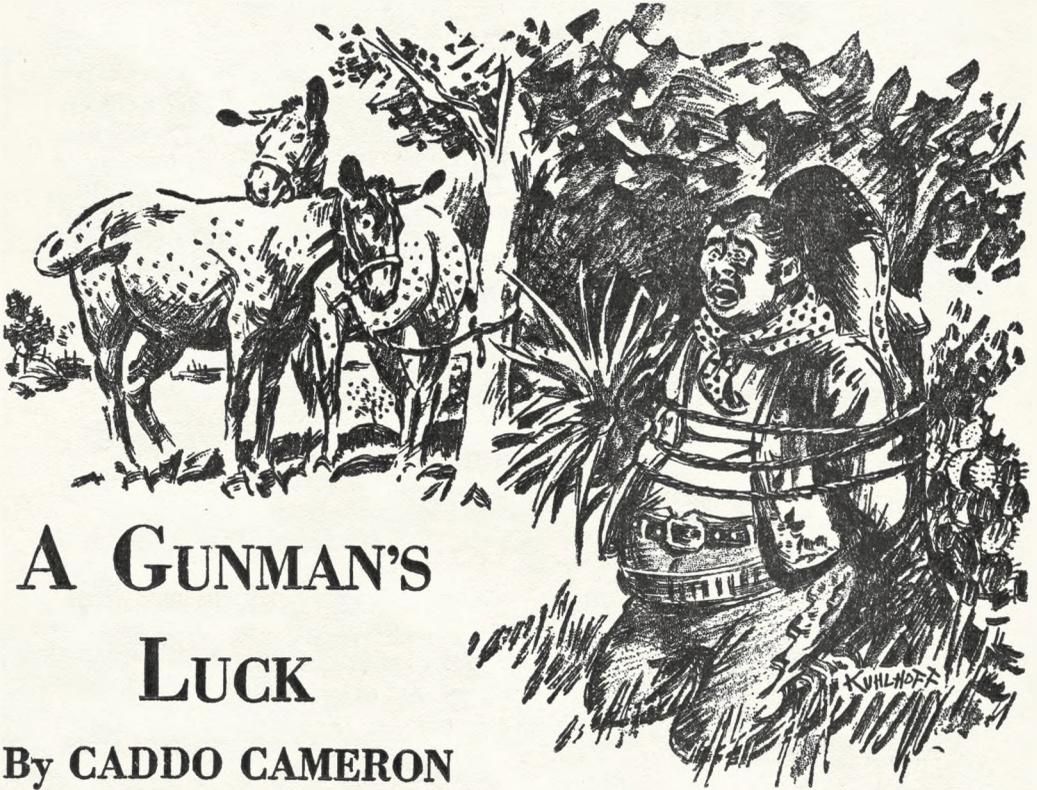
Pere Simon drew open the door and closed it upon the torrent of shrill invective that pursued him. Out in the morning sunlight he halted, bewildered.

"God help us all!" he muttered. "The man is insane. I must tell Jourdal."

With a long breath, he went striding away purposefully.

(To be concluded in the next SHORT STORIES)

*“... While Agreein’ That Luck May Be Female. I’m a-standin’
Pat on My Claim That She Ain’t No Lady!”*



A GUNMAN'S LUCK

By CADDO CAMERON

THEY say that Luck is a woman and they call her Lady, but I can't hardly believe it. Luck does things to a man that no lady would do. There are, I'll admit, some pretty fair reasons for thinkin' that Luck is a female, like—for instance, the way she behaves. Good one day, bad the next; sweet on a fella today, down on him tomorrow; and just about the time you figure you've got her located permanent on your range, bridle wise and plumb gentled, she jumps the fence and runs off after another man. Those are female peculiarities, so to speak. Of course, ever since Adam ate a green apple and blamed his bellyache on Eve, men have been makin' dumb plays and blamin' 'em on women. But that don't prove nothin'. A woman don't have to be a lady to get the blame for somethin' or other. And so, while agreein' that Luck *may* be a female, I'm a-standin' pat on my claim that she ain't

no lady. Just looky here what she done to me a while back.

It happens like this.

Luck ain't no ways to blame for me accumulatin' a span of calico mules—Brother and Sister Noah—she bein' plumb blind as a bat and him more or less hell on four legs.

I didn't have to accumulate them mules. Likewise, it wasn't Luck that makes me take 'em from Arkansaw all the way clean down to Laredo, Texas, along with a fullblood Choctaw named Johnny Antelope who is a college man and a bank robber, a fightin' fool and a footracer. Nope, that ain't luck. That's plain damned foolishness. And Luck didn't have anything to do with us corralin' that there Mexican bandit, Francisco Hernandez, and deliverin' him and three of his men to the Rangers. That was good business and done a-purpose. But from here on Luck horns into our affairs and what she does to us, a lady hadn't

ought to do to no man. Which just goes to show that Luck ain't no lady.

Ever since I got them mules and figured they belonged to some pore Mexican, I been bound and determined to give 'em back to their rightful owner. Leastwise, I tell myself that I am. Maybe I don't mean it. Maybe I'm just usin' the Noahes as an excuse to go rampagin' around over the country when I'd ought to be layin' low and not exposin' myself to the law and other dangers. Honest, I ain't shore which it is. Anyhow, away down here in Texas we find out that Brother and Sister Noah belong to a pore Mexican sheepherder up on the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation in the Indian Territory, which ain't very far from where we started when we came to Texas, so now we're a-headin' back that way with the mules—Johnny Antelope and me and Old Luck.

After the way we made him a present of those bandits, I calc'late that Ranger Captain Mesquite Wilson will be feelin' sorta kindly toward us and we won't be bothered by Rangers while in the country that his company is patrolin'. I guessed right for once. We move north on the Texas side of the Rio Grande and meet three detachments of Rangers between Laredo and Eagle Pass and nary a one of 'em makes a play for me, notwithstandin' I know for a fact that they've got me and my description in their little black book. Reckon Captain Mesquite figured I swapped him Hernandez for me and he got the best of the trade.

But Rangers ain't the only nuisance we've got to look out for. News travels mighty fast in this border country and it won't be long before everybody knows what we done to Francisco Hernandez and what I mean—he's got a whole slew of friends, both American and Mexican, not to mention relations by the hundreds in Mexico and Texas. The average Mexican is the best-natured person I know. He does a heap of livin' with plenty eatin' and drinkin' and talkin' and laughin', and he loves music and bright-colored clothes and flowers and things, but his family ties are mightily strong and if you tromp the toes of his fourth cousin he's liable to come a-huntin' you with a knife or a gun, or both. We'll be powerful lucky if we don't have trouble

with the Hernandez outfit before we get clean away from this country.

IT'S after three o'clock by the sun when we jog into the narrow and dusty main street of Eagle Pass. As usual, Brother Noah is at the point of our outfit, a-settin' the pace for his blind pardner who he has somehow trained to walk almost exactly in his footsteps. He's mighty careful where he takes her, too. The thatched *jacals* and low 'dobe buildin's of the town are a-breakin' in the heat and across the Rio in Mexico, the huts and houses of Piedras Negras are doin' the same.

"*El Paso del Aguila*," says Johnny Antelope in his college Spanish. "The Pass of the Eagle—a pretty name for a town. D'you happen to know where they got it, Slim?"

"Nope, but I wouldn't noways blame an eagle for passin' up this here town, it's so 'damned tough."

Johnny laughs. This long, lean Indian friend of mine is a sure enough good-lookin' cuss any time and especially when he laughs careless and reckless like that. "I don't care how tough it is, just so we get to sleep in a bed again and put our feet under a table and eat somebody else's cooking. But, about that name. Back in Forty-nine, goldseekers bound for California camped near here before there was any town. An old eagle had a nest in a cottonwood on the Mexican side and he used to fly back and forth across the river, feeding his woman and kids. So, when the town was laid out in Eighteen-fifty they called it Camp Eagle Pass."

"You college-education outlaws shore know a heap of things," I tell him. Maybe you can tell us whether we'll get out of here alive and free if we throw off and stay all night just to taste civilization again. Can you?"

Johnny grins wide and a handful of perfect teeth show up against his copper skin. "Get out of here? Huh! I'd ride into hell with Mister Gunman, confident that I'd ride out alive and free providing he didn't decide to stay there and take over the place."

"From what I've seen of hell, the devil can keep it," is my answer to that. "Eagle Pass is likely to be hot enough for me."

Johnny and I are ridin' abreast now and we're keepin' our eyes peeled, him takin' one side of the street and me the other. Up ahead a ways on my side there's a lively corral. Brother Noah is so damned smart, all I have to do to steer him is to holler at the cuss and I'm figurin' to turn him in there. Two men are standin' outside by the gate. They're a-lookin' our way—lookin' hard. One of 'em is a lean, hawk-faced American a-packin' two six-shooters. The other'n is a Mexican sport wearin' anyhow five hundred dollars worth of clothes—the Sunday riggin' of a *caballero*; silver spurs and conchos, white silk shirt, gold and silver braid on his pants and jacket, and a gold-mounted *sombrero*. When we get closer I see that his gun is pearl-handled and so is the knife in his red satin sash. They've got their heads together a-talkin' mighty serious and when we pass 'em on our way through the gate, I catch a few words of what the American is sayin', "—and that's them, all right." Johnny Antelope heard it, too. I can tell from the way he's a-lookin' 'em over.

THE corral boss allows that we'll probably want stalls for our horses and let the mules run loose, but I tell him that we'll need four stalls because one of them mules is blind and the other'n is a calico devil. Before the words are hardly out of my mouth, things commence to happen. Brother and Sister Noah are standin' head-to-head a-talkin' it over more'n likely and I imagine he's a-tellin' his blind pardner that this is a sorry place for free-rangin' mules to have to spend the night, or somethin'. All of a sudden a big sorrel mule trots over and goes to take a nip at Sister Noah for no reason. She don't move. Brother Noah has trained her thataway. But what I mean—*he moves*. He changes ends like a fightin' wildcat and lets the sorrel have both hind feet low on the shoulder. Noah's little hoofs crack when they land. Bones are splintered. In a flash he whirls and charges the sorrel—neck stretched, ears laid flat and teeth bare. The other mule tries to spin away, throws weight onto its busted shoulder and staggers. That calico devil's teeth clamp shut on the sorrel's throat. It tries to r'ar up and strike with its forefeet. Noah gives

a lightnin' twist and a jerk. That sorrel mule is a-bleedin' to death now. Johnny and I have left our saddles and lit runnin', but we get there too late—it all happens so fast.

I turn to the corral boss, and tell him, "I'll pay for that mule. Who owns it?"

The American and Mexican have come in and are standin' close by. That snaky-lookin' gunslinger speaks up, "Friends of mine owns the sorrel and you'll shore pay for it, mistah. But first off, I'm drivin' a bullet through that calico killer of your'n."

By now I've got him spotted for what he is—a border gunsharp. He's a-huntin' trouble deliberate. He's wantin' to get himself another credit, file another notch on his gun, and nine chances out of ten somebody is payin' him to cut me down. I know his breed. I've tangled with many a one of 'em.

So I tell him quiet, "Before you start on the mule you'll have to drive a bullet through me. Said I'd pay for the damage he done, didn't I?"

That's what the gunslinger wants—trouble. He makes his play. He's a shade slow. He looks my six-shooter in the eye and his face says he wonders how *that ever* happened.

"Hold it!" I snap. "I don't want to kill you. I ain't a-huntin' credits and nobody is payin' me to wipe you out. Fold your arms, but keep your hands in sight."

He lets go of his gun. It's still in its leather. He looks over at his pardner. The Mexican sport is starin' popeyed at the muzzle of Johnny Antelope's six-shooter.

In his polite Spanish, Johnny says, "So, my friend! You are not good with a pistol. Perhaps a knife is your favorite weapon. If that is true I shall put away my pistol and we will fight with knives. Yes? No! Then you are a coward and not fit to fight with men. Go and fight rabbits!"

Keepin' his paws clean away from his pearl-handled six-shooter, the Mexican folds his arms and sticks out his chin and puffs up like he's Somebody.

"*Pelado!*" he hisses in Spanish. "You do not know me or you would be afraid to say such things. I am a *Hernandez*—Timoteo, brother of Francisco Hernandez. Do you understand? I am an aristocrat, a rich man. I do not soil my hands with

such as you. I pay men to kill you."

It's my turn now. I tell the American, "So that's it. He hired your guns. What's your name?"

"Spade Comer."

"I've heard of you." Holsterin' my gun, I fold my arms. "Want to try it again, Comer, just to see if you can earn your pay? This time, though, I'm playin' for keeps."

It sounds like I'm fair groundin'—just a-showin' off—but I don't never go for such stuff. I'm simply givin' Comer a dose of the medicine that does his kind the most good. Sometimes you can make 'em feel so damned cheap and sheepish they're ashamed to show their faces and that's one way to get ahead of 'em. Anybody can see that Spade Comer has had a-plenty. He don't make a move. I'll betcha he saddles up and this here town tastes his dust before sundown.

"All right, Comer," I tell him. "You're usin' your head. By the way—I'm figgerin' to rest up here for two, three days. This town ain't big enough to hold you and me simultaneous. *Savvy?* Good! I calc'lated you would."

Hernandez whirls on the gunsharp. "Coward!" he snarls in English. "Damned *gringo* coward! Get out of my sight!"

"Shut your mouth!" I growl at the Mexican. "Spade Comer has got a sight more sand in his craw than you have. At least he does his own fightin'. He ain't *afraid* to swap lead with me, he figures it ain't smart, that's all."

The gunsharp gives me a look that says I've done made me a friend. I see murder in the Mexican's face, so I goon. "I've heard a-plenty about you, Hernandez. They tell me that you brag how you take Texans' ears and string 'em and dry 'em and hang 'em in your patio, and when the wind blows they rattle like dried chili peppers. I've heard that about you, Hernandez, and it don't listen good."

All of a sudden there's a heavy throwin' knife in Johnny Antelope's hand. I don't know how it got there so quick or where it came from, but there it is. "Shall I take his ears and string 'em on my bridle chains?" he asks. "They're pretty little ears and I'd sure like to have 'em. What say, Slim?"

Hernandez turns green around his mouth and nostrils. He splutters and tries to talk but nothin' comes out. Watchin' him behave thataway, I get an idea that maybe we can throw a scare into him that it might take him a few days to get over and by that time maybe we'll be plumb out of reach of him and his murderin' hired hands. It may not work, but it can't do any harm because we're certain to have trouble with him anyhow.

So I quick tell Johnny, "Why not let us have some fun with the Great Timoteo—the rich and aristocratic Hernandez who strings Texas ears and hires men to kill *pelados* like you and me? Tell him to unbuckle and drop his belt, Johnny, but let him keep his knife; then, before you take his ears, show us what you can do with a pigsticker. D'you like the idea?"

"Like it?" cries Johnny Antelope. "Hot damn! Here's my gunbelt, Slim. Drop yours, Hernandez. Drop it! Good. Now, draw your knife. Oh—so you won't."

Hernandez looks as if he's about to choke to death on his own tongue. He can't say a word. Off on one side a little ways, Spade Comer is a-grinnin' like a dad-blamed 'possum under a persimmon tree and so is the corral boss.

Johnny drops into his polite, college Spanish, and goes on, "Very well, Don Hernandez, if you will not do me the honor of crossing blades with me I shall treat you as my own people treat a coward. I am about to cut you into very small pieces and feed your meat to hogs!"

Considerin' the things a fella can do with a six-shooter, I'll never know why any sensible man should want to learn to fight with swords, but this here Choctaw Indian friend of mine taken fencing in college and then he turns outlaw and gets to be an all-around fightin' man, so he takes what he learned about swords and what he knows about knives and puts 'em together and makes himself the out-fightin'est man with a knife that you even seen. He practices with his knife-throwin' and fencin', like I practice with guns and it's hard to believe some of the things I've seen him do. He does 'em now, and I ain't talkin'.

You can always see his arm move and usually his hand, but the point of his knife is too fast for the eye. It's razor sharp,

that blade, and the finest kind of steel. It flickers out and all of a sudden you see a thin pink line like a needle scratch from the corner of the Mexican's eye to the point of his chin. He perks back, gasps, throws his head up. A flick of the blade, then you see another line halfway around his fat neck. He's got a big nose. Before you know it, two needle scratches make a cross on the end of that nose. This is where the knife does some really delicate work. The Mexican's shirt gets split from collar to sash in front and there's a long scratch on his bare belly. First one jacket sleeve and then the other is cut from shoulder to cuff and hangs open. His satin sash is cut through and drops off'n him. Hernandez is jumpin' around like a grasshopper on an ant hill.

He turns around to run. His jacket gets split all the way up and down his back and hangs in two parts from his shoulders. His shirt gets slit from top to bottom behind and a needle scratch runs along his backbone. The Mexican is a-squealin' like a pig now. He stops runnin' so sudden he mighty nigh falls on his face. Before he can get turned around the right leg of his pants is slashed from waist to knee, then the left leg and a drop of blood shows through his white silk drawers. Johnny mis-figures a fraction on that one. One more lightnin' slash and Timoteo Hernandez is a-holdin' up his pants and his fine clothes are a-floppin' like he's a scarecrow.

Johnny steps back, breathin' easy and a-grinnin' wide. "I'm sorry, Slim," he says, "but I haven't got my touch today. Every time I try to slice him I miss him by just so much."

"No call for you to feel upset about that," I say. "Even if you can't hit his ears with a knife, betcha six-bits a ear that I can't miss 'em with a brace of bullets."

"It's a bet!"

A-holdin' up his pants and jumpin' around like a fat rat in a trap, Hernandez goes to hollerin', "No! No! No! *Senores!* I will pay! I am rich! I am rich! I will pay much money!"

I jerk my head at the gate. "Git to hell out of here, then! Git!"

He gits, a-holdin' up his pants.

I'll swear I thought Spade Comer and the old corral boss would die a-laughin'. Pretty

soon the boss gets his breath, and says, "In all my bawn days, I never seen the beat of it—never!"

And Comer declares, "Me neither. It was worth the buffaloin' I had to take from Gunman!"

The corral boss puts out his hand. "I'm Jeff Tutter and I want to shake with you stem-winders. Jest you wait until I tell the boys. This town will get you-all so damned tight you can't hit the ground with your hats. That little banty rooster has been comin' over here ever so often a-struttin' high and wide and gettin' away with it, simply because folks know that he's got a mighty bad bunch a-ridin' for him in Mexico and they're afraid of a raid on this side. Seems like Texas law ain't got nothin' on him right now. You fellas shore clipped his spurs and yanked out all his tail feathers."

Maybeso, I'm a-thinkin', and I'm hopin' that his spurs don't grow out again before we reach the Devil's River country north of Del Rio.

Spade Comer speaks up then. His voice is low and hard, the way a man talks when he's doin' his best to hide his feelin's. "I'm sorry, Gunman, and I'm shore much obliged to you."

"Sorry for what, Comer, and why are you thankin' me?"

He's plumb embarrassed, so he speaks tough. "Sorry that I'd taken the job of killin' you and I'm thankin' you for lettin' me live. Any objections?"

"Nary a one, Spade, and no hard feelin's. Shake!"

Damned if he ain't so flustered he mighty nigh puts out the wrong hand. He shakes hard and he means it. I see somethin' in the lean face of this killer that tells me I'll never have to watch my back when he's around. Why don't I hate him for what he is? Hell, man! What I am don't justify me in hatin' any man for what he is.

"Whereabouts can I find your friend who owns that dead mule?" I ask him. "Want to settle up with him?"

"Hernandez owns it. To hell with *him*."

"How much is a mule like that worth?"

Comer and Jeff Tutter look at each other. Jeff says, "Twenty-five dollars would be a fair price."

I hand him thirty. "Here's twenty-five

for Hernandez and five to hire somebody to drag the carcass away."

Jeff takes the money. "That there sorrel mule had it comin'. He was every bit as cussed as Hernandez hisself. Crippled a good horse the last time he was in here."

We put up our horses and the mules. Afterwards, Johnny Antelope is dead set on takin' our beddin' rolls to a hotel and givin' the town a chance to get us tight like the corral boss said. But I've got other ideas.

So I tell him cautious when nobody is listenin', "Looky here, you wild Indian. While we're in this part of the country we gotta walk soft, talk low and look in all directions at once. Don't you never forget that our money-belts are heavy and our scalps loose."

A SHORT time later we've got our feet under a table in Soo Ling's eatin' house. Johnny orders a whole lot of everything Soo has got fixed to eat and I tell the Chinaman to fetch me five dollars worth of ham and eggs. When a fella is on the dodge and a-sleepin' out he don't get no ham and eggs. I'm sorta hungry for 'em. Before we any more'n get a good start with our eatin', I'll betcha the whole American population of Eagle Pass—men, I mean—is gathered in there and Soo is havin' trouble gettin' through the crowd with my relays of ham and eggs. The good food notwithstanding, if I said I was anyways comfortable in here I'd be a wall-eyed liar. A man like me can't be comfortable in hostile country with strangers all around him thisaway. Jeff Tutter is here and he takes that little fracas with Hernandez and stretches and ornaments it until he's got the durndest story a fella ever heard. By the time he finishes tellin' lies about what all we done, I'll swear ninety-nine men are doin' their damndest to get us tight and I've got my hands full a-tryin' to keep Johnny from gettin' full. That dad-blamed Indian slows up my eatin' of ham and eggs somethin' scandalous. Pretty soon two more men come a-rampsin' through the door. They're a-packin' badges! My eatin' of ham and eggs comes to a sudden and complete stop, entire.

One is a sheriff, the other'n a marshal. The crowd opens a path for 'em and they come straight to our table. I edge my

chair back a little, figurin' I'll do the best I can without hurtin' any innocent spectators. Johnny Antelope—he's sorta feelin' himself over for knives and guns, bein' a mite foggy in the head spite of all I've done to keep the fool sober.

The big, brawny sheriff walks right up to our table and sticks out his paw. "Me—I'm Drag Blake," he says right cordial. "You're Mister Gunman and I reckon this here wildcat is Johnny Antelope. Welcome to the border country, boys."

The marshal give us his hand, too, and says:

"I'm Sol Tate, fellas. Welcome to Eagle Pass. After what all you've done, I'd give you the keys to our city if we had any keys, but we ain't 'cause we never close up."

I go to eatin' ham and eggs again, plumb ashamed to look at anybody but my plate.

After a while, Sheriff Blake says to me, "If you're through feedin', Gunman, let's you and me go outside. I'd like to talk to you."

AT THE hitch-rack by ourselves, he goes on to say, "Up and down the Border everybody knows what you and your pardner done to Francisco Hernandez. The Rangers passed the word along. Now folks will hear how you buffaloesd his brother, Timoteo. So you're safe from Texas law down here. If you're a-headin' north, though, better keep an eye peeled. It's known that you're in Texas now—some old rewards are still alive."

"I'm shore much obliged, Sheriff," and I mean every word of it. "We're in a sweat to get out of range of the Hernandez outfit, so I figured to hit straight for the Devil's River country."

"Good idea far's the Mexicans are concerned," he declares, "but when you get up there, look out for a sheriff by the name of Bob Dupler. County lines don't mean nothin' to him. He ranges wide and he's a reward hunter. Blood money spends easy for him. You know, of course, that there's plenty wanted men in that country. Dupler will gather him a posse of outlaws who ain't got no bounties on their hair and take out after one that has. *Watch out for him.* He's shore to know that you're down here and figure that you're comin' back north.

Chances are he'll get word long before you reach his country."

"You're a plumb white man, Sheriff."

"If you'd drop them mules someplace," he adds, "with the horses you and Antelope are a-forkin' you wouldn't have to worry about Mexicans or sheriffs or nobody."

"Reckon you're right," I admit sorta sheepish, "but you know how a fella feels Sister Noah bein' blind thataway and—"

"Certainly, and I don't blame you a particle."

I corral my Indian pardner and rope him out—so to speak—then take him to a room in a hotel and send for a gallon of the blackest coffee ever brewed in Texas. By the time it's pitch dark outside, Johnny Antelope is a-rarin' to go. So am I. Only he wants to go and start celebratin' all over again and I aim to go and saddle up and hit for Del Rio sixty mile north. After more or less talk, we go and saddle up.

THE Devil's River country is a heap of country. A fella can find mighty nigh anything he wants in that country, even water, if he knows where to look and I do. Once I combed that section good, a-huntin' stolen horses. Another time while I was a-ridin' for Drumm and Draper down in Frio County, I pointed a herd of stockers through there on a short-cut to a northern range. And last time, when I first tangled with the law serious twelve years or so ago, I rode a bee-line for a Devil's River hideout that a Border horse thief told me about and I holed up in there until I got a chance to make a break for The Nations.

We're well north of Del Rio now and movin' along steady, Brother Noah in the lead and a-settin' the pace for his blind pardner on a trail that I remember. No trouble so far. I've been watchin' our back-trail with my spyglass pretty close ever since we left Del Rio, figurin' that it's about time for Timoteo Hernandez to get over his scare and come a-huntin' us with a band of his prime cutthroats—if he comes at all. We're still within his range. This is wild country with no law worth mentionin' and there's nothin' to keep him from raidin' this far into Texas, unless he accidentally runs onto a company of Rangers. On account of Sister Noah we can't travel fast, so he won't have no trouble catchin' up with us.

It's around noon of a mighty clear day, when I tell Johnny, "We been damned lucky so far, but I ain't gamblin' that our luck will hold. Take my spyglass and ride to the top of that sharp knob over yander. They call it Indian Knob because war parties use it as a lookout. With the glass you can see our back-trail for twenty mile and you can look north for all of forty from there. Make 'aste. I've got a feelin' that we're due to have company. This has been too good to last."

"Hope it doesn't," says this fool Indian. "Trailing behind a span of calico mules isn't my idea of a full life for a healthy man."

He sets off at a gallop. The knob ain't more'n two mile from our trail and I see him top out on it. He don't stay there long. Pretty soon he puts his horse down that steep slope a sight faster than any sensible man would ride it and when he gets to level ground, he fairly lines out that bay racer of his'n. He soon sets his horse down at the trail and the flash in his eyes and the fire in his lean face tells me to expect the worst.

"Company is coming all right, Slim!" exclaims Johnny. "And it's coming from two directions—north and south!"

"Hell's fire! You don't mean it!"

"No fooling," he insists. "There's a bunch of riders on the trail behind us ten to fifteen miles back and north on the trail ahead I was able to make out a group of horsemen. They're a long ways off, though, because with your six-power glass I had to study them to make certain that they were riders. The bunch south of us had missed some waterholes or ridden its horses down. They're not moving much faster than we are now."

"I'll be damned! Old Luck shore is a-fixin' to slap us around."

Johnny laughs—the durned fool. "You mean Lady Luck is fixing to be good to us. Think of all the fun we'll have with Timoteo Hernandez shooting at us from one side and Sheriff Bob Dupler from the other."

"Huh! Be still and let me see can I think some."

As I was sayin', I used to know this country and still remember most of it. From where we are now, opposite Indian Knob, it's six—eight miles north on this trail to the nearest water. I recollect that spring and the little canyon it's in: shore ought to, for

the last time I was there I staggered into the canyon with a bullet-hole in me and a give-out horse between my knees. It's a good place to hole up. Two men with rifles and plenty ammunition could fight off an army from there, but not *two* armies. That's the hell of it.

"About how many in that bunch behind us?" I ask.

"The best I can do is a pretty close guess," answers Johnny. "Not less than eight or more than ten."

They'll catch up with us long before dark if we keep goin'. Their trackers won't have any trouble followin' our sign to the canyon if we throw off there. From what Johnny saw, the bunch comin' down from the north is a long ways off and inasmuch as they're just more or less scoutin' the country for us, not knowin' exactly where we are, they'll probably camp for the night at the next water south of 'em—Deer Spring, ten miles north of our canyon. On account of Sister Noah we can't run from either of these outfits. We simply have to fight our way through 'em or pull shenanigans on 'em, and far's I'm concerned I like the smell of trickery a heap better than the taste of gunsmoke.

After a while Johnny Antelope grins, and asks, "How are you comin' with your thinking?"

"I'm chasin' an idea through the fog in my brain," I answer, "and it's gettin' sorta leg-weary. I'll tie onto it before long."

WE COME to where the trail passes through a freak formation—a cut just wide enough for two men to ride abreast, walls about ten foot high and a hundred yards long. At the north end of this pass, an animal trail prongs off to the left. By followin' that path for a mile we'll come to the little canyon and water I'm a-headin' for. Before leavin' the main trail, I rein in and look back at the cut. That's when I snare this wild idea of mine. Even if it is mine, I kind of like it.

"Come on, Johnny," I tell him. "We'll go to the spring and water out and feed our horses a little of the corn we're a-packin' and feed ourselves some grub and give Brother Noah a chaw of tobacco, then we'll come back here and have a little powwow with Timoteo and his boys. Sheriff Dupler

will still be too far away to hear us a-talkin' to Hernandez. How d'you like my idea?"

"I love it! Mister Gunman, you have saved my life. I was dying of ennui."

"Whatever in hell that is, I hope it ain't catchin'."

On top of the cut the ground is fairly level on both sides, a few boulders covered by heavy brush. Johnny hides behind a big rock in chaparral up there at the north end and I do the same at the south end. We have already spotted the Hernandez raiders less than two mile south on the trail and comin' along steady. When the bandits show up they're a-ridin' in pairs and I count ten of 'em. Hernandez himself is one of the two men at the rear of the line. Reckon he'd rather eat dust in the drag than to face danger at the point. Kneelin' up here behind a boulder in a clump of brush with my Winchester, I watch the Mexicans trot into the cut and I wait for Johnny Antelope to touch off the fireworks. Pretty soon they're all inside the pass, the leaders ten yards short of the north end. The Indian's rifle cracks!

One of the lead horses pitches head-foremost. Its rider falls hard. Again comes the rippin' report of the rifle. The other leader crumples in its tracks. The next pair in line curb their horses so hard the animals rear and paw the air, then every last man of 'em is doin' his damndest to turn in that narrow cut so as to get away from the rifle ahead of 'em. They tangle and throw their own horses, spur and quirt the crazed animals and I see one man beatin' his mount over the head with a six-shooter. These Mexicans go plumb wild, screamin' and yellin' and shootin' in all directions. It's hell down there in the cut and not pleasant to look at, if you like horses.

I lay low until Hernandez gets turned around and starts back. He's a-quirtin' and yellin' like a lunatic. I put a bullet through his horse's brain. Its head plows up the dirt of the trail. The fat little bandit rolls over and over like a damned toad. He ain't hurt, though. His men are racin' past him now—two horses carryin' double, a-ridin' hell-bent back the way they came. He grabs the head-stall of a big black that has just got turned around and pointed south. The scared rider gives his horse another cut with the quirt. Hernandez hangs onto its bridle with one

hand, pulls a gun with his other and shoots his own man twice!

I'm strong tempted to let *him* have it then, but catch myself in time. Steppin' quick into view, I holler down at him, "Stick 'em up, Hernandez! Stay off'n that horse!"

Maybe he's too scared to hear me. He gives the dead man a shove, then pops into the empty saddle. I shoot the horse from under him, knowin' damned well that I'm killin' the best one of the two.

WE'VE got a full moon tonight. Brother Noah is a-pointin' our outfit north on the main trail with fine light to see where he's takin' Sis, while Johnny and I traipse along in the rear. Timoteo Hernandez is a-settin' my saddle and I'm ridin' behind him. He's mighty nigh dead from fright—this rich and aristocratic Mexican bandit—because Johnny Antelope has convinced him that we're takin' him with us so as to use him as a live target for knife throwin' and pistol practice. Johnny has been a busy man since we had our scrape with the bandits. He scouted north until he found where Sheriff Bob Dupler had camped for the night with a posse of eight men—at Deer Spring where I guessed he'd camp. We're on our way there now. I know this waterin', know the country and how to circle the posse and get back to the trail; but that wouldn't do us a particle of good, for they'd soon pick up our sign and overtake us. With Sister Noah to slow us down, we can't take a chance on givin' the slip to a posse of mounted men. That's why we're on our way to the sheriff's camp at this time of night.

Deer Spring is a good half-mile up a timbered draw from the main trail. When we come to this ravine I take and tie Hernandez good and make him comfortable with his back against a tree, then we anchor the Noahs to another tree. Johnny and I shuck our chaps and boots and put on moccasins. When he scouted the sheriff's camp this evenin' he learned that the posse has staked its horses on the only grass anywheres near the spring, a meadow about five hundred yards up the draw. This bein' horse-thief country and light of the moon, Dupler will no doubt post a guard at the meadow. I figure he'll probably make three guards to-

night, which means that there'll always be two horses under saddle in camp and I keep remindin' myself of that so's not to forget it.

We ride a circle around the spring and back towards the meadow and halt maybe two hundred yards away from it. My long horse, Blaze, has been de-nickered by patient trainin' and Johnny's bay racer, Flip, ain't no hand to gossip; so we ain't no ways afraid of what *our* horses will say when they catch the scent of the others, but we dassn't gamble on the lawmen's nags and we make it a point to get the wind on 'em. Johnny Antelope can move like a ghost. Me—I ain't no slouch at that business. I reckon, after livin' with the Osages a year and gettin' special trainin' in horse-stealin' and havin' them name me the Owl because I see pretty good at night, but what I mean—I ain't in Johnny's class. So he gets the job of cuttin' picket ropes. I take the job of un-squawkin' the horse guard when we find the cuss, for two reasons: first, I'm a heap huskier'n Johnny; second, I don't want no killin' and I don't trust my Choctaw friend's knife in the excitement of a good fight.

WE'D a had fun findin' the guard if he hadn't lit him a smoke. He lights it in his hat, of course, but two pair of eyes like ourn can't miss the glow in the fringe of the timber borderin' the meadow and it ain't no time before we're less than ten feet behind him in the trees. I'm movin' mighty cautious now. A little miscalc'latin' could be damned nigh fatal. With my unnaturally long legs I don't have to pick my feet up and set 'em down as often as most men do to cover a certain distance, so two steps put me in strikin' range of the horse guard. I haul off to let him have it with the barrel of my gun. Like a durned fool I've looked every place but where I'd ought to a-looked—over my head. My gun barrel tangles with a branch. That there guard is good, powerful good. His six-shooter is out and a-smokin' before he even turns his head. He don't hit nothin', but he shore scares hell out of a lot of things—includin' me. Next second I beef him cold, but it's too late now. They're a-sleepin' light, that posse. One man hollers, then they all go to talkin' at once.

Recollect me sayin' that Johnny is a foot-racer? Well, what I mean—*he is*. This dad-

blamed Indian slides out into the meadow and goes to cuttin' picket ropes and he makes me and my long legs look so infernally slow I'm plumb disgusted and about to stop helpin' him, then the last lawman's horse is free to roam. The guard's shot upset those nags completely and they were runnin' on their ropes before we cut 'em a-loose. Now we yank off our shirts and wave 'em and holler and Johnny empties his gun at the moon, and those horses are long gone. They can't see us from camp, but they shore can hear us. In three shakes here come the relief men and they're a-poundin' leather, and if we hadn't remembered 'em and made haste fast they'd a-caught us in the meadow.

Johnny and I scoot back to our saddles. "How long d'you think it'll take them to round up their horses, Slim?" he asks. "A whole day?"

"A day, hell!" I answer. "Maybe never. This is powerful wild and rugged country populated by horse thieves. Likewise, a horse don't stampede as easy as a cow, but he's a sight worse when he does. Them ponies are headed east. What the thieves don't catch will be swimmin' the Mississippi before dark tomorrow."

When we get back to the trail, I unloose Hernandez and give him his weapons. "I won't ride the same horse with you another rod," I tell him. "You stink! Go up this here draw a little ways and you'll run onto a camp of men. You'll be welcome there. They stink, too!"

TWO weeks later we're across the line in the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation, and we've been huntin' high and low for a pore sheepherder by the name of Tomas Hernandez. He's a cousin of the bandit, Francisco Hernandez, and an honest man—so we heard. Francisco told us he had given them calico mules to Tomas and we're doin' our dumndest to find him so's to give 'em back. I figure any pore Mexican sheepherder shore needs his mules. Johnny Antelope is a-hop-in' and prayin' that we don't never find Tomas 'cause he's done taken a shine to the Noahs and wants us to keep 'em. I do, too, but I won't admit it.

We've been ridin' wide of the Indian Agency because it ain't no ways safe for me to be seen around there—Johnny Antelope

neither—but I finally make him stay with the mules in timber down in the bottoms and take a chance on it myself. It's middle of the mornin' and the settlement is already chock full of Indians. Don't see many whites around, though, so I'm breathin' a little easier when I go to the Agent's Office. I ask a clerk if he can tell me where a man will be likely to run onto a fella by the name of Tomas Hernandez and he points through the open door.

"Down yonder in that grove where you see all those Indians," he says. "You can't miss finding the son-of-a-gun."

I find him all right. He's a good-lookin' scamp, a genuine sport dressed in the fancy clothes of a gamblin' man and he's a-smokin' a cigar that would stopper the muzzle of an eight-gauge shotgun! I can't hardly believe that's him—a pore Mexican sheepherder—so I ask another fella and he swears that's Tomas Hernandez who used to herd sheep. Right now this ex-sheepherder is standin' behind a little table, a-throwin' monte. Cheyennes and Arapahoes are a-pikin' and the way this pore Mexican is rakin' in their grass* money is a caution to see.

I hang around inconspicuous-like until the game sorta busts up, that bunch of Indians bein' more or less cleaned. Then I go and tell Hernandez that I've got his calico mules, taken 'em all the way from Arkansas to Texas and brung 'em back to The Nations to give 'em to him.

Plumb excited, he takes off his hat and grabs him a handful of curly black hair. "What? Those mules! You bring me those mules! They are possessed of devils, those vile creatures! Don't let me see them. Don't let them look at me. Please! Please, *Senor!*"

Sounds crazy, but most gamblin' men are superstitious; Mexican gamblers more so.

"Why not?" I ask him. "They're mighty fine mules."

"No, *Senor!*" he howls. "They are the devil's own bad luck. When I owned them I was a sheepherder in rags, with one woman and five children also in rags. Then the mules were stolen from me. My patron saint had them stolen. My luck changed at once. Look at me now. I have fine clothes. I am rich. I do no work. I now have many

* Indians often leased their lands to cattlemen for grazing purposes and the rental they received in cash was called "grass money."
C. C.

women and an unknown number of children!"

'This excitable Mexican is talkin' with both hands now. "Take those mules away from me! Please, *Senor!* Take them away --far, far away!"

I ride back to Johnny Antelope and the Noahas. While I'm a-tellin' him what all happened, Brother Noah sidles over care-

less-like and takes a nip at my sleeve. I scratch him under the jaw and sorta pull his ear. With his velvet lips he takes a-hold of the Durham tag, that's a-hangin' from my pocket, flips out the tobacco sack and goes to chawin' blissful. I look down at him and cuss him. He looks up at me and rolls his eyes sentimental.

And I'm a-thinkin', *Maybe Luck is a lady.*

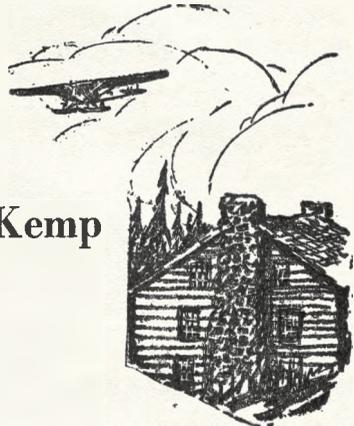


WHEN you wire a girl—collect—that you are all set to marry her, you might expect one sort of trouble. Engine smoke in your nostrils can promote another.

“SMART GUY”

By T. T. Flynn

Sourdoughs like old Cockeye MacDonald wouldn't for a minute admit that they couldn't get along with the new North of bush flying as well as with the days of the freight mushers



'BUSH FREIGHTER'—H. S. M. Kemp

AND OF COURSE THE
SHOOTER'S CORNER

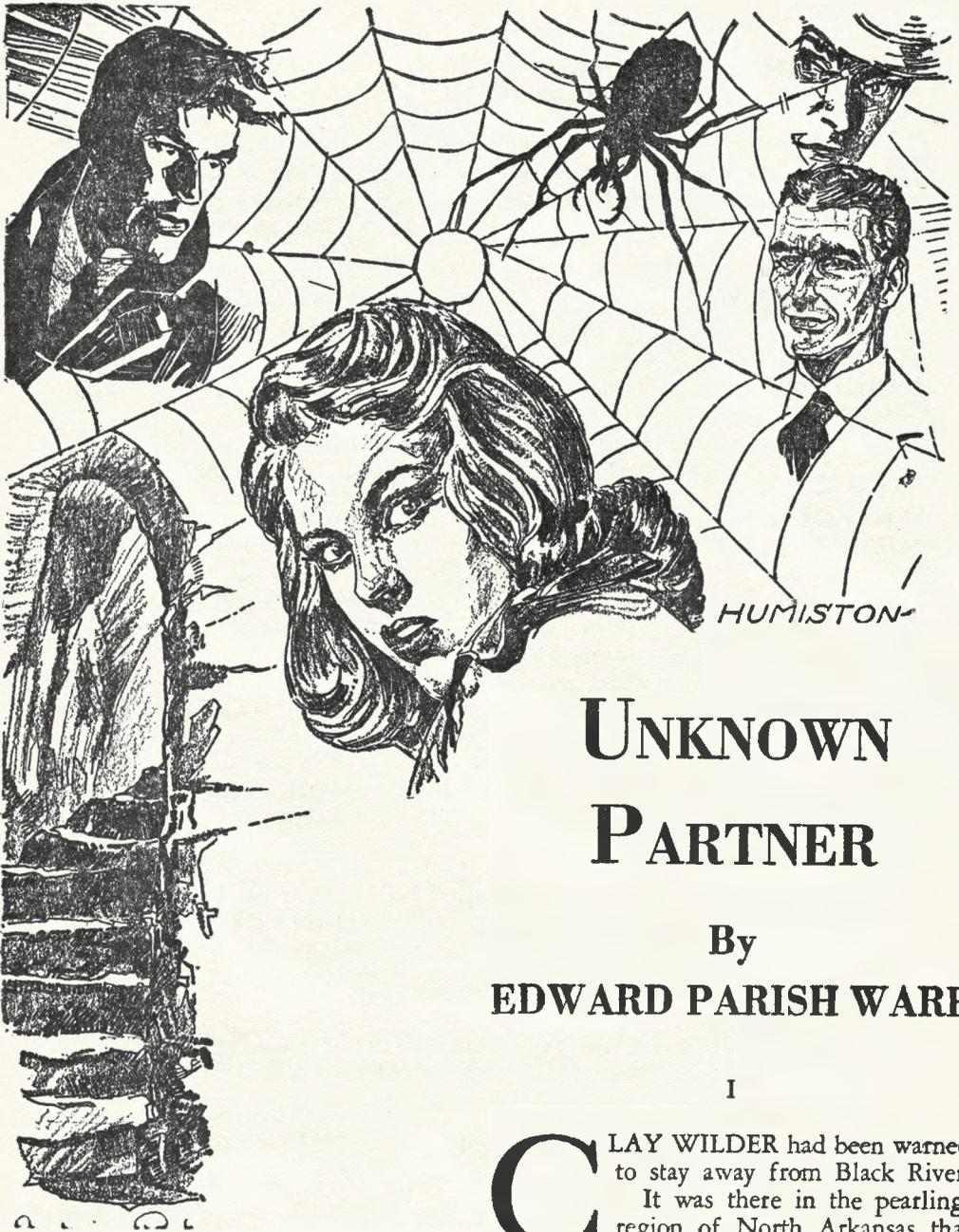


Don't miss it, brother

GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL
W. C. TUTTLE • HUGH B. CAVE
WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN
H. BEDFORD-JONES



All in the next issue of
SHORT STORIES



UNKNOWN PARTNER

By
EDWARD PARISH WARE

I

CLAY WILDER had been warned to stay away from Black River. It was there in the pearling-region of North Arkansas that the mystery-trail he had been riding should promptly end—but he was bothered by a nagging hunch that it would not. That it might be just beginning.

Dan Lawton's letter, with its accompanying sealed manila envelope, had pictured the entire region as hopelessly crime-ridden, but Wilder had taken that with considerable salt. Dan's word-picture was much too sinister. This was, after all, the twentieth century.

*Somehow the Twentieth Century
Seemed to Have Been Mislaid
Along Black River in the North
Arkansas Pearling Region*

On the long horse-back ride to the first rise of the Ozarks and Black River, he had suffered a change of mind. Dan had been right. Crime was rampant along Black River.

"Damned glad I'm not here for pearling!" he congratulated himself and, nudging his bay Morgan with a heel, rode down the rutted trail to where a rickety rope-and-pulley ferry nosed the shore. "And the sooner I get in and get out, the better I'll like it!"

A shriveled little gray man with long whiskers shuffled aft when the Morgan's hooves rattled the warped boards of the ferry's deck.

"Fo'-bits fer hossbackers," he announced, holding out a hand.

Wilder forked over a half-dollar, chuckled and said, "Okay, Charon. Pretty stream you've got here, the Styx!"

"Name's Biggers. Uncle Newt Biggers. And this here stream ain't no Sticks. It's Black River," the old one corrected, after casting off the bank-line.

"My mistake," Wilder apologized.

"You ain't no pearler," the old man allowed presently. "Leastways, you don't look like none. Air you peddling something?"

"I'm not and no," Wilder said good-humoredly. "I want to go to Bullard's Tavern, and I want to go the shortest way. How do I get there?"

"Bullard's hey?" the old one repeated. "Well, fer a place that ain't had no trade



hardly a-tall since the State Highway was run ten mile nawth of it, Bullard's is sorta picking up. Leastways, today it is."

Wilder was suddenly attentive. "Somebody else going to Bullard's today?"

"Yeah. Three hossbackers asked directions. Tall feller, a short, skinny feller, and a squatty one with a mean look to him. Two hours ago. They rode up the River Road, first, to git dinner at Ribrock Settlement, afore going to Bullard's."

"All right. How do I get to Bullard's?" Wilder demanded sharply, fishing a five-dollar note out of a pocket. "Hurry up, Gramps! How far and how?"

The ferryman's Adams-apple jumped up and down in his stringy throat as his eyes coveted the bill.

"Five miles," the old one told him as the ferry eased in to its anchorage. "Straight ahead frum here. The old Cherokee Trail, and you can't miss it. The trail ain't marked and it's plumb wore out!"

"Thanks. Goodbye!"

Wilder tossed the bill to the old man, touched up the Morgan and clattered off the ferry.

Gramps was right. Old Cherokee Trail was plumb wore out. Only the high middle between the deep wheel-ruts of long-gone years showed signs of travel. Horsebackers evidently made occasional use of it, but, Wilder was heartened to note, none had traveled it that day.

LEAD-COLORED clouds which had been threatening rain for the past several hours suddenly began fulfillment. A brisk shower, then a slow but steady fall. Wilder swore disgustedly as he removed his slicker from where it had been tied against the saddle-horn and got into it.

He knew the long, tough manila envelope, still sealed as he had received it, was safe inside the leg of his right riding-boot, but he felt for it nevertheless. The contents of that envelope was solely responsible for his being on a mystery-trail. He didn't want to lose it.

Dan Lawton had written:

"This is one tight fix I don't figure to get out of, but the trail to Bullard's is plain enough—with a hundred grand at the end, if you are smart. Go there the

week of September 8th, and wait. You'll meet your partner there."

There was not any doubt in Wilder's mind that the writer of the letter was now dead. Dan Lawton. The first Chief under whom he had served when, a graduate civil-engineer fresh from college, he had tackled his first job. Eight years ago. Wilder had been twenty-two. And now the Chief, living or dead, was trying to put wealth in his way.

"And being damned circuitous about it!" Wilder grumbled ungratefully. "An appointment at Bullard's to meet a partner who will have a second manila envelope to put with mine. Together they mean a couple hundred grand in pearls. If we are smart!"

Would this partner be white, black, yellow, red? Old or young? Male or female?

Wilder was to wear a mulberry-colored flannel shirt, a red bandanna handkerchief in the pocket. He would be recognized.

"And maybe shot instantly!" Wilder griped. "A helluva way to give a guy dough, Dan—I must say!"

Then he recalled the matter of the three horsemen who had broken their journey to Bullard's because they craved grub—and he keened up on the instant and began scanning the trail behind.

He was now more than ever convinced that the warning letter he had received by mail in Memphis really meant something. The letter, unsigned, had directed Wilder to stay away from Black River and Bullard's Tavern. To remain where he was, ready to keep a later-made appointment—and bring a certain manila envelope with him.

That was all—but enough to tip Wilder off that somebody not supposed to be in the know had got wise. Dan's elaborate precautions hadn't worked. At least Dan's main point, secrecy, had certainly blown up.

And the three travelers for Bullard's—

The trail jogged, straightened, and Wilder pulled up on the bank of a shallow run. He searched the back-track with danger-sharp eyes, then splashed into the little creek, headed the Morgan down it and rode ashore where buckbush and hazel crowded the water. From there he watched the crossing.

He had not been more than ten minutes

under cover when a black horse carrying a black-slickered rider splashed into the run and crossed in the direction of Bullard's. A gray followed the black. The gray's rider, protected by a slicker too, was slight of figure and not nearly so tall as the man on the black. "A kid," Wilder ticketed the second rider, then was watching a third horseman who rode a shaggy bay.

The third was squat, heavily built, rode with slicker unbuttoned and the front brim of his hat pushed up. The pushed-up brim revealed a broad, sallow face, bushy eyebrows, a flat nose and a heavy mustache which completely concealed the mouth. He was out of sight quickly.

"The one with a mean look to him, surely," Wilder thought, recalling what the ferryman had said. "And they are heading for Bullard's—on Tuesday of the week of September 8th. I wonder, now, if my partner is one of them?"

Wilder let fifteen minutes pass before he took to the trail again, and when he did he rode with sharpened caution, alert to every sound, watchful of the trail ahead and suspicious of the brush beside it.

"If one of those riders is this partner," he reflected as he rode on, "why come so well guarded? Dan wrote that only we two, the parties to the appointment, would know about it. Maybe I won't hurry into that mulberry shirt with the red bandanna. I don't like the look of——"

THE sharp crack of a revolver, a spear of smoke-shot flame in the brush at Wilder's left, sent the Morgan into the air, to come down in a jolting lunge. With a gun half-drawn, Wilder heaved in his saddle, lost his stirrups and plunged to the ground. Matted undergrowth broke the fall.

The Morgan sprinted ahead for a short distance, wheeled, cocked his ears forward, then stood trembling in the trail.

The fringe of brush across the trail stirred and a man in a black slicker stepped out cautiously, scanned with sharp eyes the motionless man on the brush, then went slowly toward where he lay. He moved alertly, revolver cocked and ready, and stooped beside his victim. Keeping the muzzle of his weapon clear for action, he thrust a hand inside Wilder's slicker, fumbled with the tightly buttoned coat beneath—

Wilder acted. His left hand shot out and caught the bushwacker's right wrist, forcing his hand up just as his revolver let go a jarring blast. There was a second blast. One from Wilder's gun.

The bushwacker rocked on his feet, and his gun slipped from his limp fingers as he buckled at the knees and went down.

Wilder sprang up, looked down at the face of the man he had tricked, and swore. The bushwacker was the squat third rider. The one with the mean look to him.

But he was more than that.

He was positive proof that danger was no longer merely a threat. It was a concrete presence, active and murderous—and it had come up with him!

II

AS WILDER had expected, the belongings of the dead man revealed nothing. Nothing in the saddle-pockets or pack on the shaggy bay which he found tied a hundred yards off in the undergrowth. One thing however was certain:

The dead man with the mean look to him tied right in with the riders of the black and gray.

"And that should come to something," Wilder thought, as he draped the body of the squatty man prone across the bay's saddle and tied it there. He then cut a wide strip from the skirt of the dead man's oiled slicker, and another buckskin thong from a rosette on the saddle.

From inside the leg of his right riding-boot he brought up a long manila envelope, wrapped it securely in the strip of slicker and tied it with the thong. Again he went into the underbrush, and when he came out he no longer had the package.

"So long, old fellow!" he chuckled as he turned the bay back toward Black River, smacked him on his rump and sent him loping down the trail. "I'll be seeing you again soon, or I don't know horses!"

Bullard's Tavern proved to be a much spread-out two-story building of hand-hewn logs and native rock. It stood without fence about fifty feet north of the trail, and had a forlorn, old-world, unused look about it.

Wilder arrived at Bullard's at a fast lope, flung himself from the back of his lathered Morgan and plunged precipitately through

a wide doorway into a huge room which was bar, dining-room and parlor. He was panting, his face registering the fact that he was fresh from a bad scare.

"I've been robbed!" he cried, making for a heavy, pot-bellied man in middle-age who had a nearly bald head and wore a dirty apron.

He was leaning against the end of a bar at the left. "Held up and robbed! Is there any law hereabouts? When it gets to the pass that a citizen—!"

"What you need is a drink, Mister. A good stiff one!" the pot-bellied man broke in, going back of the bar.

"But he robbed me, I'm telling you—robbed me right in broad daylight!" Wilder insisted, badly rattler. "Shot at me first—!"

"Stranger," the barman interrupted, "there ain't sheriff nor deppity nor yit a constable—no law a-tall, in fact—anywhere hereabouts. No law that's worth its salt anywhere in the whole country, as just anybody you meet will bear me out. Down the hatch with this here good brandy—then do yore talking."

"Good advice, I'd say," came in a pleasant, cultured voice from back of Wilder, and a tall man, with black hair and eyes, stepped up beside him.

The tall man was well dressed and very clean except as to his riding boots. They were caked with drying mud.

"Pardon me for butting in, friend," he continued, "but I'd say Mr. Bullard is telling you right. Your bandit is probably far away—and no help for you as far as the law is concerned. Drink up, friend, and have another with me."

"Thank you," Wilder said, and gulped his drink. "I admit here and now that I've had one hell of a scare. Think of it! I'm riding along at a slow jog when—Blam! My horse leaps ahead like he was out of a cannon, stumbles and throws me over his head, and a bullet barely misses me. I fall hard and am stunned by it. When I notice things again, here's a short, heavy-set man bending over me and going through my pockets! And he is saying, over and over—"

"Down the hatch, pardner, with this one," the barman interrupted, shoving a nearly-full bar-glass forward. "It'll do you a heap of good and no harm a-tall. Drink her down!"

"Thank you," Wilder said gratefully, and downed it.

"You were telling us that the bandit kept on saying over and over—something," the well-dressed man reminded, nodding for the barman to fill up again.

"Yes. He was saying, 'Don't try to hold it out on me, feller. I know you've got it. Don't try to hold it out on me!' He went on like that, all the time turning out my pockets. He took my wallet and my gun and—"

Wilder shut up like a sprung steeltrap, reached for another drink and, giving each of the two men a quick, apprehensive look, downed that one.

"Got all your money, your gun—and everything, in fact, of value you were carrying. Is that the right of it?" the well-dressed stranger prompted.

"Well—not all my money," Wilder corrected, grinning, although somewhat wanly. "I had my main roll hid inside my saddle-pack, along with a mate to the gun I was wearing. All he got was fifty-odd dollars and my wallet, one gun—and—"

Again Wilder clammed up.

"There was something else of value?" tempted the tall man.

"You can put yore trust in me and Mister Fenton, stranger," the bartender assured him in a near-whisper, although there was nobody else in the room. "And count on us helping you however we can. That right, Mister Fenton?"

"Of course it's right, Mr. Bullard!" Mr. Fenton affirmed promptly. "The fact that the bandit did not make a more thorough search and find your hidden roll, Mr.—?" he stopped and looked inquiringly at Wilder.

"I'm Clay Wilder, gentlemen," the engineer hastened to introduce himself. "A civil-engineer from Memphis. Most anybody there will vouch for me—"

"Now, friend, nobody need vouch for you," Fenton broke in soothingly. "Mr. Bullard and I both know an honest, truthful man when we see one, don't we, Mr. Bullard?"

"Shore. You bet we do, Mister Fenton!"

"Of course," Fenton agreed. "As I was saying, I should think the bandit would have made sure you had been cleaned proper—"

"Wait!" Wilder exclaimed. "I haven't told it all yet. I can't say that he wouldn't have searched my pack for more plunder, but my Morgan, which had trotted back to where I was, flung up his head and nickered. The bandit jumped like he'd been stung, looked off down the trail toward where the Morgan's ears were pointing—then made off toward the brush. He yelled at me to stay right where I was, or he'd fill me full of lead. I didn't. I leaped onto my horse and rode hell-for-leather. And that's the straight of the entire matter!"

Bullard's fat-encased blue eyes were not on Wilder when he finished, but had switched to the face of Fenton. He didn't say anything, but it was clear to Wilder that he was anxious for Fenton to say something. Fenton did, presently, and his voice was only casually concerned.

"You didn't wait to see who was riding up the trail?" he asked. "Might have been a traveler who would have helped you out."

"I'd been told that mighty few bona fide travelers ever ride the trail these days," Wilder offered in explanation. "I didn't take chances, but mounted and rode. I didn't want to meet up with any more bandits!"

"Don't blame you at all!" Fenton declared with a sour grimace. "And since your loss was not great—unless, of course, there was something else you haven't mentioned?"

Wilder looked away from the speaker, clearing his throat nervously. He said speculatively, "Reckon I should ride back to Black River and try to get hold of the sheriff, or somebody—"

The tavern's entry door opened abruptly to admit a lank, sallow-skinned native. He was excited, and his narrow-set, amber-colored eyes searched jumpy until they rested on Bullard.

"A bay hoss jest come up with a feller sprawled acrost the saddle, Bull!" he exclaimed in a voice as jumpy as his eyes had been.

"Drunk?" Bullard demanded, lumbering toward the outer door.

"Naw. Dead, if you ask me!"

Fenton had just taken a glass from the bar and had it halfway to his lips. He held it there, his black eyes shooting a sharp glance of inquiry toward Bullard.

Bullard jerked his head in a signal for

Fenton to come, and heaved his heavy body outside. Fenton set his glass down and followed, and Wilder went out directly behind him.

The shaggy bay was standing at the hitch-rail, head down wearily, and jack-knifed across the saddle, held there by leather thongs, was the squat man with the mean look.

He'd always have that mean look—for death had frozen it there.

III

THE dead man's head was toward the tavern but his prone position hid his face. With no show of distaste or hesitation, Bullard lifted the head by its hair, looked at the face and said:

"Never saw him before. Stranger hereabouts, shorely."

Fenton went closer, obviously a bit finicky about the blood-splashes on the stirrup-guard and the bay's side. He looked at the man, shook his head decisively and declared:

"I've never seen him before, either. But I'm practically a stranger here, of course—"

"I've seen him before!" Wilder interrupted excitedly. "Just once before. He's the bandit that stuck me up. I'd not forget him in a thousand years!"

Bullard's eyes sought Fenton briefly. He lowered the head and asked:

"Right shore about him, Mr. Wilder? Just seeing him once, you all excited to boot, you might make a mis—"

"It's him, all right!" Wilder declared, moving forward. "And I'm going to search him for my plunder!"

Bullard lifted a staying hand. "I would not, Mr. Wilder," he protested. "Nobody but the law has a right to do that—"

"But you said there is no law hereabouts!"

"Mr. Bullard could hardly have meant that the law will not function in a case of murder," Fenton argued. "Better wait—"

"Not on your life!" Wilder exclaimed, already busy searching. "You wouldn't wait, either," he went on angrily, "if you'd lost something as valuable—!"

He stopped there, concentrating on his search. Resignedly, Bullard and Fenton started helping. Even the boots were re-

moved from the feet and searched—but there was nothing. Not a single item found was laid claim to by Wilder.

"Well," he exclaimed finally in exasperation, "this sure does beat me!"

Bullard and Fenton looked for a moment at each other, then the tavern-keeper said:

"Whoever killed him had taken what he had on him. Mebbe that rider that was coming along the trail, Mr. Wilder?"

"Right!" from Fenton. He stepped forward, lifted up a skirt of the dead man's slicker and said in a puzzled voice: "Somebody cut a strip from the slicker. Looks fresh, too. Now—I wonder why?"

Wilder was puzzled too. "I didn't notice the slicker had been cut," he offered. "But it could have been."

"Not important, I guess," Fenton decided, and walked away from the horse. "Better put the body in your harness-room until the law can get here, hadn't you, Bullard?"

"Yes. I'll send word hossback to Powhattan."

Brushing his long, strong hands fastidiously as though they had been soiled, Fenton walked back into the tavern, followed by Wilder. Just across the sill of the tap-room, both men stopped abruptly.

Lying on the floor, her print-dress disarranged, face as white as though she too were dead, lay a woman. A girl of perhaps nineteen or twenty—and whom Wilder, at least, had never seen before. Her eyes were shut and she was deathly still.

Wilder dropped to his knees beside her, felt her heart, pulse.

"Just fainted!" he exclaimed relievedly. "Who is she, Fenton?"

Fenton's eyes were fixed in a strange manner upon the girl, and his face-lines had tightened.

"Who is she—or do you know?" Wilder repeated, lifting the slight figure from the floor.

Bullard came through the door at that moment, and it was then that Fenton found his tongue.

"The young woman is, I believe, our landlord's niece. Eh, Bullard?"

"Yes. Yes, Mr. Fenton. My niece. Dead sister's girl. I'll take her!" He snatched the girl from Wilder's arms and hurried away through a door in the rear.

Wilder gazed after him briefly, then said, "She must have looked out and seen the dead man—"

"Of course!" Fenton agreed quickly. "That's exactly what happened. No sight for her, poor child!"

"Right. And I think it'll require about five-fingers in a washtub to revive me properly, Fenton. What do you say?"

"At least that," Fenton smiled as he walked to the bar.

The hoofs of a horse pounded outside, saddle-leather creaked. A moment, and the tavern door was letting in wind and rain. The door slammed, and a very tall man, almost completely hidden by slicker and wide-brimmed hat, stood looking toward the two at the bar.

"Has this place got a hostler? If so, where is he? My nag's standing in the rain. Where the hell is the garcon?"

His voice was a deep-throated roar. The rear door swung open and Bullard hurried in.

"My boy will take your horse, sir!" he exclaimed. "Nasty night out! Come to the fire, sir—!"

"Damn the fire!" the tall traveler interrupted. "I want liquor. Plenty liquor. Who wouldn't on a night like this?"

He walked in long strides toward the bar, shucking his slicker and dropping it in a wet heap on the floor. The newcomer was tall, probably over six-feet-two, and slat-thin. He wore a dead-black sack suit with the bottoms of the trousers folded into the legs of black spike-heeled riding-boots. A white boiled-shirt, turn-down collar and black string-tie completed his visible apparel.

At the bar, waiting impatiently for the slower Bullard to serve, the newcomer removed his high-crown black hat. His thin, wrinkled face was nut-brown, eyes as black as sloes—and his high-domed head was as innocent of hair as a billiard ball.

"Hot in spite of the rain!" he bellowed, mopping the moisture from face and bald dome with a big, polka-dotted blue handkerchief. All in all, he had a distinctly monkish look, if arrogance, impudence and sly humor would be becoming in a monk.

"What will it be, sir? Whiskey and hot water—?" Bullard began.

"Since the good God made me!" the

newcomer exploded. "Ain't I wet enough already, without pouring water into my suffering belly? Fill up a tumbler with your best brandy. That's my tippie. And you gentlemen?" With a nod to Wilder and Fenton. "I hope you'll join me? What will it be?"

Both nodded acceptance, and Fenton introduced himself and Wilder. They shook hands, and the newcomer became communicative.

"Stanley & Company, Mining Properties. Lead, zinc, silver, gold or what have you? You gentlemen may have heard of us. I'm Stanley. Horace K. Just scouting around, now, looking for any lead and zinc property I can get my hooks in. Incidentally, I'm as hungry as a she-wolf suckling a dozen pups—"

"Supper in ten minutes, sir!" Bullard interrupted. "You'll be in Number Four, and Mr. Wilder in Number Two. Lashus, my help, has done toted your saddle-bags and packs up. You'll mebbe want to fresh up a bit?"

After a second round of drinks, Mr. Stanley decided he'd go to his room, and Wilder followed him up the stairs. He entered Number Two, noted with approval the fat-looking bed in a corner, saw that the place was clean, then started to unstrap his saddle-pack which lay on a chair. He eyed the pack narrowly, nodded and remarked to himself:

"Been searched. Bullard and his friend Fenton haven't overlooked any bets—and neither have I. At least," he corrected with just a tinge of anxiety, "I hope I haven't."

ALTHOUGH the garments inside the pack had undoubtedly been unfolded, examined and replaced, nothing had been taken. Wilder removed a mulberry-colored flannel shirt and a red bandanna and re-rolled the pack.

"Not quite sure that I've been on the up and up about the hold-up," he surmised as he eyed the objectionable shirt. "The manila envelope wasn't on the dead man, and my pack and saddle-bags failed them. After they get their heads together, as they may be doing right now, they'll decide that they played in hard luck. Squatty got the envelope, right enough, but somebody got both Squatty and the prize. Damn it, if

the situation wasn't so hot with danger it would be funny!"

He decided that since his identity with the "partner" duo was already known, he might as well wear the startling, highly visible shirt. When he went back to the tap-room he had it on, and a red bandanna was tucked carelessly into the pocket.

In the tap-room, his nostrils were pleasantly teased by the warm odor of food. Not until then had he realized just how hungry he was. The delicious fragrance arose from steaming dishes and bowls on a table near the back of the room. Heaped up dishes and bowls—and a profusion of them!

Hungry eyes were scanning the table and chairs were being pulled out when, without warning thud of horse-hoofs, the entry door was opened to let in a furious gust of rain-laden wind—and a lone traveler.

The traveler was a woman.

That the woman was young was apparent despite the fact that she was covered, except for mouth, nose and eyes, by a rain-washed slicker and a wide-brimmed hat, the brim rain-wilted and drooping about her face. She stood just inside the tap-room, eyes seeking, then spoke to Bullard who hurried toward her.

"I wish accommodations here for a few days. Perhaps a week or more. And please have somebody bring my things in before they get wetter than they are."

As though it were a matter of course that she would be accommodated, the newcomer removed the concealing hat, revealing a small head of dark-brown, wavy hair, brown eyes and a delicately tinted, fresh-skinned face that could belong only to a woman in her very early twenties. She next removed her slicker, handed both hat and coat to Bullard, then, with a nod and a smile to the group at table, joined it.

"Bullard's appears to enjoy an all-male patronage," she commented with a charming smile. "Well, I promise not to be embarrassed if you're not. I'm rather used to it, my work taking me into queer, off-the-beaten-track places as it does. I'm Ann Avery."

"Your work, Miss Avery, must be very interesting," Mr. H. K. Stanley offered, "to entice one so young and charming into such surroundings."

He introduced Wilder and Fenton.

"Oh, it is!" the young woman declared happily. "I do special features for the weekly magazine, *Americana*. Perhaps some of you read it? My latest series, 'Old Taverns in America,' is scheduled to begin with next week's issue, and the story I'm after now will complete it."

The astonishingly talkative young woman was in the act of sitting down when her glance rested on Wilder. There it stopped, not to admire his dark, well-chiseled features but to remain in what seemed fascination upon his flamboyant mulberry shirt. Briefly her brown eyes were big under distended lids, then with perfect aplomb she sank into her chair, smiling at Fenton who had gallantly placed it beneath her.

"Old Taverns in America," commented Horace K. Stanley, politely interested. "A most engaging subject, I should say. What special tavern are you after now?"

"This one. Bullard's. Quite the best one yet, if it lives up to what I have heard about it. Founded by the present Mr. Bullard's grandfather, away back yonder. If only it yields up its secrets it will be, believe me, the very best—"

The crashing of china brought her to a full stop. Bullard, carrying a large pitcher of wine from bar to table, had let it slip from his hands, to smash in pieces and spill its contents in a dark, reddish flood on the floor!

IV

IF ANYBODY but Wilder suspected there might be a connection between Miss Ann Avery's remarks concerning Bullard's Tavern and its proprietor's mishap with the wine, it was not apparent in face or manner.

"Butter-fingers!" the young woman jibed laughingly.

"Too bad, garçon—unless you have plenty more wine?" from H. K. Stanley, whose bald pate and thin, lined face needed only the complement of a cassock to make his resemblance to a monk absolute.

Fenton, who appeared not to have noticed anything out of line, said nothing.

"I'll bring more wine!" Bullard muttered, staring at the mess he'd made of the floor. "Just a minute!"

As for Wilder, he was not certain that

dropping the pitcher had not been the bit of carelessness it had seemed. He concentrated, dredged up the exact words Miss Avery had used at the moment, and gave them a mental scanning. He spotted the phrase, the only one, which might have given Bullard a start.

"'If only it yields up its secrets—'"

Supper came to an end and cards was suggested. Wilder excused himself, saying, "I'll go have a look at the weather. Hope it fairs up, but doubt it."

He opened the door upon pitch-black night. A rainy night, fit only for weasels, mink and other predatory animals setting store by such cover.

The stable stood against the main structure and, except for the light of a barn lantern, was dark. Wilder took down the lantern and walked down the gangway, examining the stalled horses on the left, walked back and did the same for those on the right.

All the horses he had expected to find, including the black and the gray, were there—with one exception.

The shaggy bay which had brought a dead man to the tavern's door that afternoon was missing.

What had become of the bay?

In long strides, he crossed the gangway and pushed open the door of the harness-room, entered it and swung his lantern from side to side, his eyes skipping nothing.

The dead man was missing too!

Moreover, there was not the slightest sign in the room that he had ever been there. Harness, saddles, feed, one cot with tumbled blankets—and dust. So much dust and so thick that had a man, dead or alive, lain on that floor there would have been evidence to tell of it. There was nothing.

Why had horse and corpse been taken away?

"Too damned many questions—and no answers at all!" Wilder exclaimed aggrievedly as he stepped down into the gangway—

And dodged aside just in time to avoid the impact of a club which lashed downward viciously from the darkness beyond.

The man with the club had been so certain of himself that he had not taken a miss into account. The down-sweep of the club carried him with it—and before he

could recover, Wilder had him in a grip that almost cracked his bones.

The lantern, having fallen on a side, was threatening to explode. Wilder tangled his right leg with the struggling man's left, and felt great satisfaction at the thud he made when he hit the ground. Before he could get to his feet, the engineer had the lantern in one hand and a revolver in the other. The lantern was so close to the down man's face it almost blistered.

"Well, well, Lashus," Wilder said chidingly. "You almost provided a corpse for the harness-room, to take the place of the one that should be there but isn't. Was that your idea—you lousy, jump-eyed moron?"

Lashus had nothing to say. He got up from the floor and stood looking at the engineer, and deep in his amber-hued eyes there was fear.

"Where's the dead man, Lashus?" Wilder asked.



The amber eyes jumped to one side, then to the other, down to the floor, back to the steel-hard ones of the engineer. The fear in them had intensified.

"Talk—or take it," Wilder told him quietly—and lifted the long barrel of his weapon to strike.

"I—I ain't knowing!" the stableman croaked. "He—he was in here—!" He gulped, shrank back, and came to a full stop.

"I know he was in here. But where is he now?" the engineer urged with a gentleness that was wholly false. Once again he lifted the gun-barrel. "Talk, hickory-head—or do I work you over?"

"Don't—don't lam me on the head with that there gun! I'll talk! I taken the bay hoss with the dead man on it—!"

Lashus' voice was jumpy like his eyes—and it ended in a high, terrified leap.

The lantern in Wilder's hand leaped too, as the globe flew in pieces and the wick snuffed out.

The shot had come from the darkness at the back!

V

WILDER spent perhaps ten minutes in an unsuccessful search for Lashus, whose going had been coincidental with the going of the light. He made no direct attempt to find the marksman who had so dramatically demonstrated his rifle-shooting ability, nor did he feel any uneasiness as to his own safety. The marksman had shot out the light, cutting short Lashus' revelation and giving him a chance to escape. That was all.

The puzzling whereabouts of a certain manila envelope guaranteed present immunity for Wilder. Whatever else its contents might be, it certainly did hold at the moment a life insurance policy.

Wilder went back to the tap-room, finding it, somewhat to his surprise, deserted except for Bullard.

"The young lady didn't care for cards tonight," the tavern-keeper explained from back of the bar. He grinned and added, "So cards wasn't no attraction for the men-folks either. They all went up to bed."

"Not a bad idea," Wilder commented, going to the bar. "I'll have a night-cap and do the same. Brandy. Double it."

Was it perspiration or raindrops that beaded the tavern-keeper's baldness? Impossible to say, but the fact that it was cool and comfortable inside the tap-room inclined Wilder to cast his vote for raindrops. Native hillsmen were almost without exception crack shots with a rifle. And Bullard was a native.

"You sent word for the sheriff, of course?" Wilder asked while Bullard was setting out bottle and glass.

Bullard did not look up. "Yeah. I sent word," he answered.

Wilder drank, felt grateful for the smack of the brandy in the bottom of his stomach, and said:

"Then he should be here tomorrow morning, probably?"

"Sometimes our law moves sorta pokey," Bullard told him. "Law ain't popular in the river country, and they don't stir about only when it's forced on 'em. Sheriff'll either come or send a deppity, I reckon, mebber tomorrow or next day. You staying on till the law comes?"

"Of course. I'll be the star witness, won't

I? Besides having a complaint of my own to lay down. See you in the morning." He went to the door opening on the enclosed stairway, turned and said, "By the way, if that stableman of yours, Lashus, should come in, send him up. I've got a pair of boots I want him to clean."

Bullard's eyes came around to Wilder's in a brief, hard stare, but his fat face was without expression. He nodded.

"Yeah. I'll tell him."

"You will like hell!" Wilder thought, but went on up the stairs without saying it.

There would be a new stableman in the morning. He'd seen the last of Lashus.

He lighted the kerosene lamp in his room, went back and bolted his door, then removed his coat and unbuttoned the distasteful mulberry shirt.

"Thieves to the right of me, thieves to the left of me—and I'm all the Light Brigade there is," he soliloquized fancifully as he shucked out of the shirt. "It's worth a hundred-grand to be caught alive in that damned thing," contemptuously, as he tossed the offending garment over the back of a chair, "and twice that to be seen dead in it! Yeah," he continued his reflections, "Bullard is a thief—and probably worse. Fenton is a thief—and I'm absolutely, positively, tetotally damned sure he's worse. No small stuff for him, either. A hundred grand, maybe two. He could snuggle up to that—and love it. And Baldy the Monk. He craves to sink his hooks into some zinc or lead property. A legitimate yen—if he really has it. Arrived pat to the occasion, though—and that goes for the scribble-gal, Miss Ann Avery. I wonder what she really does for a living? Finds mulberry shirts attractive. Or stunning. Stunning as Webster defines it. So do I. We have that in common—"

He was about to unbuckle his belt and drop off his trousers when a sound, slight and having no certain direction, attracted him. It came again. A rustling noise, such as a rat might make back of wainscoting. But this room had no wainscoting. It had, though, a clothes-closet—

Certain physical contours under Wilder's searching hand identified the gender of the occupant of the closet. A woman. He released her, holstered his gun and said hospitably:

"Come out, baby, and be sociable. I'm somewhat dishabille, being minus shirt. It's on the chair, though, if you crave another eye-full of it. Really, I look better without it—"

His jaw dropped. It wasn't the writer-girl who came slowly into view from the confines of the closet. It was someone he had certainly not expected. Her face was white and her blue eyes wide and anxious.

"Been thinking about you," Wilder said as he motioned her to a chair, "ever since I picked you off the tap-room floor this afternoon. Remember?"

The girl—he could see that she was more than pretty enough to live up to the fine red-gold curls which he remembered—circled him timidly, reached the chair and stood hesitantly by it.

"Go ahead. Break the ice, baby," Wilder urged. "Say something—and try and make it as sweet as you look, if that's pos—"

"I'm sorry," the girl interrupted in a low voice which was husky and pleasing. "I—I just had to come—" She broke off and looked helplessly down at her hands, the fingers of which now seemed to be twisted inextricably.

"I know!" Wilder coached helpfully. "You heard about my shirt. The mulberry confection. And you just couldn't believe it. Well," with a sweep of an arm, "there it is. It's gospel true. Look your fill, baby—"

"Please!" The girl was looking at him, her blue eyes pleading. Wilder ceased his nonsensical chatter, and she sat down. "I must not stay here long. Somebody might discover that I'm not in my room downstairs, and—" She shuddered. Her voice faltered, then picked up again. "Well, I wouldn't want that to happen!"

"Uncle Bull, eh? Or is that all hooley?"

She looked at him blankly. "I don't know what you mean," she said, wrinkling her brows.

"No savvy hooley? Bunk. Tripe. Bushwa. Confetti. Any of that register? No?" surprisedly. "Well, what I mean is, did Bullard really uncle you? Had that un-salted hunk of leaf-lard ever a sister who could have mothered a lovely like you? Don't be hoity-toity, neither coy. You may take it that I'm regular, baby."

A flush crept into the girl's cheeks and

her blue eyes were no longer timid. "You evidently want me to believe that you're a regular nitwit," she said, an edge to her voice. "Very well. I believe it. But even nitwits can be serious upon occasion, can't they?"

"This one can," Wilder assured her soberly, and sat down, his back against the mulberry shirt. "It's only that the situation had me a trifle flustered," he went on to explain, "and I was trying to cover up."

"And still trying. Or pretending. Frankly, I don't believe you fluster easily—and you may take it that I don't. Now," she asked with a sudden smile that might have charmed a far less susceptible man than Wilder, "are you willing to play ball with me in a nice way—or aren't you?"

"In a nice way," Wilder said promptly. She slips in and out of her brittle shell with the ease of a contortionist, he was thinking. "Pitch when ready, bab—No. Not baby. Have you a name I might use temporarily?"

"Sueanne Ames—"

"Spinster?"

"If it makes any difference—I'm single. And," she added with just a bare ghost of a smile, "I mean to remain so. Now if you're ready, I'll pitch—"

"Hold it a second. Your first name. Sue, space, Ann? Like that? I like to get names straight—"

"All together. Sueanne. And you needn't bother to say it's odd and pretty. I know that. Now—for the pitch." She hesitated, looked squarely at him, and asked, "Have you got a certain manila envelope?"

Wilder's mood for foolishness passed instantly.

"That one," he said, "was right over the plate!"

"Glad you didn't try to foul it off," she smiled. "Perhaps you'll return the ball—or do a little pitching yourself?"

"Both. I did have one. I haven't it now. And why in hell should you know things about manila envelopes?"

"Because I have one myself," promptly.

"Have—or had?"

"Have. Why do you ask that?"

"Association of ideas. I had one once, and now I haven't. Thought the same might have happened to you."

"It didn't."

"Then where is it?"

"I don't intend to—" she stopped abruptly.

"Balk!" Wilder declared, grinning. He waited.

"Yes," she nodded, "it was. With nobody on—"

"I'm on. On to a lot of things. Shall we call this ball game and start another kind of game? It's called questions and answers. Feel up to it?"

He waited. She was patiently making up her mind, and not quite certain about whether the water would be shallow or deep, hot or cold. At last she nodded.

"Legitimate questions will get answers. That understood?" she queried.

"By legitimate," he said a trifle ironically, "you mean such questions as you want to answer. I expected that, and shall endeavor to bear up under it. I ask questions first, you answer—maybe. Okay?"

She nodded.

"First. You are really Bullard's niece?"

"I am."

"Were you here at the tavern—say, yesterday?"

SHE was undecided for a moment, shaking her head slowly. "No," finally. "Perhaps we'd best not waste time with irrelevant questions?"

"Mine won't be. That one wasn't. You were not here yesterday. Arrived today, didn't you?"

While she hesitated, he said, "You either did or you did not. You can tell the truth or you can lie—"

"I shall do neither!" she cut in angrily. "I shall defer the answer. Have you another?"

"Yes. How long had you lived at the tavern before you went away?"

"Since I was about ten years old—and how do you know I have ever been away? A trick question, wasn't it?"

"You didn't get your education and manner here in the backwoods," Wilder told her. "You may once have been a small pearl-in-the-rough, but you went away and got polished up. You are probably nineteen years old. Uncle recently sent you to a girl-school, didn't he?"

She nodded. "Obvious, isn't it?"

"Obvious about the school, but not obvi-

ous that Uncle Bull sent you there," Wilder answered promptly. "Miss Beaufort's, Nashville—for a ten-dollar note. And does that one cost dough! You came here just today—didn't you?"

"How—how did you know about the school? Miss Beaufort's. Why—why you couldn't be sure!" she stammered.

"I could be and am. A couple of my girl cousins got finished there—and they're both just as smooth, polished and tricky as you are. Ergo, Miss Beaufort's. And who came with you, Sueanne, when you got back today?"

She hesitated long before finally deciding to answer. Then:

"What if I did get back just today. Is that pertinent? I don't see how it could be. Nor what difference it could make who came back with me!"

He eyed her curiously for a moment, then started bringing up the heavy guns. "You came here in company with Fenton and a squatty fellow who rode a shaggy bay. At least, you actually reached here along with Fenton. Squatty failed to complete the journey. An hour after you got here I came along—and my coming may have been expected by you, but not by Fenton and Bullard. They were pretty damned sure I wouldn't get here. When you entered the tap-room, looked out a window and saw your former trail-companion lying dead across his horse, you fainted. You were not supposed to show up in the tap-room—and Bullard was mad as hell when he snatched you from me and beat it. Right so far?"

"The—the dead man, Squatty as you call him, was not really with us," the girl said, after taking time out to make up her mind. "He only asked to ride with Mr. Fenton and me because there are so many bandits in the river country. Before we got here he turned off the trail, saying he lived off south of here. Naturally, when I recognized him lying dead on the horse it was a shock. The bandits had really got the poor fellow. So—I fainted. Undoubtedly you saw me in company with Mr. Fenton, who kindly consented to see me safely home to Uncle, so there would be no point in denying it. There's nothing to be ashamed of about it."

"You admit, then, that you were the

rider of the gray horse? That you crossed at Uncle Newt's ferry with Fenton and Squatty? You want that to stand, do you?"

"Certainly I did—and I do want it to stand!" she declared, her eyes now fiery. "But we've lost sight of the issue! Manila envelopes—!"

"On the contrary, we haven't lost sight of the issue. At least I haven't. My very dear Sueanne," he smiled, getting up, "the questions and answers game has been tremendously exciting and mentally stimulating. But it's ended now. All things come to an end, don't they? While I am ever so glad you came, sweet," he went on while she watched him walk to the door in round-eyed amazement, "I think you'd better go now. Uncle Bull might get curious. Not so?"

The girl's face went white, reddened with indignation, and she opened her lips with the evident intention of unleashing a torrent. She closed her lips on silence, and walked toward the door.

"Sorry, baby," Wilder said in mock apology, "but this is the way it has to be. You'll think of me sometimes, won't you?"

"You—you're unspeakable!" she flung at him contemptuously.

"And you, dear one, are unbelievable," he tossed back. "In other words, you're phoney. You haven't even a bowing acquaintance with truth. You never saw this ratty old dump in your young life until today. You're no more Bullard's niece than I am—and, barring the unfortunate indiscretion of one certain shirt, I'm not even faintly feminine. Now, baby," he ended, swinging the door open, "will you trip along to wherever you came from—and forget all about manila envelopes?"

With her eyes glinting ominously the girl walked out and Wilder closed the door behind her.

VI

HAVING learned long ago to sleep raw and like it, Wilder shucked out of the rest of his clothes and crawled beneath the blankets, taking a six-shooter along with him. He did not anticipate anything like an attack that night, but the girl with the ominous eyes might stir up something.

"The damned little phoney!" he grunted,

lying flat on his back and staring up into the darkness. "Play me for a sucker, huh? Well, Uncle Bull and Uncle Fenny are convinced that I haven't got all my marbles, seeing the sappy show I put on for them this afternoon. Maybe Uncle Baldy thinks so too. And maybe Auntie Ann—God love her, she's a pip, and to hell with what she really does for a living!—got a wrong impression from that shirt. Maybe the whole pack of 'em are wrong about me. And maybe I don't give a damn whether they are or not. Maybe I'd better woo some sleep, because it may be a hard day tomorrow—and tonight is still tonight!"

But sleep proved to be coy, refusing to be wooed. Maybe if he let his mind sort of wander, tip-toeing easy-like so as not to scare Lady Sleep off entirely, he'd get somewhere. Here goes, mind—let's wander!

Whether or not his mind perversely refused to tip-toe and went along stiff-legged and flat-footed, all Wilder got out of the experiment was a jolt. One helluva jolt!

"What if, after all, the gal with the hauntingly lovely but ominous blue eyes does possess a manila envelope? What if she actually is the partner I'm to meet here? What if Squatty did turn off as she said? What about that, mind? Got anything on it?"

Mind had the bit in its teeth by then, and all he could do was string along. Probably he would be led down false trails, but he couldn't help that. He had to follow. One trail, at least, seemed pretty straight, with few jogs in it. Nevertheless, there were jogs.

That the girl with the red-gold curls and the ominous eyes was neither kith nor kin to Bullard he was certain. If she had been claimed as a niece by Fenton, that would have been different. She would have been on safer ground. But to say that she had spent many years of her life with Uncle Bull, and then not know the way from Uncle Newt's Ferry to the tavern was certainly asking him to believe the unbelievable.

"Three hossbackers asked directions."

The words right out of Uncle Newt's own mouth—and they were dynamite exploding right under Bullard's avuncular pretensions!

Wilder wished his mind would quit

bothering him with questions he couldn't answer. Maybe there were no answers. Maybe he'd put away too many drinks that afternoon and evening. Maybe too few. Maybe what mind needed right then was a man-size slug of rye as a sort of settler. That would soothe it, or stimulate it, one or the other. Well, damn it, soothe or stimulate—here goes!

He slid out of bed and inched his way through the darkness toward his saddle-pack. Inside the pack there was a quart—

He froze—and the chill of late night on his bare body had nothing at all to do with it. He had heard something. A closeby sound. And he was convinced that close-by sounds in the darkness in Bullard's Tavern would have teeth in them. Long, sharp, wolfish teeth.

The sound came again, only this time the sound was more sustained. It kept right on. A teeth-on-edge, metallic sound. Wilder's eyes probed the darkness toward a spot against the wall below the foot of his bed. His ears were pinning the sound down—

Something thudded solidly but softly, a match flared—and Wilder was staring amazedly into a pair of large brown eyes set widely in a face which had seemingly bloomed out of a square, black hole in the floor.

"Hey there, Brownie—wait a minute!" Wilder begged softly—and made a dive for his pants and darkness.

The brief match burned out. Wilder, hustling into some clothes, heard a giggle. The giggle sounded choked, but nevertheless it was a genuine giggle. Then he struck a match and applied it to the wick of his lamp. He turned around.

The writer-girl was sitting on an edge of the black hole. She had evidently used the match for two purposes. To see by and to light a cigarette. Her brown eyes, filled with amusement, were contemplating Wilder through a thin veil of fragrant smoke.

"You know," Wilder remarked, leaning against the foot of the bed, "I'm very glad you came along—but damned if I wouldn't like to know how you came. The, er—the mechanics of it, so to speak?"

"Quite simple—once you understand it," Miss Ann Ayers told him obligingly. "And

maybe I'm lucky you turned out to be the God-awful shirt man. You see, I was just prowling."

"Then please prowl some more," Wilder begged. "Come right on in and get better acquainted. There may be a horrible draft—"

"Shaft," she corrected, obeying the invitation.

"A sort of one," she hedged, motioning Wilder over beside her. "A wall-ladder inside the clothes-closet of my room—and I couldn't resist it. I would have dropped up on you quite a while ago, only," with a knowing roll of her eyes and an I've-got-the-goods-on-you quirk to her smile, "I didn't want to break up the party."

Wilder's slow, somewhat abashed grin definitely acknowledged the corn. "So—you were making a second trip up that ladder?" he chided. "Yet you pretended you played it lucky that I'm that you-know-what man. Knew I was, didn't you?"

"Thought you were," she corrected, moving over to a chair. "Hadn't you better let that trap-door down? Might be a horrible draft, you know?"

"Leave it open—for a quick getaway, just in case."

She still wore riding-breeches, boots and brown kahki shirt—and she was unquestionably the prettiest girl Wilder had seen since he saw her last. He was positive about that.

"A blonde," he reflected aloud, "just can't hold a candle to a brunette. Not to little brown-haired, brown-eyed brunettes, at least. Not in my book they can't."

"How sweet of you to say that. Now I feel infinitely more at ease!"

Damn it, he was being kidded! Better to put the scribble-gal in her place now than have to do it later—

"Put on your shirt," she suggested solicitously. "There may be—"

"A horrible draft. Let's have a drink together—what you say?"

THE girl laughed amusedly, nodded consent and asked mischievously, "Did you two ever get together about those manila envelopes—or did you go on playing baseball?"

Wilder, when she spoke the word

"envelopes," almost dropped the bottle. He saved it, however, and demanded:

"Say, you—how much did you hear while you were hearing?"

"I didn't hear you offer the blonde sensation a drink," she countered. "Never mind a glass, Mulberry. I'm a bottle-baby."

"Damn that shirt! You don't think I am wearing it because I saw it and fell for it—or do you? Careful of the answer. Your entire future may depend upon it!"

The girl's laughter was soft and genuine. Nothing phoney about her laughter. It did things to the room. Like draping the rough walls with silken cords having tiny silver bells for tassels. Wilder was glad he had not gone to sleep.

He handed her the bottle and watched the clean, lovely lines of her throat as she tilted her small head back to swallow. He liked her provocative, clear-cut chin, her long-fingered, delicate hands—and it absolutely did not make any difference how she really made her living!

"Have one with me," she invited, passing him the bottle.

He looked at her frowningly over the bottle-neck.

"If you turn out like the blonde baby," he told her, "I'm going to wish I hadn't been at home when you called."

"She didn't turn out. You turned her out," she corrected, and added, "And not just out the door, either."

He chuckled, drank deeply, sat down and put the bottle on the floor beside him. "How you mean?" he queried.

"Well—she came to turn you inside out, and left looking like the wrong side of a paper bag. Good answer, isn't it?"

"It will do. Now—what did you come for?"

Straight from the shoulder, and direct.

"I came to offer you the loan of some manila envelopes," she smiled at him. "The fold-your-own kind or the mail-it-flat kind. Take your choice. I've plenty of them."

"Don't be like that!" he protested. "I really want to know!"

"Well, all right. But you won't believe me. Old taverns have many secrets—like hidden passages, hidden rooms and all that. It's my business to find 'em, examine 'em, get their history and tell folks about them.

When I spotted that wall-ladder I wanted to know where it led and all about it. After I found out—well, I couldn't resist having another look at that unbelievable shirt. A man who runs to shirts like that, I reasoned, might be worth knowing—"

"Keep a respectful tongue in your head, hussy—and stop lying!" Wilder broke in, half-angry but wholly charmed. "I might chuck you back down that trap—"

"With the horrible draft?" In pretended apprehension she turned her head and glanced toward the square hole—

"Look!" she whispered, grasping him by an arm. "The trap is closed!"

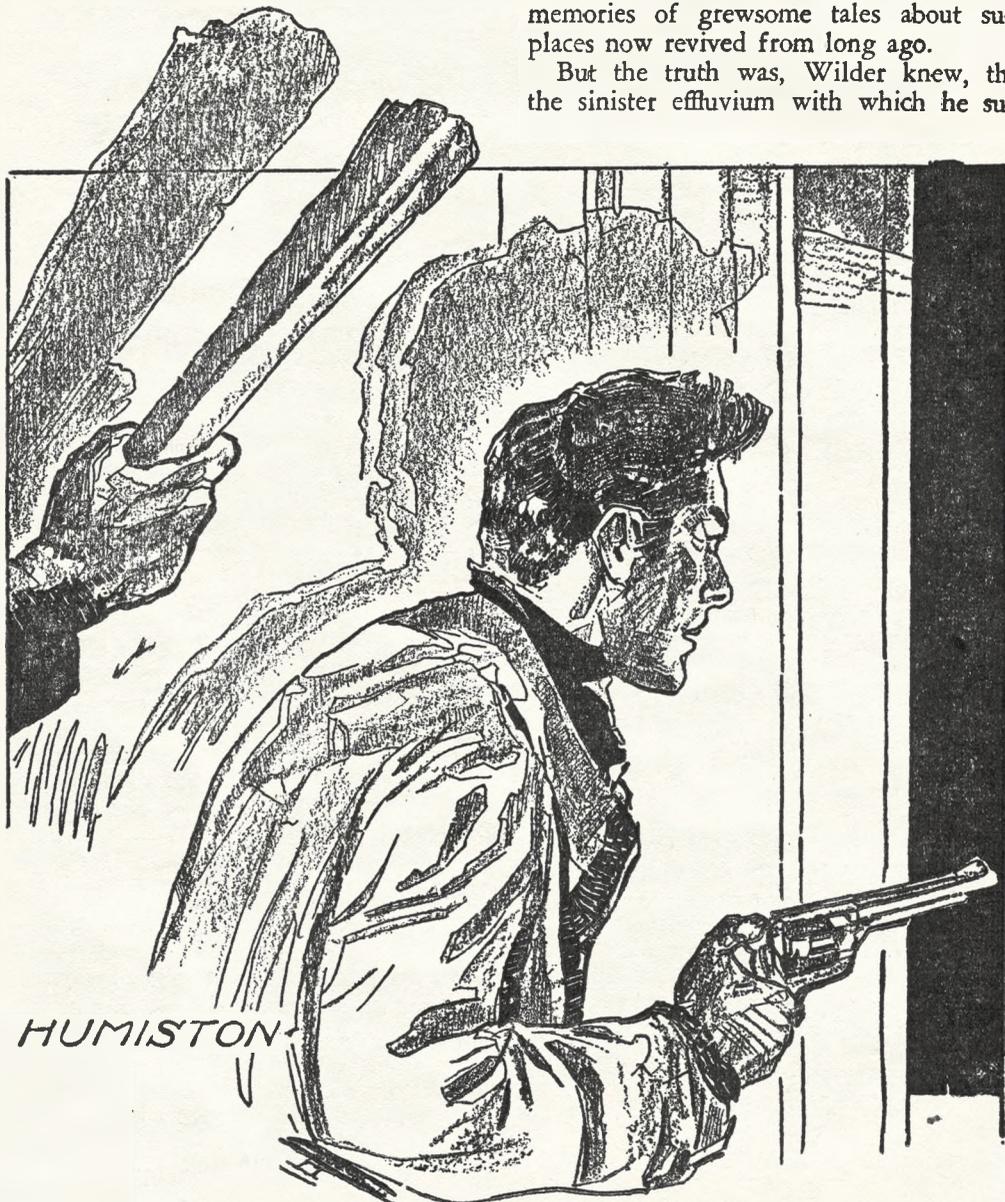
Not only closed, Wilder discovered when he tried the door, but securely fastened!

VII

"WHAT—what are we going to do?"

Ann's voice was shaded with terror, and Wilder knew that she too had been feeling something sinister in the atmosphere pervading Bullard's Tavern. It might be due to age, the grim, prison-like construction and hue of the walls, or even memories of grewsome tales about such places now revived from long ago.

But the truth was, Wilder knew, that the sinister effluvium with which he sud-



denly felt the place to be saturated, and which was right then causing a poised and nervy girl to go limp and cling to him, was not an emanation from walls nor ghostly wraiths evoked by faint memories of long-told tales. The feeling of threat, of ominousness, was wholly telepathic.

Cunning minds were plotting ruthless deeds, and even the night-time silence was pregnant with evil. The air was electric with it, whispering it into ears which were attuned—

Wilder brought himself up with a jerk. Bunk! What the hell? Was this a time to go completely ga-ga?

A couple lousy crooks, and one suspected female accomplice, were scheming to put the bite on him, maybe give him the works, and the atmosphere of the tavern, whether noxious with the breath of the Devil or sweet from Elysian winds, had not a damned thing to do with it!

With an arm comfortingly about the slim girl clinging to him, he spoke reassuring words—and thought up a plan.

"I'm betting there's nothing at all really to frighten in the matter of the closed door," he told her, but careful to keep his voice low. "It stinks of spite. A woman's trick, designed against you for being up here and against me for just being alive. What'll you bet the blonde heart-throb didn't sneak up that ladder—?"

"Oh! Do you really think so?" Ann interrupted relievedly and, oddly enough, clung just a little tighter still.

"I do. That ominous-eyed gal would be capable of doing anything. Just anything at all!" indignantly.

"I'm sure she would. And where does that leave us—in particular and specifically, me?" Ann inquired of the top button of his shirt—if he'd had a shirt on.

He started to say—right here, sweetheart, where you belong. But he got his emotions quickly by the throat. What he said was:

"If it was the blond girl, we'll put a spoke in her wheel right now. If it wasn't—well, we'll spoke a wheel anyhow. I'm going down stairs and unfasten that door. Say—did you lock your door before you started out to view the sights?"

"No. I didn't think there could be any reason for locking it."

"Okay. You lock mine after I'm gone,

then plant yourself on the trap-door. You don't run much to weight, but you can yell loud as hell should anybody try to come up from below. I'll pound three pounds on the under side, and then you can get off the door. Got it?"

"Yes, of course. But—but you'll be mighty careful, won't you? What if you run into somebody?" She was prettily and sincerely concerned.

"If I do it won't be the blonde, honey—so you should care!" he grinned impudently. Then he went swiftly and silently into the corridor.

The corridor was pitch-dark. Ten steps took him to the opened doorway at the head of the enclosed stairs, and twenty treads downward let him into the tap-room. All in silence. He found one light there. A brass one which hung above the bar. The rest of the big room was hung with shadows, some of them patches of impenetrable blackness.

The door in the back-wall through which Bullard had gone with the red-gold blonde in his arms was his first objective. Wilder went with light feet to the door, opened it and faced more impenetrable darkness. There was a corridor, as he knew there would be.

In days of old when ladies were ladies and gentlemen were no different than they are now, unattended female guests were housed almost hermetically in rooms on a separate floor from the males and immediately adjacent to those occupied by the inn-keeper and his family. Bullard, it would seem, had preserved the custom.

Ann Avery's room was directly beneath his own, so Wilder slid along the corridor, counted by touch the doors on his right and located Ann's. The door opened without even a faint squeak. He closed and bolted it.

Two minutes later he was knocking softly on the trap-door's under side. He heard the creak of timber when Ann moved off, and thrust upward. The door bumped the wall softly and he was back in his room.

Back in his room—and staring in pop-eyed amazement at something an uneasy, jittery Ann was holding in a hand.

"Where — did — you — get — that?" he managed to ask.

"It was shoved under the door!" she an-

swered, really excited now. "Right after you went out! Just shoved under. It looked so very odd, coming slowly beneath the door. Like a flat, yellow animal crawling—!"

He snatched the long, tough manila envelope from her, stared hard at it, felt its thickness, then, his eyes probing the girl's, said:

"It's not mine. Not the one I had. It looks exactly like mine, but it isn't. Mine had a certain private mark on it—"

He ceased speaking abruptly, but did not cease his penetrant searching of her eyes, his own now steel-hard and shiny like glass.

"Damn you!"

"Don't!" she begged softly, but not backing an inch from his reaching grasp. "Don't think what you are thinking. Stop it! It came in just as I said—!"

"You," he broke in, the long fingers of his right hand painful when he relaxed them, "you came here to put something over on me—!"

"But I didn't! I don't even know what it is you are talking about! What is the significance of the manila envelopes?" she begged. "Tell me, Wilder. Maybe I can help!"

He relaxed suddenly and sat down. His eyes were getting normal, with a glint of understanding in them. The girl took the envelope from him, turned it over and over, scanning it with enquiring eyes. To her it was just a sealed manila envelope like hundreds she had seen before, and she told him so.

"It's been unsealed," he pointed out to her, and then she saw that it had. "And sealed again. Anyhow, Ann, if I'd stopped to think a bit I wouldn't have swarmed all over you. The fact that the envelope is in this room is proof that you don't know a damned thing about it. If you had come to gyp me out of mine, you wouldn't have brought yours along."

Ann folded down onto the floor and sat with her legs beneath her. She looked up at him and said:

"All right. I'm listening. There's something crooked in this, and I have a very crooked mind. Only an unconquerable fear of punishment and an inescapable belief that sin begets retribution keeps me straight

at all. Make use of my criminal potentialities quickly, side-kick—for the night waneth along."

"I'll probably marry you anyhow, if I ever get out of this present mess, so I might as well let you start picking my mind now," he shrugged—and then told her the whole story.

Ann's brown eyes got bigger and bigger as the tale progressed, while she hitched closer and closer to him, risking more than one apprehensive look at the trap beyond the foot of the bed and at the door into the hall. When Wilder finished and fell silent, she had hitched as far as she could. Wilder gathered her up from the floor and planked her down on a knec.

"Now, crooked-brain, what do you make of it all?" he asked, more than half serious.

"That I'm scared stiff, Wilder!" came in a rush. "I'm scared, scared and then double-scared! You're only one. They're three, two of them men. And that Fenton looks like he might have outside connections. A gang, I mean. Bullard is crooked, and brutal by nature. Fenton coolly contemplates evil and then does it. He's dangerous. And smart. Say, couldn't you leave now and arrange to settle matters through a couple of proxies or something?"

Wilder couldn't help laughing. Couldn't help kissing her, either. He did that, then stood her on the floor.

"Proxies won't get it," he told her. "Besides—I want to see the thing through. That envelope coming under the door will complicate things to beat hell. I want to open it and find out what it's all about. I started out to play this game as Dan Lawton doped it out—but Dan couldn't have foreseen a double-cross."

"You mean that you're being double-crossed by that partner?"

"I'm certain of it. I feel it—and the cards seem to run to that," he answered thoughtfully. "If I'm right, then I know who the partner is. At least, who got the manila envelope—"

A cry that was more a wailing gasp than cry shut him off. Ann was clutching his arm, trembling, pointing. "Wilder! Look! It's coming under the door! It's come! Another one!"

Wilder whipped around, eyes searching. Ann had seen aright.

A long manila envelope lay on the floor just inside the door!

VIII

"**B**LOW out the light!"

Ann obeyed even before the knob turned under Wilder's hand. With the room utterly black, he swung the door open noiselessly and slid into the corridor. He stood intent, listening, all his auditory senses alert. Had there been anything to hear, he would have heard it. Even a slight perfume, such as the blond girl had about her—his sense of smell would have caught that. But his eyes were useless.

The same sooty blackness which masked Wilder worked adequately for the stealthy donor of the manila envelope. Not a creak of a board, the slurring drag of a shoe-sole, not anything to indicate even the direction in which he had gone.

Or—maybe she?

No. Wilder had seen too much hate, too sincere a threat, in the blond girl's eyes ever to think that she might have been acting a part, not willingly for his deception but at the command of others. No. Wilder had defeated her. Picked her to pieces. The ominous look in her eyes had been personal. She wouldn't be playing on his side now.

He slipped silently back into the room, closed and bolted the door. Ann applied a match to the lamp-wick. They looked questioningly at each other, and each at the same time shook a head in silent confession that neither had the least idea what to make of the gift of the two envelopes.

"Is this latest one yours?" Ann asked, putting the latest one in his hand. "You said there was a mark."

Wilder glanced at the back, although there was no need. He would have bet without looking that the envelope was his.

The envelope he had wrapped in oil-skin and thrust far back under a boulder in the cover of a dense forest!

And there it lay in his hand, defying him to divine how it came to be there!

"All right, Ann," he said, decision in his voice. "Let's see what's in the jackpot. The door is bolted, and we'll sit on top of that trap. Don't be surprised at anything at all that comes out of these envelopes," he warned her as they sat down, each on a side

of the door, lamp on the floor and a clear space between them. "Just cross your fingers and hope for the best."

Ann was scared again and would have admitted it vocally, but excitement and suspense had done things to her voice. She could only nod vigorously to signify that she had heard and wouldn't be surprised—

But she was. Both were. Of all the surprises of the night, the one pouring from the two slit envelopes kicked the hardest and stunned the most.

The contents literally poured out of the envelopes, settled in two spots on the floor—and became two heaps of cut-up paper!

"No!" Ann's low cry was a protesting whimper. "This isn't true! Can't be! The precious secret all cut to pieces—!"

"Here's something uncut!" Wilder exclaimed, and fished from the heap beside him a narrow strip of tough, white paper which was all in one piece. There were words written on it—but they revealed nothing.

Clay:

You should do this easy.

Dan

That was all—and Dan Lawton had penciled the words.

Ann had been digging industriously in the pile of scraps at her knees—and from it she drew a slip similar to the one Wilder held in his hand.

"Just names!" she exclaimed in disappointment. "Two names—!"

"What are they?" sharply.

"Just Sueanne Ames written in the center—!"

"The blond girl! Her name, Ann! Then she is the partner!"

"Don't be too sure. She could have put the slip in the envelope herself, or somebody else could. Remember that it had been unsealed!"

"No. Dan wrote the name. I'd recognize that queer fist of his no matter where I ran across it—!"

"But why would she cut the secret papers in pieces? Granting that she is as sappy as blondes can't help being——"

"Wait!" Wilder had scrambled for and found the envelope which bore his private mark. The one which had been sent to him.

He had slit along the top edge with his knife when opening it, and the flap had not been mutilated. He made a swift examination of the flap—

"She didn't cut up this stuff, Ann!" he exclaimed positively. "The seal of my envelope has not been disturbed. Know what that means? It means—that Dan Lawton cut the scraps himself!"

"Why, oh why, oh why, oh—!"

"Stop that!" Wilder commanded. "Don't get hysterical—get busy! Don't you get it now? It's a map, Ann—a map. Pieced together, it will reveal the secret Dan Lawton wanted two people to know—and neither of those persons could know a damned thing without the other! That's how Dan planned it—but one of the persons happened to be a crook and played to hog it all—"

But Ann wasn't interested in the whys and wherefores, and said so. "A map!" she cried gleefully, her brown eyes dancing. "Like a picture-puzzle. Come on, Wilder darling—let's!"

Excitement blazed in their eyes as they started. The sheet upon which the map had been drafted was of tough paper of the texture and consistency of light bristol-board, and since Dan Lawton, engineer par excellence and master draftsman, had drawn it, it would be good. It would be perfect.

IT WAS Ann who discovered the pencil-markings on the reverse side of a wedge-shaped bit which she had been turning in her fingers, wondering where she should place it. She cried:

"Wilder—when it's all put together, there'll be a message on the back! Dan wrote a message on it before he cut it up! Hurry, Wilder dear—hurry!"

"Then we'll have to put it together twice," Wilder told her. "Once for the map, again, and reversed, for the message. Yes—hurry is the word!"

They did it. In a fraction under one and one-half hours, after almost countless false starts and frequent blunders, the thing was done.

Dan Lawton's carefully drafted map lay in its completeness on the floor.

In the center of a forest of trees and underbrush, Bullard's Tavern was indicated. The Cherokee Trail which skirted the inn was noted. There were many lines indicat-

ing paths and animal-trails which made a network about the inn. So many and so crossed and recrossed they were confusing. They did not make sense. Just a crazy tangle. The boulders which fairly choked some parts of the map were just boulders, not one marked with cross, arrow or what-not.

They would not be.

Dan Lawton had drawn that map—and there would be nothing so obvious as arrows on a boulder. Dan, knowing, or at least hoping, that Wilder would one day examine the map had drawn it accordingly.

Wilder knew what to look for. What, if found, would indicate as clearly as one could speak the line or trail he should follow. In a timber country where rocks were not, the symbol would be done with limbs or even twigs. In the Ozarks, where one walked on rocks and stubbed toes against the tops of nearly buried boulders, the symbol would be rocks.

He found it. Little cairns of rocks were spotted here and there along all the trails, having no pattern and meaning nothing at all. Beside just one of the trails the manner in which the rocks were piled made sense—to Wilder. He and Dan had used it time and time again—and Dan had used it there for the final time.

He put a forefinger on the little cairn and said: "There it is, Ann. Doesn't look like much, but it means plenty."

Ann looked at the cairn, lifted puzzled eyes and said:

"Under there? Do you mean the treasure-trove is under that little heap—?"

"Exactly that," he affirmed. Then, "We've got maybe four hours left before daylight," he went on, after a glance at his watch. "Now for the reverse side. It shouldn't be too difficult."

Piece by piece, the map was reversed—and, as Ann had deduced, Lawton had penciled a message there. It read:

Clay:

The man to get is Conway Fenton—if the chance comes your way. He's smart, dangerous and game. So look sharp. Fenton's gang of thieves numbers many and they are everywhere. They are all around me now, here in my cabin on Shelf Creek. I can't take a step with-

out being watched and followed. I can't even leave the country.

I have made several very rich strikes of pearls on Black River. All of it is in the rough, so I can't make more than an approximate estimate of the whole. But it will run upwards of two hundred grand. I want half to be yours and half to go to the daughter of an old crony, Hank Ames. The daughter, about thirty now, is Sueanne Ames. She lives in Nashville, has a small income and takes in boarders, girls attending school. I'm taking measures to guarantee, as best I can, that each of you will get what I want you to have.

You will now have received a manila envelope, along with a brief letter telling you how to proceed. Sueanne will have one too. Both together will reveal to you, Clay, all you need to know. The old symbol we used when we made a prelim. A native called Eli Trant, whom I have staked several times, is hooked up with Fenton—and he will help me as far as he can. That isn't far. But he has promised to get the two envelopes into the hands of the mail-stage driver at Ribrock Camp. If he does, all to the good. If not—well, it'll be just another one of those things.

My one chance, Clay—and a slim one it is—is to slip away if possible and get to Bullard's Tavern. Rodney Bullard owes me a favor. If he can be reached, I'm sure he will help me get away. But—I'm not taking my cache there. Nearly there only. I'll be alone—and this map will show you where the cache has been made.

Good luck to both of you, Sueanne and Clay—and not much doubt that this is also goodbye.

Dan Lawton.

THEY read the note with heads touching, and then their eyes met. Horror in one pair and black rage in the other.

"You get it, don't you?" Wilder asked, his voice low and strangely thick. "Dan escaped from Fenton's trap, came here to Bullard—and Bullard betrayed him. See what I must do, don't you?"

"It—it's true, Wilder," Ann said softly. "But it can never be proved."

"It's already proved—enough for me!" He smiled—but there was no mirth in it.

"You mean—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a—?"

"Yes!" he snapped harshly. "And what difference who pokes out the gluttonous eyes and draws the rotten teeth? Ann," his voice leveling to a gentler tone, "there's two jobs to be done here—and one is, so far as I'm concerned, a damned sight more important than the other. Dan Lawton was probably killed here in this tavern—and Bullard is the guilty one. Isn't that enough for me to know?"

"But you can't deliberately execute—!" Ann began in protest.

Knuckles rapping solidly on the corridor door interrupted her.

"Come out, Wilder!" The voice was Fenton's. "It's showdown—and there's nothing you can do about it!"

"Get away from that door!" snapped Wilder, sliding a gun into his hand. He nodded toward the map, made motions of scrambling things with his left hand, nodded toward a tin wash-basin on a stand. "I'm not coming out—and you're not coming in. Get—away—from—that—door!"

Ann understood just enough of Wilder's signaling to completely mystify her—but she obeyed as best she knew how. He wanted the map scrambled up and the pieces put into the wash-basin. Very well. Now—they were there. What next?

"Don't be a fool, Wilder!" from Fenton, whose voice might have been chiselling ice. "You've got that envelope, and we know it. It won't ever do you any good. Come out—and maybe we'll not harm the girl. Are you coming?"

"Yes—like hell I am!" Wilder replied—lifted his gun and let drive at the door. Again he fired—

There was a groan, an oath—and feet went stumbling along the passage toward the stairs. Wilder reached for the door-knob, looked over a shoulder and shouted an order.

"Put a match to those peices in the pan—and see that they burn. Hurry!"

This, thought Ann, is the end of things! All things! But she struck a match and set fire to the pieces in the pan. They blazed up.

"What now?" she cried out to Wilder's

vanishing back. "I want to go too! They'll burn without me watching them! Wilder darling—damn you! Wait for me!"

Wilder heard Ann, but he did nothing about it.

He ran to the head of the stairs and plunged down them. Fenton and Bullard were somewhere below. Fenton was wounded. He had to get them both. Ann's life, his life, Baldy's life he now knew, depended on whether or not he killed Bullard and Fenton—

He leaped from the third tread down onto the floor of the tap-room—felt the floor giving way, sinking—

Fenton stood near the bar, a triumphant grin on his weasel face. Bullard was back of it.

Wilder whipped his gun up and fired. Bullard jerked, shrieked a high, agonized wail—

The trap dropped from under his feet, and Wilder went down—far down into a darkness blacker than blackest night!

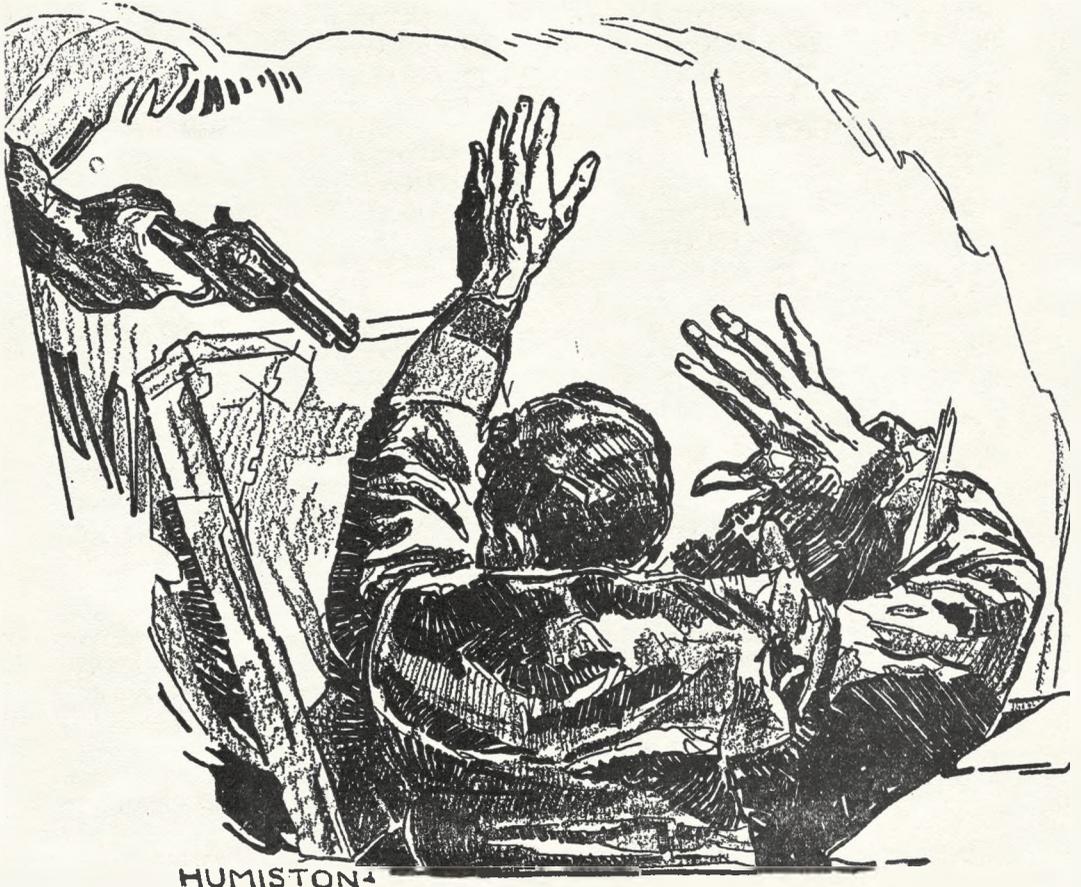
IX

WILDER'S brain had time for only one lightning-like thought, and that was that it would be a long, long drop. But it wasn't. Perhaps a dozen feet, and he was scrambling up from a floor of rock. One quick glance at his surroundings he had, and then the trap above him closed and blanked out the shaft of light.

He was not hurt. Just jarred—and his revolver, found on the floor near him, had apparently suffered no harm either. He tried the mechanism and it worked.

He'd got Bullard. That had been a death-wail he had heard just as he took the plunge. Bullard was dead—but Fenton still lived. He was not even wounded. His pretense had been just a ruse to entice him out of the room, down the stairs—and into the black hole where he now was.

"Secrets? I'll say the damned place has secrets!" he exclaimed ruefully. "And I have discovered one of them!"



HUMISTON

Ann? What of her?" She had been running along the corridor behind him, but she had evidently avoided the open trap. Perhaps she had seen him go down, and had run back up the stairs seeking safety—

But was there safety in the tavern for Ann?

There wouldn't be. Ann knew too much, and Fenton knew that she did. Damn it, there must surely be a way out of the hole. He had matches. Plenty of them.

What the light of the first match revealed was in a manner heartening. Wilder was in a wide passage of what could be nothing else but a cave. Above him, except where a square hole had been driven or blasted to accommodate the trap-door, rock formed the roof. Beyond the trap and toward the front of the building the cave ended in a blank wall.

"A few thousand, or maybe a million, years ago," he thought as he struck another match, "water hollowed this cave out—and where it came in I can surely go out."

The second match showed Wilder to be standing about halfway between two rock walls which were perhaps fifteen feet apart—and shrouding darkness straight ahead. The match burned out—but a thin beam of light slanted through the blackness from directly above.

The trap was being opened! Wilder instantly slid his gun out and made ready to blast at anything that showed. The door, he then saw, could be raised from above and it was being raised very carefully.

"You're armed, Wilder," came down to him in Fenton's oily voice, while Fenton remained invisible. "And you can shoot at what's coming down—but maybe you'd better not. Here it comes!"

It came—slowly, lowered on a rope.

And it was Ann!

The trap slammed shut, darkness blacked out everything—and Ann was in his arms.

"There's no way out, Wilder," Ann told him, while he held her tightly to him. "Fenton said so. No way except by the trap-door above—and—and he said all who come down here through that door make a one-way trip. I—I guess we can take it—can't we?"

"Stop it!" he snapped. "Forgive me, Ann!" he was instantly contrite. "But we mustn't look at it that way. Fenton lied

about it. There must be a way out. This is only a part of a cave which lies beneath the tavern. I know that because it didn't just happen. Caves don't. This isn't like a cellar, dug to suit. Water had to get in here to carve it out—and it's up to us to find the spot where it entered."

"That will be taken care of, won't it? Closed up?"

"Of course. But there must be indications. We must search. I've got matches—"

"Fenton knows about the map being burned—and he was furious. Not for long, though. He says that you wouldn't have burned it if you hadn't already learned all you needed from it—"

"How smart of him!" ironically. "Of course I learned all I need to know—but I'd have destroyed the map anyhow, rather than let him have it. Bullard—what about him?"

"Half your job is done, Wilder," Ann whispered. "He's dead!"

"Good. I had my gun up and there was just a second for the shot. It hit. Did Fenton give you a proposition for me?"

"Yes. Tell him where the cache is," Ann answered, "and after he gets it and is safely out of the country, somebody will conveniently find us—"

"Bunk!"

"Uh-huh. Likewise hooley."

"And he's going to stick around until starvation brings us to time, eh? I'll be glad to tell him where the cache is, in exchange for a few scraps of grub. A sort of last meal for the condemned. Well—maybe so. If it gets too tough on you, sweet—"

"No!" Ann interrupted fiercely. "If—if we can't get out, Wilder darling, well—you've got a gun, haven't you?"

"Game gal!" Wilder applauded. "And I'm loving you plumb to death right now. But—hell, honey, we're going to get out. We solved one puzzle tonight, didn't we? Well, this is just another. Come on. Hold onto my belt from behind, and we'll prowl ahead in the dark. Got to save the matches. Ready? Let's go!"

How far they had gone before Wilder's feet informed him that they were no longer on comparatively smooth going but the way had become plenty rough. Wilder had no way of telling. Perhaps fifty, maybe sixty

feet from where they started. The place seemed different, more confined.

He struck a match. The walls were closer together than before. Not more than six feet apart, and they were rough. Wilder thought he knew why.

The narrow corridor had once been much narrower, and somebody, perhaps even a hundred years before, had enlarged it with pick and giant-powder. That must have been it!

"We're getting somewhere, Ann!" he exclaimed reassuringly. "At least, this is the route the water took when it came to do its chiselling!"

He moved over to his left and slid a hand along the rough surface of the wall while they went on. Suddenly there no longer was a wall. He struck a match.

The entire character of the cavern had changed. While the matchstick held out the two stared about them, forgetting for the moment the danger they were in.

"It's just like being inside a big balloon!" Ann summed it up when the burnt match fell.

IT WAS like that. The cavern was no longer squared by straight walls. The room was larger than that into which the trap had let them, and the walls, except where the short passage entered, were a continuation of a high dome which formed the upper part, coming down in a bulge which narrowed and drew in near the bottom, to leave an uneven floor perhaps twenty feet wide and as long. It was, as Ann had said, just like being inside a huge balloon, or the shell of a gigantic pumpkin.

"The water poured into this when it was a very small space, and it was a long, long time finding, forcing, a way onward. It ate away the small space and made for itself this rounded one, and it came, Ann, must have come from high up above. Perhaps at the top. I'm going to strike another match. See everything you can while the blaze lasts."

The match crackled, flared into a light—and Ann's almost instant cry told Wilder that she had found something. His eyes followed her raised arm and pointing finger—and he saw what she had seen.

A crescent slit, like a slice of orange with the straight line downward, measuring per-

haps ten feet in width and no more than six at the highest part of the upward curve, opened the wall before them at a point about fifteen feet up. It looked like a wide, toothless mouth grinning down at them. Back of the slit—darkness.

"Too high!" Ann whispered. "Too high!"

The match burned out. He could feel her trembling. Perhaps she could feel him trembling too. They had found where the stream of once-living water had come into the cavern—and it mocked them!

Too high, Ann had cried. Yes—far, far too high.

He was holding Ann very tight, since his words could hold no comfort—and he felt her start. Almost instantly he saw what had startled her.

The aspect of the grinning mouth was changing. Something seemed to be flowing out of it—

"Like a tongue!" Ann whimpered chokingly. "Like the mouth is poking its tongue out at us!"

"Light, Ann!" Wilder cried. "It's a shaft of light! Somebody is approaching the slit, carrying a light—"

"Fenton? Could it be Fenton?"

"I don't know. We'll soon see," Wilder answered grimly, and made ready with his gun. "If it is Fenton—!"

"Don't shoot too quick! Wait until you are sure!"

"Of course—!"

A man's long, black-clad legs swung down through the slit, a torso, then a head came into sight, revealed by the yellow light from a lantern.

The head was as innocent of hair as a billiard ball!

X

"**W**ILDER and the little girl-friend, eh?"

"**V**Sorta surprising all around, isn't it?"

The baldhead's voice sounded hollowly in the room, but if there was even a taint of surprise in it it didn't show.

"Any way for us to get up there where you are?" Wilder asked. "Excuse our impatience, but we'd like very much to check out of this hotel."

Baldy chuckled. "So you shall," he answered. "Just a minute, and I'll be down."

He reached into the darkness back of him, and immediately something slithered snakily down the wall below him. It was a thick rope, and the rope had knots at intervals of about three feet.

"I can climb that thing in nothing flat," Ann whispered excitedly. "Wilder darling, let's go!"

"Wait," Wilder cautioned. "It's Baldy's deal!"

It was and he was dealing. He was lowering himself agilely down the rope, the lantern swinging from an arm. His boots and clothes were muddy, his hat was gone, but he wore a wide, triumphant grin.

"We'll sit down, make ourselves comfortable—and eat," he told them, shifting the strap of a knapsack from a shoulder. "And we'll talk. Hungry?"

Ann's sigh was eloquent. Wilder was ravenous too. They seated themselves against the wall beneath the slit, lantern placed where it would cast the most light. The knapsack gave up a plentiful ration of fried squirrel, cornpone and a flat quart bottle containing liquid.

"Moonshine likker—so go easy," Baldy warned, as he uncorked the bottle. "I didn't know how long I'd be doing this little job, hence the items of sustenance. Have at it."

Wilder had an appetite for something besides squirrel.

"You shoved two envelopes under my door," he said, taking the flat-quart from Ann. "How you got the first one is puzzle enough, and you couldn't have got the second—but you did. I'll tell you what happened after that second envelope, then I hope you'll spill all for us. Here goes."

"So Bullard got his," Baldy commented when Wilder had brought him up-to-date. "Too bad he didn't get it years ago. Not my pigeon, though. I'm after Fenton. Okay. I'll start off with my real name. It's Brokaw. Al Brokaw. U.S.S.S.—if that means anything to you?"

"Plenty. Secret Service. And I've heard of Al Brokaw, too," Wilder told him quickly. "But how come Secret Service interested in Fenton?"

"Besides being the absolute pappy of all con men, and the brains of the slickest gang of thieves in the Black River country," the secret service ace explained, "Fenton behaves very disrespectfully toward Uncle Sam's

treasury. Best in the business. Engraves his own plates, prints his own dough, bosses the smoothest gang of shovers we've ever been up against. Girls. Clara Dane is one, and probably the best. She's the cute blonde upstairs—"

"Phoney, as I thought. Claims to be Sueanne Ames!" Wilder broke in. "But I'm interrupting," he apologized. "I won't again."

Brokaw nodded. "Better get this powwow over with," he told them, "although interruptions are not likely. At least, not soon. S.S. has been after Fenton for a long time. An operative placed him in contact with a girl named Clara Dane in Nashville. I went there and missed Fenton, but put a stake-out on the girl. Fenton had picked her up three years before. Off the streets in Chicago. Had her going to a girl-school in Nashville. Capitalizing her natural good looks, charm and unadulterated gall. She shoved a lot of stuff for him in her leisure hours. Clara was living in a tony boarding house for college girls. That's where the name, Sueanne Ames, comes in. She ran the place.

"A bit over a month ago, Sueanne Ames died." He disregarded the effect the statement had on Wilder and Ann, and continued. A few days later, and with Clara still at the boarding house, Fenton showed up. Could have nabbed him—but that wasn't the time for it. Wanted his plates more even than I did him. Anyhow, he visited with Clara for a coupla hours, then lit out for Memphis. There he got in contact with a crook named Trant. Eli. They hung around in Memphis for a week—and what they were doing I don't know. Our man says apparently nothing at all.

"I was still in Nashville with Clara, putting her to bed at night and taking her up in the morning, so to speak. She lit out for Memphis a week ago, and I trailed along. When Fenton's pal bought three horses at the gypsy market, saddles and all, I knew the entire party would soon be taking a ride. So I bought a plug too.

"It wasn't too difficult to trail them when they set out. The blonde is damned good-looking. She was noticed, you can bet. But until they crossed Black River at Uncle Newt's Ferry I hadn't a notion where they would hole up. I found out. Bullard's

Right here. Knowing that, I took a ride ahead, cut through on a trail long in disuse—and when your squat friend, Trant, tried to blow you down, Wilder, I was close by. I got the play when you got Trant instead—at least I got some of it. When you cached the wrapped envelope under the boulder, though—”

“So you got the envelope then!” Wilder exclaimed. “Why didn’t you make yourself known to me—?”

“Secret Service doesn’t work that way,” Brokaw told him. “Besides—who were you? I didn’t know. It wasn’t until last night when I was prowling a hidden room which opens out of the room Fenton was occupying that I was reminded of the manila envelope. Among some things I was looking for, I found one.

“The wall separating Bullard’s room from the hidden one was a fair sound-conductor.

“The pair was in there—and I heard a lot about manila envelopes. By the way, they had pretty well doped out what had actually happened to Trant by then. The blonde had been sent up to seduce you, at least your mind—and didn’t have any luck at all.

“While they debated what next to do, I took the envelope, along with the plates for which I was searching, and slid it under your door. I still wasn’t willing to tip my hand to you. But, having time on my hands, I got the one you hid under the boulder and made a really generous gesture. I slipped that one to you also. Now—what’s your conclusion in the matter?”

“Easy enough now,” Wilder answered. “Dan Lawton came to Bullard for help. Bullard killed him for what pearls he was sure Dan had on him. Dan had none. This Eli Trant mailed Dan’s two letters, one addressed to Sueanne Ames and one to me. He either wrote the names and addresses down or remembered them. He was hooked up with Fenton, and, probably learning what had happened to Dan, told Fenton all about it later. And—guessing as I go along, of course—Clara Dane had copped the letter to Sueanne Ames. She communicated with Fenton immediately—and Fenton, Clara and Trant set out to get the cache. What I can’t understand, Brokaw, is why Fenton wrote a warning letter to me in

Memphis. Told me to stay away from here—”

Brokaw’s laugh interrupted. “Fenton’s smart as hell. He wanted you to act on that manila envelope dope, had sized you up enough to know that you wouldn’t take that warning lying down. At least, that’s how I figure it.”

“I’ll accept that,” Wilder grinned. “Now another thing—and I’ll be completely un-fogged. Neither Fenton, Trant nor Clara knew how to get to Bullard’s from the ferry. Their ignorance in that matter tipped me off that the blonde was a ringer. Anything on that?”

“I may have. Fenton operated mostly from Memphis and Black Rock. Black Rock is a good many miles from here. Bullard undoubtedly had worked with Fenton in his plundering down here, but they had not met at the tavern. Bullard’s had to be above suspicion. He probably didn’t know about Fenton’s new scheme until he and the girl got here. A word or two, plus the mention of copious plunder, would be enough to insure Bullard’s playing ball. That satisfy you?”

“Perfectly. It had to be that way. Now—you were not looking for us when you showed up a bit ago—”

“I was looking for a route into this damned owl-roost, and knew there must be something like a cave beneath it. One of the secrets Miss Avery alluded to last night,” he chuckled, looking at the wide-eyed Ann. “I know the section pretty well, and had a fair idea about where I’d pick up the course of an old dry-wash which might be what I was looking for. It was. Boulders and brush conceal the entrance—about two hundred yards from where we now sit. And, I offer for consideration—where we should be pretty pronto.”

“But you’re not going to let Fenton get away—” Ann started to protest.

“The man who cooked up all this grub, my dear,” Brokaw eased her mind, “is an operative of S. S. His cabin is two miles away—but he isn’t there. He’s probably in contact with our Memphis headquarters right now. We’ll pick Fenton up tonight. One more item, and the bag is empty,” he went on, preparing to leave. “I’ve got three nags saddled and tied off in the brush. Got ’em out of Bullard’s barn. Seems Lashus

met with an accident, and nobody was there to prevent me. Lashus is there all right—but he's dead. Killed. Putting two and two together, he must have served his purpose when he took Trant off in the timber and buried him, and shot the bay somewhere thereabouts. Anyhow, one of that lousy pair knocked him off. I got the horses out just in case I located you and you craved to take a nice, long ride—"

"As we damned well do!" Wilder assured him enthusiastically.

"Will we have time to get those pearls?" Ann asked anxiously.

Both men laughed. "That's why Wilder came here, isn't it?" Brokaw reminded her.

"You can now try climbing that rope in nothing flat, Ann," Wilder told her. "I'll time—"

"Listen!" Brokaw cut in.

WILDER and Ann heard it then. They stiffened, Ann staring with unblinking, frightened eyes, back in the direction they had come.

What they had heard was a voice. It could have been anybody's voice, the words being distinguishable but the underground passage doing queer things to the tone.

"Well, Wilder," reached them eerily, "will you come through with the dope, or do we smoke you out? Better answer—and make it yes. An hour from now you

A long novelette in
the next issue of

SHORT STORIES

¶ All the ranchers were represented at the meeting to discuss what rustlers were doing to the Lazy A.

¶ Every man in that room went out of his chair and to the floor as both barrels of a shotgun blasted together just outside and hoofbeats faded away.

"THE LOOT OF THE LAZY A"

A Hashknife story by

W. C. TUTTLE



won't be alive—and suffocation is damned tough!"

Wilder's glance sought the secret service ace. Brokaw nodded.

"Can do," he said. "Mattresses, blankets, green brush. No draft down here to cause much blaze and, what is more important, to draw off the smoke. It's up to us to leave—and, fortunately we can. Let's make it snappy!"

IT WAS not until they had climbed the rope, passed through a low-vaulted tunnel and were standing under black, dripping skies, that Brokaw showed his first trace of excitement. He said:

"Fenton may know about this entrance, or some of his crooks may have come along. One of them may know. The sooner we move out of here the better. We'll go to the horses first!"

Leading the way as rapidly as the hampering underbrush would allow, he took them directly to where three horses stood hitched in a concealing clump of buckbrush, Wilder's Morgan being one of them.

"That cache—how far, and how quick can you get it?" Brokaw wanted to know.

"The cairn is just this side of those twin boulders we passed to the left a moment ago!" Wilder replied, excitement tensing him. "Should have it in ten minutes, maybe less!"

"Get it. I'll keep Ann with me. Keep a gun handy while you're at it!"

To Ann's astonishment, Wilder, when he returned ten minutes later, carried two two-pound coffee cans in his arms. She hadn't known what to expect—but certainly not coffee.

"You'll be surprised!" Wilder told her, laughing at her so evident disappointment. "That is—if you're a good girl!"

With the cans packed into Wilder's saddle-pockets, they mounted and rode.

"We'll strike into Cherokee half a mile below the tavern," Brokaw said, taking the lead. "You two smoke it up for that ferry and then God's country!"

"What about you?" Ann wanted to know.

"I'll turn off pretty soon. Got to stick around until our men come for Fenton. But we'll all meet in Memphis—one of these days!"

They rode into the trail and headed east. A quarter-mile farther along, Brokaw called goodbye—and vanished where a trail took off northwards through the brush.

A mile farther—and Wilder pulled the Morgan up sharply. He listened for a moment, then said, "You hear anything, Ann?"

"Yes," she nodded. "It—it sounds like horses. Coming fast!"

"Ride!" Wilder snapped, and touched the Morgan with a spur.

"They're coming closer!" Ann cried a few minutes later. "Sounds like a lot of horses, too. Who—who do you think—?"

"Fenton and some of his pals! Maybe they're getting away—but most likely they discovered our escape. Anyhow, Ann—ride like hell!"

Through the night they rode, seeing practically nothing of the trail. Leaving it all to their mounts. And closer and closer came the thud of hooves from behind.

"They're gaining!" Ann cried, her voice coming back to Wilder on the wind of her flight. "How far to the river?"

"Don't know! Maybe a mile. Maybe two! And—we've got to get there first!"

They flashed down the side of a rise, up the other, flattened out across a bit of level ground. Up there it was lighter. The first gray of dawn was breaking through. When they dropped, a moment later, to a low level they were no more than a quarter of a mile ahead of those thundering hooves behind. Their mounts had gallantly given them all the speed they had.

Ann's began to falter—

Ann's horse stumbled, shot forward. Wilder, alertly by her side, caught her around the waist just as the saddle fell from under her. He dragged her into his lap, shot spurs home in the Morgan's flank and went on. All but hopeless now, he knew, with the Morgan carrying an additional weight!

A light streak ahead informed him that they were near the river. The strip lightened momentarily—

And those terrifying hoofbeats behind came nearer momentarily.

There were shots now from behind. Guns were talking. A bullet whirred past Wilder's head—

The ferry— It wouldn't do to race for

the ferry. That would only trap them surely. Some other way!

Suddenly a possible chance dawned upon him, and he tightened rein slightly, pulled left and sent the Morgan off into the brush beside the trail. A moment, and four lathered horses raced by almost in a bunch.

Wilder had Ann on the ground instantly. Out of the saddle-pockets came the cans, and he was thrusting one into Ann's hands.

"Come!" he told her, striking off toward the river. "Follow close. We'll strike the Black below the ferry. It's a chance!"

THEY came out on the river's bank, and day was throwing a soft, gray, hazy light over the stream. Up toward the ferry nothing could be seen clearly, but a moil of sounds came down to them. On which shore would the boat be? Better far for them if it lay across the river!

Wilder found a skiff with oars in it, tied with a rope to a stob. He put Ann in the bow, stepped past her, slapped the oars into locks and pushed away into the current.

A shout of discovery came from the bank above—and Wilder laid to the oars. A shot. More shots. Thanks to the hazy light, no lead hit or came near.

"They'll ride their horses across!" Ann cried, looking back.

"Too swift for that!" Wilder answered her. "But the ferry is on their side. They're getting aboard it now!"

The bow of the skiff nosed against the east bank just as the creak of a pulley informed Wilder that the horsemen had sent the ferry out into the current. He caught Ann by an arm and hurried her up the bank. Ann was no drag. She clamped her teeth and ran.

The ferry, an over the shoulder glance showed Wilder, was nearing the middle of the river, bringing four horses and their riders rapidly to the eastern shore.

"They'll ride us down!" Ann cried, seeing them too. "We are on foot!"

At that instant a small gray house loomed up before them, and Wilder made a dash for the yard behind it.

"Maybe not!" he shouted to Ann as he ran.

There was the wood-pile, the axe. A heavy, double-bitted axe. Wilder caught it

up and ran on. Somewhere near would be a tree, a post, to which the ferry-cable was anchored—

He saw it then. A tree just ahead, the cable circling its bole just within reach of the axe. He reached the tree swinging. The sharp bit of the axe struck true, sank in. He called to Ann:

"How close now?"

Again he swung the axe against the cable, feeling it bite deep, knowing it was separating the strands.

"Halfway here!" Ann called. "They're all looking up here! Hurry!"

"Run ahead!" Wilder ordered. "They may start shooting!"

They did. Bullets sang—and so did Wilder's axe.

The axe won.

With a loud snap, a keening whine, the cable whipped loose from its anchorage, curled down toward the bank—then straightened out above the water. The ferry-boat, caught in the current, started end for end, rocking shakily under the force of the current. It was hurtling downstream!

Shouts, oaths, cries—!

An hour later, mounted on a pair of horses Wilder had bought from a native, and recovered from recent struggle and excitement, Ann broke a stretch of thoughtful silence to say: "Sueanne Ames is dead. What about her share of the pearls? There must be somebody entitled to them. Kinfolks. Most people have them, you know."

"We'll find out," Wilder said. "If Sueanne left heirs, they'll get their share. But—how about your share? How shall we divvy on that?"

"I wouldn't be knowing, would I?" Ann queried solemnly. "Haven't you some ideas about it—Wilder darling?"

Wilder laughed. "Tell you what, Ann," he said, crowding the Morgan as close to the girl's mount as it could get. "Marry me and life will be just one big bed of roses. Roses and pearls—"

"What kind of roses?"

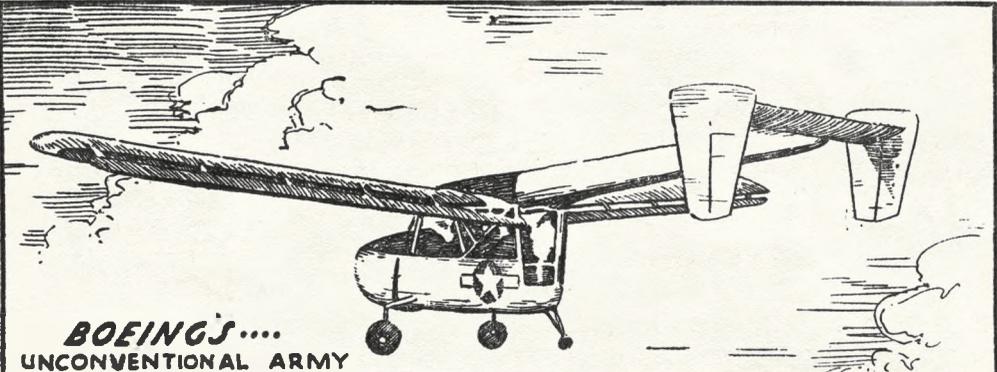
"Any kind. What kinds are there?"

"Lots of kinds. But I prefer pink."

"Red ones for me. Tell you what. We'll mix 'em. Okay?"

Ann leaned far over toward Wilder, face uplifted—and he caught on right away.

PLANE FACTS BY Jim Tracy



BOEING'S....

UNCONVENTIONAL ARMY LIAISON PLANE, THE L-15-A IS CALLED THE "FLYING JEEP." IT IS DESIGNED TO SERVE AS AN AERIAL OBSERVATION POST, PARTICULARLY FOR SPOTTING AND DIRECTING ARTILLERY FIRE. IT ALSO CAN BE USED FOR COMMUNICATIONS COURIER WORK, PHOTOGRAPHIC AND SUPPLY SERVICES, WIRE LAYING AND AERIAL PICKUP.

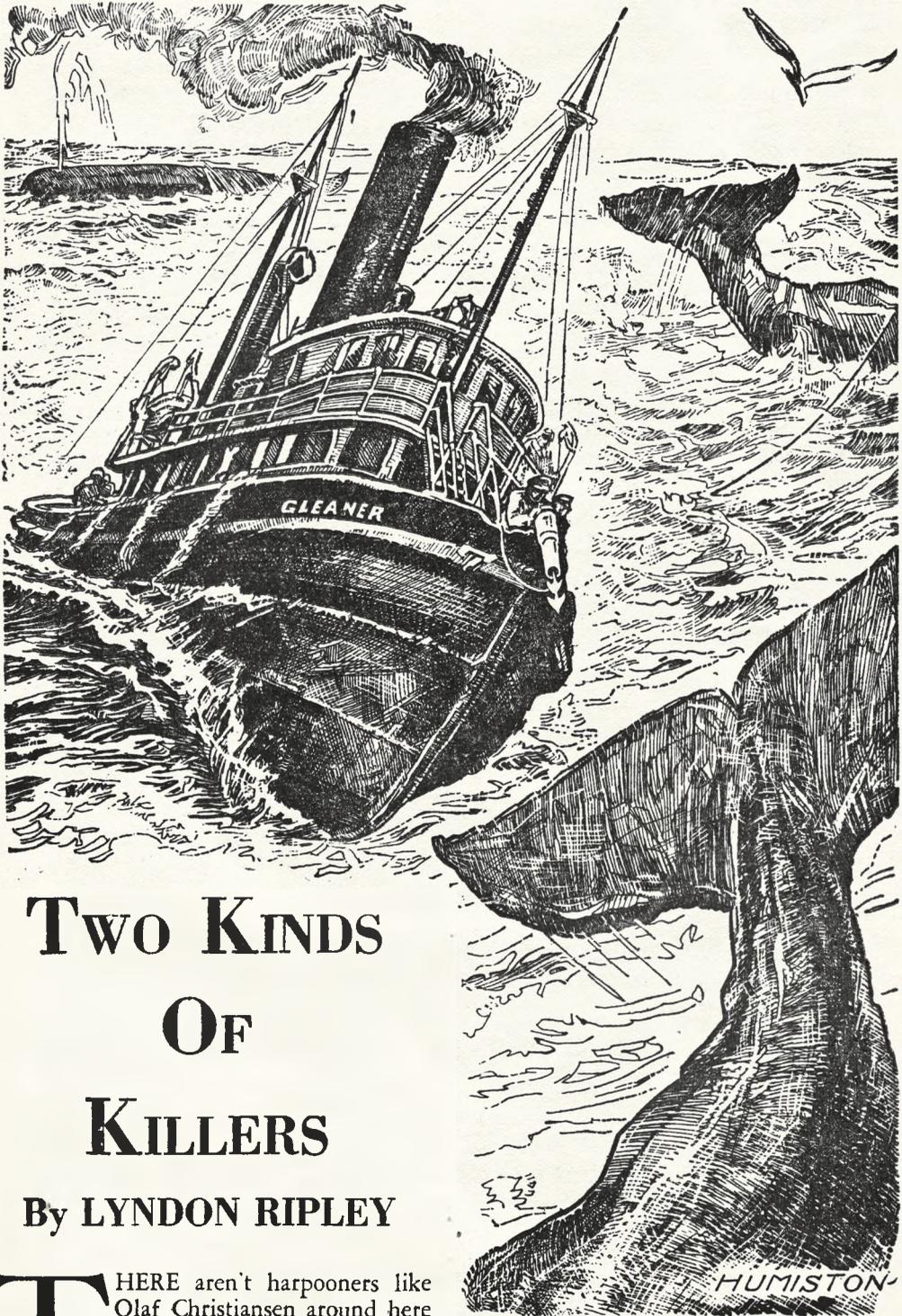
THE "FLYING JEEP" CAN BE TOWED BY A LARGER PLANE AND THEN RELEASED ALOFT AFTER ITS ENGINE HAS BEEN STARTED. USED IN THIS MANNER THE PLANE COULD REACH A BATTLEFIELD WITH A FUEL SUPPLY FOR 2½ HOURS OPERATION IN A COMBAT AREA.

THE L-15-A IS 26 FEET LONG AND HAS A WING SPAN OF 40 FEET. IT HAS THE ABILITY OF QUICK TAKE-OFFS AND LANDING OVER HIGH OBSTACLES AND CAN LAND ON ROUGH UNPREPARED AREAS.



THE L-15-A CAN TAKE OFF AND CLEAR A FIFTY-FOOT OBSTACLE IN A SPACE OF 600 FEET.

Maybe Thirty Years of Harpooning Give a Man a Magical Touch



TWO KINDS OF KILLERS

By LYNDON RIPLEY

THERE aren't harpooners like Olaf Christiansen around here any more. Of course there are good hunters on catcher boats, feeding factory ships in Arctic waters, able gunners and hardy men, but

they don't have leaky old tubs under them, half rotten at the seams and liable to fall apart at each boom of the rusty bow can-

non. Well Old Chris did, and thereby hangs a tale.

I came to know Chris back in '42 in the quiet little village called Field's Landing, located on Humboldt Bay, just south of Eureka, California. At the time a San Francisco company was operating the whaling station, before it was converted to a dehydration plant.

They had two "killer boats" in "action" at the time. I say action advisedly, for something always seemed to be interfering with the May to October activity of the refitted, out-worn tugs. An engine would break down, the pitted planks would need caulking and plugging, whales would be somewhere out of sight or fog would be too soupy to venture out from shore.

Business wasn't too hot for they needed a good harpooner. Then one day, like an old hunting dog smelling a good job, Olaf Christiansen put in his appearance. Where he came from nobody knew or found out. He was a blue-eyed Swede, about 65 years old, mild as milk toast and not a little bashful.

His soft speech and unassuming manner put us all off guard. Only at the end of operations did I realize that he was a rare, weathered specimen with steel nerves and judgment verging on the uncanny. Maybe thirty years experience in harpooning had given him a sort of sure, magical touch. Take that June 19th trip, for instance.

IT WAS about seven o'clock in the morning, with fog just lifting from the tide flats, when the S. S. *Gleaner*, the better of the shore station's two wheezy boats, warped up to the Standard Oil dock and hoo-hooed its horn for service. By the time that fuel oil and motor lubricant had been stowed below, a talkative deck hand, a new mate and I, on the prod for news, were also aboard. Without delay our skipper, short, alert little Captain Lund, headed the converted 100-foot tug out into a white-capped sea.

It was really a sea, going through the treacherous jetty entrance. Green combers came at us with heavy foaming crests. I began to feel uneasy. The new deck hand, supposedly a deep water sailor, gradually quit talking, then made for the rail. Hardly a mile off the harbor jetty he was worse

off than I, and I'm a landlubber of the rankest sort.

Up on the port bridge wing Gunner Chris was on lookout. It was useless, in such a rolling sea near shore, for him to be at his station in the bow, behind his gun. Now he was under orders from Lund. When a whale was sighted Chris would take over and Lund would then take orders from Chris. The guy that brings in the whale, I learned, was the guy who was boss at sea.

By the time that we got away from ground swells, some twelve miles out, and nearly noon, the fog had evaporated. Nothing had been sighted but snipe, ducks, pelicans and gooneys and seagulls. It proved to be a grand day, with bright sun and calming sea. When nearly 12:20—broadcasts were always at 1:20 and 4:20—Captain Lund radio telephoned the ship's position to the shore station's office from his cabin abaft the wheel house.

"Sea calm, no whale sighted," was the extent of his message. He flipped over the set lever. The burp-burp changed to a loud, squawky report full of static:

"Coast Guard *Shawnee* calling the S. S. *Gleaner*. Two whales sighted due west of Eureka. Largest yet observed. Coast Guard *Shawnee* calling the S. S. *Gleaner*—"

I SIDLED up to our gunner in the wing corner. "Say, Chris," I said, "just where are we?"

Chris twirled the ends of his grizzled handlebar mustache, then took out his deep-bowled, strong-smelling pipe and fingered the half ashy dottle. "Dragon Channel, lad," he said, "with just a trace of Swedish accent in his soft tenor voice. "Near Saint George Reef. Now a leetle north of Crescent City. Look."

He pointed a gnarled forefinger, then tipped back his brown tweed cap, wiped his hairy nostriled nose. He looked at me benignly, like an affectionate older brother. "That's Northwest Seal Rock Lighthouse over yonder. Plenty of rocks, py yiminy."

It was rocky, all right. The lighthouse was on a promontory island, I could see, as we threaded our way through the tortuous channel. Apparently it was a good place to stay out of in a storm. The island was provided with a sturdy crane for hoisting a

launch up the sheer stone wall. A couple of porpoises were—

"Whale ho!" yelled the new mate. He was on the starboard wing, opposite us.

Chris whirled and stiffened. His mild blue eyes pin-pointed, became ice hard. I followed his gaze. Again the ocean broke as a black object surfaced like a submarine. A gasping sigh whistled across the water. A vapory geyser rose and fell, then pitchfork flukes rose, waved briefly and slid under.

IT WAS a signal for attack, a fire alarm, a call to sudden action. Everybody—except the indisposed new deck hand—knew his place and got there fast.

"Hard a'port!" Chris sang out. "Yust half-speed—so!"

Cap nodded in the wheel house, telegraphed the engine room. Somebody furiously spun the wheel behind him.

Gunner Chris scrambled down the iron ladder and hurried across the forward deck. In stepping toward his gun, he collided with clumsy George, a deck hand who was adjusting the cable on the winch. Chris grinned, patted the youngster's shoulder, sidestepped nimbly like a boxer, in spite of his advanced years. Presently he was up on the bow platform behind "Thunder Baby," as he lovingly called his harpoon cannon.

Quickly, gracefully, he kicked off the set screw swivel, swung his gun, limbering it up. It was the heart of this leaky old tub and everybody knew it. From now on, until hunting was over and the quarry had been towed back to shore, Chris was head man.

As I stood there I couldn't help but marvel at the quick, deft way Old Chris managed the ponderous, deadly weapon that threw a 135-pound barbed projectile with the greatest of ease.

This four-foot cannon of his had a cushion of glycerine, to absorb recoil. The dart-like object in the muzzle of the tapered snout was harpoon, made of finest Swedish steel but rusty just same. Right now the four outward opening barbs were folded back and loosely tied with coarse string. Later they would spring free and open when jerked backward.

The pointed spear head was hollow cast iron and filled with black powder, so rigged

that a percussion time fuse would set it off about five seconds after it was imbedded inside a husky victim. It killed a whale quickly, like shrapnel, and was more humane than just stabbing.

"Yah—ready!" Chris called back, smiling and at ease.

I'd never seen a killer so unconcerned and mild. He stroked his mustache with the grimy fingers of one hand, his other lightly resting on the sighting bar of his gun. He gazed on ahead, at the recently disturbed spot in the Pacific, his blue eyes squinting slightly.

I'd heard that this fellow up in the bow was one of the deadliest big game shots on record. Fellows in the know had told me that Antarctic and Newfoundland whaling captains insisted it was true.

RIGHT then Old Chris made a cutting motion with his right hand, straight out from the shoulder. Cap Lund throttled down to half speed. At another sign from Chris the engines idled, and we drifted. Whales, I remembered having heard, have excellent hearing but poor eyesight. Thus there was as little noise as possible during our cautious approach.

Again that steamy, wheezing whistle came across the water, this time off to starboard. The ocean surged mightily, again the black flukes waved briefly, then were gone.

Chris motioned toward the new breakthrough. Lund wheeled the *Gleaner* personally to the swirling, foamy spot, rang the telegraph, kept the boat near the upheaval, steam engine idling.

Time dragged then. The fifth minute was ending when there was a new eruption and the mighty sound of escaping steam sounded off to port. Again the old boat swung, plunged ahead, lingered. This time, before the black, bulbous form disappeared, we noted that it was a Humpback.

Old Chris put his pipe in his mouth and puffed. He waved his left hand. "Over there—yust a bit," he said, gesturing, and squinted up at Lund through the smoke of his strong tobacco. "He come up—forty yard!"

Our cetacean friend broached again, came up where Chris had indicated. We were then within ten yards of the mammal. Our unconcerned gunner took the pipe from

his mouth, leaned his stocky body over his Thunder Baby, sighted briefly at a steep downward angle, and caressed the trigger.

"Powee—whoosh—kerwhump!"

The killer boat shook and heeled over. The speeding harpoon thudded into the black, blubbery floating island. The two-inch manila rope, that had been coiled under the snout of the cannon, unwound like a striking snake. It zipped away, off to starboard, then started smoking over the pulleys. Our quarry rolled then, and cannon wadding rained down on the lazy Pacific swells. Acrid powder smoke eddied in the offshore breeze, then drifted back past Chris on the bow platform.

George, being one of the more experienced deck hands, was now at the double steam winch. He threw on the brake band. The rope, as it zipped over the rail, became a steel cable where it was spliced on. The Hump was diving now, diving for its life.

In a few moments black fins cut the water and smashed blue wash into foam. The bulbous cetacean shook, trying to dislodge the deadly harpoon, the point of which had exploded in its stomach. The *Gleaner* staggered again, bow to stern. Five tons of flukes struck the killer boat a glancing but sickening blow. Old ribs cracked and none too secure planking sprang like a bow.

George shouted then, gave his winch the steam. The cable began to wind on like thick, metallic thread, began to roll the Hump in our direction.

IN THE meantime Old Chris was not idle. He pocketed his pipe, jerked the visor of his cap, danced aside on his folding platform, swung his cannon around. There was no time to lose, in case this harpoon tore loose, but Chris was as calm as a backwoods pond. Two members of the crew, assigned as helpers, rushed forward, bounded up beside him. One carried a sausage-shaped bag of powder and some wadding. The other held a tamping rod and rammed the charge home. On top of this was plugged in another harpoon, taken from the gun locker under the rust-flaked bridge stairs.

The first harpoon had not struck a vital spot or else this Humpback had too much

stamina. It was likely the latter. The barbs, now opened inside the huge body, were gripping well enough, but there was no guarantee that they would hold.

The winch rumbled and wheezed. George kept winding in cable. The Hump, dragged closer now, swung, gasped and fanned its flukes a little. It was young, we could see now and scared, scared plenty. Without warning it ducked a head that would have filled a garage door and dove straight down.

Old Chris, watching the reloading of his gun, glanced at his victim. He raised his right arm, gave a flip of his wrist toward the stern. Cap Lund reversed his power. The cable sang under tension. Whirlpools slid past us, on ahead, then contrarily we were dragged in their direction. The harpoon still held like a bulldog. It was now a tug of war, with George using the winch like a reel on a fish pole.

Again George eased his clutch. More cable wound onto the rusty winch spool. Suddenly tension eased. It was an ominous sign. Either the Humpback had got loose or the rope had broken. Down in the engine room the old steam whoofer idled, the only sound on the waiting, listening boat.

"Maybe old Humpy got fr—" George began. He never finished what he had started to say.

Directly ahead the ocean parted as if an atom bomb had exploded four fathoms down. A black, fat cigar tore out of the depths. It swooshed in an arc ahead of the boat, almost clearing the water. For an interval of time it seemed to linger there dripping salt water, glistening like ebony in the sunshine. Then, in a thunderous moment, it crashed back into the ocean like a gargantuan torpedo.

A great wave came swooping at us. Old Chris waved his helpers back, grinned up at Cap Lund in the wheel house, braced himself for the tidal upheaval, using only one hand on his sighting bar. The *Gleaner* headed into the cliff of water, rode up and over. George gave his old winch full steam. Cable wound in like mad.

I was watching Olaf Christiansen then. His cannon was reloaded and a new harpoon speared out of the muzzle, ready for the releasing touch of its master. Chris waited for the pock-marked back to show, waited

for the moment it would be awash. Then he squinted, casually sighted, slowly, almost imperceptibly eased his trigger finger tighter.

ANOTHER searing roar rocked us to our heels. Once more two inch rope zinged outward, the spliced on cable followed after. George again allowed the other end of the winch drum to idle. It too unwound, crazily free. This time we all heard it. The dull, muffled boom of the harpoon bomb head as it exploded, deep inside of the ponderous whale. The deep blue of the open sea began to cloud with crimson.

The big Humpback let out a steamy roar, seemed to stagger as its fins churned water. Instinctively it tried to sound again, to repeat its escape tactics. George, however, kept reeling in. There was no leaping, no powerful diving now.

Old Chris, obviously having participated in this death struggle hundreds of times, unconcernedly picked up a long pole that had been placed in a nearby clip, behind his folding platform that jutted out over the port side of the bow. It was more than a pole, however. On the tapered end a five-foot steel lance was fitted, and having an arrowhead tip.

Chris swayed there, absorbing the ocean's surges with his knees not unlike a skier. As the now listless whale passed under him, his right arm flashed up, then down. The lance stabbed in where he knew the huge heart should be. There a slight sawing motion, a final twist.

Quickly now, almost like a fencer, Chris jerked the lance upward, ducked aside as a pulsing geyser of blood rose rail high and fanned out in the June sunlight. A few feet farther aft he again stabbed over the rail.

There was a soft hissing that gradually increased in volume, as gases of the stomach and lungs escaped from the dying behemoth.

The rest was routine. George and Butch, the latter another member of the crew, rushed in with a drop line weighted with large lead sinkers. Quickly, efficiently, the giant flukes were snared and pulled to the bow. Chain then replaced the drop line, making the Humpback's tail secure to our killer boat by running the chain links

through the bowport, then wound around a deck cleat and wedged.

Chris then came up with a hose, not unlike a garden hose, but having a four foot length of perforated metal tubing at its end instead of a nozzle. He jabbed the sharpened end into the serrated belly. Compressed air began to surge into the dead body of the Hump. This species, I learned later from Chris, usually sank. Compressed air would keep it afloat until we reached the ramp of the shore station.

Affairs on deck began to get down to normal. Cap rang for full speed ahead, which was a mere five knots an hour. Chris handed his lance to George, started to clean up his Thunder Baby as the crew sluiced down the deck. It was all a matter of routine. To me it was sort of callous. The big Hump hadn't been a bit pugnacious, had made a few powerful motions only to escape, not to fight back.

AS THE *Gleaner* started to slip away from the reddened water, I glanced up at the bow. Old Chris was standing beside his gun, rag in hand, puffing nonchalantly on his pipe. He was watching dead ahead, watching the rocks through which we were making our way. I vaulted up to his bow platform.

"You don't look worried, Chris," I said, "but you're watching out for something. Mind telling? I'm kind of green at all this."

"Su-ure." Old Chris fingered his side-slopped cap and hitched up his greasy black serge pants. "We're in Saint George Reef, laddie," he explained. "We played our Hump into Oregon, back to California, py yiminy. Only few fathom down is black teeth. No foolin' with 'em." He meant the rocks along Dragon Channel.

For a good half hour, after that, we crept plenty careful through reef waters, dragging a dead whale.

It was early afternoon when the *Gleaner*, with its fifty tons of harpooned meat, found deep water again.

It had all been too easy. Under full speed again, the bow waves raised and the boat headed south toward the home pier. I watched our gunner tidy up the coiled hawser under the muzzle of his cannon, saw him kick on the set screw swivel lock. Then

he jumped down on deck, checked the cable back to the winch, saw that it ran free.

"Nice going," I complimented, following him, scratching a match to relieve the dry sucking of his rank pipe. "Doesn't take you long to do your job."

Chris gave me that self-effacing, rather bashful grin of his. "Not much of a job, lad, after all these years. Yust stand there and pull the trigger. Anybody do it easy."

I laughed. "If they only knew where to shoot, and when. Don't kid me, old-timer. You—"

I didn't finish. "Pancake" Fairchild, the *Gleaner's* cook, stumbled out on deck near the stern and let out a startling whoop.

"Hey Chris! God a mighty, man! They's grampus off to port! Look!"

Old Chris swung on the thin soles of his soft black oxfords, alert as a wise old gull. He flashed a blue glance at cookie's outstretched arm, then stared, eyelids puckered, into the golden west.

"That lad, he's sure enough right!" he exclaimed, half to himself. Turning he waved his hand and nodded. "T'anks, Pancake," he yelled. "You fine hunter and yust in time!"

WITHOUT waiting for word from Captain Lund. Chris sprang to the chain that made our whale secure. He licked away the wedge, tugged at the chain end, but it was too tight, due to the house-like drag. I tried to help him, but together we couldn't budge it either.

"Hey, Cap!" he shouted then through worn teeth that clamped his pipe stem. "Dead ahead a second! Make it snappy!"

The small, high-cheekboned face of our skipper peered out the deckhouse window. He nodded knowingly. The engine room bell clanged. Speed fell away. The wash caught up with us.

In a matter of seconds the chain jerked free and clanked away. The flukes of our Humpback, dragging tail first, dropped low, then floated free of the boat. George and I grabbed the unburdened chain and hauled it back on deck. When I straightened I eyed Chris my puzzled question.

He merely pointed calmly out to sea, to a churned disturbance headed in our direction. "We get the hell out of the way," he said succinctly. "Full speed ahead, Cap,"

he shouted up at Lund. "Grampus make after Humpback, py gosh!"

Then I saw what he called "grampus." I looked no more questions. I had heard about these smaller brother mammals, half to a third of the size of the Humpback we had just cast off. To every seaman they were devil in full dress. In other words, the much hated and feared Killer Whales.

They came on towards us strung out side-by-side, in military formation. They rose and dove in unison through the gentle sea. If I hadn't read a little about them I would have said they presented a beautiful sight. White throats flashing in the sun. white spots on the jet black bodies for all the world as if they were dressed for an evening out.

"Killers in dress suits," Chris had said once. "They always look for trouble, make it if they not find it. Py yimmy, lad, the Grey whale, even the Right, Sulphur-Bottom and Finback run away, scared to death, even if they twice as big. The Sperm only one not afraid, but he to lose in battle."

"But they're not so big," I had said then. "A Blue, for instance, could slap the stomach out of a Killer."

"Ha, don't you believe it," Chris had said softly, not arguing, merely stating a fact, noted from past experience. "These Killers hunt in packs, from five to fifty. Together they tear out tongue of big whale, for tongue is favorite, like lollypop. They have powerful interlocking jaw with ten to fifteen large curved teeth. Lad, they afraid of nothing, stop at nothing and, py gar, they good for nothing. No harpooner fool with them."

In less time than it takes to tell it the Killers arrived beside the body of our Humpback, now a bare hundred yards astern. I could hardly believe what my eyes beheld. The calm Pacific became a maelstrom of localized savagery, as though a pack of wolves had converged on a luckless moose.

The sea was full of leaping, churning black-and-white forms that tore at the mouth of the Humpback, at its sides and belly. As we steamed away under full power, the old *Gleaner's* hull trembling and straining, we saw the huge frame of the Humpback whale reduced to a stripped skeleton that gradually sank out of sight. Like mad dogs

the Killers dove for the remains, still ravenous.

I held my breath, petrified by the sight. We would be next! If the Killers couldn't tip us over, they would leap on deck or bump holes in our leaky, half rotted timbers! I looked at no one on deck and, I'm sure if I had, a crewman would have been as hypnotized as myself. That is, excepting maybe Gunner Chris.

Then the Killers formed into line again. They started up our wake. But abruptly, as if a leader among them had decided that we were not worth the trouble, there was a silent command and they veered off. Their rushing phalanx headed for Dragon Channel instead. I knew then. It was sanctuary for mother Humps and their offspring, I'd heard, and the Killers were aware of it, damn well!

Old Christ shook his head, glanced up at Lund in the wheelhouse. "Field's Landing," he called, shrugging the shoulders of his faded percale shirt. "No whale now if we look all day." His soft blue eyes leveled and regarded me speculating, as he slowly smiled. "Maybe sick deck hand bring us bad luck."

"No," I said. "I'm sure I'm the hoodoo. I should have stuck to my books in the shore station office."

"You okay, lad," Chris assured me. "Maybe tomorrow you see good yob with gun." A sudden grin creased his saddle-leather face. "I tank I eat too many cookie's flapjacks!"

It was a glum crew that mechanically dawdled at their jobs as we headed south. George, as he oiled and cleaned the winch, was silent. Captain Lund, in the wheelhouse window, said nothing as I followed Chris up to the bridge. Butch, back again at the wheel, gave me a sour look and spat leeward, overside.

Down in the galley, somebody was arguing plenty loud. Fairchild's high, shrill voice protested. Finally there was quiet. The Killer Whales had left behind a mean bunch of men. Each one of the crew had lost \$4.25 apiece as their share of the catch. Cap and Christ had forfeited \$25.00 each when the Humpback had been dropped behind.

But we were here, weren't we? I argued with myself. *We still lived and breathed.*

Let well enough alone, I mumbled, as I strode aft, toward the galley, for a cup of Java. I left Chris reloading his pipe. He was gazing off toward the west, as if nothing had happened.

IT WAS a good hour later when the engine sputtered. The telegraph bell jangled, and our speed was halved. Then the old steamer wheezed and quit dead. The jiggly deck grew quiet as we drifted, without power.

I was passing the door of the engine room at the time. I poked my head into the swirl of hot air coming up out of the floor grille. "Trouble?" I asked of oiler Edwards, whose name was assumed, I knew, as he straightened up nearby, wiping dirty hands with greasy waste.

"Alway trouble," he said in a guttural French-Canuck voice. "Just blew head gasket. Leak all de tam, beside. Now we hafta feex. Sacradam! Why not dey try get whale in canoe, hey?"

It was no time to go bungling around, bumping into the touchy crew. I climbed up into Captain Lund's stateroom, about as big as a piano box behind the wheelhouse and nearly as devoid of comforts. It boasted little except a bunk, blankets and the radio telephone.

In a cardboard carton I located a book on navigation and started to look it over. I found it interesting, and time passed.

My wrist-watch said four-thirty when I heard the sudden rumble of the steam engine once again. The hull of the *Gleaner* began to vibrate and the cabin floor squeaked in the give and take. Speed was upped gradually, until finally the *Gleaner* had a bone in her rotten teeth.

The sun was sinking in the reddening west and we were about opposite the mouth of the Klamath River, as far as I could tell, when I heard Butch's grating voice asking something, in a higher key than usual. Cap exclaimed something in return and asked, "Chris, use the glass there, will you? Butch thinks he saw one."

"I saw it, too," Gunner Chris returned, eyes squinted. "Don't need no glass—yah su-ure, there he blows again!"

I scrambled out on top deck. I saw it then, too. It wasn't much to port, almost directly ahead, about a mile away. We were

already doing our limit in speed, so we just watched and waited.

This geyser of water was a little different than the one the Hump had given out with. I didn't know much about it but even I could tell. This was more feathery and the wheezing whistle was a quick "whooooh."

I watched Old Chris as he turned and nodded, glanced at Cap, then at me. "Finback," he said matter-of-factly, scratching his walrus neck. "Pretty late in day to harpoon. But maybe we take something home after all. Make it a night run."

The same hunting tactics were repeated all over again. The crew, back at stations, was still sullen, for it had been a disappointing day. Even light-hearted, ungainly George continued to have little to say. He fussed with his winch, watched Chris, again on his platform, as he kicked his set-screw lever and prepared for possible action.

It came sooner than we had hoped. This quarry, which we were slowly overhauling, was a streamlined Finback. This species never collected barnacles like a shore playing Hump, for they were too fast and lived in too deep water. When scared they could do a good twenty knots, four times as fast as our mangy, old, converted tug.

"Easy does it," Chris called to Cap, beside me, again behind the wheel. "Idling speed. He's headed this way. When I raise hand, cut engine. Py yiminy, gotta be quiet then. He's big baby."

The Finback surfaced again, nearer this time. Again came that spraying geyser of vapory air. Wide flung flukes waved in the air, then slid under.

Gunner Chris stood behind his Thunder Baby, at ease, swaying in the slight swell. Suddenly he grabbed the directional rod, swung the rusted cannon barrel, squinted down the sighting bar. There was nothing on the water or below it, as far as I could see. He rubbed the sole of his right shoe on the platform, like a runner getting a good solid stance. Then his trigger finger tightened.

"Boom—whoosh—zoop!"

I saw now why whaling captains had great respect for Olaf Christiansen. It was almost uncanny. A huge, oblong shape like a tapered banana rose to the surface and rolled. A white serrated stomach glistened briefly. The big flukes, wider than a

Hump's, broke water, slapped down and made a tidal wave. A quick shiver ran through the submarine frame, then grew quiet. A cheer rose on the later afternoon air. The crew was back to normal.

But Chris was too busy to notice. He was helping George and Butch disconnect the dead harpoon. Two other deck hands were hauling in a flung line, drawing the great carcass to our bow.

Perhaps it might be termed sheer intuition that our gunner had then. Perhaps it might be called experience, coming as it did after thirty years of stalking the sea for *Balaenoptera*. Anyhow Old Chris was ready and waiting when a second white-bellied torpedo showed some two hundred yards away and headed for the body of its mate.

By now the chain had been made secure around the Finback's tail. George was back at his post beside the winch. Butch was lending a hand at the bow port cleat.

Chris said afterward that he had seen it happen only once before in all his experience. The second Finback, a little larger than the one already killed, came flashing in. Carefully, gracefully, it swam up to and then coasted over, on top of the immobile body of its consort. Finding that it could not sink its companion completely, it slid off, circled under water, blew lightly and repeated its effort to save its mate.

I'll always remember the way Old Chris stood behind his Thunder Baby, sighted when the Finback made its first attempt, then shook his head and straightened as it slid off and away. He seemed to steel himself, waiting for the second try. He brought out his malodorous pipe, champed the stem, pocketed it again, waiting.

HE DIDN'T have to say anything then, or later. It was apparent in every wrinkle of his old shirt and pants, in the slouch of his side-slipped cap, in the sag of his mustache, that this time he didn't relish his job. When the Finback came sliding up the second time, Chris bowed his head, as if asking some sort of forgiveness. He studied the breach of his gun, then shook his head as if tossing aside chin sweat. Then he sighted quickly, almost savagely jerked the trigger.

They still talk about two kinds of killers, about Chris and grampus, in tucked

away little Field's Landing. That is, the few old-timers, on the houseboat float, who still go out to the banks for salmon, flounder and crab. They live a stone's throw from the old plant that used to be a whaling station but now processes sugar beets for a very ordinary living. The romance of the high seas is gone, and so is Gunner Chris.

Where Olaf Christiansen is today I do not know. He left the vicinity of Humboldt Bay as mysteriously as he came, quietly and unannounced. Today he would be at least seventy years young, still as mild as milk toast, still a little bashful.

Well, maybe that's the way it should be. I've noticed that many men who have a touch of genius generally behave the same.

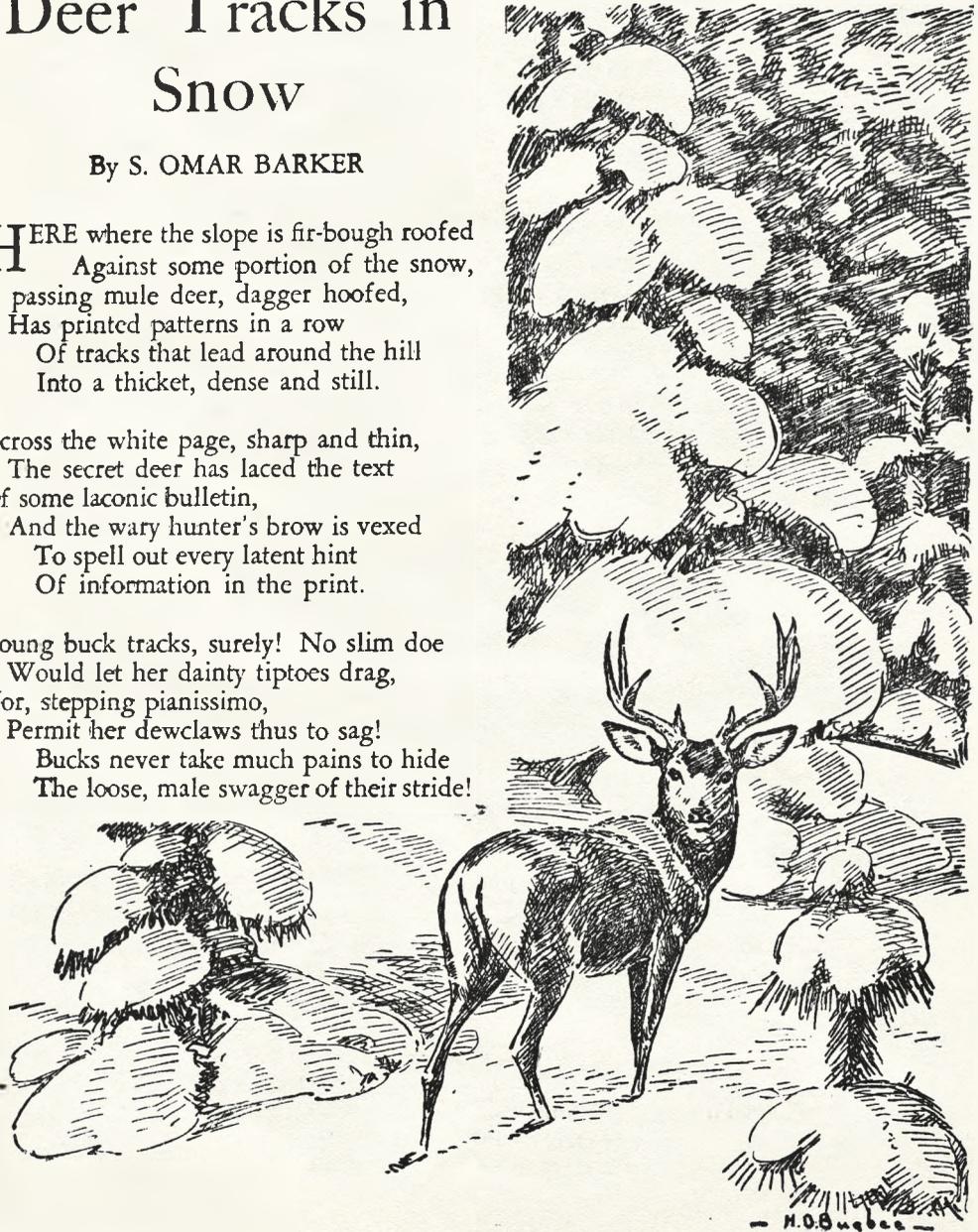
Deer Tracks in Snow

By S. OMAR BARKER

HERE where the slope is fir-bough roofed
 Against some portion of the snow,
 A passing mule deer, dagger hoofed,
 Has printed patterns in a row
 Of tracks that lead around the hill
 Into a thicket, dense and still.

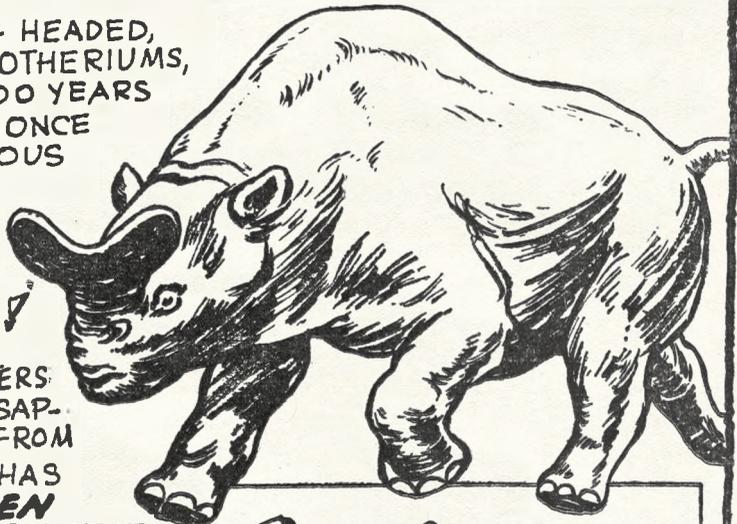
Across the white page, sharp and thin,
 The secret deer has laced the text
 Of some laconic bulletin,
 And the wary hunter's brow is vexed
 To spell out every latent hint
 Of information in the print.

Young buck tracks, surely! No slim doe
 Would let her dainty tiptoes drag,
 Nor, stepping pianissimo,
 Permit her dewclaws thus to sag!
 Bucks never take much pains to hide
 The loose, male swagger of their stride!



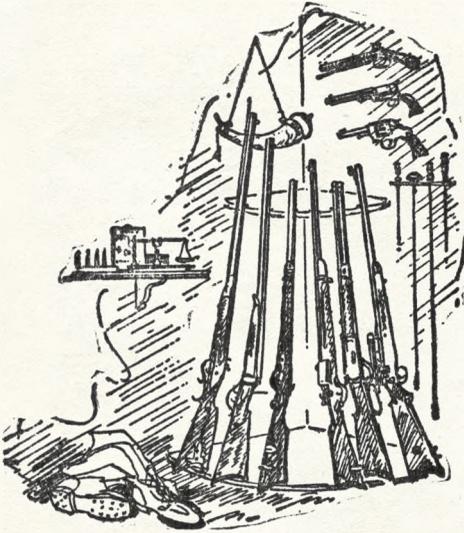
Curiosities By Weill

THE HORNY-HEADED, GIANT TITANOTHERIUMS, OF 20,000,000 YEARS AGO WERE ONCE SO NUMEROUS THAT THEY ROAMED NORTH AMERICA LIKE THE BUFFALO! THEY WERE FIERCE FIGHTERS AND THEIR DISAPPEARANCE FROM THE EARTH HAS **NEVER BEEN SOLVED** BY SCIENTISTS!



ORIGINALLY, INDIAN TOMAHAWKS WERE OF STONE.. WHITE MEN MADE THEM OF IRON FOR THE INDIAN TRADE AND THEY WERE SOMETIMES USED AS WEAPONS, **BUT USUALLY FOR CHOPPING WOOD!**

THE SILVER HATCHET FISH LIVES IN THE ALMOST ABSOLUTE DARKNESS OF THE DEEP SEA AND HAS TELESCOPE EYES THAT CONTINUALLY LOOK **UPWARD!**



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by

PETE KUHLOFF

Scatter Shots from the Mail Bag

Report from South Africa

DEAR SIR: I have been a regular reader of *SHORT STORIES* for some considerable time past, and I look forward with keen interest to each and every issue of that magazine. The first article I turn up is your *SHOOTER'S CORNER*, which I find very interesting, me having been a weapon enthusiast for over 40 years. Having reached the 50 mark, and having had some difficulty at 500 yards with the .303 Short Magazine Lee Enfield Rifle on account of "fading of the bull," I found your article in the issue of *SHORT STORIES* of 25th, February, 1947, particularly interesting.

Scope sights are as yet in their infancy in this wonderful country of ours, and until

I had read your article, I was rather prejudiced against their use, either for target or game shooting.

A pal of mine has a .22 Winchester Hornet, with scope sight, but owing to scarcity of center fire ammo. for this gun, have had no opportunity of seeing what it can do. I myself possess a .22 Walther Bolt Action Automatic Rifle, which I use with 10-shot magazine against the standard 5-shot. A beautiful weapon which I fell in love with at first glance. Pre-war such were sold retail here at £7.10.0 (about 30 dollars in your money), but I cheerfully paid my man £18. (75 dollars) and have had no regrets. Am looking forward to giving this weapon some exercise this forthcoming hunting season in the shape of bird-shooting such as: guinea fowl (a wild product, blue-black feathers with white spots thereon, about the size of ordinary domestic chicken—or fowl as we call them.) Very fast on the ground and fly when they have made a decent run. Excellent sport with a scatter gun, but I have never fancied using that type of weapon. I like to give my quarry a sporting chance.

Am an old soldier of 1914-18, and also received modern Military Weapon Training during Second World War. Have had experience of .303 Rifle Shooting under Bisley Conditions as well as Army Conditions.

Under the former, the shottist uses every available mechanical device including Aperture sight, sling, telescope for spotting, cartridge lubricant, dead black (also white), etc.

Under Army (or Service Conditions) the firer is restricted to the use of open sights, with alterations of rear sight for elevation only. Use of wind-gauge thereon not allowed. Practice is to "aim off." Use of sling prohibited, and no dead black or white to be used on sights. Service targets usually comprised a grouping practice at 100 yards followed by 200 yards Application. Military target 4' x 4' with 6" black bull's-eye and inner, magpie and outer rings, each 6" wide. Values were 4, 3, 2, 1, respectively. At 300 yards same target was used for application, as well as rapid fire (10 shots from charged magazine). Two hundred yards we also fired at figure. Three targets comprising head and shoulders of a man. Target appeared for five

seconds and disappeared for same period. Five shots allowed. End of day's shoot followed with a scratch competition at bricks. Standard building brick being used. This is 4½" wide, 9" long and 3" thick. Was stood on end and fired at from 100 yards after firers had doubled 50 yards to firing point.

On many occasions was able to get two bricks down with first two shots, but thereafter could not do a thing. Same with every range at which I fired. First shot usually a bull and then would go right off. Possibly due to some astigmatism in one or both eyes, but never had sufficient opportunity to locate the fault.

Have just been discharged from Home Defense Military Unit and endeavored to organize a .303 Rifle Commando for Recreational purpose, but our Defense Plans do not permit other than Rifle Clubs being formed, so it looks as if we have had to say good-bye to our hopes of Rifle Shooting as a recreation.

Felt I had to tell you something about myself so that you would understand how much I appreciate your articles referred to. Could tell you lots more about things as they are in this country. The weapons we use. The types of game, etc. So if you are interested in hearing more about us, please let me know. People in many parts of the world consider we are still living in a dark continent under primitive conditions, similar to your old stagecoach and Indian massacre days, but I can assure you, we are quite modern in many ways. There is lots to see and learn in Africa, but we do not appear to possess writers who are able to tell the world in the manner that your SHORT STORIES writers do. Believe me some of our "Old Timers" could trot out some hair-raising stories of what life was like in the early days here (40-60 years ago).

May you continue to enjoy good health to be able to write more interesting articles. Please convey also to the Editor of SHORT STORIES my very great appreciation of the quality and variety of the fare which he dispenses. The best that I have so far come across of the many American publications we receive here.

S. W. CRIDICK, South Africa.

Answer: Thanks ever so much for your

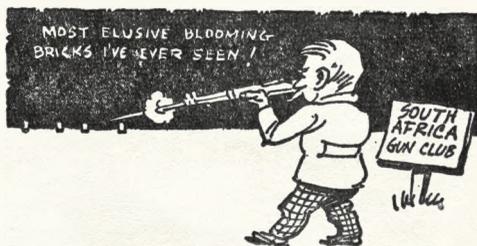
interesting letter. I surely would enjoy hearing more about shooting conditions in your part of the world, and I am certain that readers of SHORT STORIES would like to know more about modern South Africa. Thanks again!

Groundhog Rifle and Scope

QUESTION: After reading your article about telescope sights I would like some information.

In your article you suggest using a 10X telescope. Can you tell me who would make such a scope and what kind of a gun would be suitable for this power as I have been definitely sold on a 4X scope.

I am ready to buy a gun and scope and do not know just what I would like. I want it for shooting groundhogs and squirrels.



I had thought about getting a lever-action gun in a Swift .220. Frankly I do not know just what I want and after reading your article on the 10X, I do not know what to buy. Do you think a .22 Hornet would do the job as the shells would be cheaper. Being lefthanded, I prefer a lever-action or automatic gun and as the price does not enter into it, just what would you buy?

JAMES R. BLOWMAN, JR., Maryland.

Answer: After giving your problem a little thought I believe your best bet would be the .218 Bee lever-action Winchester Rifle with a scope of 4 or 6 power. No lever-action rifle in .22 Hornet or .220 Swift caliber has been commercially produced.

So the Bee is the only caliber made in lever-action that I would recommend for your purpose, and for squirrel shooting a

hand load of reduced power would be in order.

All calibers of this class, from the .22 Hornet to the .220 Swift would destroy too much meat, using factory loads. Any of these rifles will decapitate a squirrel when a head shot is made, and the .220 Swift will completely atomize a squirrel with a body shot.

Rifle sighting scopes in 10 power are manufactured by Lyman, Unertl, Fecker, and others. This power scope is used mostly for target shooting and varmint hunting, and is generally considered too powerful for small game hunting. Good shooting!

Another Foreign Pistol

QUESTION: Some time ago I was reading in SHORT STORIES some answers to questions sent to you about foreign guns and what ammunition could be used in them.

I have a 7.65 caliber pistol, Model 27 BOHMISCHE WAFFENFABRIK A.G. in Prag No. 98303.

Will the .32 Colt Automatic bullets fit this gun? If not, what ammunition can be used in it with safety?

R. L. HOSTETTER, California.

ANSWER: Yes, your pistol is chambered for the European 7.65-mm. cartridge which is identical to the .32 Automatic Colt Pistol cartridge manufactured in the United States.

Your CZ Model 1927 pistol is a composite arm incorporating a modified Colt barrel-mounting system and a modified Mauser 1910 lockwork.

And Another One

QUESTION: I recently returned from Europe with a German 9-mm. pistol. I have searched everywhere in Baltimore for some ammunition for this gun. I wish to use it for some target practice. I wonder if you could tell me where I could obtain some bullets for my gun. My gun is a P-38 and fires the same ammunition as the Luger

(9-mm.). I would appreciate it very much if you would send me this information.

JAMES L. HEFLIN, Maryland.

ANSWER: Nine-mm. Luger ammo. has been hard to get because of the heavy demand. This cartridge is regularly loaded by the American Ammunition companies—so the best thing to do is have your local dealer let you know when he receives a supply.

Peep Sights

QUESTION: May I, as an old reader, ask your indulgence in answering some questions:

I noted in your column some months ago that you own a Model 86 Winchester .33 cal. rifle. I own one of these that I have carried for many years deer hunting. My father bought the rifle for moose and it is rather heavy for deer, but I have never been a meat hunter and there is a great deal of satisfaction in having your buck sit down when you hit him. This rifle is equipped with open (Western?) rear sight and an ivory bead. With it I have killed my share, and missed my share also. As you know, in our thickly wooded country here, most shots are at about 75 yards and rarely exceed 125 yards. I have for a long time wanted to change to peep sights, but I grew up using nothing but the open sights on a .22 for small game, and I have not had the time for practice that I thought would be necessary in making a change. My only preparation for a hunt has been perhaps 100 rounds with a .22 and dry firing with the big rifle for a time before the hunt.

Now I find that I will have more leisure for practice and want to make the change. What make of peep sight would you recommend for this model rifle? Who would you recommend to do the work of installing the sight? I also own a Remington automatic .22 Speedmaster that I would also like to equip with peep sights for practice. What sight would you recommend for this rifle as being nearest like the sight that will be placed on the big rifle, and also who to make the installation?

Any information or comments will be greatly appreciated.

J. T. GILBERT, Mississippi.

Answer: It seems to me that the answer to your problem would be to have the Lyman Gun Sight Corp, Middlefield, Connecticut, mount their Number 56 sight on both of your rifles.

This sight has micrometer adjustments which make it easier to adjust for zero or to make changes in the field.

Due to the fact that this sight is mounted on the receiver of the rifle it is necessary in most instances to install a higher front sight.

I'm sure you will find an improvement in your shooting with the use of a peep sight. You simply look through the aperture (the target disc is not used for game hunting) ignoring it as much as possible, and place the front sight where you want to hit.

One Time Best

QUESTION: Can you give me any information about the following muzzle-loading rifle?

Bore about 9/16 inch, Barrel at muzzle about 5/32 inch thick, round barrel, lock plate marked Robbins & Lawrence, Windsor, Vermont, 1842, barrel marked near breech JPO/US, Percussion trigger, has piece on barrel near muzzle evidently for bayonet, length over all 48 inches.

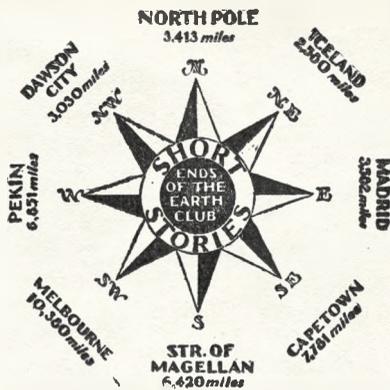
B. R. JERMAN, Arizona.

Answer: From your description I would say that your rifle is the Regulation Model 1841—sometimes called Model 1842, "Yerger"—dialect for Jäger, hunter, Mississippi rifle, etc.

This was considered the best military rifle in the world for around fourteen years. It is of .54 caliber, the bore being .52 inch.

The charge was a half ounce spherical bullet and 75 grains of powder giving a muzzle velocity of around 1850 foot-second.

These old rifles are getting hard to come by.



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Hunters and Fishermen

Dear Secretary:

Am an avid reader of SHORT STORIES and have been since 1940. Would like very much to hear from anyone who has hunted and fished a lot, also veterans who were in the European Theatre of Operations, I have served in World War II in England, France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. Anyone please write.

Sincerely yours,

Eduard W. Polley

P. O. Box 125,
Bentonville, Arkansas.

Here's a Correspondent for You Fishing Enthusiasts

Dear Secretary:

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wish to state that there is no magazine published as good as SHORT STORIES.

My hobby is fishing and I have the most complete scrapbook on fishing there can be. - I would be pleased to give any fishing information to any of the members of this club. Also I have invented a fly reel holder for your belt and several other items for fishing.

Yours very truly,
E. L. Sleppy

1911 8th Avenue,
Beaver Falls, Pa.

Like to Compare Camping Notes?

Dear Sir:

I would appreciate it if you would enter my name. I do a lot of travelling in the search of remote camping grounds which I think is a challenge to all really good campers. I've found many far-flung inviting camping grounds. I plan now to make a long snowshoe trip to northern Canada with my father.

Yours very truly,
Art D. Feiro, Jr.

411 No. 9th,
Pasco, Washington.

This Fellow Might Interest Some of Our Foreign Members

Dear Secretary:

Please enroll me as a member of your club. I have traveled quite a bit through this good old U. S. A., both by hitch-hiking and by car. Have worked on various jobs including truck driving and as a machinist on Uncle Sam's submarines.

Sincerely yours,
J. H. Barnes

P. O. Box 431,
Bellows Falls, Vermont.

He's Interested to Hear from Someone In the Second Marines

Dear Secretary:

Will you please enroll me in your club? I have been in the Marine Corps about twelve years and have read your magazine since 1940. I can really say that it is a swell magazine for all those who like adventure and can't get out in the open spaces to live it themselves.

I am interested in all kinds of firearms and the study of them; however, it is all in the written form at the present. When they start to manufacture arms again I hope to have the collection to go with the books.

Would be interested to correspond with anyone who was in the Second Marines during the battles of Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Saipan and Tinian, and, of course, with anyone else who might know me.

Thanking you in advance,

John F. Revell, S/Sgt., USMC

Building 11-A-1, Area Signal Office,
Camp Joseph H. Pendleton,
Oceanside, California.

Were You Stationed in French North Africa

Dear Secretary:

I would like to belong to your club. Have been out of the Air Corps for only a short while. I am interested in hearing from fellows who were stationed in French North Africa—especially those who were near Oran in Algeria.

At present, I am trying to get enough hours in for a private pilot's license.

Yours truly,

Earl L. Varney

96 Federal Street,
Portland 3, Maine.

The Story Tellers' Circle

(Continued from page 1)

that got him down or just the old-fashioned call of the sea tolling him back, I don't know; but he gave up his business, the girl he was engaged to, and sundry other attractions such as home comforts and began combing the shipping offices for another berth. What business was he in? Oh, yeah, I remember! He had a little shop that sold only girl's and women's lingerie. (Don't know whether I spelled that one right or not!) The last letter I got from him—about the start of the last war, 1942 or thereabouts, he'd worked up to skipper and was taking a big ship out of a West Coast port under sealed orders.



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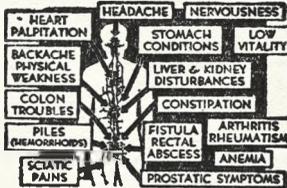
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"As for myself, I never had the advantages of school ship training. A few weeks after I was born in a furnished room in Brooklyn, New York—my late father showed me the house one day by driving by it when I was in my early twenties—my mother went back on the ship with my father for a year or so, taking me along. One of my earliest memories is being tucked into a hammock strung above a skylight, and, caught between sun and wind and salt sea spray, being rocked to sleep by the motion of the ship.

"Then, as boys in our teens, after high school graduation, my brother and I shipped out with our father and with other skippers. I chalked up quite a few years at sea, sailed on a goodly number of ships of different kinds, the slow freighters to foreign ports being my favorites, for I liked the long days of quiet routine at sea. My brother is still following the sea, soon to sit for his master's papers, I believe. He's had a long pull: had to ship out as A. B. and quartermaster during the depression, and then enlisted as an ensign and later promoted to lieutenant, junior grade, and then full lieutenant in the Coast Guard, and took part in over thirty invasions from the Aleutians through Tarawa and finally hospitalized, but now back with the American Hawaiian Line and making up for lost time. He came up through the hawse pipe, too, and, like myself, knows from experience the good material that the school ships turn out.

"It is very seldom that I write a letter to an editor and our readers, although I enjoy it. But I am always so wrapped up in a new yarn that I don't give myself much leeway for other things. I am a slow writer and try to be a careful one. With me the story is the thing and I try to do my best with each one.

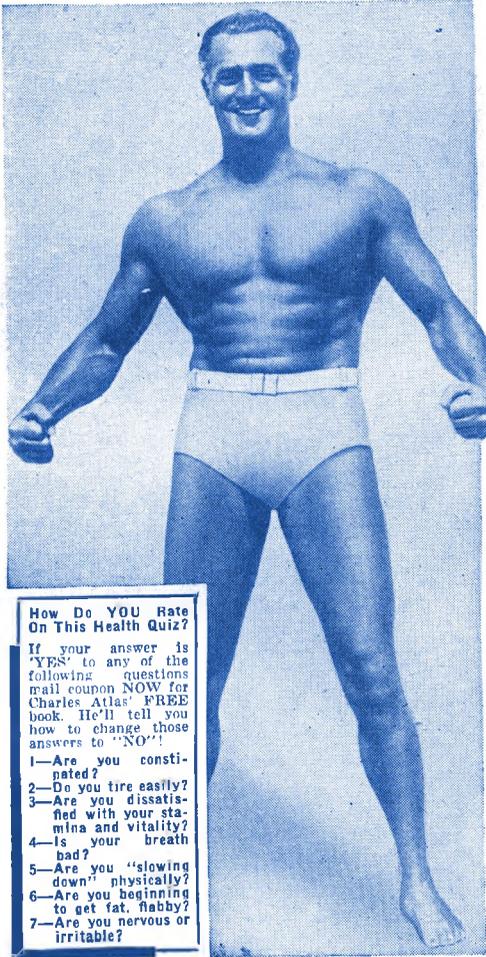
"And by the way, I no longer say that I have left the sea for good. In the past I thought I had a couple of times, only to find myself back again, edging into some foreign port with the break of dawn and pulling out again at midnight, the lights gradually dropping away astern and only the stars remaining, the stars and the sea. And I have never yet sailed as a passenger!"

Francis Gott

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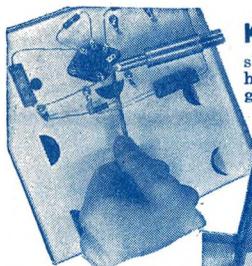
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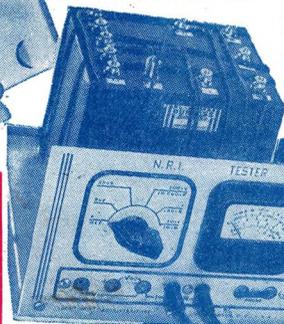
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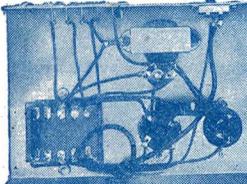
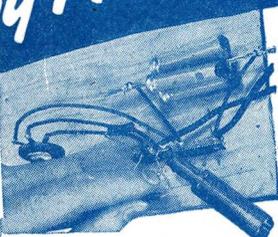
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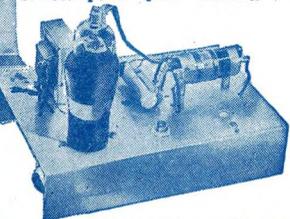
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