"Murder Deals the Cards"—WILBUR S. PEACOCK

"Action at Lostman's Bluff"—NEIL MARTIN

Short Stories

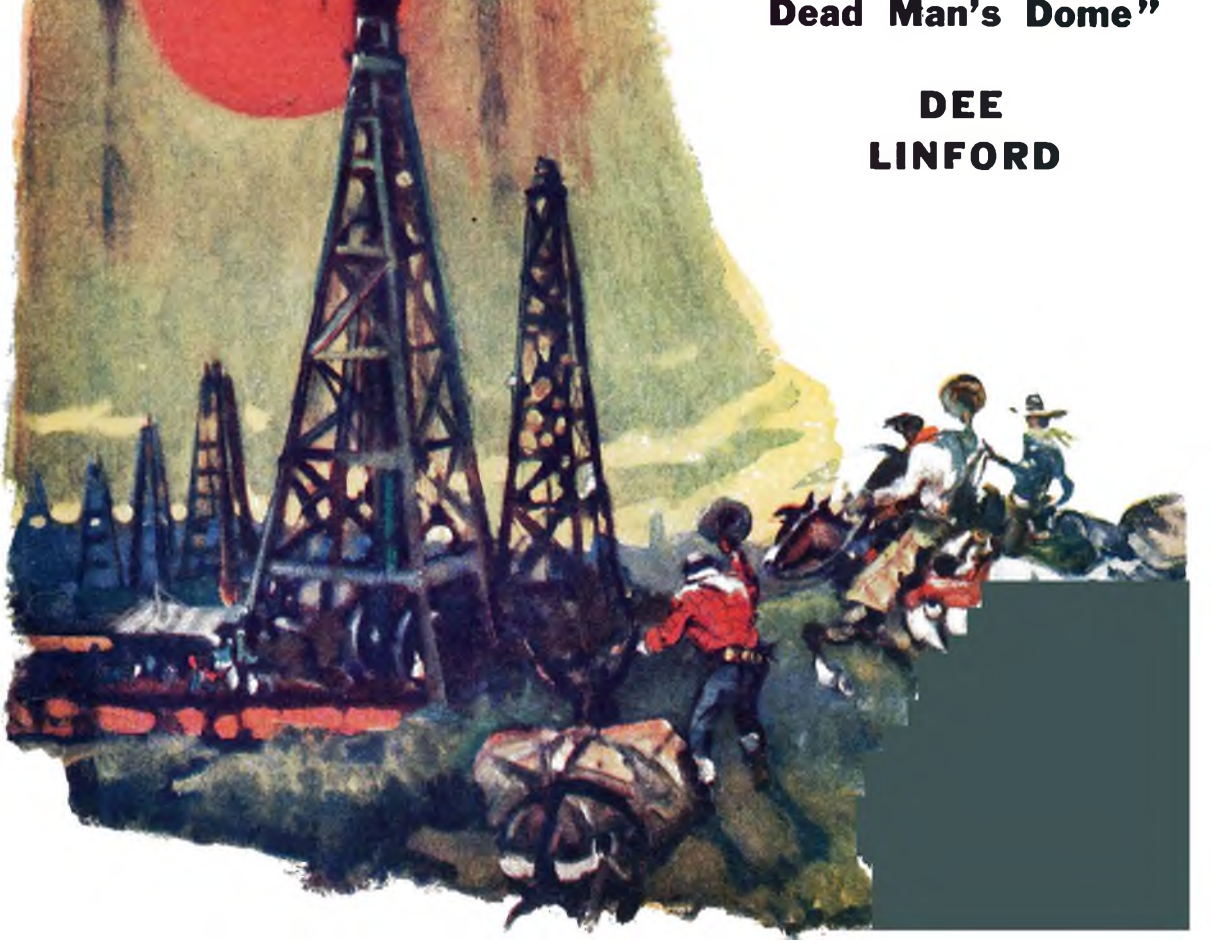
August 25th

25¢

Wildcat was gettin' so all-fired bronco wild a man couldn't keep up with her no more!

"The Master of Dead Man's Dome"

DEE LINFORD



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In the next issue of SHORT STORIES

"Everything is good salvage except the men from Outer Mongolia—we can use everything but them!"

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"NEW BROOM"

A novelette by

E. Hoffmann Price

EX-GUNMAN, ex-gambler, the ranch was proud of Cotton Dane. "For," said Boss Walker, "show me the Texas man who ain't got a past." The San Pedro spread was a good proving ground.

"The White Tiger of the San Pedro"

CADDO CAMERON

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AUGUST 25th, 1948

CONTENTS

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WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.* M. DELANEY, *Secretary.*

Gun-Stock Jewelry

AS THE standard grade rifle comes off the assembly lines in the various arms manufacturing companies, it is just a plain firearm with no fancy work whatever. The de luxe grades have a few extras such as a cheekpiece, pistol grip and forearm cap, but that's about all. Perhaps this is good, as it gives the individual shooter an opportunity to personalize his weapon.

The average gun bug is a natural-born tinkerer, but in many instances he doesn't know exactly what to do to his rifle or pistol to make it reflect his personality.

Most any sporting weapon may be refined, to a certain extent, so that its beauty, as well as its value, is increased, but this decoration business should never be overdone. There is nothing so out of place as a gaudy-looking gun!

Many rifles do not come provided with sling swivels, so the first thing to do is to make up a pair.

Detachable swivels are nice to look at and very convenient and fast if a person wants to remove the sling. But it seems to me that this is mostly talk as most shooters put a sling on a rifle and leave it there until it wears out. And besides, quick detachable swivels are quite difficult to make without a fairly well equipped shop. Also, some detachable swivels have a tendency to rattle, which is very distracting, especially when lining up on a deer.

So, what we want is a pair of plain and strong gadgets to hold the sling in place for carrying and shooting our rifle.

First we need a pair (better get three just in case) of 5/16-inch hexagon head cap screws (S. A. E. Standard) with the threaded portion at least an inch long to be cut to the desired length. As the head is just ½ inch between the flat sides, it may be ground or filed round to whatever diameter desired. A full ½ inch is fine for a heavy rifle, but should be correspondingly smaller for the light weights. Now a hole is bored through the head, from side to side, with a No. 25 drill. The head may be left cylindrical, or may be filed or ground to what may be considered more pleasing lines. An easy way to do this is to slip a No. 25 drill through the hole in the head and hold it at each end for good control when shaping it up on the emery wheel.

The loops or links may be made from 9/64-inch drill rod or round Bessemer steel rods which are tough and quite cheap. These rods are covered with a copper coating which is easily removed with emery cloth. A bending form is made from flat bar cold rolled steel. Links to take the government 1¼-inch sling should be 1¼ by 5/16-inch inside. The ⅞-inch sling takes a bending bar ⅞ by 5/16-inch. The corners of this form should be rounded and it should be six or seven inches long, so that it may be held firmly in the vise. One end of the Bessemer or drill rod is caught by the vise and it is wound around the bar in a close spiral. Each turn represents a link. Be sure and make a few extra! Now, the coils are cut down the center of one flat side with a hacksaw.

You will notice that the ends of the links are twisted sideways. This makes it easier to slip on the swivel screw, after which the ends may be lined up by holding the closed side in the vise and bending the ends toward the center with smooth jaw pliers.

Then slip the swivel or screw head back until the two ends are in the center of the head. Drill a 1/16-inch hole down through the center of the head and drive in a pin made of drill rod. This pin enters between the open end of the link and holds it in place so that it will not rattle.

The threads on the butt stock swivel should be filed out deeper so that when

turned into the hole (drilled quite a bit smaller than the shank of the swivel screw) it will hold and not tend to strip out. The coarser these threads, the better. This swivel may be located anywhere from 2½ to 4-inches from the toe of the butt stock.

The forearm swivel is located about two inches, depending on the ideas of the individual, from the tip of the front end of the forearm and is secured by embedding a proper size nut under the barrel at this point. It should be screwed up tight enough so that it will not turn.

Before permanent installation, the sling swivels should be blued. An easy and satisfactory method is that of heat bluing, and may be used for all small parts such as screws, pins, barrel bands, butt plates, pistol grip caps, sights, etc.

The small part should be held in a gas flame by using a wire or tongs and heated to a dull red. Be sure and keep it below a cherry-red, for a minute or so, and then dip into a wide-mouth container of sperm oil. Keep the part moving in the oil. Then hold the part over the flame until it flashes. Remove from the flame, and as soon as the oil is burned off dip in the sperm oil again. Repeat this flashing step several times.

A better method which has been used by many gunsmiths throughout the country, is to use a solution of 8-ounces of boiled or raw linseed oil mixed with two ounces of Marbles Nitro-Solvent oil. It is a good idea to keep this oil in a wide-mouth jar with a screw or friction tight cap as it is handy to keep for bluing jobs that do not warrant heating up the nitre box (which we have discussed several times before.) Heat the parts to a dull red and hold for a minute or so, as with the sperm oil method. Then quench in the oil muxture. Lift out for a second or so before quite cool and immediately redip. Be sure and keep the parts moving in the solution.

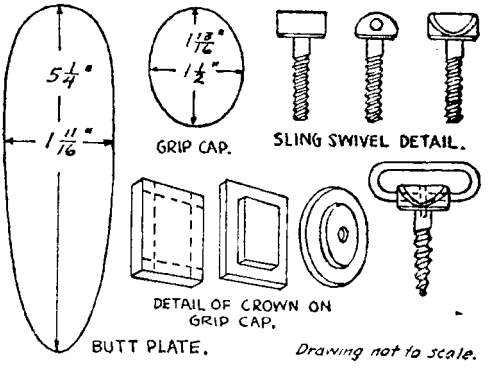
There are a number of materials that make insteresting looking pistol grip cap and butt plates. I have made these items using some of the newer plastics, aluminum, copper, bakelite (not so good as it chips rather easily) and of course steel or malleable iron.

If a grip cap or butt plate is to be made for a rifle that is already stocked, the size is naturally governed by the dimensions of said stock, which in some instances, are a little on the small side.

The circumference of a pistol grip at the cap should be about 5½ inches and should be somewhat egg-shape, rather than round at the ends. Good dimensions for a butt plate are 5¼ inches long by 1 11/16-inch wide.

The grip cap and the butt plate should be made of the same material and decorated in the same vein for harmony's sake.

The softer materials are easier on the elbow grease, and a grip cap or butt plate made of black plastic with a 1/16-inch backing of white plastic, aluminum or copper is "dressed up" without being flashy.



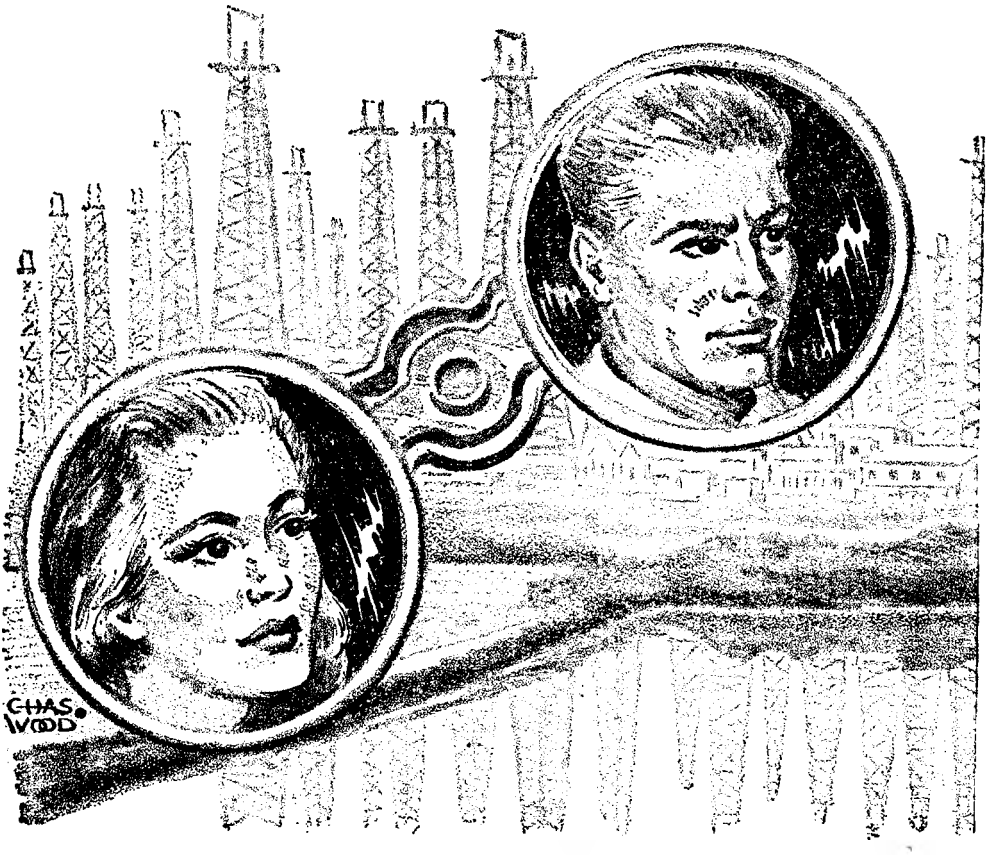
Say you decide to use a white base (it may be red or any other color) the 1/16-inch base is first cemented to a ¼ inch thick piece of black plastic that measures about 1⅝ x 2-inches, or a little larger than the base of the pistol grip of the stock. Draw diagonals on the back (white side) to locate the center point and bore the hole for the screw. To make the crown of the cap you next place the block black-side up, and scratch lines all the way around ¼-inch from the edge, and saw halfway through the black plastic. Take it easy and go no deeper than halfway!

Then saw down from the edges to these cuts. Search around and find a stove-bolt that is a snug fit in the center hole and turn a nut down on the thread as far as it will go, put on a washer, then the block, another washer and a nut. Set both nuts up tight, cut off the head of the bolt, and you have a mandrel to hold the piece in the vise or polishing head.

Use a compass or washer or anything

(*Concluded on page* 144)

THE MASTER OF DEAD MAN'S DOME



By DEE LINFORD

CHAPTER I

FUGITIVE TOWN

THE sign was a crudely lettered shingle, nailed to the trunk of the only tree in sight. "Welcome to Wildcat," it bade the stranger—expressing in three short words the whole timeless spirit of friendly optimism on which such towns are founded. But the town itself was nowhere in sight.

Stub Williams, so called because of his unusual angular height, sat hunched on the spring seat of his high-bedded wagon, looking at the sign and at the sentinel cottonwood which rose like a skeleton above the rubbish-littered flat. Weighing a problem in his mind.

The sign was in the right. The sign had to be in the right. The map the saloonman had sketched for Stub in Casper had placed the town squarely between the forks of Deadman Creek, here on the Poison Spider Plains.

"It Won't Always Be Much to You, Son. It Will Be Gold, Black Gold. And You'll Want More Gushers and More Gold" . . . This to Stub Williams, Who Declared All He Wanted to Drill for Was Water

Well, Stub was sitting within sight of Big Deadman, to his right, and Dry Deadman, to his left. And there was the sign welcoming him to town. The rubbish scattered around showed the town had been there, no more than a week before. But the town, clearly, was not there today.

The whole setup was baffling, and slightly eerie. Stub rubbed the back of his sunburned neck and looked quickly behind him, as if expecting to find the missing community of five thousand souls stalking him from the rear. But he saw only the bleaching bones and rusty tin cans. The heaps of whiskey bottles where the saloons had stood. The fly-crawling refuse and charred debris of what once had been a thriving town. A town where Merrybelle had lived, wanting to have a well sunk.

"Cyclone," Stub Williams deduced aloud. "Or a grass fire, mebbe. But the only fire sign is right here where the town set. Anyhow, them bones ain't human. A cyclone, I guess it was."

He sat a moment longer, staring now at the road's twin ribbons that crossed the Dry Deadman straight ahead of him, and dwindled to faintly blurred lines on the low southern horizon. There was, plainly, nothing immediately ahead. But Stub knew from first-hand experience that there was nothing behind. And roads have a habit

of leading somewhere. So he gathered his lines and spoke to the scarecrow team that stood gaunt and hipshot in the heat—heads down and listless, as if dreading the command to move.

It was, just as Stub often remarked, a willing team. One horse was willing to pull the whole load, and the other was willing to let him. Stub swore and swung a length of chain. The malingerer came to life and struck his collar in a crow-hopping jump that began as a power-lunge and ended in a dainty step forward. The wagon creaked into motion, and Stub Williams settled himself on the high cushionless seat, calculating grimly.

Stub had watered the team, foresightedly, at the Big Deadman Crossing; and the canteen in the box below him was full. If it came to it, and it seemed it would, he could get by in the dry camp on the desert, come night. But he'd been on the desert for two days and nights already, and the team was doing poorly on salt sage and white grass and shadscale. He'd have to find Wildcat pronto, if anything were left of it, or he wouldn't find it at all.

THE whining spang of a rifle, fired at close range, roused him from his cheerless reverie. He heard a kind of *plop,* and a small dust geyser spouted from one track, directly ahead of the balky horse. This creature was versed in the sign-talk of the region, and easily persuaded. It stopped in its tracks, bringing its teammate to a halt a step beyond.

Stub Williams, thoroughly awake now, turned cautiously on his seat to investigate the source of the shot. A hundred yards distant, a horseman was riding up out of the dust-course called Dry Deadman, a rifle in his hands. As Stub watched, the rider levered a fresh cartridge into the weapon and spurred toward the wagon.

"Where in hell you think you're going?" the horseman sang out, drawing nearer. His finger was on the trigger of his rifle. His tone was about as friendly as the shot which had kicked dust in front of Williams' team.

"Who wants to know?" Stub countered, automatically.

"I wanna know!" the horseman stated flatly. "This here is leased ground, and you better have written permission from Ira Hocker to be on it. You got that permission, farmer?"

The rider had reined up close to the wagon, and had shoved the muzzle of his gun in Stub's face. He eyed Stub inimically as he waited for his answer.

But Stub took his time about replying. Stub's own eyes were busy with his accoster's face. Breaking it down into its individual parts. Trying to decide whether it was the features by themselves or their combination, one with the other, that gave the man singular resemblance to a mountain cat.

THE head below the flat-crowned hat was abnormally wide at the temples, tapering sharply to a narrow, pointed chin. The nose was a small, roof-shaped projection with nostrils that seemingly ran straight back into the head. The upper lip was so short the nose pulled it upward, giving the mouth an odd triangular shape, with yellow teeth showing through. The eyes were almond-shaped and tawny, and Stub was able to absorb the full jolt of their malignant gaze only by steeling himself to the task. But before he attempted to answer the cat-faced man's question, the driller turned and ran his puzzled eyes over the country again, as if to recheck a first impression.

Stub Williams had punched cows and he'd homesteaded his piece of ground back on the short-grass prairies of the Powder, before turning well-driller and irrigation engineer. Stub had encountered his quota of "line riders" and "lease riders" in the past. And in his own personal index of good and bad, he ranked this particular breed of private policemen along with gray wolves and range detectives. But this was desert, and it did not seem likely that stockmen would value the miserly foliage so highly that they'd mount a gunman-guard over it, to stand off trespassers.

"Who's Ira Hocker?" Stub asked at length, by way of answering. "Why's he so choice of ground like this?"

"He is pres-i-dent of the Black Gold Oil Company, and owner of this here lease!" the gun guard stated reverently, as if he were naming the President of the United States. "He don't like trespassers, and what he don't like don't git far. What you doin' on his ground?"

STUB'S hackles stirred. But he was too absorbed in the lease-rider's information to really anger. He had heard rumors in Casper of an oil strike on the Poison Spider Plains. And while he had not connected that strike with his summons to Wildcat, he found the news most interesting. It might even explain the town's disappearance.

"I didn't aim to trespass on anybody's ground," he said reasonably. "I'm only trying to get to Wildcat. I was told the town was hereabouts."

"It was here till a week ago!" the other cracked. "Then Hocker found out about it. Ira's a heavy-handed man."

The yellow eyes glinted maliciously, and Stub Williams decided he disliked the man very much. Still he kept his tone civil. Conversational.

"I thought from the looks of the flat that a cyclone had struck the place."

"You thought right, farmer!" the other cracked, smiling at a memory inside his head. "A cyclone did strike it. The same twister that hits trespassers on all the Hocker leases!"

The man's tone and his grin hinted that he himself might be the cyclone in question—that the same destructive force which had scattered the town was about to scatter Stub Williams. But Stub had come a long ways to do a chore for Merrybelle Logan. He still didn't know where Merrybelle was, or if she had been hurt. He had to know these things before he dealt with this cat-faced cyclone.

"Whereat did the town come to earth again?" he inquired, still casual.

"Smack-dab on another Hocker lease!" his informant chuckled. "So the cyclone, she hit her again! That town's done moved locations seven times in the last month! Wildcat's gettin' so all-fired bronco wild a man can't noway keep up with her no more!"

The cyclone laughed raucously at the humor of the concept. Stub Williams smiled politely, and picked up his lines.

"Well, I expect I'll find her," he allowed. "I got business there."

"Just hold your horses, farmer!" the cyclone said ominously. "You ain't settled with me yet. What kind of bizness you got in Wildcat?"

Stub felt another stirring of anger, a bit more insistent this time. But he saw no profit in anger. No profit, either, in telling this yellow-eyed ape about Merrybelle Logan, whom he had known in Buffalo, or about her lawyer dad. He might have mentioned the fact that Merrybelle wanted a water well drilled. But, at the moment, that fact appeared to be his private concern. His and Merrybelle's.

"Monkey business, you would call it," he said with an effort at lightness.

But the cyclone's yellow gaze had fallen upon the dismantled derrick tower and the blocks and cables in the box behind the seat. The pointed cat face sharpened, and the roof-shaped nose twitched, as if taking scent.

"So—you're one of *them!*" the cyclone hissed. "Well, you ain't going to Wildcat. You got bizness, here, with me!"

Stub Williams had not the faintest idea who "them" might be, or how it came that he was one. But the cyclone's tone and manner, and the way he hitched his rifle up was evidence that whatever he was it was not a healthy thing to be.

"Look, mister—"

"I'm lookin', farmer. *You* look! Look this rifle down the throat, then turn your team around. Drive back to the Big Deadman and set your wagon in the water, where the tires won't fall off. Then unhitch your team and git!"

STUB WILLIAMS looked into the wide-spaced, almond-shaped yellow eyes. He saw the cyclone wasn't fooling. But the derrick and the drilling rig represented the bulk and nucleus of all Stub's worldly wealth. He wasn't about to give it up. Not without a fight.

"You going to turn around, like I told you?" the lease rider wanted to know, after a minute.

Stub Williams shrugged in apparent resignation.

"You got the gun," he said bleakly.

He pulled at the lines, and spoke to the team. The willing animal moved off, but the other stood stubbornly in its tracks. Stub cursed all balky horses, and came to his feet, swinging the length of chain.

The reluctant horse stood hunched and tense, waiting for the bruising lash to propel it into action. But the chain swung wide,

and struck the cyclone's mount cruelly across the nose, just below the eye. The horse reared and whirled, and the rifle exploded, almost in Stub's white face.

Stub felt the searing heat of the slug upon his cheek. Then he leaped from the wagon, his hands reaching for the lease rider, who now was fighting his boogered horse, trying to stay in the saddle.

Stub's hands found what they sought. But the cyclone was rightly called. Grabbing him was like grabbing a grizzly bear.

When Stub got to him, the lease rider was holding his discharged rifle in one hand, fighting his cat-backing mount with the other. He struck at Stub with the heavy stock, but Stub got under the blow and grabbed him around the waist, dragging down. The cyclone dropped the rifle and let go the reins and wrapped Stub's chest in a crushing embrace.

The horse was moving sideways and up and down at once, so that to Stub Williams, locked in the lease rider's arms, it was indeed like being in the grip of a cyclone. The cat-faced man was as strong as a bull. He swung Stub up so that his head was pointing down, his feet up. Stub drove a boot into the tapering face, and the two of them left the saddle, still locked together.

Stub was on top when they struck the ground.

He felt the other's ribs give under his weight. The constriction on his chest was snapped, and he rolled free on the ground. When he got to his feet, the cyclone was on his knees, his face a bloody patchwork where Stub's boot had ripped it. He had drawn his pistol and was steadying it with both hands.

The dropped rifle lay at Stub's feet. As he stooped to grab it up, he heard the pistol explode, felt the heat of the second slug on his face.

Straightening, he swung the rifle high and down. The cyclone collapsed, rigid and twitching, like an axed hog. Stub stood a moment looking down, lungs heaving for air.

"Wasn't any cyclone, after all!" he gasped aloud. "Just a howlin' big wind. Well, I expect the storm is over, for now."

Then he turned to his team, and put an arm across the balky creature's back. "I never thought I'd love a balky horse. But you pulled me out of that—you contrary, pig-headed, gnat-brained sweetheart. I'll never hit you with a chain again!"

CHAPTER II

THE POISON SPIDER

THE town of Wildcat, when he found it next day, looked as wild as its name. A patternless, greasy smear on the desolate landscape, it seemed indeed to have been blown there by a cyclone, and its myriad tents and tar-paper shacks appeared to be cowering in expectation of another blast which would blow it away again.

The only street was an elongated quagmire on which the few ramshackle clapboard business buildings fronted, and from which the shacks and tents fanned out in an unplotted crazy-quilt of greasy mud and freakish blocks. The street was jammed with long string teams, some harnessed to freight wagons, others to black-stained tank wagons, joined together in series of four, for transporting the crude oil to the railroad a hundred miles away.

Beyond the town rose a forest of gaunt, conical derricks, and the town and the field beyond swarmed like an ant hill with men and women who rushed about on frantic and seemingly aimless errands and tasks. Open pits along the approach to town served as storage tanks for the "liquid gold," and the redolent, rotten-egg stench of the black wealth filled the driller's nostrils like the stink of death.

He mentioned the stink to the hustler at the makeshift livery corral at the edge of town, where he left his team and wagon.

"You git used to it, pardner, and don't mind it so much," the hustler told him. "Besides, they is worse stinks than the crude, in Wildcat. Stinks you don't never git used to, but what you can't do nothing about."

The old man rubbed the stump of a handless arm as he talked, and his voice was querulous as a woman's. He plainly wanted to say more of the evil smells of Wildcat, but Stub Williams wasn't interested. It had been a year since he'd seen Merrybelle, and he could picture her pretty blue eyes in his memory.

"You know a man by name of Asa Logan hereabouts?" he asked the one-man information bureau.

The hustler nodded. "You mean that there at-torney that's tryin' to buck Ira Hocker, up on the Dome?"

"Didn't know he was buckin' Hocker," Stub responded. "Pa to a cute little gal named Merrybelle?"

Again the nod—emphatic this time. "Cuter'n a li'l red dog under a brand new surrey! Got all the bucks in Wildcat runnin' round in circles, even Irie Hocker."

"She's the one," Stub confirmed, not too pleased at what he heard. "Where'd I find Asa, mebbe, today?"

"Jus' seen him in the Duster Bar," the hustler said. "Not more'n ten minutes back. Undertaker bet 'im a week ago he wouldn't live the week out, an' Asa was collectin' the drinks they bet when I seen 'im."

Stub raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know Asa was poorly."

"Ain't poorly," the other said. "He's organized a company to buck Ira Hocker, like I said.

"They ain't any future in buckin' Hocker. He's got everything his way, hereabouts. He's pizen as one of them black widder spiders you hear tell about. Must of been him they named this country after. The Pizen Spider. That's Irie Hocker, right from his feet up!"

Stub Williams shrugged. From what he'd seen of Asa Logan, the lawyer was well fit out to look after himself. It was Merrybelle that Stub wanted to look after.

"Give them nags a drink an' a bait of grain," he instructed, "an' all the hay they'll eat. I'll be back, directly—"

HIS eyes fell upon a familiar mud-colored horse, eating hay from the crib inside the barbed-wire yard. It was the same animal he had left tied to the sentinel cottonwood tree back at the forks of the Deadman, the day before, after concluding that the lease rider he'd knocked unconscious would recover and need transportation. He pointed a calloused finger.

"Whose broomtail stickhorse is that, yonder?"

"B'longs to Cat Bowman—Hocker's trigger man an 'right bower," the hustler exclaimed, an odd excitement in his voice. "He's a rugged customer. He's socked more men away than my dog's got fleas. People walk mighty wide of 'im, on the Dome. Must be on account of him they call it Deadman's Dome, he's put so many of 'em under. But he damn' near got his'n, yesterday. Gang o' boomers ketched 'im out alone, up on Dry Deadman, and liked to made a dry dead man outen Cat. But he killt two or three of 'em, an' the rest stampeded."

Stub Williams grinned with quiet relish. "Gang o' boomers, eh? That Cat's own story?"

The hustler nodded. "Swears he'll hunt 'em down like they was coyotes. The ones that got away!"

STUB WILLIAMS walked slowly down the muddy street. Ahead of him, a stoop-shouldered man in pants and vest and once-white shirt was standing on top of an overturned barrel, selling slips of paper to a crowd of agitated men who waved handsful of greenbacks and shouted hoarsely at the auctioneer, competing sharply for possession of the gilt-edged certificates.

"What's he hawkin'?" Stub asked of a mulewhacker who stood lean and scowling beside his wheelers, contemplating the impasse ahead of him.

"Hocker stocks," the whacker told him. "Hundred dollars a share. Makes good wall paper an' fair-to-middlin" pipe-lights. Fifty dollars if you can clear me a track through this double-damned mob!"

"How you pay?" Stub inquired. "Hocker stocks?"

The other nodded morosely. "That's what I git paid in. Worth the paper they're printed on. We load oil to Casper, an' Hocker-stocks back. Every printin' press in Wyomin' is turnin' them out, full time. When the bubble busts, it'll scatter Hocker stocks clean to Cheyenne. Watered stock enough to irrigate the desert, by gum!"

The discourse ended, the whacker turned his attention to the blockaded street once more and shouted for right-of-way in a voice that shook the shacks and tents like a gale. Stub Williams grinned and walked on.

The mud underfoot seemed to be more grease than dirt. Crude oil mixed with dust, and kneaded to the consistency of low-grade tar. It balled up on his boots till his feet became shapeless black gobs, heavy for walking. He paused at a lister bag set up on a tripod and paid a quarter for a quart of

water. It was hot from the sun and tasted foul with alkali and oil.

"You haul this here in them tank wagons that haul the crude?" he asked.

"You don't see no rivers about do you?" the vendor countered sarcastically. And Stub Williams shook his head. No wonder Merrybelle had wanted a water-well dug.

He became suddenly conscious of a staring pair of eyes. He looked across the street, and saw Cat Bowman watching him from the line of shade in front of fragile tent-and-lumber structure with a sign that said "The Duster Bar." The lease-rider's head was swathed in a dirty bandage, and the yellow eyes plunged into Stub's like daggers. The triangular mouth pursed and formed a word that Stub didn't catch.

At that moment, a shout like the blast of a locomotive rolled down the canyon of the street, and the mule team which he'd seen stalled a moment earlier came groaning down the road—heads down and tails twitching, straining against their collars. The wagons lurched and creaked in the hub-deep mud, splashing more crude from the uncapped bungs at the top of the tanks. The wheels turned up the tar-mud in globs that stuck to the bellies like glue.

"Ho, there! Git out the way or be flattened. We air comin' through!"

When the last lurching tank had passed, a fresh slick of crude oil had been left on the street's surface, rendering the mud treacherous to footing as well as boggy and deep. The fetid stink filled Stub's eyes and his very mouth, as thick as the mud itself. He thought for a minute he was going to be sick.

Then he looked back at the Duster Bar. Cat Bowman had disappeared. Stub looked up and down the street, but saw no sign of the lease rider. He reckoned the self-styled cyclone had stepped inside the saloon. And though he wasn't shopping for trouble, Stub Williams remembered he had business in the bar. Business that wouldn't wait, merely because of the possibility of further trouble with Hocker's right bower. He stepped out into the fresh oil slick, and made his way carefully to the saloon's arched and doorless entrance.

The barroom was so packed with men that Stub could barely squeeze inside the door. Whether Cat Bowman was in the crowd was any man's guess, and Stub was wondering how he'd locate Asa Logan when he saw a commotion up at the counter, and heard the lawyer shouting his name.

"Up this way, Stub, m' boy! By the peeled heeled onions! You're a sight for sore eyes!"

An instant later, the well driller was up at the counter, where a place had been made for him, as if by a kind of magic. Asa Logan shook his right hand warmly, and thrust a bottle of beer into the other.

"I was wondering if you'd come," the lawyer rattled on. "Merrybelle will be mighty pleased. You bring your derrick and rig?"

Stub nodded, unable to conceal the pleasure he took in the lawyer's words. "It's on my wagon, back at the livery yard. Didn't you get my letter?"

The lawyer grunted a negative. "This town is shoved around so often the U. S. mail can't find us. We ain't had any mail in three weeks. Son, I'm glad you're here!"

Asa Logan had warmed in his attitude over the Buffalo days, and Stub basked and glowed with the knowledge that the lawyer approved of him at last. He tried to drink the beer, but it was tepid and bitter, and tasted of the fetor that filled his nostrils.

"What you think of our town?" the lawyer inquired, a note of pride in his tone. Stub made a face.

"Town's not so bad, but I don't know how you live with the stink. It sticks in my teeth. And this beer ain't meant for human consumption. If you'll show me where you want that well sunk, I'd like to get a-drillin'. I ain't had a drink of legitimate water since I left Buffalo."

The lawyer looked at him, and smiled with that new fondness that Stub could not get used to.

"You're not going to drill for water, son. You're going to drill for oil. For black, liquid gold!"

Stub's mouth fell open. "Oil? *Me* drill for oil?"

THE lawyer smiled. "Sure thing, son. Week's time, you'll be rich as John D. Rockeyfellow. This is a sure-fire deal!"

Stub shook his head in protest. "But I haven't got any oil drillin' outfit. All I got is a pile driver and cutter, and thirty-forty

lengths of drill pipe. Hell, I couldn't get down a hundred feet with that riggin'!"

But Asa Logan continued to smile—fondly. "They are bringing wells in at less than a hundred feet every day, son. She's close to the surface here. Used to be there was a surface seep here. Regular oil lake. Great Tar Springs, they called it, then. Indians used the stuff for medicine, and Jim Bridger mixed it with flour and sold it to the emigrants for tar. That rig of yours will do the trick."

STUB'S sun-blackened face clouded with protest. He didn't know exactly how to put it. He didn't know exactly how he felt about it.

But he couldn't see himself wallowing in mud and grease like a hog, for *all* the money in oil. He was a driller of water wells. He had been, ever since he'd figured out this cheaper way of getting water to the surface, to save his homestead back in Johnson County, a couple of years before.

In Johnson County, the big cattle companies had sought to "solve" the homesteader problem by buying or stealing title to the creek banks and waterholes, and closing the sources of water to those who would fence the land. A man could raise dryland grain on the arid flats, and stack up pretty neat, however, if he had a well and a windmill to pump water for the house and livestock and a few acres of hay.

That was Stub's specialty, windmills and wells. With his light drill-pipe rig, he could pull onto a man's place, punch a well in a couple of days, if the water table was at reasonable depth, and put a failing homesteader back on his feet overnight. He had done more drilling than farming in the last two years. And he enjoyed the work.

It made him feel a little like God, transforming barren desert into rich farmland. Filling an empty wilderness with families and houses and schools. He had done much to change the history of his country, and he had regarded his mission and its accomplishments with pride.

Therefore, when he had received a call from Merrybelle Logan to come onto the sullen Poison Spider desert and give them cool pure water in place of the villainous alkaline flow of the badlands streams, it had seemed the crowning honor and achievement of his career. Stub set a store by Merrybelle, and a store by his drilling outfit, and this had been his "command performance."

Now, it seemed, he had been tricked.

"Did Merrybelle know about this?" he asked the lawyer quietly. "I mean, I thought she wanted a water well."

"My boy," the lawyer smiled, "my daughter didn't mean to deceive you. She just forgot to specify that it was an oil well we wanted sunk. Besides, she wants to see you make something of yourself, and the chance is here. She couldn't marry a Johnny Appleseed, you know."

Marry. For an instant, Stub Williams was caught up in the bright promise of that word. It had been spoken by Asa Logan, himself.

The man who had opposed Stub Williams and all but forbidden him his door, when Stub had sought to court his daughter in Buffalo, almost a year before.

Then the lawyer's real meaning struck him, like a kick below the belt. Johnny Appleseed it was, was it? Merrybelle, she couldn't marry a man that gave his time to improving the country and the lot of the men and women and children who lived in it. She had to have a man with money. A man as rich as Rockeyfellow.

Stub Williams' blocky jaw came out. He shook his bullet head. "I'm plumb sorry, Mr. Logan. I don't drill for nothing but water."

A SHADOW of annoyance crossed the lawyer's face, disappearing almost as soon as it appeared. The smile stayed on the sun-blistered lips. But when Logan spoke again, there was a vibrant urgency in his tone.

"You can't let us down, Stub. We've a chance here to make a million dollars, Merrybelle and I—and you and my other associates. The oil is there, and we've a spot to drill on. We need a driller, and a rig."

"Then go out and hire you one, Asa," Stub said coldly.

"We've been trying, for a month, to do that very thing," the lawyer confessed. "We're not having any luck. Hocker's got Eastern backing. He can spend a thousand dollars where my outfit can spend one. We bring in riggers and drillers, and he hires

them away from us, at five times what we can pay. There was a couple that stuck. They were the last two we had. We cut them in for stock, and they saw through Hocker's game. They told him no. But—"

"But what, Mr. Logan?"

"The driller got drownded, Stub," the lawyer said, his tone as wintery as his eyes. "Fell into Deadman Creek one night. Bashed in his head on a boulder, the authorities said. In the fall, that is. The trouble was, they found 'im in the suck-sand. Wasn't any boulder within a mile of him!"

"You still got a rigger?" Stub inquired, feeling very quiet inside, without knowing why.

The lawyer shook his head. "He was killed, same night. Derrick blew over on top of him. Looked like he had been put through a rock crusher. And that night there wasn't any wind."

The lawyer's voice rattled in his throat, and Stub Williams felt a deep familiar thrill firing his veins. Then, more emphatic than before, he shook his head again.

"I don't mind a fight, Mr. Logan. Not for something I believe in. I've had other fights. To get water on the ground, I'd fight Hocker and his combine to a stand-still. But this—this stinkin' poison slime you're after here. I can't believe in that. It ain't worth a fight. I—I guess I'll be leaving, Mr. Logan."

He set the warm beer on the counter, and turned toward the door. The lawyer caught him by the arm.

"Look, Stub," he blurted, desperation in his eyes, "ain't you even going to stop by the shack and see Merrybelle?"

The driller's jaw came out again, and his eyes turned bleak as Logan's. "I dunno, Asa," he replied. "I ain't got much time. They's a sight of people, back on the Powder, that want water wells sunk. I got to be gettin' back."

He left the counter then and started for the door, shouldering and nudging his way through the crowd and the stink, knowing that if he didn't find fresh air he was going to be ill.

He carried with him a picture of Asa Logan. Not the hale and formidable Lawyer Logan he had known in Buffalo, but a small dried-up man, stooped and very old. A man in whom all hope was dead.

He felt a little guilty. A little sorry for Logan. A little sorry for himself. He had wanted the worst way to see Merrybelle again. But it didn't seem fitting to call on her, now. He was confused just now, and not too sure of his ground. But it seemed just then that he had been tricked and deceived. At any rate, it wasn't for himself or even his own occupation that Merrybelle had sent for him. She'd tried to pull the wool over his eyes, and use him, and somehow, in these circumstances, he did not want to see her. He'd leave her to Wildcat and Asa Logan—and to Ira Hocker. Leave her to the Poison Spider! He seemed to be more her kind of man.

Afterwards, Stub Williams saw that he should have known how it would turn out. You think a thing as low-down and mean as he was thinking, and pretty quick a face appears in front of you. A face you've never seen before, maybe. But you don't have to ask who it is. You know who it is, and you know you're in trouble. And you don't know what to do about it.

He was almost to the door when that face jumped at him, out of the many faces before him. A swarthy, deeply lined face, greasy and unwashed, which reminded him for some reason of the stink of the crude. The body below the face was squat and heavy, clothed not in homespun or denims, but in black broadcloth.

There was something sinister about the squat black figure. Something that suggested a spider. A poison spider, maybe.

THE spider had halted, just inside the door. He was waiting, and his deep-set black eyes were on Stub Williams. Behind him stood Cat Bowman, his head still swathed in the dirty bandage, and a couple of other ugly bruisers who also were watching Stub.

They were waiting for Stub. They were blocking the door, and there was no other exit from the crowded room. Even if there had been another door, Stub could not have taken it.

His eyes had met the spider's black ones, and in that instant the lines were drawn. In that instant, Stub Williams was caught up by something bigger than himself, and he was drawn toward Ira Hocker as a moth is drawn to an open flame.

CHAPTER III

BOOMERS' BRAWL

"KEEP out of trouble, if you can," Stub's father had advised his only son, some years before, from the bed on which he'd died. "Trouble is a sickness that you ketch from other men. The only cure is not to ketch it at the start. But when you do ketch it, don't stampede. Just keep your shirt on, and take a chew, and do what's likeliest at hand. That way, if you've lived clean and saved your health and self-respect, you stand to throw the sickness off."

Stub didn't chew, but he kept his shirt on, and didn't stampede. The door was still blocked when he got to it, and he stood in front of the spider, looking down at the swarthy features. Waiting.

"I hear you're the boomer that roughed up my lease rider, down on Deadman Creek," the promoter said cordially at length.

The tightness in Stub's chest eased a bit. The spider didn't seem put out about that affair. He seemed to think it was something of a joke.

Stub shot a glance at Cat Bowman, and saw the trigger-man was grinning covertly. Saw that his relief was premature.

He nodded, then, his gaze returning to the spider. "We had some argument, about the right-of-way."

The promoter nodded. "I've heard it all. You argue pretty well, boomer. I've got need for a man that can put up an argument like yours. My name's Hocker. I'm president of the Black Gold Oil Company—the *only* company on the Dome. I'll rent your riggin', and I pay top wages. You can start to work today."

Stub Williams did not reply at once. He had walked to the door expecting trouble. Instead of trouble, the spider offered him a job. It was much as if he'd rigged his drill for hardpan and had struck a mud pocket instead. It left him for the moment off balance, fighting to right himself. The feeling of let-down relief returned. But it was relief shot through with hot resentment.

Stub was finding he didn't like the spider. Didn't like his arrogance or his grease-stained Sunday clothes. His way of throwing his name at a man, and making it sound like a threat. His way of laying hold of a man he'd never seen before and claiming him as he'd claim a drilling lease that took his eye. Maybe this was trouble, after all.

"You got me wrong, mister," Stub said as easily as he could manage. "I don't drill for oil. I only punch water wells."

The oil man's heavy brows went up. His little black eyes were skeptical and poison. They looked Stub Williams up and down again, from his flat-heeled boots to the crown of his peak-crowned hat. He might have been examining a horse on the block, and he registered approval at what he saw.

"Then you can punch water-wells for *me!*"

Stub shook his head, still fighting for balance. "This ain't well-water country. With this black rotten muck so close to the surface, I'd have to go below the oil table to bring in a decent well. My outfit ain't rigged for that."

His words seemed to confirm a suspicion in the oiler's head. The little black eyes got smaller. An edge came into the gentle voice.

"Then I'll buy that rig off you. I'll give you five thousan' dollars."

Stub Williams swayed a little. He didn't believe his ears. If Hocker had offered him a hundred, he likely would have sold. He could build another like it, for fifty, and that way he could make this goose-chase trip pay out, after all. But five thousand dollars! Ira Hocker was plain, staring crazy. Or else he thought Stub was.

Gradually, as he stood there, trying to get his breath, he became aware of the hollow silence around him. He tore his stunned eyes from the little beady black ones, and looked about the room. Every ear in the house was listening to the conversation up there by the door. Every eye in the house was watching Stub Williams—raptly and sharply intent, as if the future of the world hung on his next words. Some of the faces were cynically resigned, sneering at him in open enmity and contempt. Some were blank and expressionless, merely waiting. A few were tense with hope and oddly wistful, as if their owners understood that they were wishing for a thing that could not be.

For another instant, Stub Williams stood in rising confusion, wondering if the moment could be real. Then a voice spoke

somewhere in his memory, repeating words he'd heard from this man and that, during the last two days.

"What Hocker don't like don't git far. He's a heavy-handed man."

"They ain't any future in buckin' Hocker. He's got everything his way, hereabouts. Pizen as them black widders. The Pizen Spider. That's Irie Hocker."

"Hocker can spend a thousand dollars where my outfit can spend one. We bring in riggers and drillers, and he hires them away from us—"

Stub could understand the expressions on the faces, then. The hopeful ones were hopeful because they thought maybe they'd see a man stand up to Ira Hocker at last. The cynics were sneering because they figured it could not be. And though he could not have explained or justified his decision, even to himself, Stub Williams knew then that he would not sell.

"Sorry, Mr. Hocker," he said firmly. "My riggin's not for sale."

The little black eyes into which he was looking seemed to recede into the dark, hairy head. But, except for this one warning signal, the oil man seemed more regretful than put out.

"That's too bad, boomer," the spider said sadly, shaking his head. "I was hoping we'd settle this without no trouble. I see you hobnobbin' with Logan and his wildcatters. I know what you're up to, and you've made a big mistake. I'm chargin' you with illegal trespass on a lease o' mine, and with feloneous assault upon an employe o' mine, with intent to kill. Or maybe you would like to change your mind?"

Stub Williams' jaw was out again. He shook his head in regretful but definite refusal. "My riggin' ain't for sale, Mister Hocker."

THE black eyes left his face, and swung to the men behind him. "Then take him, boys. Take him back to that cottonwood tree on the Deadman lease. We'll hold him for the law!"

Cat Bowman cut his yellow eyes at his two confederates, and moved in. So it was trouble, after all. Stub Williams had caught it, just as his father had predicted, from another man. Stub didn't chew, so he couldn't follow his father's instructions to the letter. But he didn't stampede. There were three of them against him, however, and all of them built like bulls. So it seemed likeliest to keep away from them as long as he could. He gave ground slowly, backing in the direction of the bar. The crowd made way for him, and the three bullies followed him, step for step.

Stub chanced a look at the crowd as he beat his slow retreat. He was half-hoping maybe the crowd would intervene in the one-sided contest. But that one glance killed his hopes. The crowd was not indifferent. The crowd was partisan and cheering silently for Stub—but cheering as it might at a dog fight. Stub was a stranger, without any call upon the crowd. And while the crowd would have paid big money to have seen Hocker humiliated and cut down to size, the crowd knew that would not happen. Just because a mule-headed drifter refused to accept the inevitable and stood up to the master of Deadman's Dome, his brashness did not commit the others to the same suicidal course.

Stub knew he could not even expect help from Asa Logan. Asa had asked help from Stub a moment earlier, and Stub had refused. Stub was fighting merely for the right to take his drilling rig and leave the Poison Spider Plains. His fight did not concern Logan or any man but himself. But Stub knew he must not let himself be taken. He remembered the story of what happened to the rigger and driller who had thrown in with the Wildcatters. And Ira Hocker was under the delusion that Stub had made a similar deal with Logan. Stub knew what would happen to him, if he were taken out of town.

When he felt the counter against his back, he knew that retreat was over, and now he must stand. His three assailants fanned out, shoulder-to-shoulder, and came on slowly, shoulders hunched, arms flexed to grapple, like wrestlers in a ring. They all wore pistols, but Stub had none. And they were three to one. They preferred to use their hands.

Stub stood on wide-spread feet, fists clenched and all his muscles welded to the single purpose of destruction. But he knew that a bare-handed fight against such odds could have but one ending. And, as the three closed the distance to where he stood,

his eyes were alert and wary, the brain behind them desperately devising a plan of battle.

"Now!"

Cat Bowman shouted the signal to attack. Instantly, the three rushed in. Stub's searching eyes had seen a bottle on the bar beside him. A quart bottle, full of busthead whiskey. As the trio closed, he reached out a hand, snaked the bottle from the counter, and swung it at the nearest head. The bottle burst with the impact, and the man went down. Before Stub could recover, another's hand had gripped his face, the fingers gouging for his eyes.

The neck of the whiskey bottle was still in the driller's hand, the jagged glass flaring out. He thrust the cutting edge into the gouger's face, twisting it as he struck, grinding the sawtooth cutter into yielding flesh, feeling it scrape on bone. Then an arm had him around the throat, from behind. Shutting off his breath. Pulling his neck back, to break it.

Understanding flashed in Stub's bursting brain. Understanding why his assailants had not used their weapons. The plan had been to kill him, all along, if he didn't own himself as Hocker's man. But Hocker was playing it cute. If they'd shot him down, in cold blood, somebody might have faced a murder charge. If he were killed in a barroom brawl—why, in a town like this, such accidents must happen every day.

His fingers clawed at the garroting arm, but it seemed to be made of steel. His pulse was hammering at his ears, and he knew it couldn't last much longer. He braced his feet, and pulled in his neck, and struck savagely backward with his head. He knew from the cushioned impact that he'd found Cat Bowman's face. He knew from the shooting pains inside his skull that the blow had a haymaker.

The arm about his throat relaxed its hold, and tried to withdraw. But Stub gripped it now in both his hands, holding it low in front of him. He could breathe now, and his lungs sucked in one ragged gulp of air. Then he marshaled the last ounce of his waning strength, and—still holding to the arm before him—hunched his shoulders and straightened his spine, all in one coordinated heave. The weight was lifted from his shoulders, as if plucked off by giant hands. He let go the arm, and Cat Bowman sailed over his head, bodily, like a great wingless bird.

Bowman struck the floor, headlong, some ten feet away. The crowd had broken before him, or his fall would have been cushioned. He did not get up, and Stub leaned weakly against the bar, eyes blearing around him, his lungs working like a bellows.

The man he'd cut with the broken bottle was out of the fight. But the one he'd knocked down was back on his feet, coming in. Stub was too far gone to swing out to meet him. He put a hand out on either side of him, gripping the edge of the counter. When the bully was almost touching him, he supported his weight on his hands, lifted his boots, and drove them into the other's middle. He felt ribs snap under his feet, and the bully was thrown backward as if he'd been kicked by a horse. His feet churned to keep him erect, and he took the whole room to fall in—striking the wall beside the open door with such force that he knocked the whole flimsy panel out and disappeared through the ragged hole.

OUT in the middle of the floor, Cat Bowman had hauled himself up to his knees, and had drawn a pistol. He was trying to sight it, using both hands to do the job. But his eyes wouldn't focus, and he was bothered by blood running down from his forehead from his reopened head wound.

There was a pistol in the sawdust at Stub's feet, dropped by one of the other two Hocker henchmen. Stub bent down and scooped it up in his hands. It was loaded, but he did not shoot. He had killed no one yet, and he did not intend to kill. He wanted only to settle this fight, and get out of Wildcat as soon as he could.

So, instead of shooting, he pegged the pistol at the cyclone's head. He scored a hit, and Bowman went to the floor again, backward. He tried to rise, but Stub had got to him, now. He kicked the pistol from the bully's hands, and his boots were not still until the Cat was stretched motionless and bloody on the floor. Then he turned, unsteadily, and looked about for Hocker.

The oil man had not stirred from his original position, by the door. His henchmen had suffered an ignominous defeat, and he—through them—had likewise lost the

engagement. Yet he'd lifted no hand to help them. And now that the fight was over, he accepted its issue with a shrug.

"If you're still aimin' to hold me for the law, Mr. Hocker," Stub panted, advancing on him slowly, "I expect you'll have to do the holding. Your hired help seems to have quit you."

For a minute, the oil man said nothing. One hand was in his coat pocket, where Stub guessed he had a pistol. But Stub wanted no more trouble. He only wanted to get out of town. He didn't make the oil man draw, and the latter showed no inclination to draw, unless forced to it. Ira Hocker, patently, did not kill his own snakes.

THE black eyes sized Stub up once more and their poison hostility was alloyed with a wistfulness the driller could not understand.

"You argue better than I knew, boomer," the little man said at length. "You've talked me out of what I had in mind. I'm going to let you go. But get out of the country. Get out of Wildcat and off the Dome. Get clean off the Poison Spider Plains—if you want to live. You understand what I mean?"

Stub nodded sourly. "I'm afraid I do, Mr. Hocker. I wish I didn't. I wish you hadn't made it so plain. I wanted to leave this place the worst way. But now you've fixed it so I can't leave, without running. I've never run from any man, Mr. Hocker."

The oil man looked very bored. "You're young, boomer. You're smart, and in good health.

"I admire you, boy. I'd hate to see something happen to you. So—think it over. I'll give you until morning to decide."

With that final warning issued, the oiler turned on his heel and left the Duster Bar, unmindful of his maimed and wounded henchmen. Stub Williams stood on widespread feet, staring glumly after him, hearing a door slam hollowly—a door that blocked retreat. He still wanted none of Asa Logan's foulsome black muck. But Hocker's ultimatum had obligated him to stay on in Wildcat, against his own wishes and judgment.

He couldn't stay on in Wildcat and be idle. He couldn't stay on and hold himself aloof of the fight in which he had become unwillingly embroiled. If he stayed, he'd have to drill for oil whether he wanted to or no.

"On second thought," he told Asa Logan, back at the bar, "I guess I'll stick around and punch you out a well or two."

The silence which had reigned in the crowded room throughout Stub's fight and conversation with Hocker closed over his declaration to Logan as water in a stagnant pool closed over a hurled stone. Then the meaning and the import of his words registered with those who heard, and the room burst into movement and raucous sound.

STUB was the center of a demonstration that bordered on a riot. Drinks were called on the house, and Stub was feted as a hero. Word spread over the camp that a cat-footed drifter had stood up to Hocker and made it stick—that this same drifter was driving home his victory by staying around to drill for oil under Hocker's very nose—and the camp's whole populace converged on the Duster Bar, to have a look at the man who'd done the impossible. "Weavil" Smith, proprietor of the bar and mayor of the mustang town, gave his whole stock of red-eye away inside of an hour, and the crowd swept away to the other dives, cleaning the shelves and cellars like a locust plague. Stub Williams and Asa Logan and half a dozen others lingered at the Duster, after the rest had gone. And Weavil Smith broke out a bottle of private stuff, from a compartment which had escaped the notice of the thirsting crowd.

" 'Duster' Bar is just what this place'll be, when that quart's gone!" the saloon man said with a grin. "But now that we got a driller and a rig—to hell with keepin' bar! We're oil men now, Ace. All wool and a yard wide!"

Asa Logan nodded agreement. When he looked at Stub Williams, there was adoration in his sharp blue eyes, a smile on his chappy lips.

"We stand a good chance now, anyhow," he said, more cautiously. "Williams, you've stood this town on its ear. You'll be a big man here, before you're done."

Stub shook his head, adamantly. "I'll stay here a week, just to make it look like I'm not running, when I leave. Maybe in that time, if this muck is as close to the surface as you say, maybe I can punch you a couple

of wells. After that, I'm back for Buffalo, where people still got their sense."

Asa Logan grinned ruefully. "Wait till you bring in your first gusher, son. Wait till you see that black muck spout up like a geyser out of hell. Wait till you get it in your hair and your eyes and ears and mouth. It won't be muck to you then. It'll be oil—liquid black gold! And you'll want more gushers and more gold! It takes hold of you, son. Once you're hooked, you're caught. And, thanks to Ira Hocker, you're hooked."

Stub Williams shook his head, almost sullenly. He couldn't see anything so nonsensical happening to him.

CHAPTER IV

WILDCATTERS, INC.

STUB found Merrybelle Logan prettier than he remembered her. Prettier, and disturbingly different. Back in Buffalo a year before, Stub had mooned after a sweet-faced girl in braids who'd run mostly to legs and neck and nose, like a promising spring colt. Now the promise was fulfilled, and he found a young woman, lovely as apple-blossoms, elusive as the scent of sage. Her eyes were her father's, yet without her father's shrewd penetration.

She greeted Stub with a shy warmth that lingered in his palms, long after her own hand was withdrawn from his. And when her father told her Stub had agreed to drill their well, she looked at him with an adoration that was identical to that in her father's eyes. The look set Stub's skin to prickling from his hairline to his toes. And the question of whether it was Stub or his rig that endeared him to the Logans did not seem important at this time.

"I told Dad you would help us!" she exclaimed, her blue eyes dancing. "Oh, Stub—I'm so glad!"

And Stub felt her gladness as his own. It now seemed incredible that he had at first refused to help. Incredible that he was only going to stay a week—just long enough to properly show defiance to Ira Hocker. It seemed to Stub now that Hocker no longer counted in the circumstances which were holding him in Wildcat. If Merrybelle continued to look at him like she was doing now, he might stay indefinitely.

For supper, Merrybelle fried venison and potatoes, and made strong coffee. And Stub, savoring woman-cooked food for the first time in a week, decided that he'd been missing out on the things in life that mattered. Maybe he *had* been wasting his time, punching water wells and turning the earth's surface green, back in Johnson County.

When the dishes were cleared away, Asa Logan lighted the kerosene lamp, and callers began to arrive. All were men, and the way they all looked at Merrybelle—as if she were something good to eat—put Stub to wondering if all were her suiters and his competitors, gathering in crowds. But when the tiny kitchen was filled to overflowing, and when each caller had made his manners gallantly to Merrybelle, Asa Logan announced the true purpose of the assemblage.

The Wildcat Petroleum Company, Asa Logan, President and Director, was meeting to decide certain problems of policy and operations, pursuant to a revitalized program of development, on which the said company was about to embark. The dozen men who filled the kitchen were stockholders in the corporation, and it was Weavil Smith who proposed that Stub Williams be voted fifty shares of stock in payment for each well he was able to bring in.

Stub shook his head. He didn't know how a set-up like that would work out, with oil. But a Land-Development corporation had worked the same deal on him, over on the Powder, and he'd found himself fairly on the way to being a major landowner. He'd learned that land is nothing but dirt and rock until it becomes your own, and then it becomes a distracting part of yourself that you cannot amputate. It had taken him most of a year to get free of his real-estate entanglements, and he did not mean to run the same risk with oil. Not after the warning he'd had already, from Asa Logan. So he declined the proposition.

"I sink water wells for fifty dollars," he stated firmly, "plus the cost of the drill-pipe and cutter. I've been told you drill no deeper here for oil than I go for water. So I don't see any difference should be made in fees. But, boys, it's cash on the barrel head."

His listeners looked flabbergasted at the declaration. But he met no opposition. And the discussion turned to other matters.

Among those present, Stub had found doctors and lawyers, school teachers, cowboys and farmers and merchants. Not one man of them set himself up as one experienced with oil. But, amateurs though they were, they all seemed obsessed and extremely well-informed on their topic, and Stub for the most part was at sea, puzzled by the glib discussion of Chugwater sands and Tensleep sands, morning towers and weavils and roughnecks. But, when talk got around to leases and claims and the fly-by-night existence of the town, Stub knew enough of the subject to know what it was that puzzled him. Enough of what he didn't know to ask questions.

"What has Hocker got on you boys that he can chase this town all over the landscape?" he demanded. "How does he get that edge?"

Asa Logan smiled thinly. "How's he get it? Why, he's got a drag with the county clerk and claims registrar like a fifty-car freight, headed downhill. He don't want anybody out on the Dome but himself and his crews. Especially, he don't like a town of five thousand wildcatters around, cutting in on his boom. Quick as the town sets down somewhere, he drills a well in the middle of it, and makes a strike—or says he does. Then he files a drilling claim, gets a court order to put off all 'claim-jumpers' as he calls us, and a U. S. marshal to make his paper stick. He keeps us so busy breakin' camp and moving to new locations that we don't have time to do any prospectin', even if we had the rig."

Stub Williams rubbed his neck. "Why don't the town incorporate, file a location claim of its own, and settle down?"

"Because Ira Hocker's got the state politicians under his thumb, too," Logan said sourly. "We've petitioned the Secretary o' State a dozen times for corporation status, for the town. Hocker protests it, and every time our petition is thrown out, on a technicality. I'm a lawyer, and I know the law, on incorporation of communities. But I can't get up a petition that can get by Hocker's attorneys, in front of the Secretary o' State."

"Then why don't this company file a drilling claim, here on this location?" Stub wanted to know. "If this company got the lease, why it would be up to you to say whether the town moved off."

The boomtown lawyer shook his head. "We've tried that. We've tried everything. Where we're whipped is, the lawmakers haven't caught up with us, yet. People have been digging gold and silver a long time, and Congress has enacted workable mineral laws, to govern mining. But oil-drilling is so new we don't have any legislation to go by, and the mineral laws apply. That's where Hocker tromps us. Mineral laws call for 'reasonable evidence of mineral presence' before a mining claim is honored. Well, Hocker's patron, this county claims registrar, he insists on crude-oil samples as 'reasonable evidence' of the presence of oil. Hocker's plug-uglies bust us up whenever we try to drill, to get that sample. Result: No sample; no claim."

Stub Williams' eyes brightened as he listened. When it came to wildcatting in oil, he was a "weavil"—a rank newcomer and ignoramous. Yet in the larger game, in the ageless competition for the right to drill—the jockeying and grappling with an antagonist for advantage through shrewdness and surprise attack—Stub Williams was a seasoned veteran.

Ever since he'd punched his first water-well and had undertaken to drill wells as a profession, he had encountered his Ira Hockers. In other dress, perhaps, and under other names. But basically the same. In Johnson County, he'd bucked not oil tycoons but land and cattle kings who'd claimed disportionate shares of the earth's surface for their own, and who had bitterly opposed Stub Williams' irrigation schemes because they made homestead farming profitable on the public domain. For several years he'd matched brawn and brains with the giants of another industry. Never yet had he been defeated. And if this fight was for under-surface wealth instead of for the land itself, why the pattern remained the same. The challenge did not change.

"I don't see any drilling rig around this town right now," he mentioned, wanting to have the whole picture. "Why isn't Hocker punchin' his sample holes here? Or is he going to let you stay put, this time?"

Logan wagged his head. "When we set the town down here, we notified Hocker that we'd organized the Wildcat Regulators, a kind of vigilance committee of a hundred members, to deal with him. We served

notice that the minute he moved a rig in on us, it meant war. Well, he sent a man to Casper to round up a private army of hard-cases, to match our committee. His army hasn't showed up yet, and as long as he knew we didn't have any way of sinking a well, he figured I guess that he wasn't crowded."

Stub Williams digested that, and felt the small electric waves run up his spine to the hairline on his neck. "He knows you've got a rig now," he said contemplatively. "He can't afford to wait any longer."

The words were scarcely out when running feet pounded up to the cabin outside. The door burst open, and a disheveled man appeared, hatless and out of breath. He elbowed his way into the lamplight, and his excited eyes sought Asa Logan.

"It's started!" he gasped. And an electric spark passed through the assembled men, freezing them to stone.

"What's started?" Asa Logan demanded, the only man in the room who could command his voice.

"Hocker!" the newcomer exclaimed, still panting for breath. "He's movin' a rig in on the town. Dismantled a derrick, up on the Dome—movin' it down by wagon—got a crew, and twenty gunmen along—to stand us off!"

A full minute of silence followed the revelation. Silence in which each man present looked to Asa Logan, awaiting his reaction and instruction. But Logan did not move or speak. Logan looked to Stub Williams. After a time, the others followed the lawyer's lead, and Stub felt the mantle of leadership fall squarely on his shoulders, the same as if they all had spoken.

Stub knew then that he was involved all the way in the fight for mastery of Dead Man's Dome, whether he wished it or no. Unconsciously, he squared his shoulders, as if to receive the burden. It was not the first time that leadership in a fight that did not concern him directly had fallen to him, by default. Nor did he seek to dodge the encumbrance. He could see now that he had been embroiled in this, actually, from the moment Cat Bowman's rifle had kicked dust in front of his team, disputing his passage across the Dry Deadman. And it was his nature to assume leadership in anything he had a hand in, whatever.

"Let me get this straight," he said easily. "Ira Hocker is settin' up his rig to drill a hole and get his sample, to move this town again. That right?"

Asa Logan nodded. "That's right. He finds his sample, the town moves again."

"And this is the last location, about, on the Dome," Merrybelle put in. "If he moves us off from here, we're off the Dome for good."

WEAVIL SMITH stood up, abruptly. "Well, he ain't going to do that. We warned him what would happen, if he moved a rig down here. I'll get the boys together."

Stub Williams shook his head. "Keep your shirt on, Weavil. There're a lot of ways to skin a cat."

The barman glowered. "They's only one way I know of, to skin Ira Hocker. That's with a huntin' knife. I'm a-going hunting!"

Williams stood up. He was remembering Johnson County, where a fight much like this one had shaped up, over land. This was oil, but the issues—and the outcome—appeared the same.

"This might come to shooting," he conceded, "before it's done. But if it does, there will be a stink that will reach the governor and the courts, and maybe bring in the national guard. In a case like that, it's a handy thing to be able to show that the opposition fired the first shot. That way, there won't be so many men get hung."

He sensed a stiffening of the tension in the room. Weavil Smith looked at him, thoughtfully.

"How else would we skin Hocker, boy?"

Stub managed a shrug. "I ain't sure. But tell me this. What happens if we punch our hole and get our sample first? Would the county clerk in Casper have to enter your claim then?"

Weavil looked at Logan. The lawyer frowned judiciously. "I think he would. If we got to Casper with our sample, and a lot of witnesses and affidavits, I think he would have to record our claim."

"If he wouldn't," Merrybelle put, "why we could go to the courts. That would at least give us a point of legality to stand on, if it does come to fighting here, and Hocker tries to put the blame on us. It would show that we tried."

The blue eyes met Stub's as the girl talked, and Stub warmed a lot to Merrybelle. She had a clearer grasp of the issues than any of the men present, her lawyer father included. She could see what Stub was driving at.

"But you couldn't sink a hole faster than Irie Hocker can," Weavil Smith objected. "He's got the latest in equipment. Sixty-foot derricks and best cable-tools. He's big-bore!"

"What I don't know about oil drilling would fill a good-sized book," Stub admitted, feeling a pair of blue eyes on him yet.

"But I'll bet my bottom dollar it will take Hocker's crew a day or more to set up their rig. With any kind of luck, I could have a well punched, about, by the time he got set up."

Another silence followed the declaration. The lines were being drawn. Williams was the pivot man. The man who was out in front. His plan was sound, if he was as good as his brag.

"How long would it take you to sink a well?" Weavil demanded to know.

"That's a big question," Stub retorted, somewhat impatient. "Like I told Logan, back in the bar, this is not my racket. My outfit is rickety and one-horse, even for water drilling. I've got nothing but a pile driver and a sand-point. Sand-point's no good for deep-drilling. In soft formation, I can go to thirty-forty feet—handy and in a hurry. With luck and all the angels on my side, I might go sixty, without buckling my drill-pipe. If the oil level's no deeper than that, and if we don't miss the formation, and if we don't run into hardpan—and a hundred other ifs—I could have you a well tomorrow night."

Weavil Smith looked dubious. "That's a pretty slim hope you're offerin' us, farmer. Too slim, I'm a-thinking. The time to stop Hocker is before he gets his rig set up. Stop him at the edge of town, on the reason that it's trespass. Let 'im on, and he'd be hard to stop."

There was hard, cold logic in the barman's words. The others were swayed by his argument. They wanted a fight, and Stub Williams had already stuck his neck out plenty far by implying that his one-horse rig could beat Hocker's high-powered outfit in a big-money race. To guarantee victory would be the height of folly. To guarantee and fail would be suicide, if he rightly gauged the temper of these men.

Stub was feeling that he'd done his best. He'd offered his services, offered to do the best he could. And he'd been rejected. Well, that let him out. He could let them go their way now. Let them go to disaster with all honor to himself.

Then he felt the blue eyes on him again. He looked in their direction, and read their appeal and their childlike confidence. He knew then that he was lost. Knew that he had got himself out on a limb that was sagging dangerously. Then, because a pair of blue eyes trusted him to work a miracle for them, he took a saw and began to cut the sagging branch behind him.

"All right," he told Weavil Smith. "Get your boys together. But don't waste them, standing Hocker off. Bring them here. They can help me set up my rig, and protect me while I work it."

The barman still was skeptical. "You mean you think you can do it? What happens to us, if you fall down?"

Stub Williams ignored the latter question, even in his own thinking. The former one he answered, to the best of his ability.

"It's nine-thirty now. If you boys have a likely location figured out, and if you'll give me a hand with my rig, I'll be sinking pipe by midnight. By dark tomorrow night, I'll be down to pay."

He added to himself, "If I ever get down to pay."

But no one, not even Merrybelle Logan, knew of his inner doubt. No one knew that he was sweating, standing absolutely quiet, on a chill Wyoming night.

CHAPTER V

BLACK-GOLD STRIKE

THE crude simplicity of Stub Williams' rig was its weakness, and its strength. It consisted of a thirty-foot tower, easily dismantled and set up again, and a hammering weight similar to the weight in a pile driver, which was hoisted by means of a horse and a cable threaded through a pulley at the top of the derrick. A trip mechanism at the top released the hammer and dropped it down a channel inside the tower to strike the top of the drill-pipe, hammering it into

the ground, as a nail is driven into a board.

Stub had got the idea from watching a pile-driver, and from pictures he'd seen of the guillotine which lobbed the heads off French aristocrats, at the time of all the fighting in France. It was a one-horse outfit, literally. But it could be assembled in the time it took the owner of a standard rig to clear and level the ground for his drilling floor and engines.

By midnight, they had the tower standing and the heavy inch-hemp cable rigged. By lantern light, Stub screwed the cone-shaped bit with its flared cutting ridges onto the end of a "first" length of drill-pipe. The pipe was porous for a foot or so above the cutter, to admit water or oil when it was reached. The drill-pipe thus served as casing, and when the drill-pipe had been driven down to its proper level, the well was completed, ready for the pump.

It was an efficient, one-stitch system—unbeatable when it worked. In sand and soft formation, Stub could hammer his pipe down to forty feet without a hitch. Beyond forty feet, he was dubious. But he was committed now. He'd just have to do what he could, and hope for the best.

The Wildcatters had offered him a choice of two locations at which to drill—on top of a rounded knoll, and in the bottom of a saucer-shaped, black-dirt basin below the knoll. The dried pothole, Logan stated, was the site of the old oil seep called Great Tar Spring. It had ceased flowing when Hocker's wells began pumping, upon the Dome. But Williams reasoned that the formation here would likely be softer than elsewhere, having been soaked by centuries with oil which had risen from the "leak." So it was in the old seep basin that he set up his rig and began to hammer down his "sand-point."

When all was ready, he hitched one horse to the hoisting tackle, raised the hammer to the top, and set the first section of drill-pipe underneath it, arranging the clamps through which it worked with infinite care. Then, when the set was as true as he could make it, he jerked the release cord. The hammer dropped swiftly down its vertical guides and struck the twenty-foot length of pipe a solid, resounding blow. Stub picked up his measuring stick and stood it up beside the pipe. The stick said twenty inches at the first lick, and Stub began to hope. If the oil-soaked formation held, he might get his well.

After that, it was mere, monotonous routine. Asa Logan would lead the horse off, like the pull-off horse on a hay stacker, lifting the iron weight to the top of its upright guides. Stub Williams would trip it. The hammer would drop, driving the pipe a foot or so deeper into the earth. Logan would back the horse, still like a pull-off stacker plug, to lift the hammer again.

The threads at the top of the drill-pipe were protected by a sleeve, the sleeve by a wooden clamp. Still, the descending hammer filled the night with a dull clanging *boom* at each blow, so that Ira Hocker wherever he was would hear it and know that Slim's rig was already in operation. They expected interference, and Weavil Smith placed his mobilized "regulator" force in a protective cordon about the rig, armed with rifles and shotguns and pistols.

But if Hocker heard the racket set up by Stub's crude engine, he either did not understand it, or he was biding his time. No attack materialized. The first section of drill-pipe sank down to level, and Stub screwed another length into the sleeve at its top, and began hammering the second length down, still without interference.

BY DAYLIGHT time, the second length had been hammered all the way down. Stub was now down forty feet, and still no oil. Now he began to worry. Once in the past he had gone to sixty feet. But only once, and that in sand formation. And from twenty inches at the first blow, the distance gained at each lick now had dwindled to two and three inches. The ground underneath his cutter was hardening, and his cutter was getting duller, and maybe pressure was mounting against the pipe above the point. He saw trouble ahead. Trouble that might defeat him, if he did not bring oil in soon.

"What's worrying you, driller?" Merrybelle demanded of him. "It strikes me that you're going great guns. Forty feet in six hours. That's medicine, as the Diggers say!"

The girl was frowsed and red-eyed from want of sleep. She had left the rig only to fetch back coffee and sandwiches all night, and now had returned once more from the shack, lugging a five-gallon can of coffee and a bread can full of doughnuts.

"That's medicine, all right," Stub told her. "But the medicine will be mighty bitter to swallow, if that formation down there gets any harder. We're runnin' on luck, right now."

TO illustrate his point, he walked to the jockey-box on the front of his wagon and got from it a massive bridge spike and a heavy hammer. Placing the point of the nail against the steel rim of his wagonwheel, he struck the head a solid blow with the hammer. The spike was bent to a bow. Lifting the hammer, he struck once more, buckling the bow to a rough V-shape.

He held the bent nail up for her to see

"When you apply enough shock-pressure at one end of a nail, and enough resistance at the other end, this is what you get. That nail is solid steel, all the way through. My drill-pipe is hollow. And the more we extend it, the more give we'll find in the middle. Just like that piece of tie wire, hangin' on the derrick. I could take a two-inch piece and drive it like a nail. Take a foot-long piece, and you couldn't drive it through your hat. See what I mean?"

The girl nodded, but reluctantly She didn't want to see.

"Your pipe hasn't started to bend yet," she pointed out. "Why not wait till it does start, before you fuss about it?"

"When it starts to go," Stub said bleakly, "it will be too late to fuss about it. When it starts, one lick from that hammer will buckle it just like this nail. The difference is, when a nail bends in wood, you can pull it out and straighten up and drive it again. If that pipe folds up, what with the ground pressure against it and that flared cutter on the end, all the horses west of Casper couldn't pull it out. Once she goes, it's over with. No well, no sample, no nothing!"

But, even as he spoke, Stub was fitting the third length of pipe to the end of the second. And the work went on.

Now that day had broken fully, they could see Ira Hocker's outfit, a block or two away, on top of the knob Stub had rejected as a drilling site, in favor of the seep basin. Hocker's fifty-foot tower had been set up, under cover of night. But the heavy steam engine which operated his rocker arm, and the massive bull-wheels which formed his cable-spool still were mounted on the rollers on which they had been transported from the Dome.

Twenty or thirty men were on the knob, but they were idle. Hocker himself was present. But instead of pushing his crew to get his rig up, he sat perched on top of his boiler, looking in the direction of Stub's rig. From time to time, he lifted a pair of binoculars, as if to inpsect more closely the action of the hammer-and-pipe contraption.

"What's he up to?" Logan growled. "Why don't he get his boiler set, and get his tower rigged? I don't like it, him sitting there like he had no call to hurry."

"He hasn't any call to hurry," Stub opined. "He knows if this outfit works, he's whipped. He knows if my pipe buckles, we're through, and he won't have to hurry to beat us. He's just waitin' now to see how we do, before he puts himself to more work and trouble."

"I dunno," Logan said glumly. "The progress we're making with this here third length, it looks like he could get rigged and still beat us, with that hot-shot cable-tool outfit he's got."

AFTER a time, it seemed that Ira Hocker arrived at the same conclusion. For half an hour straight, he watched the progress of the third pipe-length through his glasses. Then he got down off the boiler, and started his crew to leveling ground for the boiler and engine, building a drilling floor, and otherwise preparing to make a race of it.

Impatience nagged at Stub Williams, and when he permitted it suspense would tighten his chest muscles and he would swear at his primitive and puny machine, cursing it for its inefficiency. Then he would force his iron will upon himself—keeping in mind the story of the tortoise and the hare—would hold himself to the irksome routine, gaining inches and fraction-inches, whereas Hocker when rigged would make yards.

By noon, the third pipe had been sunk. But the signs were unmistakable. They'd made forty feet in the first six hours, and only twenty in the last six. He was now down as far luck had ever carried him. There was still no oil, and no indication that oil was below his rig. The formation had hardened under his cutter until the last hour's work showed almost no progress at all. Ira

Hocker now had his boiler and engine set and was working on his floor.

"An outfit like this purely can't go deeper than sixty feet," he told Logan and his anxious-eyed daughter. But he saw they did not believe him. So he screwed on a fourth length of pipe and the work went on.

But he soon saw it was no use. Now, when the dropping hammer struck it, the tall length of new pipe shivered and vibrated exactly like a nail that is held against steel and struck with a hammer. The vibrations filled the air with a buzzing, whurring sound, like that put out by a knife that is hurled against hardwood, burying its point in the grain, its handle left free to quiver.

He steadied the upper part of the pipe as best he could with clamps and guys. He shortened the stroke of the hammer, at first by half, and then by more, pulling the trip before the weight had reached the top of the tower. He waited until all the vibration had gone out of the pipe, each time before signalling Logan to pull off.

These precautions paid off in keeping his pipe from buckling. But lessening the stroke and increasing the interval between blows cut progress to an infinitesimal pace that spelled defeat in itself. An inch in half a dozen blows was good going. By sundown, the fourth pipe still protruded a long fifteen feet in the air. And Ira Hocker was rigging his tower. Doubts and apprehensions began to eat at Stub's strength, like cancer. He knew he was being beaten, and there was nothing he could do about it. And it was a funny thing. He'd had a pretty good hunch when he'd started this job that it wasn't going to work. He hadn't cared a lot. He'd do his best, and if his best wasn't good enough, he'd have to leave it at that.

But he wasn't willing to leave it at that, now. After twenty hours of effort—twenty hours without let-up, except a minute now and then to gulp a sandwich and a cup of coffee—he wanted to complete this well about as desperately as he wanted to live. And that doubt and the impatience that grew out of it brought on the disaster he had feared from the first.

DUSK was thickening into night when it happened. Driven by impatience and fear, he had been lengthening the stroke of the hammer again, gradually. Letting it rise farther up its guides before pulling the trip. He'd known he was courting catastrophe. But it had seemed at the time that he'd had no choice. The cutter tip at the bottom of the first pipe section, some sixty-five feet below, had run into something that felt like bedrock, and a dozen strokes failed to yield any progress at all.

It was then that he'd started to increase the distance and the force of the hammer's blows. But, even with the increase, the next dozen strokes were equally futile. So, from a ceiling of five feet, Stub stretched the distance to ten before tripping.

For the last several hours, he had kept one hand on the pipe at each blow, gauging its vibration and shock much as a boilerman keeps an eye on his safety clocks, ready to ease off pressure at the danger line. As the hammer struck, after the ten-foot drop, he felt the violence of the shock clear to his toes. The pipe seemed to leap upward instead of down, and left his palm completely, only to flip back and strike him a stinging, numbing blow.

"*Hold it!*" he called hoarsely to Logan. Then he stepped back a foot and looked up. The hammer still rested on top of the pipe. And the pipe was bowed slightly. Bellying out at the middle.

"Take a hold again, and lift her off!" he called next, in a voice that cawed like a crow's.

Logan backed the horse, hooked the tackle to his swingletree, and led the horse forward. The heavy weight was lifted off the pipe, and the pipe was clearly visible against the still-light sky. It did not straighten when the pressure was taken from the top.

Stub Williams stood rigid, clenching and unclenching his fists. All his doubts and apprehensions returned, one piling on top of the other, matured now into bleak despairing certainties. The pipe was sprung. Another lick would fix it like the spike in Williams' pocket.

He was silent so long that Logan left the horse and walked back to where he stood. The lawyer looked up, and saw what Stub was seeing. He, too, stood silent then. After a while, their eyes met across the gloom between them. Each read the other's face and saw his own thoughts confirmed. Neither of them looked at Merrybelle, who had walked over to look at the trouble her-

self. But, after a time, Logan did speak what they both were thinking, even if he put it as a question, not as a statement of fact.

"There she goes, eh, Stub? That mean we're done?"

Stub knew the answer. He hated Logan, for asking it. Hated him for his cowardice in making Stub be the one to say it. So he didn't answer. Not directly. He put it another way.

"We got one more time to hit 'er," he said hollowly. "One more lick, to see. So make her a good one. Take 'er to the top, and we'll let 'er go!"

Logan returned to his horse. Stub turned to Merrybelle. "Stand back," he told her gruffly. "When that hammer hits, the pipe may break. Or it may spring out and smash the tower. It might do a lot of things. So get back!"

But he didn't move an inch himself, and the girl stood at his side. Gazing upward.

The hammer went to the top of the tower. Fifteen feet above the end of the pipe. Stub took a breath, and pulled the trip. The iron weight plunged down.

Stub heard the impact. He felt the shock of the blow in the ground under his feet. But the sound of it was different. It wasn't the dull, solid clang of steel on solid steel, which he had got used to hearing. The stubborn pipe bowed only slightly more, then it dropped, as if all resistance below had been broken. Dropped till the ridge of the sleeve rang against the lower clamp. Dropped almost out of sight.

"Pull her off again, Asa!" he shouted excitedly. Logan backed the horse and raised the weight again. Stub risked his head below the hammer and put his ear to the mouth of the pipe. Far below he could hear a whispering. A murmuring of liquid, pouring through the sieve-like perforations above the cutter.

He kept himself in hand. That crust they'd hammered through might only be a subterranean river crust. The liquid flowing into his pipe eighty feet below might be nothing but water. He turned his head to the pipe, and put his nose to it, inhaling deeply.

His breath caught in his throat. There was no mistaking that smell!

Stub Williams forgot that he hated that fulsome, rotten-egg stench. Forgot that Asa Logan had told him he'd learn to like it, if he stayed around Wildcat. He knew only that he'd brought his well in. Knew only that he'd won.

"Well, there she is, Merrybelle," he said calmly. "We've brung her in. You've got an oil well."

For an instant, the girl did not speak. Did not dare to believe. Then she, too, put her nose to the pipe. With a glad, choked cry, she straightened and kissed Stub Williams fully on the mouth. His chapped lips burned to the impact, and he knew then that this was what he had been drilling for—not for the stinking crude oil.

But he had no time to enlarge on his reward. The girl's cry had brought her father, running. Behind Logan, others were coming, too. Hearing them, Stub Williams remembered how tired he was.

CHAPTER VI

THE SPIDER STRIKES

"AIN'T it going to come up, like a geyser?" Weavil Smith asked in a disappointed voice. "I mean, I thought when you struck oil, she shot up into the air—like the last well that Hocker brought in."

"Hocker tapped a gas head," Asa Logan explained. "To get a gusher, you've got to have gas or a lot of rock pressure. There may have been gas here once, but the fact there was a seep here shows there was a leak, and if there was any gas, I reckon it got away—long time before old Jim Bridger found his tar spring."

"Well," Smith resumed, "if it ain't going to run, how we going to get that sample? And after we get the sample, how we going to get the stuff up here, without any pump?"

Logan shook his head. "That's one we got to figure out. I checked on pumps, last time I was in Casper. There isn't anything in town, and there's damned little to hope for. Ira Hocker has bought everything up they ever had in that line, and has placed orders for all they can get, in the next six months. They told me there I couldn't get nothing this side of New York, and New York couldn't help me right away. Trouble is, the demand for engine-driven hydraulic pumps is a new thing yet. The manufacturers

can't fill it, till they get tooled for bigger production."

"Then what we gettin' excited for?" Smith demanded disgustedly. "A well's no good, if the oil don't run, and you haven't got any pipe."

"I—I was kind of hoping this one would run, leak or no," Logan said lamely. "Does look like mebbe we started to yell too soon. I guess mebbe Hocker was counting on this all the time."

It was a sobered group now that stood around the idle rig. Merry Logan, however, did not join in the mourning. She looked down at Stub Williams, who was seated on the ground, drinking a cup of coffee in silence. Even through the thickening gloom, Stub could read the absolute faith and confidence in her look. And, under that stimulus, an idea which had been taking shape in a secret place in his brain now rose to the level of consciousness.

"I came here expecting to sink a water well," he mentioned, holding his cup out for a refill. "I didn't expect to tap any artesian head, out here in the desert. I brought a windmill wheel and pump along."

A startled silence followed the declaration. Then Asa Logan spoke skeptically. "You mean—you think that puny water pump would pump oil?"

Williams shrugged. "My puny water-well rig punched your hole, didn't it? The well's shallow as some water wells. I don't *know* that my pump would work. But I don't see why it wouldn't. Might not bring up the stream a power pump would bring. But what the hell? A little stream is better than no stream."

Another silence ensued. Then Logan spoke again, hollowly. "Pump oil with a *windmill?* Now that would be something—if it would work!"

He laughed, at first with relish, then in resignation. "Nope. I'm afraid that's no good. If that would work, there would be a lot of people doing it."

None of the lawyer's associates challenged his logic, and Stub Williams shrugged again, willing to let it drop. It wasn't his oil well.

But Merry Logan wouldn't let it drop. She turned on her father like a lioness aroused, and lashed out at him in fury and devastating contempt.

"So you don't think it will work—because it's never been done! Maybe it's never been tried. Have you thought of that? Nobody had ever stood up to Ira Hocker, before Stub came to Wildcat. And nobody had ever brought in an oil well with ordinary farm-well equipment, either. Because nobody had ever tried it—or tried standing up to Hocker, either! It seems to me the least you could do would be to let him try this other. It looks easier and more likely to me than the other things he's tried—and made stand up!"

"Now, Merrybelle," the lawyer said soothingly, "don't get in an uproar. We aim to try everything—even windmills. But we've been on the go here for about thirty hours, and there is no call to kill ourselves off. We can let a can down that pipe on a line to get our sample, then turn in and get some sleep. We can decide the windmill, after."

But Stub Williams was glowing from the emphatic vote of confidence he had had from Merry Logan. He wanted to vindicate her faith in him, all the way. Maybe it wouldn't work. Maybe crude oil would be too heavy for a windmill pump to handle. But if Merrybelle thought he could *make* it work, why he would! And he couldn't rest until he had.

"Boys," he said, throwing the dregs from his coffee cup and standing up wearily, "I'm dead from my belt both ways. But if we're going to rig the windmill, I'm thinking we'd better get it done tonight, in the dark. What I mean is, if that deal is going to work out, we had better find out and have it working, before Hocker knows we're thinking about it. When you shoot a grizzly bear, there is no percentage in warning him first. And if that windmill works, Irie Hocker will be shot—right where it hurts!"

Silence gave its reluctant consent, and Stub began his preliminary preparations.

ALWAYS, in rigging a windmill to draw water from a well, Stub left his drilling derrick on the spot to serve as a mill tower, and added only the wheel and gears and pump. It saved time and money, and it simplified problems of transportation, on a long haul like the one from Buffalo to Wildcat.

So, his first chore was to remove the hammer and its vertical guides from his tower,

since these would serve no purpose on a windmill, and he'd need them anyhow on his next drilling rig. The block and cable he left intact, for the moment, to raise the heavy mill wheel to position. From his wagon he took the wheel and gears, had Logan hoist them on the lift, and began the tedious task of assemblage, at the top of the tower.

It was a rough and painful procedure, mounting the wheel in the dark. Logan and Weavil Smith climbed up to assist him. But they knew nothing of windmills and hindered more than they helped. But Stub Williams was now a man obsessed, and he drove himself as he had driven himself earlier, at the drilling.

By midnight, the wheel and eccentric gear were in position. The wooden blades and vane were attached, and perfectly in balance. Stub attached the long pump rod and control wire, greased the wheel and gears and set the brake shoes to hold the wheel until the pump was attached. Then, feeling all wrung out, he climbed down the tower and drank more coffee before going on.

More tedious yet for an exhausted man, was the task of joining the eight lengths of center tubing, and inserting these inside the casing, attaching the two top joints to the double-valve pump. But Stub kept moving, in spite of the shrieking protests of his muscles. And by the time dawn came ghosting up in the eastern sky, the pump was set, the rod connecting it to the gear above was in position, and the control wire was fixed to the lever he'd bolted to the tower frame.

"Well," he said aloud, to no one in particular, "I guess she's ready to buzz."

No one answered him. Not even Merrybelle. They were so close now to knowing that suspense was a hand at their throats, choking them down. Stub stepped to the control lever, and placed his hand upon it. But he too was a bit reluctant to put his brain-child to the test. If it didn't work—well, he could write off the time and effort he had put into it. His time and labor were not excessively valuable, to himself or to others. But he couldn't write off Merry's child-like faith in him.

One way or another, it had to work.

The everlasting east wind—the ogre of the desert—was blowing strongly. Coldly. Stub's damp shirt felt icy against his skin. But he kept on sweating. He raised his eyes to the wheel above him, and put a slight pressure on the control lever. Turning the wheel slowly into the wind. Releasing the brake shoe as it turned.

A quiver ran through the skeletal structure in front of him. The thing he had built was coming to life. It had happened a hundred times before. But never just like this.

The wind caught the wheel's wooden blades and began to strain and push at them. The wheel began to rotate, sluggishly. The rod moved stiffly up and down. The pump sucked and choked and coughed. But nothing emerged from the curved spout.

Stub pressed the lever further, putting the blades more squarely to the wind. The wheel spun faster, working hard against the gears. The rod worked faster, and the pump strained and gurgled like a retching man. Stub held the lever rigid, fighting down a rising desire to let the wheel go, knowing that if he did he'd strip the gears.

Suddenly the pump hawked and spat. Spat glob after glob of thick, black sludge—the oil-soaked cuttings and dirt which had seeped through the sieve below, and which had eluded his swabber. Gradually, the foul slush thinned. The straining pump worked more easily. The load on the gears was lessened, and the winged wheel leaped ahead like a hot-blooded horse given rein. Stub gave it a little more wind, as much as he dared. And crude oil streamed from the pipe spout, like black blood from a wounded hellish monster.

A high keening yell of triumph went up from the hollow-eyed Wildcatters. A yell that was echoed with sour and threatening overtones from the knob where Ira Hocker's crew had likewise worked through the night.

HOCKER'S crew also had results to show for their long fatigue shift. Their derrick was rigged, their boiler and engine were set, and the boiler had already been fired. But now that daylight had come, and their attention had been attracted to the seep by the cheering, they seemed to have forgotten their own business, on the knob. They were staring at a most improbable apparition—a windmill which pumped oil from the earth. Even at that distance, Stub Williams could read the stunned, unbelieving amazement on their faces, and espe-

cially on the face of Hocker himself. Hocker looked as if he had been struck by a heavy club. And Stub Williams felt very good.

Stub forgot the tycoon and his crew then. Hocker could go ahead and drill his hole now, if he wanted. If the county clerk honored the Wildcatters' claim, why Hocker could be moved off the town location. And if Hocker went ahead and brought in another well, that well would belong to the Wildcats.

So, Stub's interest was in his own rig. He put the windmill and pump through their paces, speeding the wheel and checking it, finding that everything worked smoothly. The ground already was swimming in oil about the derrick, and he was about to shut the windmill down when he heard an exclamation from Logan behind him. Turning he saw that Logan was pointing off toward the knob. Stub looked, and saw that Hocker's crew was no longer clustered about the legitimate rig, staring down at his crude improvisation. Hocker's crew was heading for the seep in a body, with Hocker in the lead.

The men were armed with axes and clubs and long pipe-lengths, and a few had pistols in their belts. They were coming to smash the wildcat rig and decide the contest on the spot.

Stub glanced around him. He saw Merrybelle and her father, and nine or ten others. The small army that Weavil Smith was supposed to have mobilized under cover of night was nowhere to be seen.

"Where are your regulators, Weavil?" he wanted to know. And the barman cursed bitterly.

"I expect the quitter sons got tired!" he fumed. "I expect they had to have their beauty sleep. Hell, I took for granted they'd stick. I never thought I'd have to stand over them, lookin' down their necks. I got interested in what was goin' on here at the rig. I didn't know they'd gone. Well, I'll damned soon get 'em back here!"

"Not soon enough to help any," Stub said bleakly. "Hocker's gang will be here, inside of five minutes. And if I'm any judge, they mean business!"

Weavil Smith looked wildly about him. He was excited and on the verge of losing his head, maybe his nerve. His distraction was contagious, and Stub feared that the whole group might stampede.

"Well, we got our guns!" the barman exclaimed then. "Round up your shotguns, boys. If Hocker wants trouble, we'll give him a bellyfull!"

Stub objected, violently. A shoot-out, just now, would be as disastrous as running away. Both would lead in the end to ruin.

"Forget the guns!" he snapped. "Unless they start to shoot. Grab yourselves a club, and stand by the rig!"

"Grab a *club?*" Smith ejaculated. "Man, you gone clean crazy? They's twenty-thirty of them an' less than a dozen of us. We wouldn't have a prayer. Not with clubs!"

"We'll have a longer prayer with clubs than with guns!" Stub insisted dourly. "And if you'll keep your heads, I think I can settle this without shooting. So do as I say, or I'll bash you!"

As he spoke, Stub was slogging through the grease slick on the ground to his wagon. From the box, he removed a rubber hose, two inches in diameter and ten feet long, which he used sometimes to prime a sluggish pump. Back he raced to the windmill and clamped one end to the spigot of the pump. When he straightened from the task, his eye fell on Merry Logan, who stood watching him intently.

"Merrybelle," he said sternly, "clear out of here. There is going to be trouble, and before it's over with, it will be nasty, sticky trouble."

But the girl merely wrinkled her nose at him. "This is my well, too, driller. Besides, I wouldn't miss what's coming. I think it is going to be good!"

Stub had no time to argue further. The Hocker crowd was coming close now. Ominously silent. Fingering clubs and axes. Glancing from the windmill to the spider, and back at the windmill, measuring.

STUB cut his eyes at the Wildcatters around him, and saw they, too, were armed, with pipes and clubs, not guns. They were clustered in front of their precious rig, waiting.

"Stand them away from me!" he shouted. Then he reached for the control lever and threw it wide open. The wooden-winged wheel high above him swung fully into the wind and began to spin wildly. The pump

rod danced like a piston, and the short hose leaped in Stub's hands like a threshing snake. Black crude oil shot from it in a thick arching stream, like ink from a fire hose.

The attackers were twenty feet away when the hissing streak struck them, like a solid weight. Ira Hocker, seeing Stub's intent too late, opened his mouth to shout. The black stream struck him full in the face, filling his mouth and knocking him to his back.

For a savored instant, Stub kept the foul flow trained on the writhing, floundering tycoon, defeating his efforts to stand up again. Filling his eyes and nose and ears and hair with the disgusting fluid. Letting him get to his knees, then knocking him flat again.

But then the others began to surge forward, and he was forced to give his enemy respite to force the others back.

The wheel above was racing at such a speed that Stub feared it would burst its axis and fly off into space. Even if the wheel stayed on, the pump could not long work at its present furious pace without freezing its rubber-coated piston. But, while it worked, the weapon was fearsomely and comically effective.

Stub played the stream back and forth, like a fireman covering a fire. The black rushing fluid struck with such velocity that those it hit squarely were bowled from their feet as Hocker had been. Once down—blind and choking and helpless—they could not get back to their feet on the slick surface beneath them. They huddled and balled together like hibernating snakes, and their aspirations now was escape, not attack. None had broke through to use their clubs or axes, and when the last one had crawled back out of range, shapeless and dripping like drowned cats, Stub reached for the lever and shut it down.

Nor did he fear a resurgence of the assault, once the hellish flow was blocked. Men repulsed and defeated as these had been would not be back for more. Not that day, nor for many days. So much alike were the fleeing, crestfallen mobsters that Stub could not even now tell which was Hocker.

Stub's own eyes and mouth were full of the revolting stuff, from the spray which had drifted back onto him from the hose's muzzle. But he was grinning, inside and out. And the taste of it was not as bad as he had expected.

When the whirring above him had been stilled and the flopping hose had gone limp in his hands, he dropped the latter and wiped his eyes on his sleeve to look around. His first clear impression was of Merry Logan, very close and very radiant. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, Merry was close against him, arms about his neck. Kissing him—oil and all. The others, too, were clustering about, shouting and beating him on the back.

Stub Williams, driller and grease-hater, felt again like a god.

CHAPTER VII

"LITTLE DEADMAN'S DOME"

THE days that followed were busy, golden days.

Asa Logan took Merrybelle and an adequate escort and buggied to Casper, armed with samples and affidavits, to get the lease recorded. Ira Hocker seemed to foresee and admit defeat on the matter of the seep bed. At least, he dismantled and removed his rig from the disputed ground, without digging the hole that might pass to his competitors, in case the county clerk could hold out no longer against the wildcat corporation.

Weavil Smith remained behind to guard the corporation properties, and this time he lined up a crew he knew would stick. But Ira Hocker, seemingly, had become a Christian. At least, he made no overt hostile move, and Smith's crew—at Stub's suggestion—dug a deep cistern, plastered the bottom and sides with clay, and covered it over with a dozen tarpaulins hand-sewn together. When the storage pit was ready, the windmill was started over the well and was permitted to run day and night, pumping oil from the subterranean pools, storing it in the cistern against the day when they would start transporting it to Casper.

It now occurred to Stub Williams that his work was done in Wildcat. He had stayed on in the first place because Ira Hocker's reckless ultimatum had made it impossible to leave and keep his self-respect. Well, he had taught Hocker a sure-enough lesson about pushing people around, and had given the wildcat corporation a producing well. He

therefore could leave now without loss of face or damage to his ego. But he had important business to discuss with Merry Logan, so he waited for her return. And since idleness was torture to his restless mind and hands, he filled the empty hours with work.

With timbers salvaged from an abandoned sheep corral, he built him another drilling tower and set himself to punching other wells, there on the saucer where the seep had been. He did not drive himself as he had done on the first one. But he had a good supply of pipe and cutters, and he kept plugging away during the daylight hours. And when the days had merged to tally off a week, he had brought in three additional wells, all at eighty feet.

He had no windmill equipment for these. But he showed no inclination to stop punching holes down through the seep bed. And Weavil Smith observed him with rising humor.

Williams, the barman remarked, when Stub was halfway down on his fifth well, "you put me in mind of a man I knew in Casper. 'Posthole Brown,' they called him. Handyman on Careyhurst, Senator Carey's million-dollar rancho, there on the Platte.

"Well, the Senator decided he wanted to fence a horse pasture, and it was fall, and this here Brown, he wasn't doing much around the place. So the Senator hands him a crowbar and shovel, points him out a line, and tells him to dig postholes along that line till the Senator comes out with a surveyor to locate the pasture corner.

"Well, next day, Congress is called inta special session, an' the Senator packs off to Washington. Clean forgot the man Brown. Come back the next spring, and missed Brown. But there was a line of postholes, stretchin' farther than the Senator could see. He got on a horse and went to ketch Brown and bring 'im back. But he followed them holes near a week, and finally caught Brown just diggin' into Lusk, a hundred miles away!"

Stub didn't mind the hoorawing. But he was dead serious in his answer.

"That windmill yonder will pump you ten barrels of crude an hour. All right. Sink ten wells, and pump a hundred barrels an hour. Twenty wells, and two hundred barrels an hour. Forty-eight hundred barrels a day. That's big business, Weavil. And you've got plenty room, here on the flat. Plenty oil down underneath."

The ex-barman raised his brows and both his hands. "You mean you aim to mount a windmill over every one of these holes, an' run 'em all together?"

The driller shrugged. "Why not? You could build your twenty towers and buy twenty windmill wheels and pumps for what one high-powered outfit like Hocker's would set you back. And you'd get more crude."

"But what the hell?" the other protested. "You turned down our offer of stock in the outfit. What you anglin' for?"

"My fee is a hundred dollars a well, Mr. Smith," Stub told him honestly. "This is easy digging, and I don't have to move my rig but a few feet between jobs. A good thing for you is a good thing for me. I'm making the most of it. You better do the same."

Weavil Smith looked wise and thoughtful. He didn't rib Stub any more about not being able to stop punching wells. Instead, he put his idle guards to helping around the rig and even lent a hand himself, and the work went faster.

Six wells had been sunk when Asa Logan and his daughter returned, on the twelfth day after their departure. Six wells, and the storage pit beside the producing hole was nearly full. The corporation stockholders gathered 'round the lawyer's buckboard to hear the news, and Logan gave it to them straight.

"It's good and bad," he warned them. "But the good is really good. The lease is ours. It took me a week to corral that crooked county clerk. But I got the job done. So we have got Hocker straightened out there, and we can go ahead.

"There's other good," he continued. "The railroad has built into Casper now, and a second refinery is going up. People are predicting crude will go to ten cents a gallon by the end of the year. That's money, if we can produce!"

Stub Williams did a bit of lightning calculation, on the basis of forty-eight hundred barrels a day, and he whistled hollowly.

"What's the bad?" he wanted to know.

"The bad is bad!" the lawyer growled. "Pumping equipment is just not to be had. I went clean to Denver, and they just

laughed at me. People are going crazy over oil, all over the country. There just ain't any equipment. What's allotted for this part of the country, Ira Hocker has sewed up, tighter'n a drum. That's where we're licked."

"There ain't any shortage of windmills and windmill pumps," Stub Williams put in.

Asa Logan looked at him skeptically. "You mean you'd put in more windmills? Pump it all that way?"

Stub put aside his impatience at hearing the windmill disparaged, and quoted the same statistics he'd thrown at Weavil Smith almost a week before. He filled out his statistics with the lawyer's own market predictions, and mentioned the six wells already completed, the additional fourteen or so that could be sunk on the seep bed, as soon as the pipe could be hauled in.

The lawyer listened intently. From dubious politeness the lawyer's expression changed to thoughtful reflection, to rapt enthusiasm.

"By the nine white stripes on a turkey's leg!" he burst out, when Stub had done. "You're right. It's fantastic, on the face of it. But I guess that's just because it's never been tried before. There is no reason why it wouldn't work. Stub Williams, you're the schemingest, sharpest, smartest oil-shark in the business. We got to have you in the company!"

Such a compliment, from Merrybelle's parent, was not to be shrugged aside. Merry herself glowed when she looked at Stub, and the driller admitted privately that the oil racket had its points.

Aloud he said, "I'm just a dumb driller, Mr. Logan. I only sink the holes—for a fee-fee." But he didn't say it convincingly. And Logan wasn't listening, anyhow. Logan was looking at the whirring windmill and the flat beyond it, seeing it crowded with windmills, each pumping black liquid wealth from the ground.

"It'll be the durnedest-looking oil field in the business!" he exclaimed with relish. "And one of the best producers. We'll call it Williams Field. The Little Dead Man's Dome!"

He chuckled at the thought, then laughed aloud. Laughed till his eyes watered, and he had to wipe them with his handkerchief. But behind his hale good humor, Stub could sense a lingering uneasy reservation. And he knew the lawyer had not yet told all.

"What else is bad, Asa?" the driller demanded to know.

Logan sobered instantly. "Transportation," he said bluntly. "Men, there isn't a tank wagon to be had inside of a year. Demand on these is as heavy as on the other kinds of equipment. Hocker has all that sewed up. And we can't haul our crude the forty miles to Casper on Williams' Bain."

Stub scowled and looked away. He had known that sooner or later one of these obstacles that Hocker had strewn in their path would be insurmountable. And this looked like the one. As Logan said, they couldn't get their produce to Casper on his high-box wagon. And oil in a cistern forty-miles deep in the desert wasn't worth a dime.

It angered Stub that these men had formed a habit of bringing all their troubles to him, expecting him to have a ready solution to every problem that arose. This wasn't his racket. His business was sinking waterholes. In his business, when you'd sunk your hole and rigged your pump, the job was done. You didn't have to worry about transporting your product forty miles to a refinery and railroad, to give it a value. It wasn't his racket, and it wasn't his oil. Yet, at times like this, these wildcatters behaved as if he were the big proprietor, they the hired men, waiting for orders.

Stub Williams was fed up. He was tired and licked and feeling poorly. He wanted to tell these thumb-fingered tinhorns to take their crude and their Little Dead Man's Dome and shove the works. But there sat Merrybelle beside her father, watching Stub with the same expectant trust. And somehow, because of this, Stub could not say the words that were in his mind. Instead, he said something quite different. Something that surprised him when he heard it, for such a thing had not occurred to him until that second.

"A couple of months ago, I sank a couple of wells for a farmer down the Platte. I saw a lot of tank-wagons belonging to that railroad construction outfit. Hauled water for drinking and cooking, and wetting down the new grade. Five-hundred-gallon jobs. Wooden tanks. Light. Easy to handle."

The others waited for him to elaborate. When he didn't, their faces fell. Logan spoke, a little puzzled.

"Those water tanks would work, I guess. But they're not available either, Stub. I asked for anything that would hold liquid, in amounts that would make a long drag worthwhile. The dealers laughed at me."

"Did you ask the railroad construction boss?" Stub inquired.

Logan shook his head. "No-o. I didn't see any—" His voice trailed off, and he looked at Stub intently. "What are you getting at now, young fella?"

Stub shrugged in rising impatience. "Well, you just said the tracks had reached Casper. And all the talk is, the line won't be run west o' Casper for another year or so. That construction boss has got a lot of equipment on his hands that's going to deteriorate fast, unless he can get shed of it—including a hundred or so five-hundred-gallon tank wagons. Tanks that will be falling in, the first month they set dry in the sun."

A gleam came into the lawyer's eye. But it soon died out. "If them wagons were for sale," he opined gloomily, "Ira Hocker would already have them."

Stub's shrug was thinner now. His voice constrained and edgy. "Maybe Hocker don't know they're for sale. Maybe it never occurred to Hocker to find out."

The lawyer was silent a moment. But it was evident that he was turning Stub's idea over inside his head. It was also evident that the longer he considered it, the more he thought of its possibilities. Finally, enthusiasm broke through his caution, and he smacked his palm with a fist. His admiring eyes were on Stub, and it was plain that he was about to say something golden in further tribute to Stub's intelligence and initiative. But something in Stub's bleak stare warned him off, and he lapsed into cautious understatement.

"You might have something there, Williams," he said as though doubting it in his heart. "It might work out."

STRANGELY, and to Stub's everlasting surprise, it did work out. Better than he'd dared to hope.

Stub left Wildcat at dawn next morning, carrying a six-shooter and twenty thousand dollars—the latter representing the last dollar in the corporation treasury, the last dollar in the pockets of its various stockholders.

"That's all, young fella—they ain't no more!" Asa Logan told him, by way of farewell. "Make it do what you can. You know more about what we need here than any of us do. Get what it will buy, and get us into production. Get us started to delivering crude to Casper, and then we can borrow whatever we need—I'll bet a million-dollar well!"

Once or twice, on the long ride in, it occurred to Stub to wonder what he was up to, riding to Casper with twenty thousand dollars of other people's money, to buy a pig in a poke, for which he had no personal use. But always now when he pondered his unnatural behavior of recent weeks, he found his thoughts were all tangled up with a pair of trusting blue eyes that seemed always to be watching him, even when he was far away from them, as now. So he took his puzzling conduct more and more for granted, and reserved his worrying for the tangible problems facing him.

He found the tank wagons he sought without much looking. An even hundred of them, lined up in four even rows on the railroad right-of-way just at the edge of town. He looked them over critically, and saw that they hadn't yet begun to show signs of disintegration. But all the tanks were dry, and it would not be long.

Finding the railroad boss of construction was a bit more difficult. But when he did locate the man and had made his business known, this harried-looking individual greeted him as a long-sought friend.

"I just got a wire from Chicago today, telling me to dispose of all surplus construction equipment, at two bits on the dollar!" the railroad man exclaimed. "Them wagons retail at four hundred dollars each, new. You can have the whole hundred for ten thousand dollars."

Stub did some lightning calculation. If he joined the wagons in units of four, he'd have to have twenty-five teams to draw them. The least he could hope to get by for was twenty-eight mules to the team for a forty-mile drag with four loaded wagons. He'd have to have roughly seven hundred mules to draw those hundred wagons, and at thirty dollars a head, the mules alone would run him twenty-one thousand dollars

—if he could find them. Besides, he needed more windmills and pumps and pipe. His capital wouldn't stretch.

He drew a thousand-dollar bill from his wallet, and laid it on the railroad official's desk. "This is for the option—to buy all hundred tanks," he said. "Don't let 'em go, without my say-so."

The official agreed, and Stub sought out a friend of his, Slim-Jim Cabanne, owner of the Black Hills Transportation Company, which hauled freight between Cheyenne and Deadwood. Stub suggested a quick one for old time's sake, at the C-Y Bar, and came straight to the point.

"The railroad building to Casper must hit your business pretty hard," he mentioned casually, looking into his glass.

"Not so tough," the freighter said. "Just sets the railhead up, couple of hundred miles. I'll still haul between here an' Deadwood."

"That's what I mean," Stub nodded. "You lose the Cheyenne-Casper haul. Must leave you with a heap of idle mules."

"Some," the other admitted cautiously, sensing a proposition. "You in the market for mules?"

Stub denied this emphatically. "Nobody's buying mules with the railroad here. But you could put your teams to work, hauling my oil from Dead Man to the refinery here."

"I heard you'd been cuttin' a fat hawg in oil out there," the other said musingly. Then, after a thoughtful pause, "I'd like to get in oil, one way or another. Looks like the comin' thing. But I don't think transportation is the way to get in. Won't be long till they'll pipe all the crude in to the refinery."

"Not for a good many years," Stub refuted. "You could make a good thing of hauling. I could keep a hundred wagons busy, myself. I could pay two cents a gallon, for the forty-mile haul."

Cabanne did some figuring on top of the bar. He shook his head. "That ain't so bad. But my investment would be too big. I couldn't come out. Them wagons cost plenty dough."

"The railroad has got a hundred they'll sell for a hundred dollars each," Stub informed him lightly. "And you already have got the mules. The investment wouldn't be so much"

The freighter figured again, and seemed not displeased with his answers. But he was patently suspicious.

"If you can swing a deal like that," he said, "why don't you buy the wagons and freight your own—like Hocker does?"

Stub grinned. "Drilling's my racket. Freighting's yours. Besides, you got the mules."

"What's the real reason?" the freighter pressed. "If you need capital, maybe I could help you get it."

"The big reason is Hocker," Stub said honestly. "He's got all the ground around us under lease. There is no county right-of-way out there, yet. If he was dealing with us, he might close the roads, and we couldn't haul if we had the wagons and mules."

Cabanne raised his brows. "Why couldn't he do the same with me?"

"You've got friends on the county board," Stub said simply. "And it comes to freighting, you can take care of yourself."

They haggled and argued on. But several hours and two bottles of red-eye later, the contract was signed. The Black Hills Transportation Company assumed all responsibility for delivering the wildcat crude to the refinery, weekly delivery guaranteed. Stub folded the contract lovingly into his pocket.

"One little thing," he said. "I hold the option on them wagons. It cost me money to get it. It will cost you two thousand dollars."

Cabanne looked at him belligerently. "You're a low-down sharper, Williams. I won't pay it."

"You'll pay it," Stub said happily. "And you sound like my daddy-in-law."

"Daddy-in-law?" the freighter's jaw fell. "Didn't know you was married."

"I'm not," Stub replied. "But I expect I will be pretty quick—after this!"

THAT thought was uppermost in his mind when he arrived back in Wildcat, two days later, his wagon heaped high with all the drill-pipe and windmill equipment he'd been able to buy up in Casper. But first he had to report to the assembled stockholders on the outcome of his mission. He was applauded as a wizard, and when he returned fifteen thousand dollars to the treasury, he was looked on as a hero as well. Merrybelle kissed him again, in front of the whole group. And her father watched approvingly.

"Now I'll tell one," Logan said. "While you were gone, Ira Hocker got a lot of engineers and geologists out here to look over the set-up. They told him that your windmill is sucking oil out of his deposits, under the Dome!"

STUB WILLIAFS chuckled. "I wondered when he would tumble to that. I didn't think he'd need the experts to tell him."

Asa Logan glimmered at him. "You mean you knew that all along?"

"Well, I had a hunch," Stub said modestly. "I thought it was understood. That is, if Hocker drilling up there on the Dome stopped the flow in this seep, why it would work in reverse, and pumping out the seep would cut down his production on the dome. Like you and me, drinking beer out of two straws, from the same glass. Trouble is, his straw is the biggest. We're going to have to put down a lot more straws, to get our whack!"

"Not if Hocker has his way," Logan objected. "Hocker is putting on his war paint. I expect he's really going after us now."

"Well," Stub said, eyeing Merrybelle wistfully, "I wish he would come out in the open, and get it settled. I'd like to be thinking about some business of my own."

"You're an amazing man, Williams," the lawyer said, suddenly serious. "You've changed this country till it probably never will be the same as it was when you came here. We're going to have to keep you here, in the company. We need you, and—well, hell! After what you've done for us, we owe you a sight more than your fee for sinking those wells."

"I know what I want out of this," Stub replied, his eyes on Merrybelle. "When the time comes, I'll ask for it."

The trusting blue eyes widened slightly, then took wing like frightened birds. But Asa Logan did not understand, or pretended he did not. He shook his head.

"I doubt we could make a go of this without you, even if you do set everything up for us before you pull out. Look."

He reached to the table, where Stub had carelessly tossed his hat, picked it up and put it on his head. It was several sizes large, and sat down upon the lawyer's ears.

"See what I mean?" he asked, grinning. "I can't wear your hat. I doubt there's a man in Wildcat big enough to wear it. So, I guess you'll just have to stick around—"

A tinkling of shattered glass at the window just back of Logan's head interrupted what he was saying. A flour sack blinded the pane, for all but about an inch at the bottom. It was at the bottom of the blind that the glass had been broken. And Stub Williams saw the barrel of a pistol protruding through the jagged hole.

Stub yelled, as the lawyer turned his head. But the sound of the shot drowned the sound of the driller's voice. Asa Logan jerked sideways on his chair and slipped to the floor, bleeding through the oversize hat. Through a hole in the crown of Stub Williams' hat.

The lamp was within inches of Stub's face. He blew it out with a single puff.

"Take care of Asa," he said to the others in the darkened room, knowing the lawyer was already dead. Knowing also that Logan was dead because he'd been wearing Stub's own hat. "I'm going hunting."

Then, pistol in hand, he opened the door.

CHAPTER VIII

MASTER OF DEAD MAN'S DOME

A GUN spat flame in Stub's direction as he peered out the door. The slug *plopped* into the door sill beside him, driving splinters into his face. He snapped a shot at the source of the lancing flame, and heard a grunt, followed by the sound of feet running, heavily.

He was through the door then, and to the corner of the shack. Peering around, he saw the indistinct figure of a man, running in the direction of his wagon. He thrust his pistol up and fired again. The running figure staggered, then recovered and dived for the protection of the wagon. Stub fired again, and the figure fell flat.

In his fury, the driller fired again and again, until the heated pistol clicked empty. With each shot, the shadow on the ground seemed to twitch and jerk. But when he stopped firing, the shadow lay still. In the shelter of the shack, Stub reloaded the gun and advanced cautiously, the hammer under his thumb.

The thing on the ground did not move when Stub stood over it. He turned it, with

his boot. There wasn't any moon, but he recognized Cat Bowman in the starlight. He was disappointed that it was not Hocker himself. But he knew he shouldn't be. He knew that Cat Bowman had not come to the Logan shack on his own accord that night, to kill a man who'd worn Stub Williams' hat. He knew that Hocker hired others to do his killings. Cat Bowman had made a mistake. That was all. A big mistake. A mistake that would cost Hocker's life, as well as Bowman's.

Excited shouts and footsteps now came to him from the shack. Weavil Smith's voice reached his ears, ragged and breathless.

"Damn 'em. Oh, damn 'em! Now they're hittin' our field. Come on, boys. Leave Merrybelle with Asa. We got to save our wells!"

Stub heard it then. The wild confusion of sound which had been in his ears for more than a minute, but which had not been able to break through his preoccupation with Cat Bowman. A raucous yelling, shot through with gunfire, down on the seep bed. He understood then that the attack on the field had been timed to coincide with the attempt on his life. The few guards down on the seep were fighting back. But they wouldn't have much chance.

STUB found himself running then. Stumbling over the trash and gear that littered the ground.

His first impulse had been to go to Merrybelle. But the field had to come first. He couldn't go to Merrybelle yet. Always, it seemed, there was something to do before he could go to Merry. Well, the field had to be saved. If it wasn't too late.

The gunfire on the seep in front of him had now swollen to a raving, thundering clamor. Then he heard another sound. One that brought him up, to listen. It was a low dull roaring, seemingly far away, yet plainly audible above the clamor of the guns. A muffled growling like the rumble of a distant earthquake.

Then the tension snapped in his overwrought brain. He could think clearly again, and he readily identified the sound. Ira Hocker had tapped a gas head, up on the Dome. Hocker, just at this moment of crisis, had brought in a gusher.

FOR another minute, Stub Williams stood motionless in the dark. Held idle by a thought or a feeling which he couldn't quite bring into focus.

Ahead of him, in the seep, the shooting was more scattered now, the yelling more insistent. Swelling above it all, like a trumpet call to arms, the voice of Weavil Smith summoned and directed his henchmen in the fight.

Still Stub Williams hesitated. There was little he could do in the seep. Little that Weavil Smith was not doing. It was blind, suicidal fighting down there, anyhow, in the dark. If he went down and joined it, he'd be as apt to kill his friends as his foes. As apt to be killed by Smith as by Hocker. But up there on the Dome—up where the gusher was spouting—

He had it then. The Dome! That was the place to hit Ira Hocker. That was where he could make it count.

"So you want to rough it, eh, Ira?" he inquired aloud, as if the oilman had been standing at his very side. "Then we'll play it your way this time. And, before I kill you, why I'll cut you down to my size!"

Then he turned his back on the sound of fighting in the seep, and started for the Dome. He made himself walk, instead of run. But he walked swiftly, plotting as he went.

Ira Hocker seemed to be taking it for granted that all the wildcat aggregation would be kept busy that night, defending their own field on the seep. He seemed also to be taking it for granted that Stub Williams was dead. At any rate, it was known that Hocker had engaged fifty hardcases to do nothing but guard his field. Yet Stub reached the Dome without being challenged.

Ira Hocker, Logan had said, was starting to deepen his wells, in an effort to get below the sands that were being drained by the wildcat field in the seep. Around him in the dark, Stub could see the winking red petals of the rig lanterns, and could hear the wheeze and puff of the heated boilers, the measured pulsing stroke of the rocker arms. But the center of activity appeared to be the gusher ahead. Lanterns were converging upon it from all directions, dancing across the dome like fireflies in the dark. Voices ripped out oaths and imprecations. Commands and counter-commands.

The gusher, tearing loose in the dark and in the apparent absence of the big boss, had spread confusion and a little panic over the field. It was spreading something else, as well.

As near as Stub could determine, the erupting well was exactly at the summit of the dome, spilling crude down the slopes in all directions, as a geyser spills water down its cone. Vaguely, through the gloom, he could see the outline of the rushing column—a black, cone-shaped cloud against the star-lit sky. He was still two hundred yards from it, but already he was wading in the run-off, slipping and floundering when he didn't watch his step.

It came to him that in another few minutes that black ooze would cover the whole Dome, standing deep in the ditches and low spots. Fire it anywhere, and the flames would blanket the entire field.

Stub had a clump of dry greasewood in his hand. His original plan had been to fight his way to the gusher before setting his fire. Now he saw it wouldn't be necessary. He halted beside an abandoned tower, struck a lucifer, and—shielding the flame from the wind with his body—ignited the combustible wood. When it was burning satisfactorily, he hurled it out upon the running sea of oil. There it flared fitfully for a moment, and Stub feared it was burning out before the crude caught hold. Then the flickering flames steadied and brightened.

Someone yelled in the dark nearby and began to run toward the flaring torch, splashing and falling like a horse in mire. Stub's eyes picked the man out by following the sound. He fired a shot into the ground in front of the advancing figure, and shouted a warning to stand.

The figure stopped and looked about, searching for the source of the voice that warned him back. Stub repeated the ultimatum, and the man fired an unaimed shot in the direction of the deserted rig.

It was a foolish move. The slug smacked harmlessly into the derrick above Stub, and the powder flash marked the other's position plainly. Stub snapped a second shot, and the figure grunted and stood still a minute, then retreated with steps that dragged.

Others were running toward the blaze now, yelling and swearing. Some carried lanterns, which lighted up their legs as they ran, throwing long, scissoring shadows on the gleaming black ground. But Stub didn't have to worry now about the fire being extinguished. The oil had taken hold, and his torch was now burning over half an acre's surface, spreading wider each instant. Black sooty smoke rolled up from it in choking clouds, and Stub left the shelter of the rig and started back in the direction of town. The sea of oil soon would be a sea of flame. Stub was getting out while he could.

He didn't look back until he was off the Dome, free of the sticky lube. When he did look, he liked what he saw. His fire was now spreading fan-wise up the slope, driven on by the rising wind. Driven straight toward the spouting geyser. By the time the flames reached that gas-laden spout, Dead Man's Dome would be a little hell, too hot to hold its master. The drilling crews could see this, and were fleeing the field for their lives, leaving the fire to rage unchecked.

Stub had reached the outskirts of town when the sky lighted up suddenly behind him.

An instant later, he heard the thundering explosion, as if lightning had struck the ground beside him. A searing blast of air struck him like a solid weight, hurling him to the ground upon his face.

When he sat up again, the scorching wave had passed. But Stub's head felt hot and bare. He put up a hand, and found a short, brittle stubble where his hair had been. Then he heard a sharp, crackling roaring, like the sound of heavy canvas ripping. He looked back toward the Dome and sat still a while longer, transfixed by the beauty and the horror of what he saw.

The gusher had taken fire. It was the explosion of the accumulated gases which had knocked Stub to the ground. Now it was burning more evenly. Burning like a vast, inverted blow-torch which illuminated the area around so brightly that Stub Williams could have read a newspaper where he sat, more than a mile away. He could feel the heat, also, searing his skin and eyes. But he couldn't look away. Not yet.

The oil well was now a fire-gusher. The gases burned white and red and blue—shooting high into the air. Now it was shrouded in vast, black smoke clouds. Now it stood out bright and fearsome. A beacon

of destruction that marked the end of an era on Dead Man's Dome.

The flaming gusher was not the only fire on the Dome. The whole mountain, the whole uplift, was ablaze. The fiery standard at its crest was merely the climax—the apex of a roaring tide of destruction which had enveloped the whole field. In the eerie light, below the banking smoke, the scattered drilling towers were visible, rising gaunt and skeletal out of the burning ground.

The drillers had capped their pipes before deserting their rigs, and only the gushing well was afire. But the flames had spread to engulf every derrick and rig on the dome. Hocker's whole million-dollar layout was going up in smoke. Most of the wells themselves would be intact, when the fire died down. But Ira Hocker would not work them. Ira Hocker was smashed, like a stink-bug under a heavy boot.

"There's your answer to wrecking other people's fields, Irie," Stub said conversationally, his eyes still on the appalling conflagration he had wrought. "When I find you, I'll give you an answer to shooting people in the back, through their windows, at night."

THE town, when he entered it, was in chaotic uproar. The blast from the exploding well had leveled many of the shacks next to the Dome, and the shocked inhabitants were only now digging out. There was no fire yet in the community itself. But there soon would be, if the population didn't mobilize to take precautionary steps.

The population showed no inclination to take such steps. Men milled in the streets, exclaiming at the spectacle of the flaming Dome, shouting questions that no one could answer. Horses tied to the fragile hitching rails had broken loose and were stampeding. Adding to the pandemonium, a runaway string team emerged out of nowhere and thundered down the crowded street, scattering men as the wind blows fallen leaves. The thirty fire-eyed mules had lost all their wagons but one. This one had turned over on its side and was clear of the ground most of the time, swinging back and forth like an oscillating, wicked scythe.

As Stub watched, the wagon smashed into the front of a ramshackle saloon and brought the whole structure down in a prolonged crash of caving walls. A bleary-eyed occupant of the place thrust his head up from the wreckage and peered about him, his eyes seeming to move in all directions at once.

"Wot," he inquired in an awed whisper, "was that?"

"That?" an unruffled bystander echoed. "Why, they are movin' hell tonight, stranger. Yonder went the first load out!"

Already, the crowd was gathering at the wrecked saloon, to loot it. Stub knew the pattern. Knew what would follow. A little liquor went a long way, times like this. The crowd would get larger, and become a mob. Other saloons would be looted, then the other places of business, and finally the shacks themselves. Someone in Hocker's crowd would get control, and the mob would come after Stub Williams. But Stub had more pressing worries just now.

Turning down an alley that would take him out of the congested part of the town, he made his way to the Logan shack. He saw his wagon plainly in the fitful light. Saw Cat Bowman on the ground beside it, as dead as if he had never lived.

There was no light in the cabin. He called Merrybelle but no one answered. He struck a match and looked around. Asa Logan had been lifted to the bed against the wall. His open eyes were lifeless lumps of jelly, and his flesh was cold to the touch. Merrybelle was gone. The room was in confusion, as if it had been the scene of a bitter fight.

The match burned down to scorch his fingers. He swore and blew it out, and stepped outside again. The condition of the room did not necessarily mean anything. There had been a lot of men milling around inside it in the dark, immediately after Logan had been shot. Merrybelle was likely down at the seep, giving the men a hand.

Weavil Smith met Stub at the edge of the little field. He looked at Stub's smoke-blackened face and singed head, and in them read the truth of the catastrophe on Dead Man's Dome.

"You take a hard revenge, driller," was all he said.

Stub barely heard him. Stub was look-

ing for someone he didn't see. His eyes had gone past Smith to the wreckage of his windmill, which had been smashed, and the wreckage of his drilling rig, beyond. From these to the new pipe and new equipment which had been scattered over the ground, some of it hammered into uselessness.

Hocker's toughs had done their job. But damage here didn't compare with what Hocker had got, up on the dome.

"Where's Merrybelle?" Stub asked hoarsely, at last.

Smith's eyes widened slightly. "Ain't she up—up with her pa?"

Stub shook his head. "Asa's there. Dead. Merry's gone. Room looks like there had been a fight."

"I never went back," Smith said wearily. "I didn't have time. I thought—" He stopped speaking, and jumped, as if he'd been touched by a hot wire.

"Like a *fight,* you say? And Merry gone? Hey, you think—"

"I think!" Stub said grimly, turning back toward the town. Smith started after him, but Stub blocked the path.

"I'll find Merry," he said shortly. "You stick with the field."

"But—"

"Stick with the field," Stub repeated hoarsely. "Times like this, people act like animals out of a cage. Mobs are formin' down there. Right now, they're only lootin'. But they're findin' plenty red-eye. And pretty quick, some master-mind is going to figure out how all this started. That or Hocker will get hold of them and sell them the idea. You keep the boys here to protect the field. I'll find Merry."

HE TURNED then and started off again, toward the roaring shack town. The knowledge of what could happen to the girl if she were taken by the mob filled him with dread and feral savagery. He wanted to run, the quicker to find her. But he knew that running wouldn't do it. He couldn't panic now, or there would be no hope for Merry or for himself or even for the town itself.

He had to go slow. He had to think! If Hocker had taken Merry, it was a safe bet she was still somewhere in the town. Stub's best bet was to join the mob, and drift with it, keeping his eyes and ears open. That way, if she *were* still in town, he'd be sure to find her or to hear of her, sometime. He himself would be in danger, every second he was with the mob, utterly at its mercy. But maybe in his present state he would not be recognized.

So, he joined it and drifted, and looked and listened. But daylight came, and he was still drifting, still looking and listening. He'd neither heard nor seen anything of Merrybelle, nor of Ira Hocker, when the sun rose hot and round as a platter above smouldering Dead Man's Dome—red as blood through the heavy smoke. He was abandoning the try and about to return to the Logan shack to look for clues when an urchin tugged at his hand, and handed him a folded slip of paper.

Stub held the youthful messenger by one arm, while he unfolded and read the pencil-scrawled note:

If you want to see the Logan girl alive, come to the Brown Palace Bar right away. Come alone, or the girl will be killed.

There was no signature. Stub looked down at the urchin.

"Who gave it to you?"

The boy began to squirm and whimper and tug to get away. "I do' know. Just a geezer, back there on the street. Don't take my dollar. He give it to me!"

Stub saw he'd scared the button. He reached into his pocket, took out a ten-dollar bill and gave it to him, and the boy snatched at it, then backed away, warily. Stub let him go. He didn't need to ask who wrote the letter. Ira Hocker had grabbed the girl and was holding her hostage. He'd set a trap for Stub, and if Stub didn't walk into it, the oil magnate just might carry out his threat. The spider's world had come to an end that night, and right now he would be capable of almost anything.

Stub hesitated an instant, tempted to return to the seep and get reinforcements. But he discarded the notion quickly. If Merry was in the building, he couldn't risk a gun-fight. He'd have to do as the note said. Walk into the trap.

The Brown Palace was an unsavory trouble-joint, fronting on the burning Dome. A hip-roofed clapboard structure, it was one

of the few two-storied buildings in town. The lower floor was a saloon and gaming house, the upper story housing "Mabel's Rooms."

Stub cased the place, toyed with the idea of trying to get in through the back door. But he saw that such an obvious maneuver would be expected. The back door would be guarded. Also the outside stair leading up to the rooms. Likely, Stub was under observation, and would be until he was under Hocker's gun. So, he'd do the unexpected. He would walk in through the front door, just as if he didn't know any better. And he'd likely get farther than if he tried a dodge.

THE door yielded readily to his push. The interior was filled with smoke from the Dome, and it took Stub a minute to adjust his eyes to the gloom.

His first concrete impression was that the Brown Palace had not been looted, as the other bars had been. Then his vision cleared a little, and he could see why. There were twenty or thirty men in the place. All of them armed. All of them in the pay of Ira Hocker.

Hocker himself was at the bar, alone. Drinking. He was drinking from a quart bottle, spurning the glass that stood beside it. On the counter, inches from the bottle, lay a cocked .38.

"Come on, Williams," he greeted. "Come on up. Have a drink with me."

The oilman's voice sounded hollow and musty, like a voice from the grave. Stub advanced until he could see the face. In the dim light, he hardly recognized the features. The eyes and cheeks were sunken like those of corpses and very old men. The surplus skin hung down in dewlaps along the jaws. The nose stood out from the rest of the listless face like a cruel beak—producing a violent discord in the otherwise placid expression. The eyes, too, glittered yellow like a hawk's when they looked into the driller's.

"Drink!" he repeated, spinning the bottle down the counter to where Stub was standing.

Stub shook his head. "I only drink with my friends, Hocker. I guess that lets you out. Where is Merrybelle Logan?"

Hocker laughed hollowly. "My note was a little misleading, Williams. You won't get to see her, after all. I'm going to kill you, Williams."

"Where is Merrybelle?" Stub repeated harshly.

"What difference does it make?" the oilman asked unsteadily. "She don't count now. This is between you and me."

Stub was silent a moment. He could see that, in a way, the oilman was right. It was the two of them now. Whether Merrybelle had been harmed or not, one of them would kill and one of them would die, there in that room. That much was fated now. But Stub wasn't sure just how. Or why.

It hadn't been a month since he'd first faced Ira Hocker, in another bar, there in Wildcat. They'd spoken no more than a dozen words to each other at the time. And they hadn't spoken any since. But every thought and every act of each of them since that first meeting had been preparatory to this. This was the payoff. The finish. The thing which had begun without either of them knowing it the instant their eyes had met a month before.

The month had changed Ira Hocker. A month before, he'd been undisputed master of Dead Man's Dome. He ruled the Poison Spider oil fields with an authority so absolute that he had come to think of himself as master of all men who set foot on them. Then, quite by accident, he had braced a transient digger of water wells who would not be pushed around. One of a reckless, stiff-necked breed who would not take a slap from God's own hand.

Ira Hocker should have known better, Stub was thinking. Hocker himself had sprung from that same tough breed. He had forgotten how he himself had reacted to tough old men who had crossed him, in his fighting youth. Now it looked as if it were too late for him to remember.

"You hear me, Williams?" the old man said in a wheezing whisper. "I'm going to kill you. Here. Now. If you won't fight—crawl!"

Stub surprised himself by remaining silent. The month had made a difference in Stub also.

A month before, Stub had been footloose and independent as a porcupine. He'd never ran from a fight, but he'd never crowded one, either. He'd wanted nothing to do with the wildcatters' fight over oil, and had told

them so, and had tried to leave the Dome. Then this crooked-mouthed old man had served him with an ultimatum, and all this had started.

To that extent, Ira Hocker was right. In the beginning, it had been between Stub and the spider there, and Merry *hadn't* counted. But, somewhere along the line, she had started to count. And it was for Merry that Stub had stayed on, beyond the time required to show Hocker he wasn't running. It was for Merry that he'd fought and bled for the Little Dead Man's Dome. For Merry that he'd risked his life and worked himself into a red-eyed stupor for it. For Merry that he'd killed, and was prepared to kill again.

BUT the odds against him now were thirty to one. Even if he killed Hocker, he would never leave the saloon alive. And Merry was now fatherless, and in a bad jam. Stub's dying for her wouldn't help her out. To help Merry, he had to live. Even if it meant crawling in front of his enemy.

"Let's talk this over, Hocker," he heard his voice saying. "I don't believe this is my fight, any more. You shoved it onto me, a month before. I didn't want it. But I took it, because I don't like being shoved around. I've whipped you, Hocker. I've outdone you at everything you've tried. I've burned you out, and cut you down to my size. On top of all that, why have I got to kill you, before I can leave the country?"

"You've answered your own question, son," the oil magnate said, but more gently now—as if explaining an obscure point of drilling to a greenhorn. "It's because you've done what you say that you've got to kill me—or be killed. No amount of crawling will save you.

"You can't back down now."

"I'm not backing down," Stub objected. "I'm backing out. Oil isn't my racket. I don't like it, and I don't want any more. All I wanted out of this deal was that girl. Her father's dead. But I killed the man that fired the shot. Now if she isn't hurt, I'll take her and leave the country. Ain't that fair enough?"

The oilman shook his head. "You didn't think of that soon enough. Look at what you've done to me. Think I could just forget that, and kiss and make up? No. Killing you won't undo what you've done. But it will make it easier for me to hold up my head again."

Stub opened his mouth to speak again. But the old man cut him off. The black eyes were wistful again, as they had been that day a month ago in the Duster Bar. The voice was wistful, too. And scolding. It was almost as if Ira Hocker were upbraiding a wayward son.

"Look, boomer. Let me explain this. You can't walk into a country like this, turn it upside-down, then just walk away and leave it. When you whip the top dog, you're stuck with the top dog's job, whether you like it or not. If you don't accept it, you've done the country dirt by horning in. At least, beforehand, everybody knew where they stood. Everybody wasn't at everybody else's throat, to see who'd wear the big collar. So now, it's you or me. But I think it will be me."

There was an aura of unreality in this matter that Stub Williams couldn't rationalize. It wasn't natural to stand discussing a problem of metaphysics with a man who was about to kill you, or be killed. This whole thing just couldn't be.

But it was.

A part of Stub's reluctance to fight, he'd begun to comprehend, was that he could see himself twenty years hence in this willful old man who had never compromised with life and would not compromise now.

But Stub didn't have to make the decision. Ira Hocker made it for him. The broken oil tycoon took a long pull at his bottle. Then, as if expecting the drink to be his last, he smashed the empty bottle against the glass behind the bar, and turned, grabbing up his pistol. The black eyes were hard and poison now. The crooked mouth was snarling.

STUB WILLIAMS jumped sideways, as the old man shot. The slug smashed his shoulder, throwing him backward. He flipped his own gun into his left hand, and Stub's shooting, or his luck perhaps, was better. He fired twice, and Ira Hocker went down.

Slowly, then, Stub turned to face the hostile crowd. The murderous volley he expected did not come. Shock, or surprise, or fear, or a combination of all three, held the crowd for the instant. But the enmity was

there. Thirty armed men were watching him, sullenly. When he made his next move, he would get it.

"Anybody here anxious to go where Hocker's gone?" he demanded, banking everything now on bluff.

Nobody in the room moved or spoke. It was plain that Hocker's destruction and his death before their eyes had shaken them badly. But it was equally plain that they did not intend to let the oil king's death go unavenged.

Stub met each pair of eyes individually, and stared until the other eyes dropped. One by one, as the driller out-faced them, the dead men's hirelings turned to look at a hefty red-faced man up by the door. Stub did not know the man. But it was evident he was the man in authority, with Hocker dead.

"How about you, mister?" he asked brazenly. "You feel obligated to play out Hocker's hand?"

By directing his words and the attention of everyone in the room to the red-faced man, Stub had moved that individual out in front, leaving it up to him to make the first move, without any help from the others. The red-faced man hesitated a moment, then his eyes fell nervously away.

"I never said it, did I?" he said irately.

"Come to think of it, you didn't," Stub said gently, seeing that, miraculously, he had won a victory over them all, and would leave the room alive.

"Where is the girl?" he demanded then.

Once more, the red-faced man hesitated. Then he jerked a thumb at the ceiling.

"She's upstairs. Locked in Number 3—she ain't been hurt any," he added, a whining note creeping into his voice.

"She better not have been," Stub told him quietly. Then, putting his victory to test, he started to walk toward the door. But it was no contest. The red-faced man moved aside to let him pass. He picked up a coat off the back of a chair near the door, and paused at the foot of the outside stair to button it around him. His shoulder was beginning to hurt. But the bleeding had stopped, and he took the stairs three steps at a time.

The upstairs rooms were apparently deserted. Number 3 was locked. He smashed in the door with his good shoulder, and saw Merrybelle standing by the window. He went to her, and she put her head against his chest, without saying anything. Nothing needed saying, now.

Through the window, Stub could see the smoking ruins of Dead Man's Dome, the gusher still shooting flames. Off in the other direction, he could see Williams Field. Little Dead Man's Dome. This field, too, was wrecked. But nothing like the larger one. There hadn't been the investment, to begin with. A week's hard work would put Williams Field into production again.

Even the larger field could be producing again, as soon as the fire in the flaming well had been extinguished and new equipment moved in. It would take a lot of capital and a lot of time, for whoever undertook it. But Stub was thinking he would have plenty of time and capital, in the future.

So, he knew then that Ira Hocker had been right. He couldn't leave the Dome. He had too much invested in it, now. Too much that money could not buy.

He was trapped. Trapped by his own actions during the month past, and by a pair of trusting eyes. So, he'd be staying on in Wildcat. Rebuilding on the ruins of his fight. Drilling more holes. Pumping more oil. Sandpoints and windmills until he had more capital. Standard rigs and hydraulic pumps, after that. Pipe lines to the refinery. Maybe a refinery of his own.

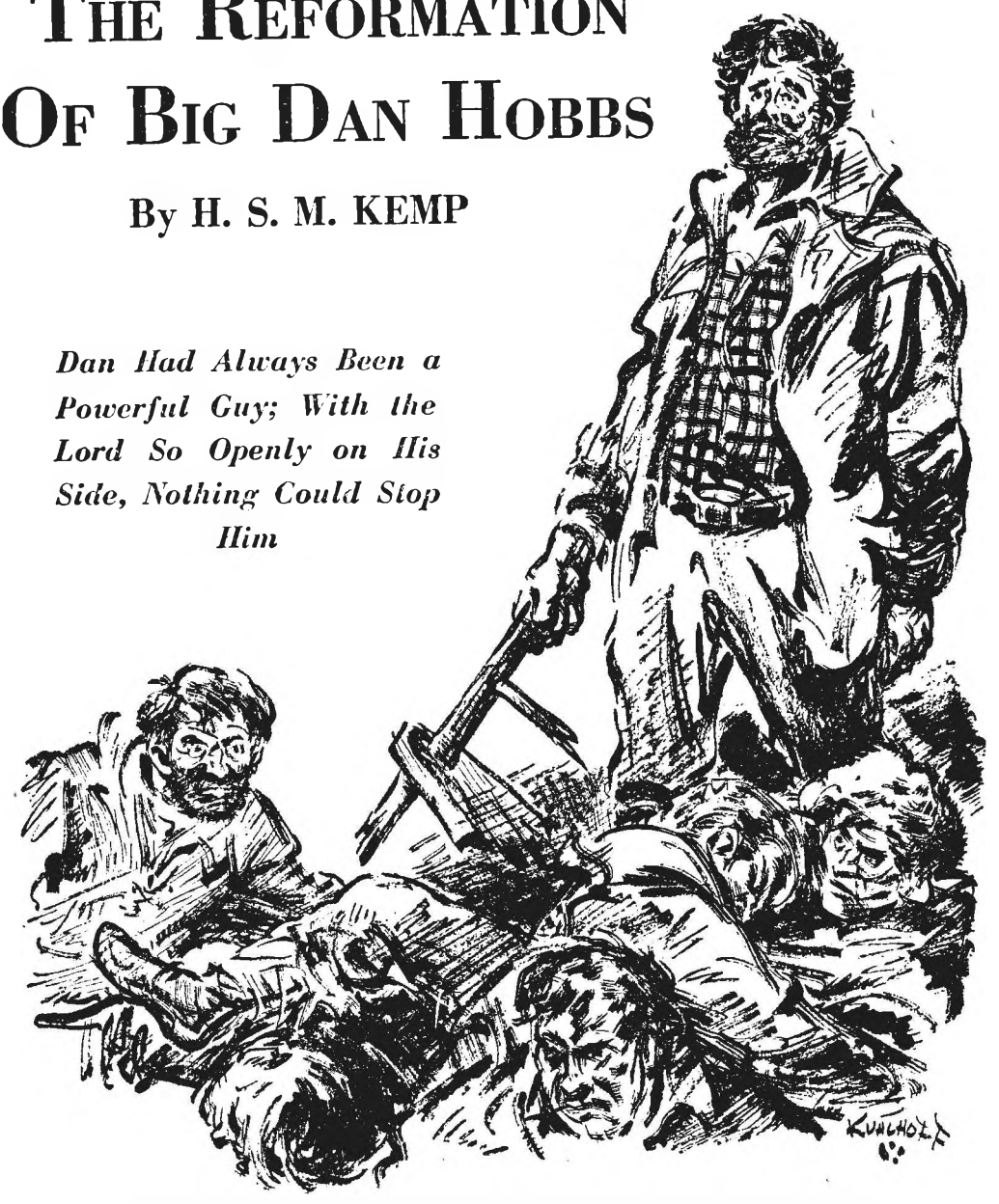
He'd build his empire, there on the Poison Spider Plains, and hold it—until a younger dog with sharper teeth came along. By the time this younger dog came, he would be too old and set in his ways to move or admit defeat. He would stand, as Ira Hocker had stood, and die on the ground he had held.

Merry Logan lifted her trusting eyes then, and kissed him. And Stub knew he would be content to have it so.

The Reformation Of Big Dan Hobbs

By H. S. M. KEMP

Dan Had Always Been a Powerful Guy; With the Lord So Openly on His Side, Nothing Could Stop Him



HE DRANK, he fought, he was most profane. His temper was explosive, he sneered at the Ten Commandments and he did unto others exactly as he figured they were getting ready to do unto him. Summed up, Big Dan Hobbs was a very great sinner and a very great weight on the heart of the Reverend Amos Brown. Said the Reverend Amos, sorrowfully, "I've reasoned with him, pleaded with him, prayed for him—and I can't dent him at all."

Sergeant Bill Peters had tried denting him too. With a blackjack. In fact, when Big Dan went on one of his whirlwind sprees, tried wrecking the Hudson's Bay post or whatever place he was in when the mood caught him, the blackjack treatment was the only one that worked. Peters had the law behind him and the authority to

back it up, but no man of a hundred-sixty pounds could handle another of two-twenty-five when the party of the second part was full of bootleg liquor and was acting like a bull-moose on the prod. So those times Bill Peters crowned him with his shot-loaded blackjack and half a dozen other men helped Bill lug him off to the cells.

Oddy enough, when on the following morning, with an aching head and a mouldy taste in his mouth, Big Dan faced old Angus McKinnon in Mounted Police court and handed over twenty bucks in fines and costs, Big Dan seemed to hold no grudge against Bill Peters. Big Dan figgered th' cop had a job to do, and hair on 'im if he could do it. Then he'd return to the trapline again in winter or his mineral claim in summer and stay there till he felt the urge to go on a binge once more.

But the Reverend Amos Brown, who was more concerned with souls than with fines-and-costs, looked at things from a different angle. Stooped a bit and gray-headed from his years in the work, the parson explained to Bill Peters what he felt.

"It isn't Big Dan alone, but it's his influence on my Indians. I lecture them on charity and Christian brotherhood, and the next day they see Big Dan mixed up in some brawl. Or I point out to them the evils of liquor, and on their way home from church they'll meet him so intoxicated that he can scarcely stand up. And the worst of it is they regard him as—well, as a sort of Superman."

The latter charge couldn't be denied. The Whitefish River Indians were amongst the finest canoemen and packers in the North. Big Dan would run any rapid they'd run; and on the portages, whether it was a load of two hundred, three hundred or three-fifty, Big Dan would match them pound for pound.

Nor did his exploits end there. He talked their language, told them ribald tales, fiddled the Red River Jig for them. His dogs were the biggest that had ever looked through a collar, he called a snowshoe-day anything up to fifty miles; and he was, save for the color of his skin, in everything a Nitchie.

Perversely enough, the women—the white women—of the settlement seemed to like him. Perhaps they saw in him virtues overlooked by their men-folk. They would speak of the time he had driven day-and-night two hundred miles with his dogs to haul a sick half-breed into the post from the Raven Lake country. Or the heart-warming Santa Claus role he played for the kids at the mission Christmas Party. Of the boost he'd given the Red Cross fund by his gift of a hundred dollars cash. But the men-folk brushed all this aside. They claimed the grizzly, the timber-wolf and the lowly polecat all had their points; and if Big Dan didn't show a little humanity once in a while, the guy wouldn't be able to live with himself.

And amongst his loudest critics were the Jobson brothers.

NO one knew just how the row had started but it seemed that Big Dan and the Jobson's—Ed, Earl, Joe and George—had been at war from time immemorial. Some claimed the feud had started over a dog of Ed's that Big Dan was supposed to have poisoned. Others maintained that it was a row concerning a beaver-house. But whatever its cause, the war went on: and Big Dan and the Jobsons tangled every time they met.

Fortunately for Big Dan, perhaps, he had never met Ed and Earl and Joe and George together. Old man Jobson hung out up on the north end of Burntwood Lake, and the two younger boys, Joe and George, lived with him. Ed, married to a halfbreed girl, wintered up at Leaf Lake and summered at Twin Falls. And while George, married to a squaw and raising a brood of kids as wild as himself, made Whitefish Lake his headquarters, he was away prospecting most of the time. But when any of the boys met up with Big Dan, trouble followed as surely as night followed the day.

Big Dan generally started it; like he did on the most recent occasion up in old Taffy Morgan's two-table poolroom. Big Dan was drinking a coke at the counter—the local bootlegger doing a thirty-day stretch—when Ed and Earl walked in. The big man pretended not to see them as they hesitated, scowled at him, then passed on around the one of the tables and began to rack the balls. Instead, he set his bottle on the counter, faced old Taffy and gave a long and analytical sniff.

Old Taffy blinked. "Whatsa matter, Dan? You smell somep'n?"

Big Dan nodded, sniffed again, said, "Yeah. Like somep'n died in here." He figgered it couldn't be no cow, though it might be a rat, or a couple of skunks. Then he turned, looked at the two scowling Jobsons and light of understanding spread over his bearded face. "Sure; mighta known it." And he asked, "When did you bums sneak in?"

They came at him swinging. Ed got in one wallop before a grazing hook on the cheekbone spun him around against the far wall. He bounced back again with a cue in his hand and fight got under way.

It was just another of those things. The two Jobsons put up a good argument for the toughs they were, but Big Dan was as durable as ever. He took and he gave, and the counter went over with a crash. A half-breed on the other side of it, caught in the debris, considered himself injured and took a hand. A prospector, dozing in a chair, woke up to a realization that he was missing something and prepared to do something about it. Within sixty seconds the place was in turmoil, and it was by the merest coincidence that Sergeant Bill Peters was in the Hudson's Bay Store, three hundred yards distant, at the time. Hearing, through the open doorway, the sound of battle and recognizing it, he came on the run and took

one quick look at things. He had no blackjack—Big Dan being more than usually sober on this particular trip to town—but one of the coke-bottles answered the purpose as well. Bill and the bottle did what the others had been unable to do together; and once more Big Dan was lugged off to the coop.

Then one week later, and out of a blue sky, Big Dan Hobbs got religion.

IT HAPPENED up on Heron Lake, where Big Dan had his claim and his summer camp. For two days it had rained with a blustery east wind, so that the net remained unfished and the six big dogs went hungry. Big Dan fed them scraps and even cooked them up a mess of porridge; but still hungry, cold and miserable, they shivered under the trees to which they were tethered and Big Dan figured he'd oughta do somep'n about it.

On this third day the rain had stopped and the wind swung to the northwest. Wispy clouds went scudding by, blue began to show through, and a spanking Fall day was promised. Big Dan knew all about these spanking Fall days after a two-day rain. The clouds would clear away, the brisk northwest wind would strengthen, and in an hour or two a feller wouldn't be able to get out on the lake in anything smaller than a york-boat. Which meant to say that if the net was to be fished, now was the time to fish it.

In the lee of his camp he launched the big eighteen-foot freighter, fixed the kicker to the stern and set a fifty-pound rock in the bow. Then with a paddle and a washtub for the fish, he shoved out from shore, cranked the engine and shot away.

The net was set out from a rocky point on an island a quarter-mile distant, the wind was due abeam and the waves were already beginning to roll. But Big Dan hummed a little tune to himself, held to the tiller of the engine, and in time crossed over to the rocky point. He cut the spark, and the momentum of its drive carried the canoe to where the net was tethered to a pole jammed between two rocks. Then he grabbed the thing, clambered amidships and began to work down the net's length.

He did all right. He found six big whitefish, three great jacks, tulibees, a maria and, down at the end of the net, a twenty-pound lake-trout.

The fish was alive and full of fight. But he ended its struggles with a wallop from the tiller handle. Then he hauled it, mesh and all, into the canoe to disentangle it.

The job wasn't easy. In the blow of the wind the canoe yawed and dragged. Big

Dan worked and worried at the twine, inched it around the gills and the gaping mouth; and ever the drag of the canoe became harder.

At first Dan worked patiently. He didn't want to snap the strands of the net, for that would mean a repairing job; but as his back began to ache and the twine cut into his fingers, the Dan Hobbs temper began to rise.

He got rougher, slammed the fish onto its back, grabbed a whole fistful of net and tried to tear it loose by force. He gritted his teeth, cursed, put everything into one tremendous effort—then skidded in the slime the trout had made and went headlong overboard.

Had he gone empty-handed, things might not have been too bad. But going, he tried to save himself. He grabbed a thwart, froze to it; the washtub of fish and the fifty-pound rock rolled with him. And when he broke water still hanging to the canoe, he found it keel-up beside him.

Big Dan had never been dumped before. The novelty shocked him. So did the water. It was ice-cold. And like eighty per cent of all Northerners who spend their lives in canoes, Big Dan couldn't swim a foot.

But he didn't get rattled, didn't lose his head. He had figured out a situation like this many a time. All a feller had to do was to lift one side of the canoe clear out of the water and she'd roll back onto her keel.

He tried it, but things didn't work out. Shoving upward on the canoe only shoved his own head under water. He tried to dog-paddle, but to have learned the trick he should have started about forty years before. Finally, giving it up as a bad job, he figgered that mebbe he'd best crawl up onto the canoe before he got too numb.

He worked towards the stern. The weight of the thirty-pound engine made it lower there. And by grabbing the keel, by getting a knee-hold on the engine, by making a mighty effort, he was able to drag himself out of the water and sprawl just about breathless on his belly.

In time he wriggled ahead, to a spot amidships. He tried to get into a sitting position, but the roll of the waves just about spilled him. So he flopped down again, spread-eagled, clinging to the smooth hull of the canoe with hands and knees.

Now he was moderately secure. Or secure as long as he lay still. The eighteen-footer rose and wallowed as each wave swept by, but keel-up and half-seas under as she was, there was little chance of her rolling. So Big Dan took stock of things.

A glance over his shoulder showed him that he had drifted a lot already. The island was quite a bit astern, but there were two more islands ahead. They were perhaps three hundred yards away and a hundred yards apart. Beyond them was thirty miles of open lake. Big Dan gulped. If he missed the islands and headed out to sea, it'd be plenty tough for him. By the time the wind had reached its maximum, the waves would be three foot high. Three-foot waves would wash clean over the smooth hull of the canoe, and when that happened it'd be curtains for Big Dan Hobbs.

He gulped again, then suddenly figured he'd be all right. The bigger of the two islands, rocky and spruce-covered, was about a mile long; and the wash of the waves was straight towards it. That meant the canoe would be swept up on shore, where Big Dan could do the rest. He had matches in a water-tight box; so he'd light a fire, dry himself out and dry the engine. There was plenty of gas in the tank, and if the drying operation took all day—well, he had all day to do it in.

HE CHANCED another look over his shoulder. He was now a quarter of a mile from the net and a half-mile from his camp. He could see his camp; and as he stared at it he heard the bell-like howls from his six tethered dogs. Well, they'd hafta howl, and it was good'n lucky fer them that he was headin' for an island. Because if he had missed the island or had bin drowned back there at the net, it wouldabin too bad for them. Chained up like they was, they'd have starved before anyone come along and turned 'em loose.

But when he looked ahead again, he frowned sharply. Mebbe he wasn't makin' for that island after all. Mebbe he was goin' to head just by it. Between that island and the next, and out into the open lake. Then he noticed that the wind was shifting. It wasn't from the northwest so much. Seemed to be more due north.

Big Dan swallowed hard, but he would-

not let himself get stampeded. He'd wait a bit and see what happened.

But waiting merely increased his fears. As the minutes went by and the wind strengthened, the canoe continued to lift and wallow, but the bow-end of her was now pointed on a definite course. The course lay straight for the gap between the islands.

For the first time, Big Dan became a bit panicky. He tried paddling with his hands, his feet, but he almost lost his balance on the canoe. He tried trailing one foot in the water, till he found that the drag merely swung the canoe more broadside to the wind. He gave it up then and surrendered himself to the gravity of his position.

This wasn't the first time he'd been in a jam. Not the first time the cards were stacked against him. But there was a difference now. Where before he had had a fighting chance, had been able to win out by the bullheadedness of his own efforts, here was nothing to do. Just to sprawl on his belly, hug the slippery hull and take it on the chin.

He looked up, around him, just as though there was a chance of somebody being near. And even as he did so, he knew the foolishness of it all. The Nitchies, those whom he might call neighbors, were into the post with their families and had been there most of the summer. They wouldn't return to their trapping-camps for a full month yet. In the meantime, he had a thirty-mile stretch of water all to himself. And when he looked ahead, saw that the twin islands would slip by on each side of him and he caught a glimpse of the whitecaps out on the open lake, something broke in his throat that was a little whimper of fear.

He didn't want to snuff out that way; not by drowning. Not by an extra big wave washing him off the canoe, snatching the canoe from him. That gurgling, drowning stuff—that was a terrible way to go. Then, like many a better man than Big Dan Hobbs, he caught himself voicing his thoughts in words.

"Guess I'm in for it. And I don't wanta die—yet. But right now, only th' Lord can help me. Can't help m'self, that a cinch. Ain't a thing I can do. And would yuh help me, Lord? Jes' this once?"

Big Dan blinked, realized with a start that he was praying. What had been the mumblings of a man up against it was now a cry for aid. And once he realized it and realized how simple it was, Big Dan went all out.

He had need to. He had reached the islands, was abreast of them. They were slipping by, fifty yards off on each side of him. Fifty yards to a swimmer was nothing; but to Big Dan, fifty yards could as well be fifty miles. And due ahead of him, with no land in sight at all, was that thirty-mile expanse of lake.

"So will you help me, Lord? I know I don't deserve it. I bin pretty wild, a hell-raiser all m' life; but you help me jes' this once, and I sure won't forget it. I'll go t' church every Sunday I'm in th' post and—yeah, I'll go t' church, all right."

BIG DAN might have promised more, but even in the moment of his extreme gravity he allowed a few reservations. Feller shouldn't promise too much. If he did, he'd only fall down. But he'd go to church—

"Yeah, I'll go t' church, Lord; and I'll—and I—I won't get drunk no more. Jes' help me outa this jackpot, Lord, and I'll sure play square!"

But soon the islands were gone; and with the big waves cracking down through the gap, Big Dan figured he was asking Providence for a miracle. Only two things could save him—someone happening along in a canoe or a swift and sudden change in the wind.

And as one was about as impossible as the other, only the greatest of miracles could bring them about.

But in his extremity, the miracle was the only hope of salvation. And Big Dan, a kid again, alone, with Death waiting for him out there, prayed as he never thought to pray before.

"Jes' this one time, Lord. Jes' this one time, and I won't bother you ag'in. And I'll raise the ante, I'll go the whole hog. Get me outa this, and I won't only not get drunk no more, but I won't take another drink. And I won't fight—well, not unless I have to—and, well, Lord, *please* help me out this once!"

He looked up, shook the spray from his eyes. Far off from behind he heard another howl from his dogs. He swallowed hard,

then cringed as a great surging whitecap rolled past. More than past, it boiled around him. He felt it lift his legs, his whole body. The canoe settled, gave a sluggish roll; righted again and broke water.

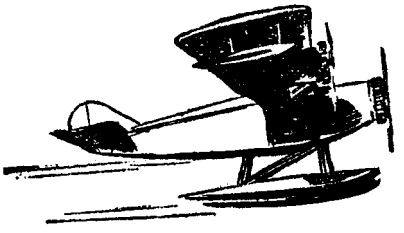
"One more like that, Lord," gulped Big Dan, "and I've had it. From here on, it's up to you—"

Then suddenly he raised his head. What he heard might have been the rush and the boom of the waves, but it sounded like something else. He flung the hair from his eyes, looked around him and up—then stared in sheer amazement. Due west, not a couple of miles off and heading in his direction, was an airplane.

He pushed himself up on his hands, yelled, watched with fearful eyes. The plane came on, its engines pulsating in the surge of the wind. For one awful moment it seemed to veer lakewards, as though it would go by unheeding; then it banked, dipped, hit water with a thudding of pontoons.

Heart pounding, Big Dan watched his miracle being worked out.

THE PLANE did more than rescue him. It towed his wallowing canoe back to camp, waited while he changed into dry



clothes, then flew him into the settlement. There, he chased an Indian up to Heron Lake to look after the dogs till he could return, and started to preach the gospel in his own peculiar way.

He had to. His experience was so dumbfounding, so unbelievable that he had to dish it out first hand.

"Dog-gondest thing I ever run into!" he declared in old Angus McKinnon's Hudson's Bay post. "There was me, asprawled out on the canoe with no more chance than a rabbit in a fox-pen. Not a soul within thirty miles o' me and th' waves startin' to roll bigger'n a house. I figgered I was a goner, and I blamed near was; then this 'ere prospectin' plane come along and picked me up."

"You were lucky," grunted old Angus.

"Lucky? You don't know th' half of it. The pilot was tellin' me that he shouldn't of come across the lake at all. Wouldn'ta done, ordinary, account he was figgerin' on hittin' more northeast. Only just as he hit th' lake he run into a big bank o' clouds. Low clouds, yunno; th' last of th' rain. So he swung around 'em, come out over the lake, and a couple minutes later he'd spotted me."

Old Angus gave another grunt. "The Lord was with you that time."

"He sure was! Just like I ast Him."

The old trader blinked. "What's that? Like you *asked* Him?"

"Yes, sir!" said Big Dan, bluntly. "There was me, sprawled out on m' belly and figgerin' I'd had it. Couldn't swim, couldn't paddle, and waitin' for one more big wave to wash me off. So what did I do? Well, whaddya think I did? Prayed like a parson. Like I'd bin doin' it all m' life."

Old Angus stared in unbelief. He stared from Big Dan to the clerk behind the counter; from the clerk to the half-dozen loungers in the store, then back to Big Dan again.

"I've heard everything now!"

"Oh, no you ain't!" argued Big Dan. "The Lord n' me made a deal out there. I told Him, 'You stand by me and I'll stand by you. Get me outa this jackpot and I'll quit boozin', fightin' and cussin'. More'n that, I'll go to church every Sunday.' So th' Lord takin' care of His side of the deal, it's up to me to take care o' mine."

Old Angus seemed to be getting in deeper. Once more he shook his head. "You said all that? You made all them promises—?"

"I made 'em!" blared Big Dan. "And I'm keepin' 'em!"

"That'll be the day—" muttered old Angus. "Still," he pointed out, "if you believe it was the Lord who saved you, keep on believing so. Only, me being a good Presbyterian, I sort of doubt it. What I mean, for ten years or more you've been a blot on the local landscape. You've drunk more liquor, got into more rows and caused more trouble than any other man in town. The Lord never worried you then. But suddenly you get into a jam, and you begin to holler about it. And now you figure the Almighty was standing by and just waiting for the chance to help you."

BIG DAN frowned. He gave the matter some considerable thought. But he came back to his own stubborn viewpoint.

"I don't know nothin' about that," he argued. "One way, mebbe you're right. Like if some buzzard did you dirt every chance he got, you wouldn't feel like helpin' him out. But mebbe the Lord's different. Mebbe He says to Himself, 'This jughead, now, he figgers he's smart. Well, that's okay by me. But one of these days I'll pin his ears back and see what he does then. And we'll see if he's as smart as he thinks he is.' Well," concluded Big Dan, "I wasn't so smart, and it wasn't till I got me ears pinned back that I knew it."

But old Angus wasn't wholly convinced. "I'd like to think it was the Lord," he argued. "The Lord Who detoured the plane. Personally, though, I sort of figure it was the clouds."

"Sure," agreed Big Dan, cheerfully. "Sure it was the clouds. But Who set 'em there so's the plane went round 'em?"

But it was not only in the Hudson's Bay store that Big Dan testified. He made a tour of the settlement, broadcasting the marvel of his escape. He told it to Bill Peters of the Police, to the Reverend Amos Brown. He told it to anyone who would stand still long enough to listen. And not all of them received the news alike. The Reverend Amos was delighted to hear of the brand plucked from the burning, but Bill Peters was a trifle skeptical.

"Sounds sorta funny to me, Dan. Sort of too good to be true."

"Whadya mean?" blared Big Dan. "You figger I'm lyin' or somep'n? That I never knew how to pray?"

"Not that," Bill Peters was quick to assure him. "I mean, about your reformation. No drinking, no fighting— See a month from now, Dan, and I'll tell you more about it then."

BUT THE month went by, and Big Dan Hobbs continued to tread the straight and narrow. He made his trips into the settlement; and though liquor—in defiance of Bill Peters' best efforts—was still to be had, Big Dan drank nothing stronger than black tea, blacker coffee or coke. He got into no fights, seemed to have forgotten all the cuss-words he ever knew and showed up at church every Sunday he happened to be in town. That the services conducted by the Reverend Amos were all in Cree discouraged him not at all. Big Dan's Cree, hitherto used mostly for the telling of ribald tales, was now put to singing hymns. Big Dan had a good voice, though Bill Peters remarked there was something a bit pardoxical in Big Dan interpreting himself as one of "the little children, weak," and bawling the hymn in a voice that shook the rafters.

But the convert seemed to enjoy it, the Reverend Amos enjoyed it more, but Bill Peters wondered just how long this thing would last. Big Dan seemed too tractable, too subdued; and Peters prophesied that when Big Dan finally did blow up, he'd blow up in a big way.

But fall turned into winter, the weeks rolled by and Christmas came around. Big Dan pulled in on the Eve with his six big dogs, his high-headed toboggan and a full load of fur. Now, decided Bill Peters, with every man in possession of a bottle, legal or otherwise, he'd see if Big Dan's reformation would stand the acid-test.

On the face of things, Big Dan was more the model of righteousness than ever. Never one to hide his light under a bushel or to keep his opinions to himself, with the larger audience that the Christmas influx offered, he expounded again his experience on Heron Lake. And not only on Heron Lake. There had been other times when the power of prayer had proved its efficacy.

"Like when that leader of mine, that Roxy dog, run off back in the bush and tangled with a porcupine. The quills was all down his gullet, and though I got 'em all out, he was in turr'ble shape. I figgered

he was a goner—till I told the Lord about it. And right away quick th' dog starts to get better!"

This one was told in old Taffy Morgan's poolroom, and there were hoots of disbelief. The doubters wanted to know since when had the Lord interested Himself in a cross-bred husky-dog.

"I dunno nothin' about that," retorted Big Dan. "All I'm tellin' you scissorbills is what happened. Then there was the time, late last fall, when I got a cold and figgered I had pneumonia comin' on. And was I feelin' tough! I got to spittin' blood, and I never had no dope in the shack at all. Then after I took th' matter up with th' Lord, somep'n told me to try kerosene. So I tried kerosene—gargled it and drunk it. And three days later I was on m' feet ag'in. No," he said, stubbornly, "you birds are missin' somep'n if you ain't doin' a bit of prayin' yourselves."

Prayer; that was Big Dan's theme. Prayer, and implicit faith. You got down on your knees, you figgered you'd get what you ast for, an, sure enough, things worked out. Of course, a feller wouldn't need to be no piker about it. He wouldn't want to be takin' all the time and never givin'. So, as the preacher had suggested, he was kickin' in for the church with ten per cent of his fur after he got his bills squared off. The money so given would, in the bad old days, have been spent on licker, anyhow.

SERGEANT Bill Peters shook his head. This definitely had him stopped. Big Dan had been on the wagon for all of two months, he swore no more, and never lost his temper. Now the regenerate was going to act on the principle of the tithe.

"Too good," grunted Peters. "Too good to last."

But Big Dan seemed to have no doubts regarding himself. With that bullheaded streak to help him, he turned down all offers of scotch, rye or screech; and instead of spending Christmas Eve with his old-time cronies, he swung on down to the mission for a call on the Reverend Amos Brown.

He found the parson putting the finishing touches to a Yuletide tree he had set up in the schoolroom for the Indian kids. It was an elegant thing, festooned with all the sparklers and decorations of the Christmas season. Beneath the tree were stacks of gifts, the payment of which would ultimately come out of Big Dan's ten per cent. The parson asked his newest convert what he thought of things in general.

"Fine," beamed Big Dan. "Hunky-dory. Only thing, the tree's a bit near to the stove."

Mild like it was, the stove was about out; but the Reverend Amos agreed with him. "We may be firing-up to-morrow. Perhaps we could move it."

Dan said, "Sure. We'll swing 'er around the other way."

They started to; but at once calamity struck. Stovepipes, elbows and all came clattering down.

Big Dan checked the expletive that rushed to his lips. He surveyed the damage, the soot on the floor, then asked the parson if that wasn't a corker.

"I'll get a broom," offered the parson. "It won't take long to sweep it up."

The pipes weren't new. They were indented at the joints; they'd been pounded, Brown that from here on he'd look after things.

"Stovepipes are tricky," he pointed out. "But I know how to handle 'em."

The pipes weren't new. They were dented at the joints; they'd been pounded, sheared, in an effort to make them fit. But patiently, Big Dan worked one end into another, got the first four lengths together and shoved them up into a chimney-cap.

"Now you—" he told the Reverend Amos. "You get up on that chair and hold 'em till I fit the rest of 'em."

This was a separate operation, the joining together of four more lengths and a pair of elbows; but with the section completed, Big Dan got up on another chair to connect it with the four-pipe job that the parson was holding.

But here, trouble ensued. Where the union was to be made, the pipes didn't fit at all. Big Dan worked, jiggled—and jiggled the lower end of the pipes off the stove.

He got down off the chair, started again from scratch; and ran into more trouble. And when he cut his thumb on the pipe's ragged edge, the sweat began to break out on him.

The Reverend Amos could have read the signs, but he was too engaged in holding

his own four pipes into place. And when Big Dan got up onto the chair again to try once more to fit the ends together, he probably thought all would be well.

But things weren't well. One side of the elbow went in, but the other jumped out. Big Dan began to get vicious. He walloped the offending elbow with the heel of his hand, bawled, "Hold 'er, can't yuh!" at the parson, grabbed both elbows and put his heart into it.

There was more slipping, more grating, another cut on another thumb. Sweat now streamed down the big man's face and the cords of his neck bulged like cod-line. He rammed, twisted, walloped; ground his jaws and dribbled through his teeth.

"You'll go in, yuh dirty, ornery so-an'-so, if I smack yuh flat in th' doin' of it!" He gave another terrific wallop, sent the Reverend Amos flying from his chair and brought the whole set-up clattering down around them.

Then the long-predicted blow-up happened.

WITH a roar of rage, Big Dan leaped from his chair to the offending pipes. He jumped on them, kicked at them, stomped them into the very floor-boards. Two that had failed to come apart he picked up and hurled across the room. And only when he could find no more damage to do, did his fury seem to pass.

But as always, it passed as quickly as it had come. He drew the sleeve of his mackinaw across his face, shoved the otter-skin cap to the back of his head, and glared defiantly at the preacher.

"So what?" he demanded. "Go on; say it! Get it off your chest!"

The Reverend Amos gave a rueful smile. "There's little for me to say, Dan. You said it all—in the last thirty seconds."

Dan sat down for that one. He seemed suddenly weak, suddenly very humble. He looked up at the parson, shook his head.

"That all you got to say? Ain't you goin' to bawl me out?"

The parson looked at the miserable, sweating Dan Hobbs. "I don't bawl anyone out. Stovepipes make me mad myself."

Dan dropped his glance to the wreck of them, at the general debris.

"I'm an awful sinner," he muttered contritely. "All I can do is to go up and get you some more."

He went out, started up the trail for the post. Night had fallen, the stars were gleaming and up in the north the Lights swept with majesty and beauty. But there was little of majesty or beauty in Dan Hobbs' soul. For going on three months, he hadn't done bad. Hadn't lost his temper or cussed once. He thought he was set for life. Then, suddenly, he'd blown his top. Had gone on the prod like the Dan Hobbs of other days and cursed a purple streak. And in front of the parson, too.

Big Dan's soul crawled within him. So that was the sort of guy he was! Couldn't keep his word, couldn't even handle his tongue. Out in the bush, alone, it woulda bin bad enough; but down there, in the schoolroom, with th' parson to see and hear everything—

He ground his jaws again, and again anger boiled within him. But this time the anger was directed against himself. And so self-centered was he that he didn't notice that the Hudson's Bay store was in darkness till he came right up to it.

"Past six," he grunted. "Guess the old feller's up at the house."

He went to the house, found that McKinnon had finished his supper and was taking a bath. The trader's wife suggested that if his need was urgent he had better see the clerk about it. He was probably up in Taffy Morgan's, playing a game of pool.

So he went on up to Taffy Morgan's and he found not only the clerk but others present, too. The clerk was knocking the balls around with old McKinnon's halfbreed storekeeper; and at the counter were two of the Jobson boys, Ed and Joe. He nodded to them curtly, looked around and found that this was old-home week for all the Jobson gang. The other two boys, Ed and George, sprawled more than sat on a bench watching the game; and with them was Ed's halfbreed brother-in-law.

Big Dan figured it might be best to ignore these three completely, so he passed by them and up to McKinnon's clerk.

"Stovepipes," he said. "How's chances to get a few len'ths from the store? For the preacher."

The clerk frowned, hesitated, but figured maybe it'd be all right; and he made a move

to rack his cue. But just then Ed Jobson shouldered forward.

At a glance, Ed was loaded. He swayed a trifle, looked at Big Dan and gave a thin laugh.

"Howsa Bible-puncher?" he jeered. "Howsa Prophet Daniel, since he got religion?"

Big Dan scowled. Feeling none too good anyway at the moment, he suggested that Ed Jobson wrap it up. But Ed had other ideas.

"Don' drink no more, eh? Don' fight no more. And y' say your A-B-Cs ever' night before y' go t' bed!"

Big Dan's eyes began to crinkle. The clerk and the storekeeper moved towards the door, out of range.

"Forget it," growled Big Dan; "or I'll slap yer ears down around yer moccasins."

"You will?" Ed Jobson gave a thick, sneering laugh, glanced over his shoulder and drove a vicious kick at Big Ben's groin.

But Dan was too fast for him. He grabbed the man's ankle, heaved, dumped him on his back—and things exploded all around.

The first was a whiskey bottle that sang by Dan's ear. The second was a crash in the jaw as the brother-in-law drove in; and suddenly he found the whole Jobson tribe ganged-up against him.

They were drunk, all of them, including the breed, else possibly the thing might never have happened at all. But their drink-fuddled brains told them that here was their arch-enemy and now was the time for a killing.

And a killing it looked like, literally. They came at him with fists, with pool-cues, the breed with a broken bottle. While old Taffy Morgan screamed for the police, Big Dan got his back to the wall and prepared to sell out dearly.

He took the breed first. He clipped him, grabbed the bottle and flung it through a window. He wrenched a cue from Joe Jobson and swung it at the man's head. But the other end caught as he brought it down and all he got was a shoulder.

They came at him like a pack of wolves, but feet braced he smashed out at them all. There was no call for science, no need to look for a target. He just used his big arms and fists like sledgehammers, clubbing, socking, swinging at anything that came near. The self-disgust, the brooding that had possessed him on his way up from the mission found an outlet in action; and the Jobson clan was there to receive it.

But there were too many of them; and they were too tough. Earl Jobson went down with a smack in the jaw, but he worked up, clawing at Big Dan's legs, Dan kicked himself loose, knowing that if he ever went down himself, they'd finish him. And after two or three minutes of this terrific exertion, he had begun to become a bit fearful as to its outcome.

Hitherto, against any two of them, he had welcomed battle. Those scraps ended up in black eyes, lumpy jaws and skinned noses; they were good, clean fun. But there was no fun about this; it was murder, nothing else. The Jobsons and the breed had just enough liquor in them to care little what they did or how far they carried it. And if they didn't carry it to the extreme, it would merely be because Big Dan was too much for them.

BUT a win for one man against five was a lot to expect. His heavy mackinaw hampered him, and his face was already cut from the blows he had received. Nor could he look for help. The clerk, the storeman and old Taffy had disappeared, probably to call up reserves; but in the meantime he was all on his own. And one look into the twisted, blood-smeared faces of his enemies told him what to expect at the finish.

But was he on his own? Was he any more on his own than he had been up there on Heron Lake? Or when pneumonia threatened and he had but kerosene on hand?

"Here we go ag'in, Lord!" Big Dan suddenly yelled. "I'm five ag'in one right now, but only till you take a hand! And these polecats are your enemies, too!" He broke off to plant a rocking haymaker on the point of George Jobson's jaw and duck a pop-bottle that crashed against the wall behind his head. "Your enemies, too, Lord—so come on in and back me up!"

So, tiring, with his blows carrying only half the steam behind them, he stood wide-legged and continued to batter and smash. His knuckles were long-since skinned to the bone, and one of them felt broken. His breath, too, was coming sharper. He drew

it in great gulps. Then again someone had him by the legs.

This time he went down, down to a knee. He saw a head and shoulders of the man that held him and drove a terrific full-fisted chop at the base of the neck. Had it landed, it would have cost someone a broken neck, but the blow was deflected so that it clipped an ear. Then he struggled up, for the final round.

"This is the time, Lord—" he panted. "If you're goin' to help me, now's th' time to do it!"

Then he ducked as he saw a chair come sailing through the air towards him.

The Jobson brother-in-law had flung it. With enough close-in work to last him for a while, he had edged to the outer rim of the affray and grabbed old Taffy's chair from behind the counter. It was a good chair, a kitchen chair, a solid chair; so that as it crashed against the wall only two of its legs were broken. Big Dan grabbed the thing in his hairy hands and went to work with it.

The first swing got Ed Jobson. Ed was wearing a heavy fur cap or his skull would have been split. George got a jab with one of the rungs that broke both the rung and his nose. And with only Joe and Earl left and a brother-in-law who was under retreat, Big Dan flung the chair away as being unworthy and finished the thing with his fists.

He was just mopping up as a cluster of figures broke through the door. One was the uniformed Bill Peters, another was a wide-eyed Parson Brown, the other two the clerk and Taffy Morgan.

Big Dan stood there as the cop shoved through. His hands were hanging at his sides, his chest heaving. Blood coursed down his forehead and over a half-closed eye. Taffy Morgan was yapping like a terrier.

"Wasn't his fault this time!" he was telling Bill Peters. "He come in here peaceful enough, and they jumped him."

When he was able to, Big Dan spat thickly. "Yeah," he gasped; "they jumped me. Tough goin' for a while, till someone chucked a chair. Then I used it."

Bill Peters stepped over the inert form of Earl Jobson, looked around, and at brother, George, who was holding his broken nose.

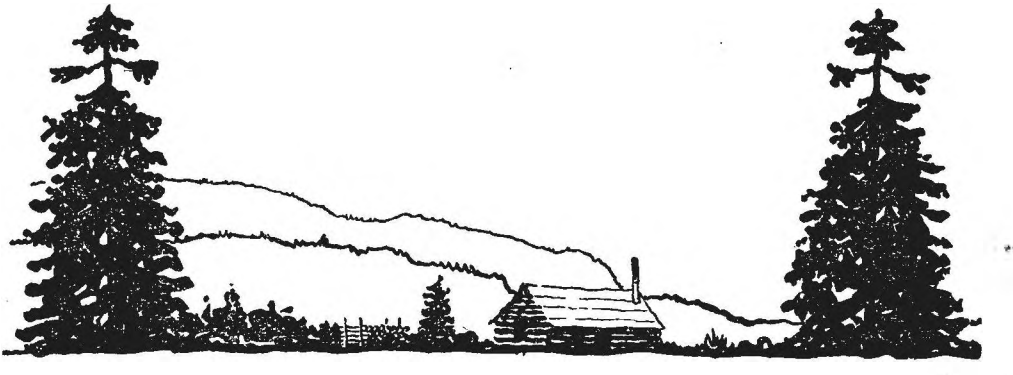
"Looks like you birds bit off more than you could chew." He gave a sour grin. "And only five to one!"

Big Dan managed a split-lipped grin at the parson. "Not jes' five to one. I had th' Lord on my side. And like I bin tellin' you, He never let me down yet."

"Didn't, eh?" grunted Bill Peters. "Well, between you, you done pretty good." He took another look at the wreckage. "Though maybe the chair helped most."

Big Dan glanced across at the parson. "Th' chair! Now it's th' chair—! My gosh," he mourned; "can't these scissorbills give th' Lord credit for nothin'?"

But the parson merely smiled. "You're right, Bill," he told the sergeant. "Though you'll have to admit Dan's right too. For all you've got to ask yourself is Who supplied the chair."



MURDER DEALS THE CARDS

. . . . There Was the Matter of the Eight Kings Routine Mixed Up in Several Murders

I

THE man was very drunk. He staggered with the rubber-kneed gait of a comedian, but there was nothing funny in the staring blankness of his face. His hand propped him away from the fence again and again, and each step was a lurching rush of movement barely strong enough to keep him upright.

Mel Carter watched from where he waited for a street light. Pity lay in his eyes, pity and a faint sheen of amusement, for the effect was ludicrous. The night was late, full moon lifting like an orange globe above the trees, the streets completely deserted.

"Boy, what a head he'll have," Carter said thoughtfully, still watching.

The traffic light changed, and he took a hesitant step forward, moving awkwardly with the use of the cane. Still unaccustomed

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

to it, he felt as awkward as the drunk appeared to be.

"Mister!" the drunk cried out then, and his knees gave way and he was slipping to the walk, hands futilely striving to hold him erect.

"Hell!" Mel Carter said thinly and turned back.

He wanted nothing of this. Drunks were messy, particularly this kind. Roused, he might fight, or again he'd probably be a flaccid lump of unresisting flesh. Either way, he was not Carter's problem.

But some impulse sent him to the man, his left foot tapping stiffly, its mechanism of steel and springs still a mystery to Carter. It was at moments like this that he realized he was not like other men. Once, he had walked quickly, precisely, but now the prosthetic leg made every movement an effort.

"Okay, let's try to get up," he said, and

bent to aid the fallen drunk. "Just try to help; I can't lift you alone."

The drunk's head rolled back and forth, saliva at the corner of his mouth. His eyes were wide and staring, seeing nothing. Perspiration was on his face, and he pawed clumsily at the air with his left hand.

"No," he mouthed harshly, "no, Kleever, no!"

Mel Carter grunted from exertion, trying to aid the other to his feet. The man came partly erect, braced on his hands and knees, shaking his head like a wounded dog's.

"Up, man," Carter said. "Damn it, you've got to help."

He saw the darkness then, saw the spreading stain on the other's back. Horror touched him, then caution. His fingers went out and came away damp, and he shivered at the stain upon his hand.

"My God!" he whispered. "You've been shot!"

The man's head lifted, and sanity lay in his gaze. He breathed deeply, the breath sobbing through his open mouth. He blinked, forcing clearness into his gaze.

"You're not Kleever," he said clearly, as though explaining to himself. "You're not Kleever or Mort or Daniels."

"Look," Mel Carter said, "just sit back and take it easy. You're hurt; I'll get a doctor."

Now the saliva was crimson, and the man was coughing rackingly, falling sideways. Only his eyes were alive, and they burned with a dreadful intensity at Carter.

"Mephistopheles!" he whispered past a gush of blood. "Eight kings threatened to save ninety-five—" He gagged, then began again. "Mephistopheles—bringing money—"

"Easy, man," Carter said savagely, and his gaze ran the length of the street, searching for help and finding none.

The man's right hand lifted, thrusting at Carter, and dangling from it was a handkerchief wrapped about some object.

"Meph—" he began, and then the hand dropped and the man was dead, crumpling gently against the brick base of the iron fence.

"Dear God!" Mel Carter whispered blankly.

He straightened, stepping back, and it was then he realized he had taken the handkerchief-wrapped object from the other's hand. He licked his lips, wondering what to do. He could not carry the man; and too, he realized the police would not like his moving the body.

He searched for house lights, finding none. The neighborhood was asleep. The nearest telephone would be in his rooming house, three blocks away.

He turned and hurried toward the corner, cursing the awkwardness of his leg, wishing he could run. Maybe he was wrong; maybe the man was not dead; maybe quick surgery could save his life.

The traffic light was green, yet he crossed, for the street was empty. His cane made little tock-tock sounds on the pavement, and he could hear the pounding of his heart. Breath was hot in his throat. He looked back, seeing the black huddle on the street walk, then went on, forcing unaccustomed speed into his steps.

He was across the street, going past the corner, when he first heard the sound of the car a block away. Headlights glittered, scything twin streaks of brilliance along the street. Here was help, if he could only stop the car.

He turned, and it was then the car spun toward the curb, tires squealing. He saw the men climb from the car, almost running toward the body. A wordless voice said something, and then the body was being lifted and carried toward the car.

"Hey!" Mel Carter cried. "Hey!"

He saw the white blurs of faces turning his way, saw the flicker of flame in one man's fist. He was throwing himself aside instinctively, even as the echo of the single shot slapped from house to house. Then the sedan motor roared, and the car whirled in a U-turn, flashing back along the street and about the corner.

MEL CARTER lay where he had fallen, shocked by the sudden viciousness of everything. Lights came on in several houses, windows sliding up. A man called out.

He came to his feet. Somehow, the shot had touched the fuse of panic in his heart, and he felt only the urge to get away. Awkwardly, he bent and found the cane and handkerchief bundle, then began his flight.

He was half a block from the rooming house when the first thin wail of a siren

sounded. He was inside the door, when the squad car flashed past. A triphammer pounded inside his chest, and he could feel cold perspiration sliding down his back.

He leaned against the wall, breathing hard. Mrs. Sanders, the landlady, peered suspiciously past a door chain, then smiled.

"I was wondering where you were," she said. "How was the walk?"

Mel Carter swallowed. "Fine, fine," he said, and heard the siren die away in the distance. "I'll be doing Highland Flings within the month."

"Of course," Mrs. Sanders said in a motherly tone. "Now you get right upstairs to bed. After all, this is just your first week out of the hospital."

"I will," Mel Carter answered, and wondered if she could see in his face the shock and horror which lay in his mind.

"Good night," the landlady said and closed her door.

He went up the stairs, awkwardly as usual, then fitted the key into his door. Inside, he threw the bolt, then paced to the tiny living room and sank tiredly into the huge chair beside the radio. His heartbeat was more normal now, and he grinned a bit, remembering his blind panic.

He poured a short drink, watching water fizz from the syphon, drank of it slowly, then lit a cigarette. His fingers turned the radio knob, and in a moment soft music filled the room.

He shivered, remembering. A man had died ten minutes before; and thinking of it, Mel Carter knew he had witnessed the final scene of murder.

He stared blankly at the wall, recalling details, and he saw then that the blood had dried in flat ugly scales on his fingers. His lips thinned, and remembered the doctor's orders to avoid excitement.

Wry humor touched his eyes; the doctor had hardly expected anything like this to happen.

He felt the lump in his side pocket, and drawing forth the handkerchief, he spread it in his lap, fingering the knot. Handkerchief spread, he examined the contents.

First was a battered deck of cards, ordinary and uninteresting. Keys glittered on a circlet of chain. There was a half-crumpled pack of cigarettes and a package of matches bearing the legend, *"Drink Gingeree, the pick up cola."* A few coins clinked restlessly, and wadded up were three bills, a ten and two fives.

Mel Carter pursed his lips. This was the usual impedimenta of a man's pockets, with the exception of a billfold or identification folder. Yet this had meant a great deal to the dying man.

THE dying man's words haunted his memory, making no sense. They probably meant nothing, were but the babblings of a man whose mind was clouded by shock.

He spread the cards, slipping them from the case and fanning them. They were drugstore cards, sold by the millions everywhere. They were dirty, well-fingered, but nothing was marked on them, front or back.

The keys were house and car keys with one exception. It was flat and small and had the words, *"US Public Locker. 45,"* stamped on it. Mel Carter's forehead wrinkled in thought as he studied the key.

He fingered the bills, spreading them, and found the tiny scrap of paper folded inside. *"Check this bill,"* the scribbled note said and carried the intitals, *JR.*

Mel Carter smiled. Maybe this was the answer. Possibilities flooded his mind, and he had to grin at the melodramatic thoughts which came uninvited.

This bill was important, that is, one of the bills was. Whether it had to do with a man's death was another thing. But for now, this seemed to be the only important lead he had. It might be kidnap money, it might be counterfeit, it might be stolen. But whatever it was, the owner had thought it important, so important that he had staggered down a street, bleeding internally, trying to take it somewhere.

Mel Carter shook his head, understanding little. This was for the police, obviously. He glanced at the mantel clock, estimating and evaluating, and he was conscious of the tiredness in his body. Morning would be soon enough.

He fitted the bills and note into his wallet, then reached for the drink. Knuckles rapped lightly on the door, and he frowned. Mrs. Sanders, of course, bringing up hot tea as she did each night after he returned.

"A moment," he said, and reached for the cane.

He came clumsily to his feet, damning

the artificial leg, feeling the ache in his thigh again. His shadow walked ahead of him, flowing up the wall, and the door bolt was cold to his touch. He opened it, then turned the knob.

"Really, Mrs. Sanders—" he began, then halted in confusion.

The hall light had burned out, but enough reflected light came through the door to disclose his visitor. Her light coat was gray, slant pockets striped with red, and her hat was perky in its style. He liked her eyes, unable to tell the color, and as she spoke, he was conscious of subtle perfume.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she said, "but I wondered if you would help me for a moment."

Mel Carter smiled. "Of course," he said, and took a step forward. "What seems to be—"

The explosion came then, starting at the side of his skull and expanding in glorious streamers of fire. He coughed, much like a man hit with a blasting slug; and he was falling forward, muscles paralyzed.

He tried to straighten, and a blow rocked his brain again. Darkness crowded his sight, and the agony of his head shot along his neck and back with incredible speed. He felt hands clutching at him, slender hands but incredibly strong. Then the third blow struck, like an echo of the first two.

"Nice!" he heard a harsh voice say, and then he went inert, knowing nothing, stygian blackness blotting out all sight and sound and sense.

II

THE lamp was a swinging pendulum of brilliance which would not come to a stop. Somewhere, a voice went on and on, the words without sense, the sound shrill and grating.

Dampness lay on his face, and he rolled his head against the flood, wondering if he were drowning, wondering if the passengers had broken free in the flashing seconds of eternity before the plane had crashed.

Then memory swelled, and he remembered those last fleeting seconds when he was struck down.

"—just lying there, when I brought the tea," Mrs. Sanders' voice went on and on. "I opened the door and came in and saw him on the floor. I thought he had fainted—then I saw the blood. I guess I screamed. After that, the others called the police and the doctor."

"He's coming around," a voice said near Carter's head.

Mel Carter opened his eyes, blinking at the light, turning his head as though to take away some of the pain. A round face peered at him, and hands were gentle on his shoulders.

"You've had quite a beating; don't move for a time," the face said, then receded, towering.

Mel Carter drew a deep breath, slowly turning his head. He lay on the couch in his living room, and people watched from near the door. A beat patrolman stood near Mrs. Sanders, notebook in hand, sympathy, mingled with suspicion, on his face. The third person was evidently a doctor.

"What happened?" the patrolman asked.

Mel Carter swallowed, reaching up to touch his head. A bandage was there, gauze completely about his head.

"Somebody hit me," he said.

The cop nodded. "We figured that out. But who was it?"

"I don't know." Carter came slowly to a sitting position, bracing his hands on the couch. "There was a knock on the door, and when I answered, somebody slugged me."

"Who was there?"

"Some girl." Mel Carter turned his head experimentally. Amazingly his head did not roll off his shoulders and bounce onto the floor. "But she didn't hit me," he finished. "Whoever was with her did the job."

The patrolman poised his pencil. "What did this girl look like?"

"Just a girl, wearing a gray coat with red slash pockets, that's all."

The patrolman frowned. "Well, you weren't slugged for the fun of it. What's gone, your money, jewelry, what?"

CARTER felt at his hip; his wallet was there. The ruby was still on his finger. Carefully, he came from the couch, the doctor offering his arm for support. A glance about the room showed that nothing was disturbed.

"Everything looks okay," he said.

Heavy fingers closed the notebook, and the patrolman nodded. "Probably got scared

off before they could prowl the place," he said. "I'll put in an attempted robbery report, for now. You'd better drop in at Headquarters and sign a statement tomorrow, though." His gaze shifted to the doctor. "He be okay now?" he finished.

"Fine!" the doctor said. "The head cut is trivial, and I'll leave a sedative. He'll be all right by morning."

"Then good night." The patrolman turned away, pausing at the door. "Next time," he finished to Carter, "don't be such an eager beaver about opening doors."

"I won't," Carter admitted ruefully.

He waited patiently for the doctor to leave a paper of sleeping powder and to shoo the anxious landlady out. He answered automatically when spoken to, but gave little heed to the words. The night had been too hectic for him. He'd watched a man die, had been shot at and then beaten. He wanted nothing but the softness of a bed.

"Good night," he said at last and bolted and locked the door.

He washed down the sedative with a short drink from the decanter, then reached for the light knob. It was then he understood the reason for the attack upon him.

Except for the battered deck of cards in the seat, the easy chair was empty. The handkerchief, the change and the chain of keys were gone.

"Damn!" Mel Carter said bitterly and, turning off the lamp, he limped across the rug to the bedroom.

There was the bright flame of anger in him then, growing by the moment. He lay a long time awake, fighting the sedative; and when at last he fell asleep there lay in him the knowledge that the affair was not yet ended, that somewhere he would meet the girl again. And strangely, despite the dull throbbing in his head, he felt no anger at the girl.

THE bank was almost deserted in the early hours, and Mel Carter paced unhurriedly toward the tellers' cages at the rear. A woman cashed a check and a man made a deposit.

Then Carter was at the window, seeing the teller's gaze go toward the taped bandage at the side of his head.

"Yes, sir?" the teller said.

"These bills?" Carter said and laid a ten and two fives on the counter. "Perhaps you can tell me what is wrong with them?"

"Got stung, eh?" the teller said, and held the bills into the light, one after the other.

"Maybe," Carter admitted. "I just didn't want to get picked up with a couple of counterfeits in my pocket."

The teller shrugged. "I'd like to be picked up with a pocket full of these," he said. "They're okay."

"Oh!" Mel Carter blinked. "Well, er—this may sound screwy, but is there any way of finding out if these are, well, hot?"

The teller wasn't smiling now; his gaze was suspicious. "I'll see," he said. "Wait just a moment."

He left the cage, going toward private desks at the rear, glancing back as he walked. Mel Carter flushed, feeling strangely stupid and helpless in the situation, but unable to reason out any other procedure to follow.

He caught sight of the bank guard, and a small fist of nerves closed in his stomach. The guard was watching, hand close to his gun. Some signal had been passed, and now he watched every movement Mel Carter made.

Carter swallowed heavily, then turned away, his gaze taking in the teller and the official. The seated man had several sheets of typed paper in his hand, going over the lists. The teller bent over the desk, glancing up now and then, and at last straightened and hurried back to the cage.

"The money's okay," he said, smiling. "What made you think it was bad?"

Mel Carter grinned sheepishly. "I guess the gang was kidding me," he said deprecatingly. "Thanks for the trouble you took."

"It's all right," the teller said.

Mel Carter moved away, thrusting the bills into his pocket, then retrieving his cigarettes. He lit one, nodding to the guard as he went by. The guard's face was no longer set and watchful, but his gaze followed Carter as he left the bank.

Outside, Carter paced to the walk's edge, signalling a taxi. Thought wrinkled his forehead as he tried to find an answer to everything. He opened the door and slid onto the rear seat. "Police Headquarters," he told the driver, and leaned back on the cushions.

Gears grated, and the taxi spun into traffic. Carter blew thin streams of smoke,

realizing now that he was beyond his depth, that this was a matter for the police. At first, he had nurtured an idea that he might play detective. But now he saw the fallacy of his reasoning. This was no task for an amateur.

The minutes passed, and when the cigarette was finished, he chain-lit another. The taxi pulled into a curb, and the driver pulled the flag. "Eighty cents," he said.

"Keep the change," Carter said, and handed the man a dollar bill.

HE LIMPED up the steps to the swinging doors and pushed through. He was in a short hallway which emptied into a large room. Three men sat in chairs at one side, and farther on, a uniformed officer leaned against a desk, talking to the desk sergeant.

"Yeah?" the sergeant said to Carter.

"I was told to come here and make a report on attempted robbery last night," Mel Carter said. "Whom do I see?"

The sergeant checked a desk list. "You Mr. Carter?" he asked.

"That's right."

The sergeant jerked a thumb to his left. "Down the hall and take the elevator to the fourth floor. You're to see Lieutenant Oliver."

"Thanks," Carter said, and turned away, cane tapping dreary echoes from the walls.

"Four," he said to the operator, and felt the elevator lift ponderously, cables rattling overhead.

He grinned a bit, feeling the slickness of perspiration in his palms. Somehow, this report seemed more important, now that it was about to be made.

On the fourth floor, he went to his right, knocking lightly on a glass-fronted door, then stepped through. "I'm Mel Carter," he said to the man behind the desk. "I was directed here to give a report on an attempted robbery last night."

"Of course, of course," Lieutenant Oliver said in a friendly tone. "Sit down; this won't take long."

Carter sat gingerly in a heavy chair, his bad leg stretched uncomfortably, cane upright in his hand. His gaze went about the room.

It was litte more than a cubicle, walls a buff color, three immense files along the rear wall. At one side was a window overlooking a side street. The only furniture was the desk and two chairs.

His gaze came back to the lieutenant, and he wished then he could see past the quiet man's glasses. They were shiny panes, catching the light, until they were like windows through which the officer could see but not be seen.

He was all in green, suit a green tweed, shirt and tie of the same shade.

"I'll have to ask a few personal questions, for the records," Lieutenant Oliver said. "Just routine."

"Go ahead." Mel Carter shrugged. "He'd learned about routine in the Air Force."

"Let's start with your name, age, and so on."

"Melvin Carter," Carter said. "Age, thrity-two; height, six feet; weight, one seventy-five. White, male, and a citizen."

Oliver smiled, jotting down figures and words on a report sheet.

"Occupation?" he asked.

"I am—I was a pilot for Coastwise Airlines."

"Oh!" Lieutenant Oliver lifted his face. "You're the pilot who brought in that burning ship a few months back."

Mel Carter nodded grimly. "I'm the guy," he admitted.

Oliver nodded. "That was a fine job," he said. "Received a medal, didn't you?"

"And lost a leg," Carter said stiffly.

Lieutenant Oliver dropped his gaze, writing again. Through, he glanced up.

"Now, about last night," he said. "I have Officer Vrerney's report. It gives most of the details. However, you can clear up a bit. First, do you keep anything of particular value in your rooms, or do you carry large sums of money with you?"

"No!"

"Could you describe this girl or your assailant?"

"No!" Carter fumbled for a cigarette.

Lieutenant Oliver nodded. "How do you feel this morning?"

"Fairly good." Mel lit the cigarette. "The doctor gave me a sedative, and I took a couple of aspirin when I woke up."

"I'm glad to hear that," Oliver said. "Sometimes those door-knockers are a bit kill-crazy." He laid the pen aside. "Well, that about does it," he finished. "We'll try to find the girl and her companion. If we

do, we'll call you in for identification. Thanks for dropping in."

Mel Carter licked his lips and found them strangely dry. "Tell me," he asked, "was a dead man found in my neighborhood last night?"

He saw the change then. It was subtle, but it was there. Oliver was all policeman now, the affability completely gone.

"Should there have been?" he countered.

"Well," Mel Carter swallowed. "Look, I don't want to get mixed up in anything, but—"

"Go on," Lieutenant Oliver said softly. "You've just mixed yourself up in something."

MEL CARTER flicked ashes into the desk tray. "I was walking home last night about one o'clock," he said, "and I saw a drunk staggering along the walk. He fell, and I tried to help him. Only he wasn't drunk; he'd been shot or knifed in the back. I couldn't lift him, so I went for help. I wasn't a hundred yards away, when a car came along, and two men took the wounded man into the car. When I called out, one of them shot at me."

"On Pine Road?" Oliver asked.

Carter nodded. "Pine and Seneca," he said. "Well, I got panicky, not wanting to get mixed up in anything, and I went on home. I went upstairs and fixed a drink and looked at what the wounded man had given me."

"Given you?" Lieutenant Oliver leaned forward. "Why haven't you reported this before?"

"Well," Mel Carter shrugged. "I was slugged shortly after that, an—well, I'm reporting it now."

"And you think the things are tied together?"

"Yes," Carter said. "You see, the man gave me a handkerchief wrapped about some stuff; and after I was slugged, it was gone."

"Everything?"

"All but this," Carter said and laid three bills on the desk.

Oliver fingered them, the blankness of his spectacles staring at Carter. His features were without expression, cold and suspicious.

"What are these?" he asked.

Carter swallowed. "I'm telling this badly, I know," he admitted.

"Go on, in your own way."

"Well, these three bills were together with a note saying 'Check this bill.' I thought it might be counterfeit or kidnap money or something, so I took it to the bank this morning. They are all okay."

"Did this wounded man say anything?" Lieutenant Oliver's tone was pryingly insistent.

"He muttered names, Kleever and Mort and Daniels."

Oliver wrote quickly on a pad. "Anything else?"

"Just gibberish. He said, 'Mephistopheles. Eight kings threaten to save ninety-five—' Then he said, 'Bringing money.' That's all. After that, the men fired at me and took him away."

Oliver finished writing. "What kind of car?" he asked.

"Packard, I think."

"Did you get the license number?"

"No!"

Oliver nodded. "And what was in the handkerchief?"

"Well, there was an old deck of cards, some change, these bills and a key ring."

"Anything special about the keys?"

"One was to a public locker, number forty-five."

Lieutenant Oliver leaned back in his chair. Tension was leaving him now, and the glasses were no longer shiny blanks. Mel Carter could see his eyes now, and he was surprised at their friendliness.

"You didn't know the man or any of the names mentioned?" Oliver asked.

"No, sir!" Mel Carter scrubbed out his cigarette. "Listen," he finished, "I'm sorry if I've caused trouble by not reporting this sooner. You see, I—"

"—wanted to play detective."

"Why, yes, I guess that about covers it."

Lieutenant Oliver smiled suddenly. "Most people do," he admitted. "That's the reason, sometimes, that cops have a hard job." He shook his head. "However, this time nothing has been hurt apparently." He pressed a desk buzzer. "I'll have a secretary take down everything," he finished, "then you can go. Is that all right with you?"

"Fine!" Mel Carter agreed.

The door opened, a girl standing in the light. Lieutenant Oliver stood, waving her into his chair.

"Take a statement in triplicate, Miss Johnson," he said.

AN HOUR later, Mel Carter walked from Police Headquarters. He was tired, drained of energy. He was a bit amazed at the ease with which Oliver had insinuated small questions, probing, seeking, until he knew as much of the night before as did Carter. A headache nagged at his nape, and he went toward the drug store on the corner.

"I beg pardon," a voice said at his side. "Mr. Carter?"

"Yes, why?" Mel Carter said, turning his head.

The man was big, almost huge, and his smile showed even white teeth. His right hand touched his hat politely, and he nodded toward a car parked at the curb.

"Will you step this way, please?" he asked.

Mel Carter shifted his gaze, seeing the dark blue Packard, muscles freezing with instinctive caution.

"What for?" he asked.

"Please?" the large man insisted, and it was then that he lifted the folded topcoat a bit and disclosed the ugly muzzle of the revolver beneath.

Mel Carter tensed. Fifty feet away was Police Headquarters.

"You'll never get away with this," he said thinly.

"I think we will," the big man said cheerfully. "So come along; Mr. Kleever would like to speak to you." His face hardened, smile almost disappearing. "Fast," he finished. "Don't play the hero."

Mel Carter drew a deep breath, estimating and evaluating the situation. The first flash of fear was gone, now there was only caution. And yet, looking at the smiling face of the huge man, he knew he had no choice.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

III

A BOY was in the back seat of the car, and his childish hand pulled the door handle and let the door swing open. He was incongruously clad in a mannish-cut suit, and in the tiny fingers of his left hand was a smoking cigar.

"Come in, Mr. Carter," he said in a treble tone. "Sit down, for we have talking to do." He smiled cherubically. "I am Danton Kleever," he finished. "Perhaps you've heard of me."

"In," the big man said, and shoved with a heavy hand.

Mel Carter almost fell into the car. He caught his balance, swinging onto the seat, astonishment still in his face. This was no boy, this was a midget. Carter could see the gray at his temples, and his face was wise, lined with years of living.

"A midget," Danton Kleever said, and shivered a bit as though the word was something unclean.

"What do you want; why the gunplay?" Carter asked.

"In a moment," Kleever said. "Drive through the park, Mort," he ordered.

"Yes, sir," the driver said, and his narrow face swung away from Carter, the motor lifting into life as he pressed the starter.

The big man slid into the front seat, turning a bit; and in his smiling eyes Carter read the knowledge that he would kill as casually as he laughed.

The Packard slipped into traffic, catching the light and turning to the right. Mel Carter leaned back, stretching out his artificial leg, cane upright between his knees. Danton Kleever smoked unhurriedly, cold eyes running appraisingly over Carter.

"We had a bit of trouble in running you down, Mr. Carter," he said at last. "Luckily, last night your cane was noticed, and today, Daniels managed to trace you to your rooming house."

The big man smiled. "I became your brother for a few moments," he said cheerfully. "Your landlady was kind enough to tell me that you had to report to Headquarters."

Mel Carter said nothing, lips tight, feeling the strain begin to ache in the muscles of his shoulders.

The car swung onto the boulevard which led to the park, and Danton Kleever visibly relaxed.

"Now we shall talk," he said in a friendly voice, and Mel Carter fought away the urge to cringe back from the man.

There was something uncanny in a man's being the size of a child. There was evil in the little man, all the more horrible because it was so great, coming as it did from a dwarfed body.

"What do you want?" Carter asked.

"Very little," Kleever admitted. "We merely want to know what Blake gave or said to you last night."

"Blake?"

"Er—the wounded man," Kleever said. "Although I assure you he was not wounded by any of us."

Mel Carter shifted, feeling the cold thudding of his heart. "He said nothing to me," he admitted. "He was dying and I went for help, that's all."

Danton Kleever smiled, daintily flicking ashes from the fat cigar.

"You are lying, of course," he said, "but no matter. I will pay one thousand dollars for the information I seek."

"One thousand!" Mel Carter shook his head. "Look, what the hell is going on?"

Daniels reached over the seat back, and his hand closed over Carter's wrist. He was still smiling, but strength poured into his hand, and Carter involuntarily groaned with agony, trying to tear away. Daniels held him with frightening casual ease.

"That's enough," Kleever said mildly. "Now, Mr. Carter, Daniels is incredibly strong; in fact, he makes a living in circuses with his strength. I do not think you could stand up to him."

Mr. Carter's face was white, and he massaged life back into his fingers.

"Keep him off me," he said in a strained voice. "Or so help me God, there'll be more trouble than even he can handle."

"Tsk, tsk!" Daniels clicked his tongue.

The driver laughed harshly, and Danton Kleever blew a circle of pale smoke.

"Daniels is overanxious, Mr. Carter," Kleever said. "Meanwhile, my offer holds good. One thousand dollars for the information."

"What do you want to know for?" Carter said thinly.

"My dear sir," Kleever said, "that is none of your concern. Let it suffice that I am willing to pay you one thousand dollars."

Mel Carter flexed his fingers, then braced the cane against his knees again. Anger lay in him, dark and shining, and he shivered at its touch.

"And if I don't tell you?"

The midget was a boy playacting, but his eyes were a man's, vicious with an inner pressure of conceit and greed.

"There's always Daniels," he said gently.

Mel Carter frowned. "Who or what is Mephistopheles?" he asked.

"Meph—" Danton Kleever lost his poise. "Where in hell does he fit into this?"

Carter shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I don't even know who he is."

"Then suppose you tell us!" Daniels said suddenly, and his hand lanced out at Carter's knees.

He caught the left one, fingers constricting with sudden power. He was smiling, eyes laughing, and he threw incredible strength into the hold.

The cane came up, spinning in a black blur of movement. Mel Carter leaned back and let the cane whirl in his hands, driving at the last second with every bit of strength in his corded arms.

Daniels grunted; he didn't cry out, for there was no time. He grunted; and then the cane had smashed the sweep of his nose, spurting blood, and he was hurled away from the back of the seat, unconscious before he crumpled.

Carter reached for the midget. He caught him by the shoulders, shaking him, driving him into the seat cushion.

"Tell him to stop the car, you stinking little monster," he said. "Tell him, before I break your neck."

Kleever's face was livid. He sucked for breath, eyes like those of a snake.

"Stop the car, Mort," he called.

STILL clutching the little man with one hand, Carter bent forward over the front seat and found Daniels' dropped gun. Mort was stopping the car, right hand fumbling for his gun. His hand stopped moving at the threat of the lifted weapon.

"Take your hands off me!" Kleever was almost screaming. "By God, take your hands off me!"

Carter threw the midget to the floor, then fumbled for the door handle. He could hear the bubbling breathing from Daniels, and Mort was half-turned, watching through a face so still it appeared frozen.

The door came open, and Carter slid out, then reached in awkwardly for his cane. His lips were thin, and his eyes blazed, and his anger was such there was a tremble to his voice.

"I don't know who you are and I don't

care," he said. "But I don't scare worth a damn. I told the cops everything, and that's the end of it for me."

"You put your hands on me," Danton Kleever whispered. "No man can do that."

"Get back to your sideshow," Mel Carter said as softly. "Next time I'll give you a spanking."

Danton Kleever came to his feet, head barely topping the back cushion of the driver's seat. His face was bone white, hands clenched at his side.

"I don't like you, Mr. Carter," he said. "Drive on, Mort."

"Yes, sir," Mort said, and shifted gears.

Carter slammed the door, standing with the gun naked in his right hand, cane in the left. One glimpse he had of the midget's malevolent child's face; then the Packard was sliding smoothly away.

A car horn sounded, and Carter turned, conscious of the gun in his hand. He thrust it out of sight in his pocket, stepping to the curb out of the traffic. Cars whirled past in an endless stream.

He could feel the shaking now, born of anger and fear and revulsion for the tiny man and his men. He breathed heavily, licking his lips, then limped across the street to the far curb. Kleever's car was out of sight now, lost in traffic.

A taxi whirled into the curb at his arm signal, and he gave the address of his rooming house. The taxi picked up speed, and he lit a cigarette, amazed at the trembling of his hands.

"Michael Katzintsky," the driver's identification card read behind its glass-faced frame, and a sudden thought struck Carter.

"Ever hear of a man named Mephistopheles?" he asked loudly.

"Huh!" The driver glanced in his mirror. "Meph—oh, sure, Old Nick, the Devil, who ain't heard of the guy?"

Mel Carter smiled wryly. "No, I mean a man, probably somebody here in the city."

Michael Katzintsky shrugged broad shoulders. "Not me, Mister," he said. "I ain't—say, maybe you mean that magician at the Rivoli!"

"Magician!" Excitement came to Carter. Midget, strong man, magician, it all tied up in one way.

"Sure, me and my girl saw him last week. Great stuff. Fake, of course, but great." Michael Katzintsky laughed aloud. "My girl screamed when he sawed a girl to pieces. Fake, of course, like I told her. Why?"

"I heard his name today," Carter explained. "Odd name, so wondered if there really was such a man."

"Oh, sure, sure. Fact is, we go right by the Rivoli. You wanta stop?"

Mel Carter hesitated. He'd taken enough. Now was the time to call Lieutenant Oliver and let him take over. A smart man would play it that way.

"Okay, stop at the Rivoli," Carter said suddenly, and decided he wasn't smart.

He chain-lit a cigarette, watching the afternoon traffic. The taxi swung from the boulevard, cutting into a business district. Buildings were old, tawdry now, like old men past the age of caring. Cheap stores ranged side by side, windows dust-laden. This was the old part of the city; once it had been opulent, but now the paint scaled and frames sagged, and the streets were littered with trash.

The taxi passed ball-playing kids, edging through truck traffic and making a right turn on Cravens Street. A block farther on, a banner streamed tiredly over the marquee of a theater.

MEPHISTOPHELES AND HIS DARK MAGIC, the banner said in faded letters. TEN THOUSAND WONDERS AND A MILLION THRILLS.

"There it is, mister," the driver said.

A moment later he swung the car into the curb, and Mel Carter paid the fare. "Don't let it fool you," the driver called cheerfully, and the taxi was pulling away.

HUGE show placards were propped at either side of the entrance. A suave, goateed man was on each placard, surrounded by miracles done in glaring red letters.

LADY WITHOUT A HEAD, read one. MIRACLE OF THE SPHINX, BURIED ALIVE, FOUNTAIN OF FLOWERS, HE READS YOUR MIND—all were there, begging, promising, and cheap.

The ticket seller boredly took Carter's quarter, machine clanging as it lifted a ticket into sight. Then Carter was limping through the doorway and into the popcorn-permeated air of the darkened theater.

When his gaze adjusted to the dark, he

saw the theater was half empty. The stage was blue-lighted, and a lone figure worked the center, gaudy silks appearing startlingly from a supposedly empty tube in his long fingers.

A piano produced music, half the notes off-key. The audience made wise comments; and Carter felt a sense of sympathy for the magician working to such a crowd.

He slid into a rear seat, close to the aisle, eyes intent on Mephistopheles. The silks had appeared to a mild splatter of applause, and now the man was finishing the act by sawing a woman in half.

Carter grinned. This was old stuff. Then he leaned a bit forward, interest aroused. The magician was rolling a portable circular saw into sight. He started the motor, and the shrill whine rose higher and higher, until it was almost inaudible.

Mephistopheles worked in pantomime, and now he showed the deadliness of the saw by feeding a two by four plank into the blade, sawdust flying, sawed ends dropping to the stage from the elongated platform.

A GIRL came on the stage, wearing only blue velvet shorts and a spangled halter and a domino mask. Gracefully, she climbed to the saw's platform, saw roaring wildly above and to the rear, ready to swing its blade across her back.

Cold sweat congealed on Carter's back. The very casualness of the magician was shocking. Despite the fact that this was a trick, the sensation of approaching death was nerve-wracking.

Mephistopheles went about the saw, reaching up for the handholds. A girl giggled in the audience, and a man made a rude remark. Then the saw was slashing forward, biting, tearing, ripping into the girl's body. She gave one pitiful scream, then the saw was through.

Mephistopheles cut the switch. Slowly the whine died away, until the blade was motionless, teeth glittering wickedly. The magician made several passes over the girl's body—and as gracefully as she had climbed to the platform, she descended, whole and unhurt.

Applause came, and then the curtains were coming to, and the first music of the newsreel sounded in the theater. A moment later, the curtains parted, and the motion pictures began.

Mel Carter swallowed, surprised at the dryness of his throat. He grinned self-consciously, then went down the aisle toward the side door which apparently led to the stage. He went through the door, closing it behind him.

Flats leaned tiredly against the wall. The girl was just disappearing, arms loaded with apparatus. The magician was wheeling a stage cart, glancing up as Carter came through the door.

"Looking for somebody?" he asked.

"Yes," Mel Carter said. "I'd like to talk to you."

"About what?" The magician's gaze centered upon the cane, then lifted. "You're Carter?" he finished.

Unreasoning anger touched Mel Carter then. He came across the stage, cane almost forgotten, and his tone was tight with rage.

"What in the hell goes on?" he said. "I've been pushed around too much already. And now you know my name. What is this?"

Mephistopheles smiled crookedly, absently stripping a false goatee from his chin. At close view, his tuxedo was warn, almost shabby, and his hair was obviously dyed.

"I've been trying to get in touch with you," he said. "Come in my dressing room."

Mel Carter forced the anger from his mind, but his breathing was still heavy, and looking down, he was surprised at the whiteness of his knuckles about the cane.

"Somebody had better explain something," he said grimly.

"Come along," the magician said. "I'll explain what I can."

He led the way, pushing the cart. Silks overflowed one end, and at the side a rabbit stared with mild eyes, one cottony ear dropping forlornly.

Mel Carter limped behind. Maybe this was the end of the trail, maybe now he'd discover the reason behind everything. At least the magician seemed harmless, which up until now no one else had seemed.

A newsreel voice hammered at his back, and he caught the faint echo of the audience's laughter. There was the smell of dust and decay backstage. The lofts were shadowy catwalks, and ropes dangled like

threads from a ruptured spider web. Carter shivered, wondering what it would be like to end a career in such a place.

MEPHISTOPHELES left the cart outside the dressing room door, going through and sitting at the dressing table, naked bulbs disclosing the makeup on his face. He applied cold cream, rubbing it in.

"Sit down, Carter," he said.

Carter sank to the top of an ancient trunk, balancing his hands on the cane. He could see his reflection in the glass, and he saw that the magician's eyes studied him.

"How much do you know already?" the magician asked.

"Not enough," Carter said grimly. "I found a dead man, I was shot at, somebody slugged me. And then, not two hours ago, Kleever and his muscle men tried to put the snatch on me."

"Kleever!" the magician said softly. "Danton Kleever and Daniels and Mort?"

"That's right. They picked me up and were going to work me over, I guess. I knocked Daniels out and got away. After that, I came here." His face hardened. "Now, what's the score; why am I a target for everybody?" His hand touched his pocket.

"I've also got an answer, in case you want to play rough, too."

The magician pursed his lips in wry amusement, then scrubbed at his face with a grease-stained towel. Mel Carter waited impatiently, anger welling again.

"Well, let's hear it," he said at last. "Who are you, who was the dead man, and what's going on?"

Mephistopheles shrugged. "You're in this by accident," he said. "You know that." His gaze grew thoughtful. "My advice is to forget everything."

"To hell with that!" Carter jabbed the cane at the floor. "I'm fed up with being a patsy for everybody. Who was Blake and why did he give me the handkerchief? What was wrong with the money?"

The magician sighed. "I'll tell you this much," he said. "Kleever and his crowd are playing for keeps. There's a quarter-million dollars involved." His eyes watched Carter's face. "Blake and I worked together; we chased that money for twenty thousand miles. Blake must have been bringing me that information when he was killed."

"What information?" Carter asked, and a pulse of excitement raced at his throat.

Mephistopheles smiled. "The eight kings routine," he said.

"Eight—" Mel Carter shook his head. "This is too complicated for me," he admitted. "What about the quarter-million, who are you, how'd Kleever get mixed in this?"

The magician shook his head. "I can't tell you everything, although Lord knows, you deserve it. The best thing you can do is take my advice and forget what's happened."

"Sure," Carter said, "that's easy to say. But it just so happens I've been a target—" He paused, hearing the light step outside the door. Then astonishment came to his face, and excitedly he rose to his feet. The sound of the footsteps disappeared, running now, and there was silence outside the room, except for the noise of the picture speaker.

"What's wrong?" Mephistopheles snapped, whirling on the chair.

Mel Carter's hand drew the revolver from his pocket, and his face was suddenly hard with strain.

"Mister," he said, "you put on a swell act. You're the guy who slugged me last night."

"You're crazy!" the magician said shortly.

"Yeah!" Carter jerked his chin toward the door. "I just recognized that assistant of yours; she fronted for you last night at my apartment door!"

"Betty!" Mephistopheles stood, ignoring the threat of the gun. Amazement lay in his eyes, and then came caution and creeping knowledge. "Wait a moment," he finished, and went toward the door.

Carter hesitated, feeling the weight of the gun in his fist. He watched the magician go to the door, uncertain as to what action to follow.

"Betty—Jim?" Mephistopheles called.

One hand on the door frame, he stepped from the room. His profile was clean in the light, and his head came forward, as he peered into the semi-darkness.

"Betty?" he snapped.

His shoulders jerked. He coughed softly, taking a step backward, shoulders blocking the doorway. His hand was a claw at the door frame, and he turned slowly, shaking

his head like a man who had taken a foul blow.

"Cart—" he began, and his knees slowly bent, hand sliding down the frame.

Mel Carter sprang forward, stumbling on his bad leg in his haste. Horror drained all blood from his face. Jutting squarely from the magician's left breast was the ebony hilt of a throwing knife.

NOW the magician was sitting, left hand clawing at the knife in his chest. Agony lay in his eyes, and the first froth of crimson spittle lay on his lips. He tried to speak, and the froth became a flood, breaking from some inner dam, spilling over his lip and chin.

Carter stood irresolutely, gun in hand, shaken by the suddenness of the tragedy. The magician raised his head, his voice rising past the bloody flood in his throat, almost a shout.

"The cards, Carter," he cried. "Eight kings—"

He went sidewise, flaccid, and his head bounced on the floor. He was dead, eyes staring in agonized pleading; and Carter was stepping past him, gun lifted in his hand.

He saw the shadow racing toward the side door, and he threw two shots at him, the echoes deafening. People screamed from the theater, and one bullet ricochetted with a banshee wail. Then the fleeing man ducked past an upended trunk and went through the door, its slamming a flat echo to the shots.

Carter whirled, hearing the footsteps from the stage. An usher stared, then screamed, her voice rising higher and higher. She spun about, flinging herself to safety, and Carter was alone.

Mel Carter swung his gaze to the dead man at the dressing room door. He could hear the confusion from the audience, and then some man's voice shouted for quiet. Panic touched Carter; he turned and ran, forgetting his leg, forgetting that this would solve nothing, wanting only to get away. He raced for the door through which the murderer had vanished.

His hand reached for the knob, and he went through, gun already dropped and forgotten in his pocket. His breath was a rushing torrent in his throat, and outside, he ran along the alleyway, racing awkwardly, thoughts a whirlpool in his mind. "There he goes!" somebody screamed behind; and then he was flagging down a taxi and the outcry lay far to the rear.

IV

THERE was no fear now. This was the end of the running, of the blind panic. Reason had taken over, and a few threads had woven themselves into the beginning of a pattern.

He sat at a bar, making idle water marks on the polished wood. He felt no fear of being charged with the murder of the magician. His prints would not be on the knife, and his bullets had marked the wall. Of course, questioning would be awkward, but he could make his story stand.

He had a few facts. Somewhere was a quarter of a million dollars, either in money or something which could be converted into money. Kleever and his two men were after it, as was the girl, Betty, who had been Mephistopheles' assistant. Two men were dead, but the two factions still sought the treasure.

The magician had cried out in his dying breath, *"The cards, Carter. Eight kings!"*

The words in themselves meant nothing. It was only that they implied that the cards were valuable. They seemed to be unmarked, Carter remembered, but maybe they carried a message in invisible ink. At least that was an intelligent premise.

The thing to do now was to retrieve the pack of cards from his room and take them to Lieutenant Oliver. The police had facilities which he lacked; if there was a message hidden on the cards, then they would find it.

Satisfied with his reasoning, he finished the drink and paid the tab. He went from the bar and along the walk. The rooming house was but two blocks down the street, and he walked slowly, favoring his mechanical leg, but not as conscious now of the stares of passersby.

He felt a strange lift of spirits, despite the horrors of the past night and day. There had been no time for brooding. In fact, now that he thought of it, there had been little time for anything but action. Evidently the doctor had been wrong in recommending quiet and rest.

He whistled softly, then lit a cigarette. Within minutes he would have the cards in his hands. His cane tock-tocked on the walk, and he paced along, shoulders squared.

He went up the steps of the rooming house, opening the door and going toward the steps. He grinned, hearing the door open at his back.

"Mr. Carter?" the landlady called.

"Hello!" he said, pausing.

She smiled at him, brushing back a strand of hair. "I let the detective into your room," she said. "He said it was all right."

"Detect—you mean Lieutenant Oliver?" A premonition struck Carter then, and his mouth thinned.

"Oh, no. He said his name was Larkins. A big man, always smiling." She preened her hair. "I liked him."

Mel Carter's breath came in a soft sigh. "Thank you, Mrs. Sanders," he said, and went up the stairs.

He unlocked the door, going straight to the chair where the cards had lain. His eyes were cold. The cards were gone, and a quick search disclosed the landlady had not laid them aside while dusting.

"Daniels," he said bitterly and sat in the chair.

This was trail's end. Kleever had the cards now, and the message, if there was one.

There was but one course left to follow; call Oliver and let him pick up Kleever's trail from here. Also there was the matter of Mephistopheles' assistant to be taken care of.

HE DID not move. Somehow, this had become very personal. Too much had happened to him for him to quit now. He remembered Lieutenant Oliver's words about citizens playing detective, and despite himself, he grinned. This was what he had been doing all day.

This was a dead end, of course; the desire to go forward could not fight the fact that there was nowhere to go. Kleever and his men were hidden somewhere, and the girl was probably far out of town now.

He frowned, remembering the girl. She had disappeared, running away, even before the magician had been killed. His glimpse of the murderer had necessarily been limited. It might have been the girl who flung the knife; it might have—

He shrugged. It didn't matter about the girl now. Kleever had the cards.

A thought touched him. Blake had been killed in this neighborhood. He had been wounded and then had staggered along the street. No man so grievously shot could travel far.

Mel Carter licked dry lips. That meant, or it could mean, that Kleever was holed up somewhere close by.

He came to his feet and left the apartment. Stair treads squeaked beneath his feet, and he could hear the muted sounds of a radio. He opened the outer door and went down the steps and along the walk, pacing as rapidly as he could. He was two blocks away when a backward glance disclosed the fact that a police car had pulled to a stop before his rooming house. He saw Lieutenant Oliver's thin figure walk up the steps and disappear.

He went ahead, walking faster. Evidently the police had narrowed the search for Mephistopheles' visitor to himself. If not already, then shortly there would be a pickup call out for him on prowling squad cars' radios.

He grinned. For the first time in weeks, he felt an eagerness for action. He was armed; a bullet stopped a big man as well as it did a small one. And—the grin was cheerful—anyway, it was exciting to play detective.

He whistled softly as he turned a corner and went along the street.

HE FOUND the green Packard as the first night shadows crept over the walks. It was parked at the rear of a small house, almost hidden within the confines of a brick garage. He studied it from the alley, then watched the house, suddenly feeling strangely alone.

Somehow, the lure of his plan had disappeared. He was no cop, no hero; this was a job for the police. And yet, because curiosity nagged, he slipped through the rear gate and went along the side of the garage, gaze tight on the curtained windows of the house.

A high privet hedge enclosed the rear yard; neighbors could see into it only from second-story windows. He heard a dog bark-

ing excitedly down the block, but nothing moved here.

Wariness touched him, and he could feel cool perspiration on his back. He walked on the grass, wanting no sound, and when he was past the garage and against the house wall, his breath was a warm sigh of relief.

He went toward the rear door, pausing and listening, and heard no sound. Gingerly he tried the knob, and it turned gently beneath the pressure of his fingers. He went in rapidly, sliding through the widening crack, closing it and reaching for his gun.

The hands caught his arms then, holding them motionless, and he heard the soft laughter from the shadows at his back.

"Welcome, Mr. Carter," Daniels said gently. "We've been wondering where you were."

Mel Carter shivered; there was something inhuman in the smiling manner of this man. Momentarily he tensed against the strong man's hands, then subsided, mouth grim, knowing how useless defiance would be.

"That's better," Daniels said. "Now, lead the way."

He thrust Carter ahead up a short flight of steps. Mort stepped back, opening the door and then closing it. He was dead of expression, only his eyes alive. They laughed weirdly out of his frozen features.

"Hello, nosey," he said, and turned away.

Mel Carter's eyes swung about. The kitchen was dirty, sink filled with unwashed dishes. Daniels propelled him forward, thrusting him past a swinging door into a dining-room. Ahead, through an arched doorway, Kleever's voice sounded.

"Bring him in," he said in his childish treble.

Mel Carter went forward unresistingly. Chairs were scattered about, ash trays were overflowing. The room was as dirty in its way as the kitchen.

The midget looked up from where he sat beside a table. A deck of cards were spread on the bare surface, and close at hand was a thick packet of bills.

"You're hardly the type to skulk, Mr. Carter," he said, his wizened boy's face smiling. "Mort saw you the moment you stood behind the house in the alley." He jerked his hand. "Search him," he finished.

Mort found the gun and laid it aside on the table. "That's for nothing," Daniels said, and his right hand freed itself and moved with flickering speed.

Mel Carter gasped. The blow caught him on the side of his head, sent him reeling across the room. He half-fell, half-sat on the couch, wondering if his jaw was broken.

"Not yet, Daniels," Danton Kleever said gently, and pattered on his child's feet across the rug. He poised before Carter, and his smile was a cherubic caricature of evil.

Mel Carter watched, his vision clearing. The cane was gone, and he braced his hands, lifting himself into a sitting position.

"Now what?" he asked, and wondered that there was no tremble in his voice.

"It is very simple," Danton Kleever said. "You will tell me where the other four kings are."

"Four kings!" Carter shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Now, Kleever," Daniels said and walked slowly across the room. One eye was almost black, and tape lay across his nose. He was big and he was smiling, and he carried death in the cabled strength of his arms.

"No!" the midget said. "I'm sure Mr. Carter will agree that his hiding of the four kings is a temporary thing." He smiled at Carter, but hell swirled deep in his eyes, and his tiny hands were clenched. "Once more," he finished, "where are the four kings?"

Mel Carter swallowed. Mort watched from one side, and in his long fingers was the mate to the throwing knife which had slain Mephistopheles. Daniels waited, eyes cold behind his smile.

"These were all the cards," Carter said.

"Now, Daniels," Danton Kleever said gently.

Daniels moved. He came in, hands reaching. Carter tried to get away, and one great hand caught and held him helpless. Then Daniels struck with his open palm, and each blow was a killing one. Carter felt flesh puff on his face. Agony ripped at him; and then the room swayed sickeningly.

"Enough," Danton Kleever said from a great distance.

Daniels released his grip almost contemptuously, stepping back, still smiling, still deadly, a new eagerness in his eyes.

"Mr. Carter," Danton Kleever said, and watched Carter shake his head in an effort

to avoid fainting, "Mort heard Mephistopheles cry out about the cards and the eight kings. Daniels retrieved those cards from your room, but only four kings are in the deck. I want the other four."

Mel Carter pawed at his bruised mouth, eyes swinging about, muscles tensing in his thighs. He'd come too far now; he'd played his part like a story-book hero, and now this was the payoff.

"I want a cut," he said.

"A cut!" Danton Kleever blinked, then nodded. "You're not quite as ignorant of events as we thought." His treble voice hardened. "A cut of what?"

Carter shook his head. He had estimated the distance to the table; there was a chance he might reach the gun.

"I don't know what it is," he admitted. "I just know it's worth a quarter of a million dollars."

"He's stalling, Kleever," Daniels said softly. "Let me work on him a bit?"

The midget scratched his chin, gray hair rumpled, looking even more like a child playing at being an adult. His hand waved Daniels back, and then he went toward the table and lifted the packet of money.

"It's in cash, Mr. Carter," he said. "There's almost a quarter of a million dollars cached away. Those four kings will give us the answer to the location."

He strode to the fireplace, a lighter flaming suddenly in his hand. He lit the edges of the bills, fanning them, watching the flames eat hungrily.

"No, Kleever!" Daniels said harshly.

"Shut up!" the midget answered grimly. "We're through arguing the point. If any of these bills are traced to us, we're dead."

"But twenty thousand—"

"Twenty or a hundred, it doesn't matter!" Kleever said, and laid the burning bills in the fireplace, where they flamed and crumbled into light ash.

Mel Carter stared. "Is that *real* money?" he whispered.

Danton Kleever nodded. "Real enough," he admitted. "But where it came from is a quarter million more." His gaze flicked to Mort and Daniels and came swinging back. "All right," he finished, "produce the four kings and you get your cut."

Mel Carter grinned. "Not yet," he said, "not till I get more of the setup."

"Kleever!" Daniels said, and begging lay in his tone.

The midget ignored the huge man, his eyes intent on Carter's bruised face. Then he nodded as though to himself.

"During the war," he said quietly, as though repeating something he knew by heart, "quite a few islands were taken by the Japs. Now, when American officers surrendered, their orders were to destroy all official papers and currency in their possession.

"While playing in the USO, my friends and I heard a story from a native. It seemed that one island had been captured and the attack was so fast papers could not be destroyed completely. Both money and papers were hidden in a cave, and the officers detailed to destroy them were killed when a stray shell blew their jeep to pieces.

"This native had seen a white man, some bum, find the money and appropriate some twenty thousand dollars of it for himself. This white man had gone to the States, intending to return later and cop the rest.

"That, in short, is the story. The native"—Danton Kleever's gaze flicked to Daniels—"unfortunately died from a broken neck before he could give the location of the hiding place."

The midget paced to a spot before the couch, rocking slightly on his tiny feet, eyes bright with inward thought. His tone was higher, almost shrill.

"It's there now," he said, "a quarter of a million dollars, ready for the finder, not a serial number listed, not a thing to keep it from lining the finder's pockets."

HE SCOWLED bitterly, like a boy who has sucked a green persimmon.

"We found our man here, and we found out too late that he had a weak heart. He died without giving any information. Then a nosey Federal man showed up, and we discovered that part of the loot, a mere twenty thousand dollars, had its serial numbers listed. This man, Blake, traced some of the money to us, but made several mistakes, and so we naturally took him captive. Last night he escaped, and when we found him again on the walk he was dead. That's the entire story."

Mel Carter drew a deep breath. Now thoughts were dropping into place, making

a sensible design. The stake was big, huge. Murder had walked hand in hand with the knowledge of its existence; these three would stop at nothing to gain such a fortune.

"Well, Mr. Carter," Danton Kleever said quietly, and he was utterly, viciously ruthless, "where are the four kings? They hold a secret that I must have. Tell me and you become a partner. Try to hold out, and I assure you that you will talk at some time or another."

Mel Carter swallowed heavily. Now was almost the moment. Daniels was to one side, the midget was no hindrance. Mort and his throwing knife were the real danger.

"Ten seconds, Mr. Carter," Danton Kleever said.

Carter could hear the soft rasp of Daniels' eager breathing. He could see the dead face of Mort and the blade winking light in his fingers. The midget stood unmoving, wizened little face watching coldly, tiny hands motionless at his side.

"Now, Kleever?" Daniels said, and a voice spoke softly in answer from the dining-room archway.

"Not now, Daniels," the voice said. "We're taking over."

Danton Kleever spun, startled, and then went motionless again, a smile wreathing his cherubic mouth.

"Hello, Betty, my dear," he said gently. "It's a curious thing, but until this afternoon, I never figured you in on this deal at all."

She stood in the doorway, a tall man at her side, and in their hands blued automatics glistened dully.

"Drop it, punk," the man said shortly, and Mort's knife clattered to the floor. He grinned at Carter. "You weren't hard to follow," he said.

"And that is that," Betty said, and she was calmly beautiful in the light.

V

THE tableau held. Mel Carter felt a loosening of the tension in his shoulders. This was a new factor; where it would lead, he did not know, but he had nothing to lose by listening.

The girl was advancing, staying clear of Daniels' reach. Her hair was golden in the light, and the mannish tweed suit followed the feminine lines of her body with breath-taking detail.

She halted at the table, dropping her gaze to the spread-out cards.

"You should have been a magician, Kleever," she said. "Then you'd know what eight kings means."

The midget stiffened. "You mean the answer's there?" he whispered bleakly.

"There," the girl admitted. "It's a set-up every magician knows." She shook her head. "That was a fool stunt, killing Mephistopheles; he was Federal."

"Federal!" Kleever said in answer.

"Sure!" Scorn touched the girl's mouth. "He and Blake worked together. He was with us on the USO circuit, running down leads about misplaced money. He probably pieced together everything, after Daniels killed that native." She looked at Carter. "Sorry Jim slugged you last night," she finished. "But we wanted what Blake gave you. Unluckily, we missed the cards then."

Danton Kleever swore viciously, like a child in a tantrum. The girl watched amusedly, gun steady in her right hand, the left scooping the spread pack of cards together.

Then the midget was silent, and slow cunning came to his small face.

"Well, that matters not now," he said gently. "I tell you what, my dear, suppose we join forces?"

The girl laughed. "To hell with you, you little squirt," she said. "I've hated your guts since those days when you thought yourself a man around me."

Never in his life had Mel Carter seen such virulent hate in one man. It flamed with a physical force, emanating, deadly, until the midget rocked with the force of it. Even the girl was shocked, and her laughter faded.

"Daniels, take him," Kleever said.

The strong man moved. He was smiling, and he walked into the man's gun at the archway. His hands were spread, and the first bullet barely rocked his step as he went ahead.

The gun roared again and again, and still Daniels went forward. Two steps, three, and then a wilting came to his legs. He lurched, blood smearing the whiteness of his shirt. He shook his head like a bludgeoned ox and almost fell.

The gun clicked empty, and then Daniels

took his final step. He caught the man in his hands. The man screamed once; then fading power surged in the strong man's hands, and the other died, head oddly askew. Killer and victim fell together.

"Dear God!" Mel Carter whispered and lunged for the gun on the table.

HIS leg betrayed him, and he fell sprawling to one side, clutching for support. He caught the edge of the table, pulling it over on himself. The gun fell, and cards sprayed wildly; and then he had the gun and was rolling for position to shoot.

He saw the gun in Kleever's hand. It was a tiny, a .25 at most, but it bulked in the small man's fist. Flame winked again and again at the muzzle, and with each report a dot of black jumped into being on the girl's chest. She went walking backward, taking slow stiff steps, incredulity mirrored on her face.

Her shoulders touched the wall, touched and supported her for an infinitesimal second. The gun rose in her hand, her soft mouth tight and strained with effort. Then blankness came to her eyes and she was going forward, toppling, dead before she hit the floor.

"Drop it!" Mel Carter snapped, and horror turned his cry into a shout.

He drove a slug at Mort, stopping the man's lunge for the knife; and then the gun swayed back and forth like the head of a patient snake.

"No more," Mel Carter said. "No more, or by God, I do some shooting!"

Danton Kleever stared about the room. The tiny gun sagged in his hand and slowly the terrible viciousness left his face.

"I *am* a man," he said quietly to the dead girl. *"I am a man!"*

"Drop the gun," Carter said, and came slowly to his feet.

Danton Kleever shook his head, and slowly sanity came to his eyes. His gaze went from body to body, and a wry smile touched his face.

"God knows how many have died for that money, Mr. Carter," he said. "I know of seven, and then there were the soldiers and sailors, of course." His eyes lifted to Carter. "This shooting will bring the police, naturally, and you are the stupid type of young man who prefers to play the hero."

He drew a deep breath. "One more life doesn't matter."

Carefully, almost casually, he lifted the automatic until he could peer into the muzzle. Even Mel Carter's instant cry did not halt the smooth movement. But at the moment of death, as he squeezed the trigger and blew a bullet into his brain, he closed his eyes.

"Don't do it," Mel Carter said wearily to Mort. "Don't do it."

Somewhere in the distance a police siren began to scream.

"WE WERE working together," Lieutenant Oliver said. "Blake and the magician and myself. Blake was to send information either to his partner or to me, as soon as he traced the fellow who had originally stolen the money on the island.

"I didn't know the fellow was dead, not until you told me a few minutes ago. And then when you told of finding a dead man in the street and of what he said, the only conclusion to be drawn was that Blake had died. I called the magician, and he told me to play it easy. Then you showed up and he was killed. Later, I came to your house to talk to you, and you had vanished. Not long after, shooting was reported, and we found you and Mort alive in an abattoir."

Mel Carter finished his second drink, leaning his elbows against the bar. The liquor was wiping some of the tightness from his nerves.

"And the card business?" he asked.

Lieutenant Oliver picked a gray thread from the sleeve of his gray suit. His hat was gray, as were his shirt and tie and socks and shoes, and there was even a tinge of grayness in his skin.

"The magician explained it to me," he said. "He and Blake used it as a code. The cards are separated into suits, each suit running in a definite pattern. The pattern was known as the 'Eight kings', and goes, 'Eight kings threatened to save ninety-five queens for one sick jack.' Each word represents one or more cards, 'threatened' meaning three and ten, for example.

"The suits are set in pattern, one suit piled on another, and then a message is written on the edges of the pack. Once shuffled, the message is lost until the pack is set up again in the eight kings' pattern. That's about all.

The deck Blake passed to you had the location of the island and the money on its edge. Washington already has the information."

Mel Carter eyed his newly filled glass. "I'm through playing detective," he said. "My God, they died like flies!"

Oliver shrugged, his glassy shiny pince hiding his eyes. "Leave it to the cops next time," he said. "You'll have less excitement, but you'll live longer."

Carter nodded. "Then this winds it all up?"

Lieutenant Oliver finished his drink. "Everything," he admitted. "Mort confessed to killing the magician because he thought he was just another chiseler who knew too much. And a ballistics report showed the girl's gun killed Blake whose body was still in the basement of Kleever's house." He smiled. "Except for the reward which will undoubtedly come along to you shortly, the case is closed."

"Thank the Lord for that, anyway," Mel Carter said. He grinned. "I'll be heading back to the Airlines next week," he finished. "I don't feel quite as useless with a phoney leg as I did. I won't fly anything but a desk, but I'll give it a bit of stick practice."

"Good!" Lieutenant Oliver slid from his stool. "Drop in at Headquarters before you go," he said.

"Thanks, I will."

Mel Carter watched the detective go through the door. He finished his drink and waved away the bartender's offer to refill. He was feeling better, and when he slid from his stool he barely swayed.

He left the bar, walked without his cane, confidence in the set of his shoulders. The old defeatism was gone, burned away in the hell of the past day and night; from now on, if he could face guns, he could certainly face the curious stares of people.

He went along the walk, savoring the late night air. Midnight was long past, and the traffic had died away to an occasional car. He was alone on the street, and he walked slowly and peacefully toward his rooming house.

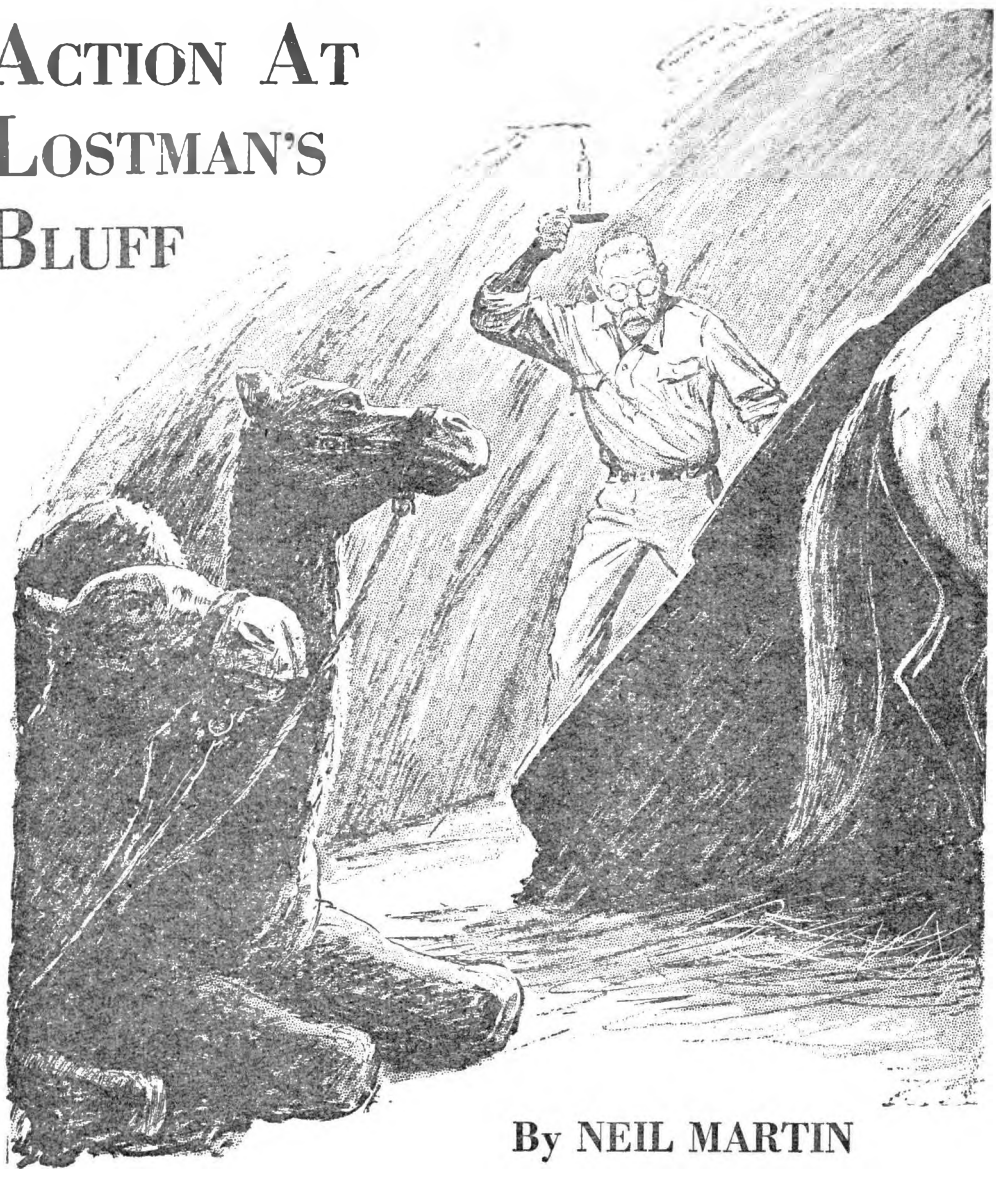
He saw the drunk stagger about the corner, walking with rubber knees, and a muttered curse broke in his mouth.

"Not again!" he said aloud.

"Mister!" the drunk called. "Hey, mister!"

"No!" Mel Carter said firmly to the drunk, and then he was crossing the street and going home.

Action At Lostman's Bluff

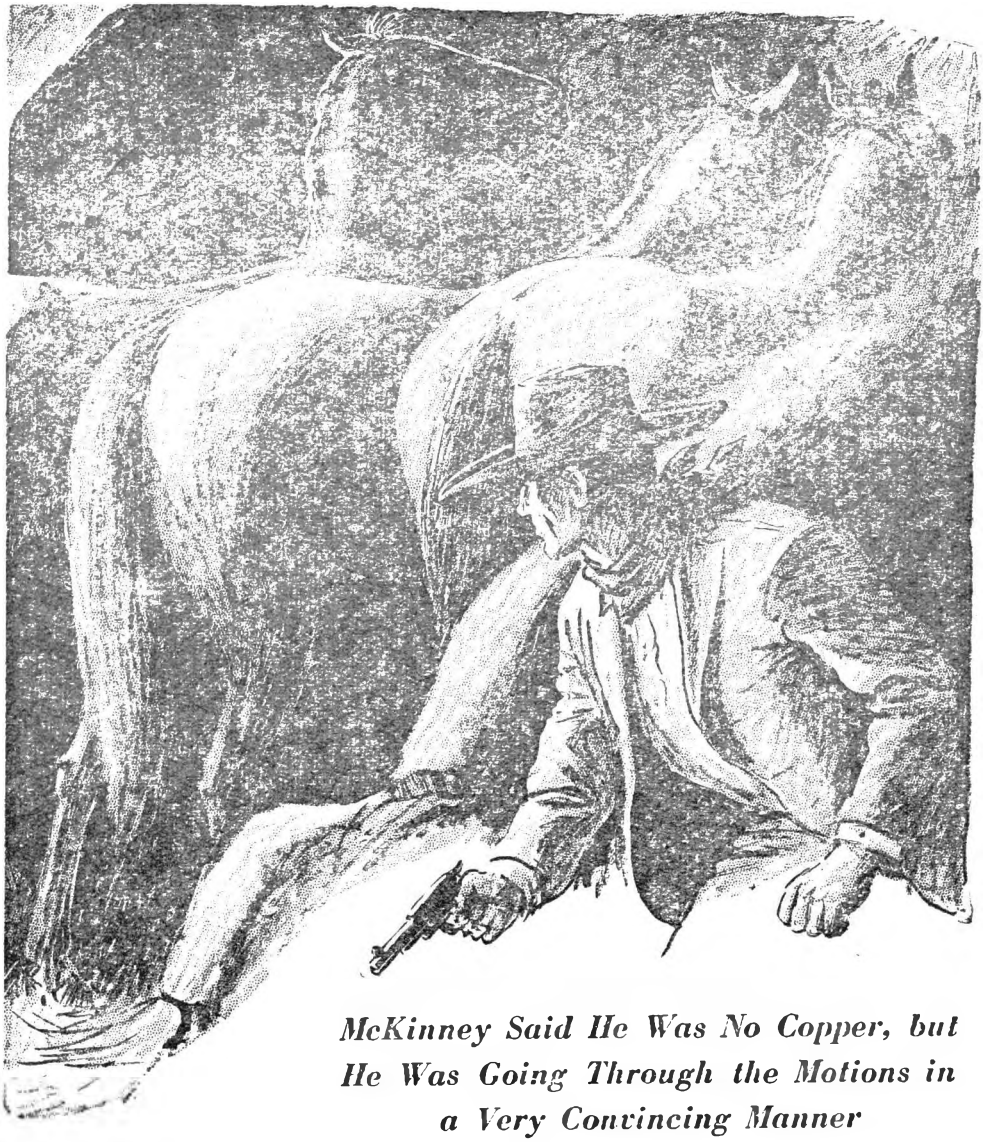


By NEIL MARTIN

THE BUFFALO thrust its flat-horned head through the screen of wattles and regarded the approaching horse and rider with mounting belligerency. It is doubtful if he noticed the man at all. Being a lusty young bull, which only recently had been expelled from the herd by an older and more powerful rival, he was carrying a sizeable chip on his massive shoulder, and was eager to demonstrate his fighting ability. Besides, the horse looked like a particularly soft touch.

Frisco Ed. McKinney wasn't aware of the danger until his horse snorted and tried to stand erect on its hind legs. He gripped the saddle with hands and knees to keep himself from sliding off backward as the buffalo came crashing out of the scrub like a minor Juggernaut, its polished, needle-sharp horns glinting wickedly in the late afternoon sunlight.

Being unversed in the ways of the water buffalo, McKinney did what no buffalo hunter would have done. As his frightened mount brought its forefeet back to the



McKinney Said He Was No Copper, but He Was Going Through the Motions in a Very Convincing Manner

ground, he drove in the spurs and went streaking across the grassland ahead of the charging monster.

Despite its huge bulk, the buffalo could run like a deer. Its horns were almost touching the hindquarters of the fleeing horse when McKinney swung the animal sharply to the right. Unable to check its headlong rush, the bull thundered past like a runaway locomotive.

Any buffalo hunter would have taken instant advantage of the situation by chasing after the bull, closing in on the left and putting a couple of bullets behind its left forequarter.

But McKinney was ignorant of the finer points of buffalo killing. Hoping to lose the beast in the thorny scrub, he headed his horse toward the creek bed.

The buffalo checked its mad rush in a cloud of dust. Raising his forefeet from the ground, he flung his huge body through a short arc, lowered his head and came tearing after the fleeing horse.

"This dam critter seems to be making me his life work," McKinney complained, as he

glanced over his shoulder at the charging bull. "And that jonop in Taggart's Creek told me a buffalo never charged more than once!"

He gave his horse its head and clung like a barnacle to the saddle, in mortal fear of falling off and being left entirely at the mercy of the enraged beast. Again, he wheeled his horse and raced parallel with the creek. Instantly, the bull pulled up in a cloud of dust, whirled and then crashed to the ground on its left side and lay there, kicking frantically, while blood spurted like a crimson geyser from a small, round hole in in its massive chest.

McKinney checked his horse, wheeled the animal about and stared in amazement at the dying bull, suddenly aware that someone had fired from the scrub, and that the report had been blanketed by the thunder of the buffalo's hooves.

HE GLANCED toward the creek and caught a flash of movement among the scrub an instant before his horse reared, came down hard on its forefeet and then sank slowly to the ground. McKinney heard the smacking report of a carbine as he jerked his feet from the stirrups and sprang clear before the horse rolled over on its right side, kicked feebly and lay still.

The next instant his wide-brimmed black Stetson was snatched from his head and sent sailing through the air by another bullet from the scrub. Diving to cover behind the carcass of his horse, he jerked his Webley automatic from its shoulder-holster and waited, hoping that the sniper would grow careless and emerge from his hiding place.

"Christopher!" McKinney commented, not at all dismayed by the strange turn of circumstances. "I must have picked up the trail at last. Otherwise, why should anyone try to rub me out?"

Peering between the stiffening hindlegs of his horse, he looked past the line of coolibahs and river gums marking the course of the creek, which meandered like a dark green ribbon across the grassland and ant-bed country of Australia's Northern Territory toward a rampart of lifestone bluffs that shimmered like a curtain of mauve silk in the afternoon heat haze.

"This sort of welcome to the Lostman's Bluff country might have been expected," he philosophized. "Probably the two Commonwealth guys who preceded me got similar welcomes. Christopher! Wish I'd had sense enough to bring along a carbine."

He realized now that the first bullet had been meant for his horse. He cringed instinctively as he realized what would have happened had the sniper pressed the trigger of his carbine an instant sooner. With the horse down, the buffalo would have made short work of the rider.

Just the same, he was certain that the buffalo was merely coincidental. Obviously, the men he was seeking must have been aware of his coming and had laid an ambush at the ford, which crossed the creek less than a hundred yards from where he now crouched behind the carcass of his mount. When the buffalo had charged, the sniper had decided to shoot only the horse and let the enraged bull deal with the rider, a plan which, if successful, would have been a perfect cover-up for murder.

Months later, when a police detail came that way on a routine patrol, they would find the skeletons of a man, a horse and a buffalo picked clean by the dingoes and the bull ants. They would report that some traveler and his mount had been attacked by the buffalo and killed, and that the man evidently had wounded the bull, causing its death. It would make an interesting paragraph in the papers, and would cause choleric, middle-aged gentlemen in Sydney or Melbourne to write letters to the newspapers demanding that the government immediately take steps to make the Northern Territory safe for travelers. And there the matter would end.

Pretty foxy, that guy, whoever he is," McKinney commented. "Oh, well, I've gone up against foxy guys before. Just the same, I'd feel one helluva lot happier if I had me a carbine."

THE affair had begun with the finding of a half burned scrap of printed paper by a black stockrider somewhere in the vicinity of the bluff that bulked like a gigantic kneeling camel against the sky to the northeast. Intrigued by the coloring and by the delicate tracery of the printing, the blackfellow had stuck it in his hatband as a charm. Later it had been recognized by the station boss as part of a five pound note, so obviously counterfeit that he had turned it over to the

local police detail, by whom it had been forwarded to Canberra.

McKinney sourly recalled the occasion of his last interview with Inspector "Noby" Clarke, of the Commonwealth Police, the Australian counterpart of the American F. B. I. On that afternoon, five weeks before, McKinney had first seen the fragment of a half-burned bank note. He had seen other notes, too, Australian and American, which the little inspector was displaying with the enthusiasm of a dealer in second-hand clothing trying to persuade a reluctant buyer.

"Look at 'em, Mac old boy," Clarke invited. "Look at the quality of the printing and engraving. Feel the paper. Never saw the like."

McKinney took a five pound note from his billfold and compared it with one of similar denomination from the inspector's collection.

"I can't see any difference," he admitted, adding, "If they're as good as you say, how do you know they're phoney?"

The inspector stroked his scraggly, blond mustache with the little finger of his right hand, his washed-out blue eyes serious. He said:

"There are several ways of determining that." He picked up a ten-pound note held flat between two sheets of glass. "For instance, this is a sample of the tenners. It's exactly one eighth of an inch too short."

"Paper might have shrunk," McKinney suggested.

"We have more to go on than just that," Clarke admitted. "These chappies use the same serial numbers as those on legitimate government issue. Several times two notes, each with exactly the same serial number, have turned up in the banks."

"How long has this sort of thing been going on?"

"It started during the war," the inspector revealed, "when your Yank troops were in training here. We didn't broadcast it then, any more than we're broadcasting it now, for fear of destroying public confidence in the national currency. It's strictly hush-hush, you understand."

McKinney's tanned, hard-bitten face relaxed in a grin. "You talk as if you believed the same old Nazi push is still operating."

The inspector nodded gravely. "I do, old man. The Sydney police picked up two top-flight members of the old mob in a rooming house last week. Don't you ever read the papers?"

"If that ever got into the papers," McKinney pointed out, "it was a cover-up for something else."

"Quite. But these chappies were very humble supermen. In fact, they were quite willing to trade information on condition that they be allowed to remain in the country."

"You got this stuff of them?" McKinney asked indicating the currency on the inspector's desk.

THE little inspector shook his head. "No, they were quite clean in that respect. But they knew that the stuff was still being printed and circulated by two of the old mob. In fact, they supplied information which helped us nab two of the local shovers."

"Some more of the old O. A. gang?" McKinney quizzed.

"These chaps weren't members of the Auslands Organization," Clarke denied. "Just local twisters, who bought the queer from a middleman at twelve bob in the quid. Bloke calling himself Jem Smith."

McKinney smiled. "Those Smith boys sure get around."

"Smith boys? Oh, quite! An alias, of course. His real name is Gemmell. He's the contact man. He comes to town from somewhere out back, carrying a supply of queer. On arrival, he inserts a notice in each of the papers. Like this."

The inspector opened a desk drawer, brought out a strip of newspaper and passed it to McKinney. "This is the agony column of the *Morning Herald*," he explained. "The insertion bordered with blue pencilling is the one I just referred to."

McKinney smiled as he read: "Muriel. Am in town. If you still love me, ring the usual. J. S."

"Ring the usual, of course," the inspector went on, "means to ring a certain number on the telephone, which we located in an empty house in the Surrey Hills district. Here's the way it works: Smith arrives in town with a consignment of the queer, inserts his notices in the papers and waits. When one of the shovers sees the ad, he 'rings the usual'. Gemmell, alias Smith, who is waiting beside the phone, instructs his caller to go to

a certain place, usually remote, and wait there, wearing in his lapel a certain flower designated by Gemmell.

"The last time, the passer made contact with Gemmell on the coast highway a few miles north of Manly. When the shover received his instructions, he drove to the designated spot and waited there for more than an hour.

Presently Gemmell drove up in a rented car, having, no doubt, first made sure that he wasn't running into a police trap. Having met the shover, he showed samples, quoted prices and went through the usual rigmarole. According to Bates—one of the passers now in custody—Gemmell never picks the same spot twice." He broke off with a shrug. "It's all pretty damned hopeless."

"Seems to me that all you'd have to do would be to stake out a man or two in the vicinity of that Surrey Hills place," McKinney pointed out.

THE inspector shook his head slowly. "It isn't as easy as that, old man. Gathering in the shovers—even arresting Gemmell—isn't going to break up the racket. We've got to get the plates."

"Australia," McKinney drawled softly, "is approximately three million square miles in area. Have you got a line on the guys who are doing the printing?"

"According to Krohn, one of the ex-Nazi underground blokes, the printing is being done by one Erich Duerst, who was sent out from Germany back in '38 for the purpose of organizing a counterfeiting ring here in Australia. According to our informant, Duerst is a master operator. He not only prints the notes, but makes the paper they're printed on. What d'you think of that?"

"Quite a lad," McKinney conceded. "I recall hearing of a guy back in the States who worked the same racket. But the Treasury dicks finally put the arm on him."

"Oh, we'll eventually gather in Duerst, never fear," Clarke declared confidently. "It may take years, though. In the meantime, those chappies down in Canberra are giving our department what-ho."

McKinney said "If this Duerst character is making his own paper, he'll be shipping in supplies from time to time. You can't make paper out of air and water."

"Two months ago," Clarke declared, "a bale of Irish linen clippings was transshipped from a Cardiff tramp steamer and shipped around the land on the coastwise steamer *Bengali* to a consignee in Darwin. Now, that was, in itself, a suspicious circumstance since no one in a place like Darwin could have any legitimate use for Irish linen clippings.

"We detailed a man to travel with the clippings in the *Bengali*. He reported from Darwin that he was heading south into the Lostman's Bluff country, following the bale of clippings, which was being transported by camel-back. His last report came from Birdum, at the end of the railway line. He hasn't been heard from since."

"So you sent another man to look for him? McKinney hazarded.

"Righto. I haven't heard from him for several weeks. However, I'm sure we're on the right track. Look at this." The inspector produced from the desk drawer a scrap of paper which looked like part of a partly burned bank note. "This was found by a black rider on one of the cattle stations up there. Take a good look at it." He handed McKinney a jeweler's eyeglass.

McKinney pressed the loop against his right eye and studied the piece of paper. Presently he said, "All the gingerbread scrollwork seems to be smeared, as if the paper slipped in the printing press."

"Righto," Clarke confirmed. "The blackfellow who found it thought it was some kind of charm. When his white boss saw it, he recognized it for what it was and passed it along to the police. They sent it to Canberra."

McKinney said thoughtfully, "The counterfeiters must have been burning their spoilage. They wouldn't be likely to leave any spoiled jobs lying around, I guess. This one didn't burn completely, and was picked up by the wind and maybe blown for miles—could have been hundreds of miles, for all we know."

"I don't think it had been blown very far before the blackfellow found it," the inspector argued. "For one thing, it doesn't have the look of paper that had been out in the weather for a long time. In fact, it seems quite fresh." He looked across the desk at the American and smiled thinly. "Interested?"

McKinney lifted his broad shoulders in a shrug. "Why should I be? I'm no copper."

Clarke grinned. "If you're not, you've been going through the motions in a very convincing manner.

"Look, old man, we're terribly short-handed. Couldn't you postpone that trip home to the States a little while?"

"Every time I plan a trip Stateside, you pop up with another of those little jobs. Hell, man, have a heart!"

"The department will see that you are suitably rewarded."

McKinney, who already had more money than he could spend in an ordinary lifetime, grunted as if the little inspector had jabbed him in the solar plexis.

"Look, brother," he growled, "those pin-dling rewards I've received in the past from those fancy-pants tightwads down in Canberra I've always turned over to the Bush Brotherhood. All I'm interested in now is what's happened to those two Commonwealth cops."

The little inspector's faded blue eyes twinkled behind the lenses of his pince-nez. "I fancied you'd be willing to co-operate, Mac," he declared happily. "Well, old man, the *Bengali* is again in port and due to sail tomorrow for Darwin. If you travel on her, you might be able to learn the identity of the consignee of that bale of linen clippings. But once you reach Darwin, you'll be on your own."

"If those guys are really making their own paper," McKinney said thoughtfully, "they must be located where there's little or no travel. Paper mills stink. But what d'you mean I'll be on my own after I reach Darwin? Don't I get any help from the local jonops?"

"Let me give you a few words of advice," the inspector suggested. "You've been very lucky with past assignments. But don't let that success make you over confident. Fortunately, you don't look like a police officer. Perhaps that's your greatest asset. So don't try to act like one. If you need help, contact the nearest police detail. But don't associate openly with the police. I suspect that the two missing men made that mistake and had themselves taped." He rose and offered his hand. "Good luck, old man!"

SO FAR, McKinney reflected, as he peered between the stiffening hindlegs of his dead horse, his eyes probing the line of scrub along the creek bank, he hadn't had much luck. He thought sourly of his profitless wanderings to and fro over the grasslands of the Northern Territory, of the strange lack of co-operation shown him by the police detail nearest the spot where the burned scrap of banknote had been found. Perhaps Head Constable Corcoran, William, or Constable Mecker, Clarence, had nothing to tell him. Or, perhaps they were jealous of his status of successful amateur, a dabbler in police affairs who really should have known better.

"Lucky me!" McKinney commented gloomily. "To succeed where the regular cops have failed. That just isn't done—except in story books. All I'm likely to get out of this detail is a slug in the guts. Yeah, Bright Boy McKinney."

Quiet hung like a blanket over the surroundings. A pair of native companions emerged from the scrub and went into their strange love dance. Watching the gyrations of the dancing cranes, McKinney began to wonder if the sniper had withdrawn. He was about to rise from behind the carcass of his horse when a flock of galah parrots erupted in screaming flight above the treetops. Next, a green and yellow cloud of budgerigaroos curved from the scrub, soared in compact, graceful flight out over the grassland and then curved back toward the creek and vanished in the brush a mile from where they had emerged.

"Something scared those budgies," McKinney reflected. "Could be our friend with the itchy trigger finger changing position. Oh, oh!"

Farther down stream another flock of galahs wheeled into the air. Then a band of kangaroos, led by a towering "old man," burst from the scrub and went loping through the Mitchella grass. McKinney ventured to raise his head above the barrel of the dead horse as a patter of hoofbeats echoed through the creek bed. He caught a glimpse of a horseman heading upstream as if the devil were at his heels.

"Well!" McKinney exclaimed wonderingly. "Looks like he's decided to call it a day. He scared the galahs and the budgies and the 'roos. But what in hell scared him."

Rising to his knees, he saw the reason for the sniper's hasty retreat. Strung out in a long line, a mob of at least two thousand cattle was bearing toward the creek, preceded by the drover and two lead riders, while several more men rode at the tail and on the flanks of the herd.

"A droving mob!" McKinney exclaimed gratefully. "Brother, what a break!"

Rising to his feet, he walked over to where his Stetson lay on the ground, scowled at the bullet hole in the peaked crown and clapped the hat on his head. Then he turned to watch a scene which once had been commonplace in the American West.

This was the time of the year when cattle were being driven down from the high plateaus of the northern country, mustered, re-drafted and the picked beeves started toward the meat works at Wyndham, on the coast, following beaten cow trails between artesian bores, waterholes and occasional flowing creeks, averaging ten or twelve miles a day for weeks, until their journey ended in the pens of the packing plants.

With a slow thunder of hooves and a clicking of horns, to which was added the sharp barking of the kelpies, the Australian stock dogs, the cattle came on beneath a cloud of brown dust that hung like a moving canopy above their swaying backs. The driver and his two lead riders splashed their horses breast-high across the ford, preceded by a swimming kelpie. The dog shook his coat free of water, trotted over to McKinney, inspected the man with critical nose, sniffed at the dead horse and then barked warningly.

The drover trotted his horse up the sloping bank and reined in before McKinney. He looked questioningly at the dead horse and the buffalo a dozen yards beyond, then turned to McKinney with the customary greeting:

"Evenin'! Howsit?"

"Everything's lovely—now," McKinney responded, grinning.

"Buffler gore yer moke, what?"

"That was his intention," McKinney assured him, "until some guy plugged him from the scrub, then plugged my horse and tried his damndest to plug me. He hauled it when he heard you coming."

"I say, now!" the drover exclaimed wonderingly. He was a tall, lanky man of forty-five, with sandy hair, and with calm blue eyes in a lantern-jawed face, the cheeks and chin of which were covered with a sandy stubble. "My bloody word! Tried to plug yer, what?"

McKinney took off his hat and showed him the bullet hole in the crown. "That's how close he came to it," he declared.

The foreman stroked his sunburned mustache and looked worried. In his wide-brimmed hat, denim overalls and knee boots, he looked so much like an old-timer of the American West that McKinney felt a twinge of nostalgia. The man glanced quickly toward the cattle, which had now drunk their fill and were straggling eagerly up the creek bank toward the luscious Mitchella grass.

"I say," he suggested, "you'd better 'op up be'ind me, before some 'o them bloody bullocks run over yer."

As McKinney climbed up behind him, the drover went on. "We ain't strong on crime up 'ere. A bit o' poddy-dodgin' by wanderin' abos now an' then. But nothing serious, like this 'ere bushwackin'. 'Ell no! Me name's Finley, by the way."

McKINNEY gave his own name and watched the hungry cattle flow past like a brown river, driven by riders who wouldn't have seemed out of place on the streets of any American cow-town, except that most of them were black.

When the last of the cattle had passed, and the herd was spreading out over the bed-ground, he slid from the horse's back and asked:

"Can you sell me a horse from your remount mob?"

Instead of answering, Finley dismounted and walked over to the buffalo, studied the dead animal for a minute or two and then beckoned to a tall, middle-aged black, who was carrying an armload of firewood from the creek and leading his horse by the bridle rein slung over his shoulder.

"Hi, Charlie," the foreman directed. "I want yer to get the best cuts from this 'ere bull. No use leavin' all that good meat for the dingoes an' bull ants. Oh, aye! An' yer might pick out a 'orse for this 'ere new chum."

"Can do, boss," Charlie responded. He

was booted and spurred and big-hatted, and clean-shaven, except for the upper lip, from which sprouted a luxuriant mustache that made McKinney think of Uncle Joe Stalin doing a turn in blackface. He flashed the American a white-toothed grin and inquired, "What name b'long you, boss?"

McKinney smiled back at him as he gave his name, deciding that he liked the tall aborigine. As Charlie moved on with his load of firewood, the drover sat down on the dead horse and remarked:

"A bloke 'as ter 'ave a bloody good reason for tryin' ter kill another bloke, what?"

McKinney nodded. "You can say that again."

Finley looked up at him from under bushy, sun-bleached eyebrows.

"Yank, ain't yer?" he pried.

"That's right. I'm doing a bit of prospecting up here. I've been figuring that the guy who tried to rub me out might have been a prospector who'd stumbled onto a good lay and didn't want others horning in."

The drover dismissed that with a slow shake of the head. "No bloody go," he protested. "This 'ere's limestone country. No mineral, 'ceptin', mebbe, a bit o' coal. An' there's too much coal down south for anyone ter be interested in coal up 'ere." He looked shrewdly up at McKinney and asked, "Yer ain't a jonop, by any chance, what?"

McKinney hesitated, tempted for the moment to unburden himself, until he recalled that twice before he had landed in trouble by confiding in strangers. He asked:

"How could an American be connected with the Australian police?"

Finley nodded, apparently satisfied. "Lots o' Yanks up 'ere durin' the war," he declared. "Air force blokes. Started comin' in after the Big Bash."

McKinney smiled and looked away; nowadays, everyone in the Northern Territory referred to events as having happened either before or after the Big Bash, when Jap planes pounded Darwin to rubble.

"I was with the United States Navy," he explained.

"After the Big Bash," Finley continued, "we was sure the Nippos would make a landin'. The politicians down in Canberra sent young army jackaroos up 'ere ter tell us what ter do about that." He chuckled reminiscently. "Told us ter burn our 'ouses kill off our stock and whatnot."

"Scorched earth policy," McKinney said.

"Scorched earth, me bloody 'at! Me old woman 'ad a word or two to tell them young blighters about that. 'E says to 'er, 'Madam,' 'e says, 'yer must do as the army directs. We can't 'ave all the roads up 'ere cluttered with refugees, like the roads in Belgium.' "

McKinney threw back his head and laughed at the idea of cluttered roads in a country where the only roads are cattle trails and where the population averages one person to every fifty square miles.

"Rich, that was," Finley chuckled. He looked searchingly at McKinney and added, "You're the second stranger I've seen up 'ere in the past three months. This bloody country must be 'aving a settlement rush."

McKINNEY looked over the bed ground while he digested the drover's statement. The cattle were now quietly grazing on the knee-high Mitchella grass, and the stockriders had unsaddled their mounts and were busy making camp for the night. Two riders were stationed at widely separated points to keep the cattle from drifting too far, the figures of men and horses vague silhouettes against the darkening sky. The mustached black, Charlie, was skinning the hindquarters of the buffalo, humming softly through his nose as he worked. A haze of pungent smoke drifted upward from the camp fire, blending with the perfume of trampled grass and the pleasant, acrid odor of the cattle.

Finley spoke again. "Big red-'eaded bloke, 'e was. Called 'imself Quinlan. Didn't talk much about 'imself, but arsked a lot o' questions. I 'ave a sneakin' suspicion 'e was on the dodge."

McKinney said nothing. Sensing Finley's typically Australian dislike for the police, he decided to let the matter ride. He was vaguely disturbed by the drover's revelation, for the red-headed Quinlan was the first of the two Commonwealth officers assigned to the case. And he, apparently, had vanished into thin air.

After a supper of boiled buffalo steak, damper and strong, black tea

McKinney and Finley lay side by side on their blankets and smoked while they discussed cattle prospects in the northern grass country. The night was cool, with a gentle breeze blowing from the north, laden with the spicy scents of tarweed and eucalyptus. Out beyond the bedded herd the night riders drifted quietly to and fro, the figures of men and horses faintly highlighted by the moon rising above the distant bluffs.

Presently the drover put away his pipe, announced that he was making an early start, then covered his face with a corner of his blanket to shade his eyes from the moonlight. McKinney followed his example. Soon the camp was silent, save for the murmuring sounds of cattle chewing their cuds and the soft patter of hoofbeats blending with the tinkle of curb chains as the night herders rode slowly around the bedded herd.

HOURS later, he awoke with a start, his ears filled with the frantic drumming of hooves, as if someone were riding hell-for-leather toward the camp. Finley and his men were already awake, quietly pulling on their boots. The kelpies, still sluggish from too much buffalo meat, were moving stiff-legged around the horse mob.

"What's coming off?" McKinney inquired. He flung aside his blankets and sat up. Then he saw, less than a quarter of a mile up-wind from the camp, a thin line of flame creeping like a fiery serpent through the Mitchella grass.

"Holy Christopher!" He reached for his boots. "Isn't this something? How did it start?"

Finley spoke quietly to the rider, who was still sitting his horse. When the man answered, the drover turned back to McKinney and declared:

"Tommy says some bloke rode out o' the scrub an' set fire to the grass." He added in a tone of relief. "Lucky it's still green."

McKinney stood up, stamping his feet to ease the feel of his boots. Surveying the scene, he saw that the cattle had bedded down with their backs to the wind. So far, the beasts were tranquil. But once they scented the fire, they would stampede down wind.

The riders were moving with swift efficiency, flinging saddles on their mounts. No one made any noise for fear of alarming the drowsing cattle.

"What are you going to do about it?" McKinney asked.

Finley shrugged. "We'll start 'em movin' across the creek. After daylight, we'll stop for tucker."

"But the fire—what about it?"

"Why worry about it?" Finley asked carelessly. "It'll stop at the creek."

"Not if the wind gets up," McKinney pointed out. "The grass is still green, but it'll dry out ahead of the fire. We'd better douse it, before it gets too much of a start."

"Just 'ow d'yer propose doin' that, matey?" the drover asked, a trace of sarcasm in his tone.

McKinney accepted the challenge. "Sure, I can stop it." He was about to ask for a couple of ropes when he realized that Australian cowmen didn't use lariats. "How about letting me have the lashes off four of your stockwhips?"

Finley hesitated; an Australian stockrider's whip is a highly personalized article. He asked, "How in 'ell can yer put out a grass fire with whips?"

"You give me the whips—also that horse you promised me," McKinney said. "I'll show you."

Finley spoke to Charlie, who swung into his saddle, rode to the horse mob and returned with a skittish brumbie. The black held the horse, while McKinney hastily saddled and bridled the restive animal.

When Finley collected four whips, McKinney cut away the short stocks and joined the ends of the twelve-foot lashes in a reef knot, fashioned a bowline with one end, and bent the other in a clove hitch about the forelegs of his dead horse, after which he passed the bowline over the brumbie's head and snugged it down on a blanket collar. Meanwhile, Charlie had stripped the lashes from the stocks of the remaining two whips. As he went about fashioning another improvised rope, McKinney glanced toward the slowly advancing line of fire. As yet, it didn't seem worth worrying about. But dawn wasn't far off. And with the dawn there would come a wind that would fan the flames to greater intensity and send them sweeping over the grasslands

and leaving blackened desolation in their path, so that another rainy season must come and go before trail herds could again be driven over that route.

When, at last, the remaining rope was fast about the hindlegs of the dead horse, Charlie passed the bowline over his horse's head and vaulted lightly into the saddle. McKinney bound a bandanna over the eyes of his restive brumbie and mounted.

"Okay, Charlie," he warned. "Take a steady pull and pray to your fuzzy-headed gods that the ropes hold. Now! Easy does it!"

The two horses bowed their necks and took up the slack. The carcass moved, bounced over the uneven ground as the riders headed at a trot toward the wall of flame, which stretched from the edge of the scrub for more than a mile, and was creeping slowly out over the grasslands.

Reaching the line of flame, McKinney spurred his horse across the blazing grass and faced westward. The two men then maneuvered the carcass until it lay squarely across the fiery windrow. Then they drove in the spurs and went galloping along the line of burning grass, dragging behind them the carcass of the dead animal, the weight of which pressed out the flames.

The first run to the end of the blazing line was ticklish work. Their horses bucked, shied away from the heat. Never an expert rider, McKinney was in momentary danger of being pitched headforemost into the flames. When, at last, they reached the end of the mile-long strip of fire, they swung about and dragged the carcass back over the blackened ground, repeating the maneuver over and over until no spark remained.

Behind them, the cattle were drifting toward the creek in a compact mass, with the riders and their dogs keeping them bunched together. There was no hurry, no confusion and little noise, save the occasional warning bark of a kelpie.

Satisfied that there no longer was any danger of fire, McKinney dismounted and removed the ropes from the legs of the carcass. As Charlie coiled the scorched whip lashes, he grinned admiringly and declared in his soft voice:

"You one pella plenty savvy."

McKinney grunted sourly. Many times in his life he had been knocked down. But he never had failed to come up swinging. He felt now as if he had been knocked down, that he was up again and ready to start swinging the instant he saw anyone to take a swing at. He realized that the grass fire had been just one more attempt to eliminate him. The sniper had been frightened away the afternoon before by the arrival of the cattle. Apparently, he hadn't gone far. Returning, he had remained in hiding until shortly before dawn, and then had started the fire up-wind from the bedded cattle, hoping they'd stampede down-wind, over-run the camp and trample the sleeping men.

"Nice guy!" McKinney commented. "Willing to cause the deaths of Finley and his crew in hope of getting me. Brother, I hope we meet soon."

FIGURATIVELY, there was blood in McKinney's eye as, later that morning, he rode slowly through the creek bottom, following the trail of a horse that showed plainly in the soft, moist earth.

Finley had pushed the cattle safely across the ford and had paused on the east side of the creek, to let the animals graze, while he and his crew prepared breakfast. McKinney stayed with them until they were ready to drift on toward another ford some ten miles down stream.

Now, as he rode along in the sparse shade of the river gums, McKinney's Irish was up. Until the day before, he had considered the assignment as mere routine. But the two attempts upon his life had changed it to a strictly personal matter. No longer was he satisfied merely to seek certain wrongdoers, report their whereabouts to the police and let the officers finish the job. Now he wanted to make the clean-up in person, to get his capable hands on the man who had started the fire in hope of eliminating him along with the droving crew. The more he thought about that, the angrier he became.

"Of all the dirty, low-down rats!" he growled. "What he needs is a face-lifting. And he's going to get one, too, if I can land on him before the cops can move in to protect him."

His map told him that the creek came no closer to the bluff than thirty miles.

Having already concluded that the place made the most logical hide-away for those whom he sought, he was puzzled to account for the route being taken by the man he was trailing. According to his reasoning, the fellow should have taken the most direct route. Yet, by following the course of the creek, he actually was going away from the bluff, which bulked like a great, white mound against the sky, far to the northeast.

Reining in, McKinney took a pair of field glasses from his saddle-bag and focussed them upon the eminence. He had a clear view of its eroded face, of the jumble of huge boulders about its foot, which almost concealed the dark arch of a cave opening. High above the summit, a filmy column of smoke wavered in the clear, morning air.

"Looks like somebody's hanging around there," he commented. He watched the bluff for the next half hour, without seeing any other sign of human occupancy. Finally he put away his glasses and looked dubiously at the strange hoofprints in the soft earth.

Twice before, since coming into the territory, he had found himself following trails which had led nowhere. Convinced, now, that the bluff was inhabited, he was impatient to reach it, and was deterred from leaving the cover of the creek and striking out across the open country only by the realization that he would be spotted from the summit of the eminence before he had covered the first mile. On the other hand, if he followed the trail, he might again find himself up a blind alley.

AWARE that he couldn't approach the bluff until after dark, he rode on, keeping his eyes on the line of hoofprints, satisfied that he was following the man who had shot at him the afternoon before, and who later had tried to wipe him out along with the drover crew by setting the grass fire.

The creek bottom was alive with game. Galah parrots rose, screaming, into the air as he passed. Cockatoos scolded him from the safety of the higher branches. Bush turkeys, too fat to fly, scurried clumsily from under his horse's hooves. Twice, he flushed a band of kangaroos. And once he crossed the trail of a small herd of water buffalo. He worried because of the commotion brought about by his presence, realizing that the flight of the birds and the kangaroos would betray him to any bush-wise person who might happen to be watching the creek from the summit of the bluff.

At noon he halted to rest his horse and make a billy of tea. Dismounting, he tethered the animal, collected a few handfuls of bark and started a hot, smokeless fire. He filled the can at the creek, set it on the fire and then unsaddled his horse, removed the bit and allowed the animal to graze. He was about to take his walkie-talkie radio from his tucker bag, to make his daily contact with the police station at Birdum, when he noticed that his mount was staring fixedly toward a clump of bushes a hundred feet away.

Unhurriedly, McKinney shoved the little radio set out of sight. Keeping his back to the clump of bushes, he thrust his right hand inside his shirt bosom and slid his automatic from his shoulder holster. Then he whirled, the big Webley aimed from waist level.

"Okay, brother," he drawled, "you can come out now."

The bushes shook as a man emerged from cover, grinned placatingly at McKinney and declared in an unmistakable Sydneyside accent:

"I wasn't up to nothin', Matey—straight, I wasn't. Just takin' a bit of a dekko at yer, that's all."

McKinney looked him over with appraising blue eyes. The stranger was short and slender and very blond, with shrewd, blue eyes deeply set on either side of a large, bony nose, the skin of which had been badly sunburned and was now beginning to peel. In his ragged shirt, torn trousers, dusty wide-awake hat and broken shoes, the little man looked like a typical swaggie town on his luck.

"Well," McKinney said carelessly, "I reckon there'll be no charge for just looking at me. I was just about to mug up. Feel like joining me?"

The little man beamed. "My bloody oath! I was a-corkin' off behind them bushes when you halted. Blime! I ain't had a sniff o' char in a month. Not since I lost me swag. Me name's Grimes."

"Mine's Jones," McKinney declared with

a straight face, suspecting that, as an alias, it was as good as any, and probably as valid as the name furnished by the stranger. "So you lost your swag, eh?'

"Aye," Grimes revealed, "everything I had, even me bluey. And if you think sleepin' up 'ere without coverin' at night's ail beer and skittles, matey, you should try it sometime."

"Abos?" McKinney queried.

"Uh—oh, aye. Abos. The blighters stripped me clean."

McKINNEY was wondering at the other's momentary hesitation as he opened his tucker bag and took out two tin cups and two tin plates. He opened a can of bully beef, divided it equally between the two plates, added a few hard biscuits and then filled the pannikins with strong black tea.

"Lunch is served, me lord," he declared, sitting down on his saddle. He added, "One good thing about this country, there's no fear of a man starving to death as long as he stays with the creek."

Grimes filled his mouth with canned beef, took a bit of hard tack and masticated vigorously. Presently he swallowed and said:

"You oughter try a steady diet of bush turkey and nothing else, matey."

McKinney smiled. "I reckon that would be rather monotonous," he admitted.

He watched the other eat hungrily, studying him from under his black brows. There was something furtive about Grimes, an evasiveness which suggested that he was weighing his words, as if he feared saying too much.

The little man washed down a mouthful of bully beef and hard tack with a long draught of tea. Setting down his pannikin, he looked furtively at McKinney from under his blond brows and probed:

"You're a Yank, or a Canuck, what?"

McKinney grinned. "Which would you like me to be?"

Grimes shrugged. "It's all the bloody same to me, matey. Yer tucker is good and that's what counts. Which way are you goin'?"

McKinney sensed that the other wanted to tag along and share his tucker. "I'm headed up toward the Aboriginal Reserve," he evaded. "I'll be moving fast, once I get away from the creek. Were you prospecting up this way?"

"Pros—oh, aye. For tin," Grimes declared, after a momentary hesitation. "There's some tinstone up here, but not enough to be worth while." He groped in his shirt pocket and brought out a number of pinkish crystals. "I found these up the creek aways. Zircons. They're all over the bloody shop."

"Interesting," McKinney said. He examined the gems and returned them to Grimes, who dropped them back in his shirt pocket. "By the way," the American continued, "there's a cattle mob heading down to Wyndham. I parted with it this morning. If you could catch up with them, you'd be sure of your tucker and a horse all the way down to the coast."

"That's an idea, matey," Grimes responded. "I'll be out after 'em after I stoke up. How do I find 'em?"

"Keep on down the creek until you pick up the trail," McKinney directed. "You can't miss it. The drover, Finley, isn't pushing the mob very hard. So you should be able to come up with 'em before sundown."

"Blime, that's a break!" the little man declared gratefully. He rose, carried his plate and pannikin to the water's edge and scoured them with sand. He handed the mess gear to McKinney and continued, "Now if you'll give me a fill of tobacker, matey, I'll be paddin' the hoof." He took an old briar pipe from his shirt pocket and looked hopefully at the American.

McKinney gave him half a plug. The other said "Ta!" waved a slim hand in farewell and hurried downstream. In a few minutes he had passed from McKinney's view among the trees.

The American watched him out of sight, suspecting that Mr. Grimes wasn't exactly what he professed to be. He put away the mess gear, saddled his horse, then mounted and rode on, wondering if the little man could have any connection with the man he was trailing.

THE trail of hoofprints led him on all afternoon. Close to sun-down, he reached the mouth of a billabong, up which the trail led, mingled with the broad pad-marks of camels. Looking toward the northeast, McKinney saw the bluff of gleaming white

in the light of the declining sun. Stretching from the mouth of the billabong almost to the foot of the eminence was a line of trees.

"By Christopher!" McKinney murmured. "This is it, at last. They come and go by way of the creek and this billabong. That's why they're never seen. That guy who tried to bushwack me yesterday afternoon, figured I was on his trail, and aimed to rub me out before I learned too much."

He pushed on up the slough, which was dry except for a chain of soak-holes along the center. The ground between the waterholes and the sloping banks was covered with matted scrub and waist-high Mitchella grass. But in the few bare places the tracks of the horse and camels could be plainly seen.

Suddenly his horse stopped, stretched its neck toward a clump of bushes and snorted. In the same instant a dingo emerged like a drab, yellow shadow from the scrub, scrambled hastily up the bank of the billabong and fled with its tail between its legs.

Dismounting, McKinney drew his Webley and walked toward the clump of bushes. Instantly, his nostrils were assailed by the lingering odor of decay. Pressing aside the branches, he looked downward and saw the skeleton of a horse.

There was no way of telling how the animal had died, for the dingoes and the bull ants had stripped the carcass bare. McKinney poked about in the scanty undergrowth, looking for some remains of horse gear which would tell him that the horse had been broken, and hadn't been a brumbie stray. But there were no remains of saddle or bridle.

"Might be just a wild one," McKinney conceded. He looked toward the bluff and saw that the eminence was now within easy rifle range. "Just the same, this skate could have been potted from the bluff. Well, it'll all come out in the wash."

He mounted and rode on, letting his horse have its head, knowing that the half wild brumbie would warn him of lurking danger. Darkness came with tropic suddenness, but he continued on, leaving his horse to pick its own path through the tangled undergrowth, knowing that the animal would follow the line of least resistance.

Presently the bed of the billabong sloped abruptly upward to the level of the plain, above which the bluff towered like a fairy castle, silhouetted against the glow of the rising moon. McKinney rode up out of the slough and walked his horse across the level ground, which was still shrouded in darkness. All at once, his horse picked up speed and stretched his neck toward the bluff, now less than a hundred yards away.

Reaching the jumble of boulders at the foot of the eminence, McKinney dismounted, hastily removed saddle and bridle and hid them among the rocks. Then he let the horse go. The animal started off at a walk, straight toward the foot of the rise, its ears perked expectantly forward as it followed a winding path among the boulders. Trailing the animal, McKinney watched it vanish in an oval of shadow which he realized was the opening of a cave.

"H-m!" He sniffed the cool night air. "Horses. Reckon that brumbie knew where he'd find a supper of oats."

He went on, dodging like a shadow among the boulders, until he reached the mouth of the cave, from which there emanated a strong ammoniacal odor that almost stopped his breath.

"Christopher!" he gasped. "Don't those guys ever police their stables?"

An uproar broke out inside the cave. Squeals of horses blended with the stamp of hooves and the bubbling of camels. McKinney chuckled, realizing that his brumbie was fighting the other horses away from the feed trough. Slipping inside, he used his pencil flashlight to sweep a slender beam of radiance over the interior. He saw three horses tethered to stakes driven in the ground at one side of the cavern. Among them was his own brumbie, with its head in the feed box. At the opposite side of the cavern three camels knelt sedately, chewing their cuds and eyeing him superciliously. At the rear of the cave the floor rose in a natural ramp toward a fissure about twenty feet above ground level.

The horses started fighting again, the three residents ganging up on the intruder. Again there was a pandemonium of squeals and kicks and snapping teeth as the animals engaged in a free-for-all. McKinney switched off his pencil flash as a light showed in the crevice, while a querulous voice rang through the cavern in a question which

sounded to McKinney like "Wer da?"

Retreating hurriedly from the cave, he squeezed himself into a fold in the limestone, from which he could see over the interior. He watched the light grow as a man came through the fissure and cautiously descended the ramp, holding a guttering candle high above his head. He was short, stoop-shouldered, with a ragged mustache half concealing his mouth, and with thick-lensed glasses through which he peered near-sightedly at the fighting horses.

"What's up, Kempie?" someone called from above.

The little man halted at the foot of the ramp, swiveled his bullet head on his skinny neck and called back in an accent that would have made the fortune of a character actor:

"Id iss a strange horse fighting der odders."

"Got a halter on 'im?" the other queried.

"Nein!" Kempie declared, adding, "You come down here und put him oudt. Horses iss not my business."

"If he ain't got a halter on, he's just a stray what's wandered in 'ere after a feed of oats," the other man said in an accent that wouldn't have sounded out of place along Sydney's far-flung waterfront. "Leave the blighter be. He'll hook it after he's had his fill."

The little man shrugged, turned to ascend the ramp and then stumbled to his knees as a loose stone rolled underfoot. The candle fell from his hand, flickered out, leaving the cavern in darkness.

This, McKinney told himself, was made to order. Leaving his hiding place, he felt his way through the darkness, guided by the sound of the little man's movements as he groped about him for the candle. McKinney's plan was simple and direct. He would, he decided, knock Kempie out, carry him to some place outside the cave and ask him a few pointed questions when he was sufficiently recovered to talk. If the answers were what he hoped they'd be, he would turn the animals loose, thus leaving the others as completely marooned as if they were stranded on a coral patch in mid-Pacific. After which he would call Birdum on his walkie-talkie, then sit back and wait until the police arrived.

Suddenly McKinney paused, aware of another presence. Still in a half crouch, he whirled, saw the vague loom of a man's figure silhouetted against the patch of moonlit sky showing through the cave entrance a scant instant before something thudded against the back of his head, knocking him face downward on the ground, out cold.

WHEN consciousness flooded back, McKinney found himself lying among the kneeling camels, his head pillowed on an odorous heap of litters. For several minutes he lay still, staring up into the darkness, trying to recall what had happened. As memory returned, he remembered stalking Kempie in the darkness, remembered catching a glimpse of the mysterious third actor in the little drama an instant before feeling the shock of the blow.

"That's one time I seem to have stuck my neck out good and far," he ruminated. "Christopher! That little guy looked like a soft touch. But I didn't figure on the other. He must have been watching me all the time. Probably posted outside on guard."

He tried to rise and discovered that his hands were fastened behind his back, and that his legs were immobilized by the simple expedient of pulling his breeches down over his boot tops. He struggled with his bonds and felt them give. But not until he had freed himself did he discover that he had been tied with thongs fashioned by slitting his leather belt.

"Why, the scum!" he muttered angrily. He struggled to his feet, pulled up his breeches and held them in place by rolling down the waistband. He searched vainly for his pistol and flashlight. Realizing that his unknown assailant had taken them, he felt in his pockets and discovered that nothing else was missing. Apparently, the other hadn't bothered to search him, for the canvas belt worn next his skin, which contained his money and credentials, was untouched.

He peered about him in the darkness, puzzled to account for apparent lack of interest in him. According to the rules, he should have been taken to the upper cavern and subjected to questioning, instead of merely being tied up and left lying among the camels.

He tensed as his ears caught the sound of labored breathing. Dropping on all fours,

he peered through the darkness and saw the prone figure of a man outlined dimly against the graying floor of the cave. Moving cautiously, he crept forward, touched the man's back with feather-light fingers and discovered that the fellow was bound hand and foot with strips of leather, which he surmised were parts of his own belt.

McKINNEY searched the man for weapons and found none. When he turned him over on his back, he caught the din sheen of glasses on the other's face and realized that he was none other than the little man, Kempie, who had been effectually gagged by the simple expedient of forcing a lump of limestone into his mouth and securing it in place with a clammy bandanna that smelled strongly of perspiration.

"Christopher!" McKinney wondered. "This business gets screwier all the time. Evidently the same guy knocked out both of us. But why both?"

He surmised that the puzzle would resolve itself in time, and decided to go ahead with his plan to maroon the gang. Kempie was conscious, and might talk. He tried to talk now in a protesting gurgle as McKinney heaved him over his shoulders in a fireman's lift and carried him from the cave.

A hundred yards from the entrance, McKinney deposited his burden among a maze of boulders. Squatting on his heels beside Kempie, he said wheedlingly:

"Listen, fella, I represent the law. We've got you and the rest of the gang dead to rights. Want to tell me if we've missed anything? It might make matters easier for you."

Kempie glared through his spectacles and mumbled around the limestone gag. Then, as McKinney unfastened the bandanna, the little man spat out the lump of limestone and loosed a yell which the American was certain could be heard for at least half a mile.

"No you don't, brother!" McKinney clapped his right hand heavily over the other's mouth. "If you let out another yap, I'll belt hell out of you."

When Kempie tried to bite his hand, he forced the stone between the man's lips and bound the bandanna in place.

"Okay, fella," he drawled, "if that's the way you want it. But you're only making it harder on yourself."

He decided to go ahead with the rest of his plan, aware that, under Australian law, he had no right to force a confession, Kempie glared defiantly through his spectacles as McKinney examined his bonds and settled the gag more securely in place.

"Well," McKinney said, "I'm leaving you to think it over."

He returned to the cave, paused for a few minutes outside the entrance and listened to the bubbling noises of the camels and the restless movements of the horses, which were still being plagued by the brumbie. Satisfied that no one was waiting for him, he crept inside and felt his way toward the camels.

The long-necked beasts rose expectantly as he paused beside them. McKinney surmised that they hadn't been watered that day. Unbuckling the headstall of the nearest camel, he struck the animal sharply on the hindquarters. The camel walked sedately to the entrance, sniffed loudly and then took off toward the billabong in a swinging trot.

The remaining pair of camels followed the first as fast as McKinney could free them. After they were gone, he rebuckled the headstalls, so as to make it appear that the beasts had pulled their heads free. He next turned his attention to the horses. Once freed from their halters they headed toward the slough at an eager gallop. Only the grass-fed brumbie refused to leave. When McKinney tried to drive it from the cave it swung about and let fly with both hind feet, reluctant to leave the small ration of oats remaining in the feed trough.

McKinney let the animal stay, realizing that one horse would make little difference to the marooned gang. He started toward the ramp, then halted suddenly when he saw a light flicker through the fissure. Whirling, he ran from the cave and took cover behind a boulder opposite the entrance.

A MAN came through the fissure and walked down the ramp, raising above his head a gasoline lantern which filled the cavern with its hard, white glare.

"Hi, Kempie!" he called. "Where the devil 'ave yer got to?" He looked toward the stakes where the horses had been teth-

ered, then swung his gaze toward the opposite side of the cavern, his mouth slowly opening to emit a protesting, "I say!"

"What's wrong out there, Wilben?" someone called from inside the fissure.

"The bloody mokes are gone—and the camels," Wilben declared. "And Kempie ain't 'ere."

Another man came through the fissure and joined Wilben. He asked, "What happened to them?"

"I don't know, Eric," Wilben growled. He walked on down the ramp and picked up one of the camel halters. "Looks like they pulled their 'eads through the 'eadstalls."

"That's probably because they weren't taken to water since yesterday," the other snapped accusingly. "I distinctly ordered you to see that they were fed and watered."

"Kempie must 'ave gone after 'em," Wilben said lamely. He examined the camel halters, then walked across the cavern and looked at the headstalls of the horses. Glaring at McKinney's brumbie, which was still contentedly munching oats, he growled, "That bloody goat musta driven 'em out." Snatching up a stake, he struck the horse savagely on the rump. "Out o' here, you bloody swine. Hook it, blast yer!"

The brumbie promptly lashed out with his heels and bowled the man over like a tenpin. Wilben picked himself up and was about to return the attack when the other stopped him.

"Hold on, there!" he warned. "Don't injure that horse. We might need him. If the others aren't recovered, you can damned well walk out to the coast."

"Walk?" Wilben jeered. "And 'ave every bloody jonop between 'ere and Darwin wandering about four blokes on foot. Walking ain't just done in this country, Duerst. Not by white men, anyway."

McKinney regarded Duerst with renewed interest, aware now that he looking at the brains of the mob. Duerst was short and thick-set, with a high, intelligent forehead above a squarish face. Since his hair was blond, McKinney assumed that his eyes were blue.

"I brought you fellows in here without being seen by anyone," Duerst was saying. "I can take you out in the same manner. Now get outside and see what's keeping Kempner." He turned, walked back up the ramp and passed from sight through the fissure.

"I don't like this a damned bit," Wilben muttered. He picked up one of the camel halters, looked at it sourly and dropped it again. "Nice bloody 'ow-de-do!" Lifting the lantern high above his head, he started toward the entrance of the cave.

McKinney squeezed farther into his hiding place and watched the white glare of the lantern move in a wide arc across the ground as Wilben emerged from the cave. The man passed without being aware of McKinney's presence until the American's left fist smacked him under the right ear and dropped him in an inert heap.

"Two down, two to go!" McKinney grunted as he snatched up the lantern and hastily extinguished it. Darting inside, he picked up a couple of halters and used them to bind his victim hand and foot. Then he lifted the unconscious man, carried him a hundred feet from the cave and dropped him behind a heap of boulders.

HE SEARCHED Wilben for a pistol and discovered that the man was unarmed. Returning to the cave, he paused for a moment outside the entrance and peered over the interior. Suddenly the report of a single firearm reverberated through the honeycombed recesses of the bluff in a succession of rolling echoes which sounded as if a bombardment had been opened up by a battery of seventy-fives.

McKinney slipped inside the cave and crouched close to the floor. Above him, the white beam of a gasoline lantern slanted through the fissure, laying down a path of radiance along the ramp. As he watched, the light went off and came on again. This was repeated a number of times, as if someone were moving rapidly back and forth before the lantern. Again a pistol shot went rolling through the caverns.

"Christopher!" McKinney wondered. "It can't be that these mugs have turned on one another."

He tiptoed up the ramp and reached the top of the incline just as the light went off again, accompanied by a metallic clatter which suggested that the lantern had been knocked over. The darkness beyond the fissure was filled with the clamor of battle.

The stamp and scuffle of feet on the rock floor blended with the thud of blows and the labored breathing of struggling men. To McKinney, it was like listening to a radio thriller; he could see nothing, could only surmise from the racket that a free-for-all was going on inside the upper cavern.

Quietly, he felt his way through the fissure, blundered into a small side cave and came up against a blank wall. He groped through the intense darkness until he again reached the fissure. Halting, he listened, suddenly aware that the clamor of battle had ceased.

For several moments there were only sounds of heavy breathing. Presently a voice whispered in the darkness.

"Are you all right, Johan?"

"*Ja.* I am sitting on his legs," Johan replied in an accent that suggested Hamburg. "How did he get in here? I saw nothing until I woke up and found you struggling with him."

"He must have been hiding in that small cave off the passage," the first speaker said. "When I went down to see what was bothering Wilben, he slipped in here. Probably he hoped to rescue that police spy we're holding. Light the lantern and let's see what he looks like."

The soft crackle of a match was followed by a yellow glow which revealed Duerst standing over a figure huddled like a bundle of old clothes on the rock floor. A few yards away another man was touching the flame of the match to the mantles of a gasoline lantern. As the light flared up, filling the cavern with its white glare, McKinney saw that Duerst was gripping a Webley automatic.

"The swine tried to shoot me—twice," Duerst declared in an aggrieved tone. "Turn him over, Johan, and let us see who he is."

The other man set the lantern on the floor, stooped over the inert figure and droned, "He iss not dead."

"That is good," Duerst said. "Now we can force him to tell us who he is and why he came here. Turn him over."

Johan turned the unconscious man on his back. He said, "If he is of the police, that is bad. *Ja!*"

Duerst shrugged, stepped closer to the light and examined the pistol in his hand. "This gun is government issue," he declared. He stuck the weapon inside the waistband of his trousers and peered down at the man on the floor. "Judging from Wilben's description of the fellow he claimed to have shot down there in the slough last month, I'd say that this is the same man."

Wilben," Johan declared heavily, "is a boasting liar. It would not surprise me to discover that he also lied about killing that one yesterday."

"Grenfel warned us about that one," Duerst said. "Wilben should have taken particular care to liquidate him. However, Johan, it is a warning. Now that we've used up the last batch of paper, we might as well get ready to leave. Sooner or later, the police will smell us out."

"How can we leave without our horses and camels?" Johan asked.

Duerst shrugged. "Wilben will recapture them. He's supposed to be expert on such matters." He looked down as the man on the floor groaned. "Ha! He's coming out of it." He kicked the man viciously in the ribs. "Snap out of it, *schwein!*"

The other sat up, blinked at Duerst and replied in a burst of Sydneyside profanity hot enough to boil water. Seeing him, hearing his high-pitched voice, McKinney stared from the fissure, his amazement growing as he recognized the tousled blond head, the hatchet face and the large bony nose of the little swaggie who called himself Grimes.

DUERST again kicked Grimes in the side. "Enough of that!" he snarled. "Who are you and why are you here?"

"I," Mr. Grimes declared solemnly, "am a bloke who spent a couple of years stickin' bayonets in swine like you and listenin' to 'em squeal."

"So? You need a lesson in courtesy," Duerst declared softly. He looked at Johan. "Get a rope."

Johan shouffled from McKinney's field of vision and returned with a coil of rope. Deciding that matters had gone far enough, McKinney sprang inside the cave. Duerst whirled, his right hand streaking toward the butt of the Webley stuck inside the waistband of his trousers.

Before he could draw the weapon, McKinney hit him—hit him on the point of his prominent chin with a bony left which had behind it all the gentle persuasiveness of a battering ram. Duerst's body arched as he

rose on tiptoe, almost lifted from the floor by the force of the blow. Then he folded like a wet sack.

As McKinney stooped and reached toward the gun in Duerst's waistband, Johan heaved the coil of rope at him, then tugged at the butt of a revolver protruding from his right hip pocket.

With a shrill "Whack-o!" Mr. Grimes came off the floor with the snap of a suddenly released spring. Gripping Johan by the shirt front, he butted him savagely in the face with his head, tripped him expertly and fell on top of him. Kneeling astride his victim, the little man bounced his head against the rock floor, then flipped him over on his face and jerked a short-barreled revolver from Johan's hip pocket.

"Whack-o!" he shrilled. "Richard is 'imself again, by cripes!" He levelled the stubby gun at McKinney and warned, "Steady on, old bean. Drop that gun and give an account of yourself."

McKinney regarded him with the glowering intentness of a top sergeant about to bawl out an erring rookie. "Listen, halfportion," he drawled, "you'll be lucky if I don't decide to lay you across my knee and whale hell out of you. Who in Sam Hill d'you think you are, anyway?"

"The name is Grimes, Richard—really," the little man stated. "Also, I'm with the Commonwealth."

"You mean you were with Commonwealth," McKinney corrected him. "When Inspector Nobby Clarke hears about the didoes you've been cutting, he'll blow his top so hard it'll sound like a twenty-one-gun salute. And that'll probably blow one Grimes, Richard, right out of his job. Incidentally, my name's McKinney, if that means anything to a smart operator like you."

MR. GRIMES' hatchet face revealed his sudden inner turmoil as he exclaimed, "Ow!" He glared defensively at McKinney and went on, "You told me your name was Jones. If you'd given me the oil straight, I wouldn't have pulled a boner like that. Ow!"

McKinney grinned. "You must have figured me for one of the mob."

"I did, and all," Grimes declared angrily. "When you handed me that lame alias, I thought I had you taped. So I tagged you all afternoon, waiting for a chance to take a crack at you. When you turned up the billabong, I was sure you were one of the push. So—" He broke off with a shrug and stared defiantly at the American.

"I found the skeleton of a horse in the billabong," McKinney told him. "I figured from that you were giving it to me straight about being robbed."

"That was the dinkum oil," Grimes asserted. He parted the hair above his left ear and revealed a half-healed scar. "Look at that. The blighter who potted me from the scrub thought he'd done me in, and left me lie. Then he shot my nag and walked off with everything I had, even my saddle and bridle. He left me nothing except a penknife and a box of matches."

"That must have been Wilben," McKinney said. "He seems to be the official torpedo for the mob. He tried to rub me out, too. How did you manage to lay out that Kempie character?"

"The little bloke with the Old Bill mustache?" Grimes chuckled reminiscently. "I watched you unsaddle your moke outside, then follow him inside. When I started in after you, I saw Kempie coming down the ramp with a lighted candle. I didn't see you at all. Then Kempie stumbled and the candle went out. I headed straight for him. But you got in my way, so I gave it to you with a rock in my bandanna. You fell over on Kempie. That was the first time I realized there were two of you. So I beaned Kempie, took your gun and torch and tied both of you up with strips of leather cut from your belt."

"And then you went topside and ran smack into trouble, eh?"

"I was hiding in a little cave off the passage," Grimes explained. "I saw Wilben go down to see what was delaying Kempie. Pretty soon Duerst joined him. Then I slipped into the cave here and started looking around for Quinlan. But I'd forgotten all about this Johan bloke. He was stretched on one of the cots yonder. When he saw me, he jumped up and started yelling for Duerst. Duerst came in then, and both of 'em grabbed me and started giving me the works. It was quite a lively shivoo."

"So that's how it happened," McKinney said, relenting in his determination to report Grimes to Inspector Clarke. "Well,

everything's all hunky now, so I reckon we can forget you damned near beat out my brains. How about this Quinlan?"

"Aye, what about him?" A voice boomed querulously from the rear of the cavern. "Looks like you blighters would stop gammin' long enough to get me loose."

"That's him," Mr. Grimes exclaimed. He snatched up the lantern and trotted off in the direction from which the voice had come.

PRESENTLY, he returned, accompanied by a tall, red-haired man who had "copper" written all over him, although his face was covered with a coppery stubble, and his khaki shirt and trousers were torn and dirty.

The big man shook hands with McKinney, then sat down on an empty box and massaged his wrists. "You didn't get here a day too soon," he revealed. "These blokes were gettin' ready to shove off with about half a million or so in queer money. They'd have flooded the country with it, and we'd 'ave been up the bloody spout."

"While they'd still have the plates and the know-how to go on making more," McKinney said. "They seem to have been pretty well organized."

"Not half!" Quinlan declared. "They 'ave a bloke name of Grenfel planted in Birdum, to report by field wireless on every stranger who comes into the country. I suppose they 'ad me spotted before I was in town an hour. Another bloke comes up in a plane from somewhere down south, bringin' in supplies, and so forth, and takin' out the finished product for distribution among the shovers.

"Why," he went on, "they even make their own paper. They've got a little paper mill back there, and the most efficient printing press you ever saw. You know, they're survivors of the old Nazi underground now working on their own. All except Wilben, that is. He's just a Sydney larrikin."

"Clarke has a line on the shovers and the contact man," McKinney revealed. Noticing that Duerst and Johan were showing signs of returning consciousness, he cut the coil of rope into suitable lengths and bound the pair hand and foot. "Well, that's that. Wilben and Kempie are lying outside among the rocks. We'd better bring 'em in."

LEAVING Grimes on guard, McKinney and Quinlan went outside and brought in Wilben and Kempner. McKinney carried in his own gear, cajoled his brumbie with a handful of oats while he slipped a halter over the animal's head and tied him to a stake.

"That's one bronc I won't have to go chasing after in the morning," he declared as he and Quinlan herded the two prisoners up the ramp.

In the upper cave the men's bonds were removed and replaced with more efficient fastenings of rope. Now that his mission was all but ended, McKinney felt a definite let-down. The fact that he had captured a gang of dangerous criminals with his bare hands gave him no satisfaction, for it seemed to him that the case had been brought to a successful conclusion, not by any cleverness on his part, but by sheer, blind luck.

"I don't know why in blazes I ever let myself be talked into this mess," he grumbled.

"I'm damned glad you did," Quinlan assured him.

McKinney eyed him questioningly. "That reminds me. You never told us how come these guys snagged you."

Quinlan grinned sheepishly. "To tell the truth, Mac, I shouldn't care to broadcast it. It wouldn't be at all to my credit as a police officer. You see, I depended too much on the majesty of the law, and walked right into a trap these blighters had laid for me, after being tipped off by their spotter in Birdum.

"As I couldn't very well argue with four guns, I surrendered, hoping Clarke would send someone to look for me before I was given the business."

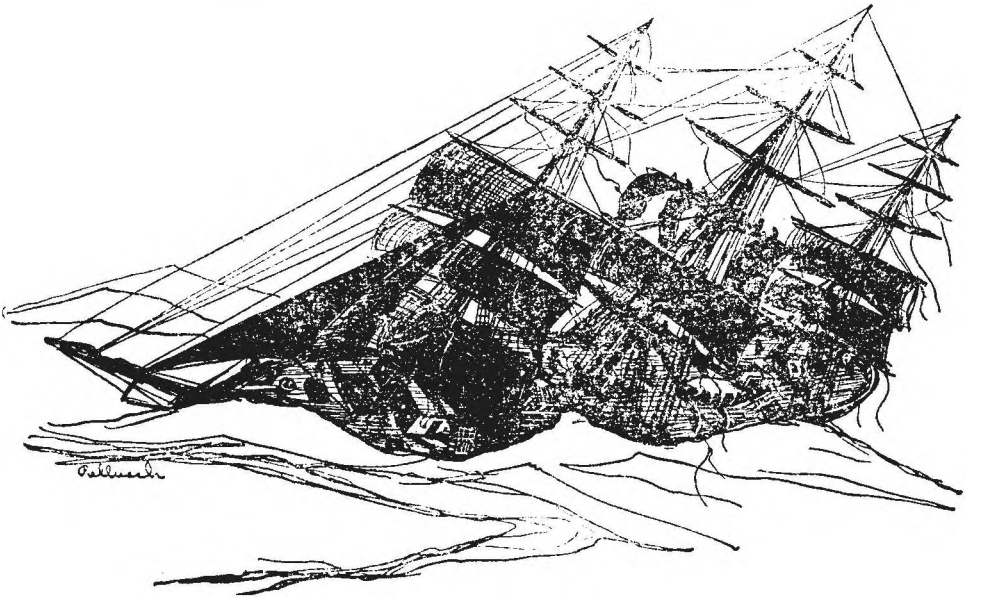
McKinney felt better after hearing Quinlan's confession. After all, he thought, he probably had saved the big red-head's life. Also, he had succeeded where a pair of regular Commonwealth cops had failed.

"Yes," Quinlan repeated soberly, "I'm damned glad that Clarke talked you into taking the assignment. My bloody oath!"

McKinney nodded absently. "He knew I was a sucker for a hard-luck story." He grinned sheepishly and added, "I reckon it must be the boy scout in me."

Curioddities By Weill

Remember, You're Dancing With a Beautiful Lady When You're At the Helm of a Windship



GABBY DROPS THE HOOK

By FRED LANE

CARRYING a Washington D. C. dateline, the story clattered out on the newswire teletypes. Probably it had been tapped out by a tired rewrite man after a fruitless call to Navy PRO. It contained no news, but paradoxically enough, had story value.

"The Navy was silent today regarding the Norwegian schoolship Ariel, *which sailed from Palau three days ago for Pearl Harbor, manned by a crew of U. S. Navy bluejackets. The square-rigger, commanded by Lieutenant Bulwer N. Nash, carried emergency radio equipment, but her signals have not been heard for the past 24 hours,*

"The Ariel *was captured by the Japanese during the war and was recovered when U. S. forces landed on the Palaus. With war's end, the Norwegian Government, through diplomatic channels requested that the big sailing ship be brought to Honolulu by the Navy, where a Norwegian crew enroute from Oslo, is to take over.*

"Concern is felt in shipping circles because of the cyclonic storm which swept the area yesterday."

FESTUS "GABBY" PERKINS, Chief Warrant Officer, U.S.N., leaned angularly against the taffrail as the windship *Ariel* ran east northeasterly from the Palaus. A long, ecstatic sigh whistled up his throat and ruffled his mustache when he glanced aloft. As he gazed lovingly at the wind-filled topsails, an angry gust of wind lifted the cap from his dome-shaped head. He grabbed for it with a dexterity acquired by long practice and the sacrifice of many headpieces, and jammed it hard against his ample ears. Scratching his tickling cheek where his gray antler mustache kept blowing against it, Festus resumed his admiring scrutiny.

"Beautiful, that's what," he murmured. "Nothin' prettier'n a square-rigger."

This was something like it, after a long, soft berth at Pearl. He felt the live decks

under him, the salt spray on his face, Bulwar Nash, the young lieutenant assigned as skipper, had been letting his mate handle things. And that was as it should be. Festus knew sail. He'd bring her in, snug and shipshape—probably his last job for the Navy before he was billeted about.

Festus glanced at the youthful helmsman whose knuckles whitened as they gripped the spokes of the big wheel. "Try to get the feel of the ship, lad. Ever dance with a lady?"

"Aye aye, sir."

Festus grinned reminiscently. "When I was your age, there wasn't a better waltzer than I was. Nor a better helmsman, either. Now, just remember, you're not steerin' a battlewagon. You're dancin' with a beautiful lady when you're at the helm of a windship. Take it easy-like. Don't step on her toes. An' listen to the sea an' wind. That's your music, lad."

"Aye aye, sir."

Snatching at his cap again, Festus went on: "I was seventeen when I signed on the *Silver Cloud*. Four-masted bark with a skipper harder'n a crimp's heart. Belayin' pin soup an' handspike hash was the daily ration—but I got along. They said she was a cranky ship. But she wasn't. She had spirit an'. none of those scrimshankin' goneys understood that. I loved her an' she knew it. Only trouble was I always got the helm in foul weather an' lost sleep. But a man don't mind losin' sleep if he's dancin' with a beautiful lady—" Festus paused as he heard footsteps on the companion.

Bulwer Nash, Licutenant U.S.N., and skipper pro-tem of the *Ariel*, clumped heavily aft. The two officers exchanged salutes and Licutenant Nash growled: "I'll take over, mister. Go forward and pipe up all hands. I want more sail on this hooker."

Festus' mouth opened. "More sail! But sir, I been in sail an' I thought—"

"I'll do the thinking for the ship." Nash's voice took on the rasping ring of a handsaw striking a nail. Lieutenant Nash had been reeling his way, satisfied to let his mate handle the deck while he nursed his confidence and mined his memory for whatever sailing ship lore he had been exposed to. But, after two days at sea, blown by fair winds, Bulwer Nash was ready to do some skippering himself.

"Aye aye, sir," Festus responded, Jamming his hat down hard. "But I wouldn't advise gettin' any more muslin on her—"

"Set the upper topsails," the skipper said explosively, seeking the words he had been studying in an old sailing ship manual. "The jib and the stay—the lower stays'ls. Main and mizzen."

"Aye aye, sir." Festus twisted his mustache with bony fingers. "But sir, most of the lads don't know a gasket from a sheet. An' if that storm happens to change its mind about where it's goin', we might have the sticks blown out of her. Why I remember a voyage on a skys'l yarder called the *Tally Ho*. Shipped a green crew out o' Seattle an' run into a snorter off'n Flattery. I'm tellin' you, sir, we was lucky to—lucky to—" Festus' voice trailed off as he became aware of a rosy tint dawning above the young lieutenant's collar.

Lieutenant Nash's mouth was a thin line between his aquiline nose and barge-like chin. His dark eyes glinted ominously. When the tight lips parted, the words barked out like shells from a six-inch rifle. "Go forward, mister."

"Aye aye, sir." Gabby sighed and went.

THE nickname "Gabby" wasn't entirely appropriate. True, his words flowed like a rain-swollen stream; but this was not the conventional variety of gab that ran the gamut from humidity to politics. Festus yarned of windships and the men who sailed them. To him, canvas was the exquisite fabric with which man had captured the winds to drive the tea clippers and the grain racers, the Black Ball and Swallowtail packets over the deep sea roads to adventure.

He glanced at a downy-cheeked lad soojie-moojieing the after cabin paintwork. Eighteen or so, the boy was. At that age, Festus Perkins had been four years before the mast. At fourteen, he'd stowed away on a wooden bark, commanded by his father. He remembered the old man's scowl—and the twinkling eyes—when he'd said, "Son, ye'll not be comin' through the cabin winder. It's up through the hawsepipe for you. An' when ye get a ship of your own—"

Festus had his mate's papers in sail when he was younger by five years than Lieutenant Nash and he would have been a skipper if the first world war hadn't changed his

plans. The shooting over, he was assigned to such windship chores as the Navy had left and, regretfully, he put his boyhood dreams aside. Coal and oil had something to do with it; but mostly it was a romantic interlude which resulted in the acquisition of a wife and family who deserved the security the Navy offered.

But, Festus Perkins never forgot sail—and seldom did he allow anyone else to forget it. The walls of his office at Pearl were covered with pictures of famous sailing ships. His bookcase bulged with windship shore.

In this office, one quiet morning, Gabby was regaling a CPO with a yarn: "You could see Cape Stiff, a purple rock risin' up out of the sea, but there wasn't time for sight-seein' what with a sixty knot no'wester hammerin' us while we tried to claw in canvas frozen stiff with ice. We finally had to go about and run clear around the world to reach the Pacific an'—" He broke off as a messenger handed him an official looking envelope. He opened it and stared at the contents.

Suddenly, Gabby Perkins sat upright. Then, a wide, slow smile lit up his long, craggy face. He balled his fist and brought it down on the desk, sending papers flying and overturning the ashtray. The office force looked up, startled, as he rose, jammed his hat on his head and stalked out muttering: "Hey ho, blow the man down!"

THE order affecting Festus Perkins had its origin with the Secretary of the Navy who sent it to the Chief of Naval Operations.

It was radioed to Cinpac at Pearl who relayed it to the area commander at Guam. The admiral wiped the perspiration from his forehead, shook his head, and pushed a button.

Boiled down, it ordered the Navy to sail—not push or pull—the Norwegian training ship *Ariel* from Malakal Harbor at Palau to Honolulu. "It's one of those things, gentlemen," the admiral told his staff. "We can't tow her. That wouldn't add to the Navy's prestige if it got into print. We'll call for volunteers from ships in the area, find a skipper and mates—and hope they make it in less than six months."

Someone mentioned Festus Perkins, commenting drily: "Gabby can talk the arms off an octopus, but he knows sail."

Festus was duly traced and, in a happy daze, said goodbye to his wife, Elva. He was flown to Palau and installed as first mate of the square-rigger *Ariel.*

On the foredeck, Festus tilted his hat and sniffed the wind. The typhoon season was about over but, early that morning, the Navy Weather Central at Guam had reported a small cyclonic disturbance moving northwestward from 8 North, 140 East. If it behaved like most typhoons, cutting a wide arc east of the Philippines, there was little to worry about. If not—Festus shook his head and then grabbed for his hat.

The skipper's orders were carried out and the canvas went up—but not without difficulty. Mr. Johnson, the second mate, had papers in sail. The third mate and bosun, and a few older hands had sailed before the mast. But the rest, although willing and eager, were quickly confused.

Festus sprang aloft to loose a gasket, or stood by the running gear to pick out the right downhaul or halliard until, finally, the upper topsails and staysails were sheeted home and the courses set. The ship plunged smartly through the shimmering sea, a gurgle in her throat.

"All due respect to the skipper—" and Festus glanced aloft uneasily, "but he's a mite stubborn. Could be he'll get into trouble if'n he won't listen to some advice."

"He ain't the kind to take advice." Johnson, the second mate was a tall, gaunt man whose hard blue eyes stared at the sea with a constant challenge. "You don't s'pose he volunteered to skipper this craft just for the ride, do you? Why, he actually thinks he knows everything about sailin' because he knows all about yachts—he says." Johnson snorted. "As if handlin' a dinky one mast fore an' after in some bay makes him a sailor! Nope, he won't take no advice, but he sure as hell will take credit. He saw to it he got his name in all the papers when they towed that recaptured cruiser from Tokyo to Manila. They said he sailed her across! What happened was that a chief bos'n suggested they raise some canvas to steady her on the towline."

"An' he got the credit for—sailin' a cruiser!" Festus chuckled. "Well, mister, it's the skipper what gets the credit—if any. But,

he gets the blame, too. Reminds me of a voyage I made in the *Elsinore*. Iron bark out o' Frisco with grain for the United Kingdom. "Cautious" Cassidy, her skipper was, an' he'd kept warnin' the mate about that inset current off Chile, but when he knocked off for a bit of shut-eye after seventy-two hours on the bridge an' the mate'd piled the *Elsinore* up— Well, who do you figger got the blame?"

THE southerly wind held until midnight, then began to decrease. By eight bells, when Festus relieved Johnson, the air barely stirred.

The sails slated in the creaking yards in rhythm with a long swell from the southwest. Aloft, the stars arced across the sky with the ship's motion. But, in the southwest, there was a blanketing blackness.

"Maybe you better call the skipper, mister," Festus said to the second mate. "We're in for a blow, or I'm a sojer."

"A lot of good he'll do," growled Johnson as he left.

When Lieutenant Nash came aft, he glanced at the sea and sky. "Looks like a rain squall, mister," he said. "Anything from the radio officer?"

"No sir. But radio still ain't so good it can tail a storm like a pilot fish tags a shark. It don't look good to me, an' if I was you, I'd get some canvas off her, right now—"

"You would, eh? If I listened to you, mister, we'd probaby lift Diamond Head some time next year."

"But look, sir," Festus explained patiently. "This ain't a battlewagon what ain't bothered by squalls. Or even a windship with a full crew of experienced hands where you can keep canvas up till the last minute. Though, even then, it ain't safe. Why, once when I was with the cannery fleet, an' our skipper was tryin' to run in with the first load, he left everything up but the cook's shirt, with the glass fallin', an'—"

"That's enough, mister," Nash interrupted hardship. "If you want to do something useful, some star sights might help."

DAWN broke blood red, with the glass dropping. Two hours later, the skipper ordered all hands piped up and the ship stripped to lower topsails, reefed foresail, and fore topmast staysail. But the order came too late.

The swell had increased and working aloft was difficult. Then, the wind blew up from the southwest in a whiny murmur which increased to violent, explosive gusts. Suddenly, the upper main topsail split with a crackling roar, streaming out in tatters.

Aloft, the green crew fumbled frantically. The wind blew harder and great seas hammered the decks, smashing and snarling through the gear, lashing the boats and housing. The ship, caught unprepared, yawed and rolled until it seemed that she was going over on her beam ends.

But when, finally, the tattered canvas was secured, the *Ariel* ran comfortably before a quartering sea under shortened canvas.

"Pretty, ain't it?" Mr. Johnson panted as he looked aft. The deck gear was a mass of sprawling wreckage. The radio shack had been stove in, the equipment smashed and soaked with salt water. There would be no help from radio if they needed it. Not for days.

"You'll think," Mr. Johnson went on bitterly, "we'd been in a real storm instead of the tail end of a small twister."

She ran under shortened sail for two days, slanting toward the Northern Marianas, a chain of steep volcanic islands and reefs stretching north and south for nearly four hundred miles. Meantime, much of the wreckage was cleared away and secured, the canvas mended, and the craft generally shipshaped. But Bulwer Nash was not satisfied with her appearance and said so.

"Don't you worry, sir," Festus assured him. "We'll have her neater'n the commodore's quarter deck on Navy Day when she drops the hook at Pearl. Why, you should've seen the brig *Coralie* after she came through a pampero off Panama. Foremist and jibboom snapped off clean like a candystick. Yards an' booms snarled up in a hooraw's nest you never did see the likes of which. But—" Festus paused as the skipper snorted and went forward, then continued his recital to the helmsman.

On the third morning after her battering, heavy rain slashed down from an unbroken black sky. But the wind had eased. Gabby Perkins, pacing the poop, paused occasionally to stare uneasily into the murky gloom. He didn't like it. There'd been no sights for

days and, somewhere ahead lay the Marianas —a row of festering fangs.

"We'll need more canvas on her," he told Johnson when the second came up to relieve him. "I kind of smell land. Is the skipper up?"

Johnson nodded. "Aye, in the chartroom. But he ain't likely to want any more sail on her after what happened, I gather."

"Learned his lesson, did he?" Festus grinned. "Trouble is, he only learned half of it. Reminds me of a skipper, name of "Too Late" Muldoon. He—Well, I'll tell you about that later. Now, I got to have a talk with the boy."

Bulwer Nash glowered up from the charts as Festus entered, saying: "Beggin' your pardon, sir, but the wind's eased, an' we ought to get more sail set."

The skipper sighed through clenched teeth as Festus, pulling at his mustache went on: "Visibility's bad, sir. We might be closer to the Marianas than we figger. S'posin' the wind changes an' we're close in? Well, this ain't no yacht an' if need to beat in a hurry like we did on the bark *Tilbury* off northern Australia, well—We couldn't tack, sir. An' we was being driven onto a dead lee shore.

"We let go the lee bower anchor to hold her, then hauled her up through the wind's eye with a spring rove through the quarter hawse to the capstan. The way it's done is to let the hook go just when you haul the mains'l yards around, an' you can keep her from goin' off in irons. We ought to be ready, sir. She needs more muslin—"

"We'll set no more sail," the skipper broke in. "That's all, mister."

BY noon, the wind had veered to north of west and, reluctantly, Nash ordered more canvas set. But again, he had waited too long. The upper topsails and lower staysails had been sheeted home and the ship was running almost due northerly on the port tack when the lookout yelled: "Land ho. Weather bow."

Eyes strained to penetrate the murk. A few moments later, through the rain and scud, they saw land—blue and ominous. As they watched, the lookout's voice rang out again: "Land ho. Lee quarter."

Bulwer Nash cursed. The jagged, broken shoreline was faintly visible. To the northwest, a barren, rocky shore rose up into the overcast. Curving in a long arc to the east and south was a chain of reefs, spuming white with the spent anger of the battering seas. Another island lifted hazily astern. The *Ariel* was embayed.

"Better wear ship, sir," Festus suggested. "We need a better offing."

"Why can't we tack, mister?" the skipper demanded testily.

"Might beat with more sail on her, but I wouldn't try it. She's slow in stays, anyway. Wind's tricky, now, an' you can't tell about currents in here. I recall the time—"

"Close your hatch, you damned windbag. We'll tack! Set the mains'l and mizzen. Shake out the foresail."

Festus, frowning dubiously, went forward.

When, finally, the courses filled and the spanker went up, the reefs were dangerously close. "Hands about ship." Men sprang to their stations. "Down helm." She came around, lee rail awash. The yards swung, but she was missing stays. Frantically, they boxed her back with the headyards and she filled, struggling as the wind slapped her and the current snarled at her keel.

"We'll wear ship." the skipper shouted.

"Too late, sir." Festus pointed to the wake. "Look at the leeway. Current's got us. No sea room for wearin'. She'll pile up."

Bulwer Nash's face was gray. He stared grimly to leeward at the nearing reefs and headland, his teeth biting deeply into his lower lip.

"Nothin' we can do now," Johnson yelled. "Anchors wouldn't hold her long. We might run her onto that black sand beach off'n the starb'd bow. It's that or the boats."

Bulwer Nash stared despairingly toward the beach. Then he turned toward Mr. Perkins. Swallowing hard, he said: "Mister, that—that clubhauling maneuver you mentioned—"

"It might work, sir."

"Do it then! Clubhaul! What are you waiting for?"

Festus shouted to the second mate. "Come along forrard, mister. We'll need a hawser to bring back from the lee anchor to the quarter hawse. Send men to unshackle the chain at 45 fathoms."

"Why didn't you let him beach her?" Johnson asked breathlessly as they ran for-

ward. "If this fails, he'll see that you share in the blame. If it works, he gets the credit. You're nuts, mister."

"He knows what he's doin', that boy. He knows he'll get the blame—all of it—it this don't work. But he ain't goin' to let a ship die if he can help it. A mite impatient, he is, an' a mite ambitious. But he's all right. Willin' to take advice, ain't he?"

The lead was cast. 28 fathoms. Sand and pebbles. Fair holding ground. Two men at the wheel kept her full.

"Ready! Ready! The ship raced, angling toward shore. But she needed speed, now.

"Helm's a lee." She came around, reeling. The canvas slatted and shook thunderously. "Rise tacks and sheets." The courses lifted and the wind caught the weather leeches. "Mains'l hauk." The yards spun, gear smoking through the blocks.

Johnson, standing by the windlass shouted: "If you can drag her 'round by manpower, mister, I'm Davy Jones hisself."

"Let go the anchor," Festus yelled. The anchor plunged into the smother. The chain tautened, gave, then steadied.

"Heave." Men strained at the capstan bars. The hawser to the anchor tightened like a fiddlestring through the quarter hawse. Slowly, the ship was dragged—through the wind's eye.

"Let go and haul!" Hands leaped to the lee forebraces. The headyards swung. "Slip. Slip anchor." The last link ran over the windlass wildcat into the sea. Only the hawser held the anchor, now.

"Heave." They groaned at the bars as the ship fought. Sheer muscle hauled the stern around. "Anchor's dragging!" someone yelled.

It was. But the job was done. The yards were trimmed, the mainstack sheethauled aft, and the *Ariel* was on the starboard tack, tugging impatiently at the anchor astern. Festus ran aft with an axe. One stroke frayed the hawser. The ship did the rest. She broke free, plunging exultantly toward the open sea.

PEOPLE lined the beaches as the *Ariel* ran up proudly past Diamond Head. A trim motor sailer with officers and newsmen aboard, roared out to meet her.

Lieutenant Nash paced the quarter deck in clean, full-dress whites. Gabby Perkins, in khaki undress, watched the port anchor—the only bower left—rattle down. Walking aft, he surveyed the spotless decks, new paint and tarred rigging. "She's shipshape," he said proudly to the second mate. "Those Scandihoovians can't say we been scrimshankin'." A vagrant gust of wind lifted the cap from his head. He grabbed and missed. The cap went into the sea.

"Ain't the first one I lost." Festus sighed. I was in a brig, once. *The Flyin' Fish,* an'—"

"Never mind that," Johnson interrupted. "I'm goin' to work on those newsmen before the boy wonder gets his oar in. I ain't lettin' him get the credit for savin' the ship when it was all your doin'."

Festus put a restraining hand on Johnson's shoulder. "When I'm billeted out, I'll look back an' remember a sailor's job of work done. Pictures in the paper won't make rememberin' any better."

The following evening when Festus came came home, his wife looked up from her newspaper. "Did you read this, Festus? All about Lieutenant Nash being a hero, saving his ship from a typhoon, and from going on a reef, and—" She glanced back at the paper. "It says here: 'Shipping circles state that such men as Lieutenant Nash are a credit to our Navy—' and they're giving him a banquet. See his picture? Why don't shipping circles—whatever they are—invite you, too?"

"I don't mind gettin' in on the feed. Those things ain't important, Elva. But, it kinda hurt, though, when they got me on the carpet, today, for losin' the starb'd bower anchor."

"Losin' the anchor! Festus, did you really?"

"Well, I s'pose I was responsible. Clubhaulin' always costs an anchor an'—"

"Now, if that isn't just like you! Losing an anchor, just like you're always losing hats." She clucked reproachfully.

Festus grinned and sank into a chair. "Speakin' of anchors, Elva, reminds me of when I was on the barque *Peking.* We dropped the hook off Pango an' there was a heavy swell." He paused.

Elva Perkins sighed. "Well, what happened, Festus?" she asked dutifully.

The Professor Didn't Know Lulu

*Runs Sunday Only

By JOHN E. KELLY

THAT Chinese feller, Confucius, said anything can happen and usually does. He musta been thinking about Uriah North South. Take the time some of the boys introduced the tenderfoot Professor to Lulu. He thought he was gypped. But he just didn't understand folks out here. Finest people in the world, if you play their way.

Professor Elias Pursifoy—all 250 pounds of him—came busting into the office waving one of our timetables.

"I'll sue you!" he yelled at our Old Man, Division Superintendent Michaels, "for making me miss an important lecture engagement! I was at the station at nine o'clock like it says here—and your train had left two hours before."

Michaels nodded resignedly. This happened at least once a week with drummers and tenderfeet.

"Read the note at the bottom of the page," he replied. "The nine o'clock runs Sunday only. On weekdays Number Three is Number One and leaves at seven."

To a railroader that was perfectly clear. To Prof. Pursifoy it was clear as mud. He said so, loudly, his safety valve popping. He was madder than a drunk squaw caught

in a beartrap. He slammed the timetable down on Michael's desk.

"Only a jerkwater streak of rust would call this a timetable," he shouted. "Why don't you use regular ones like the Eastern roads?"

The Old Man got pink around the gills. Our Super came up the hard way from section hand and wouldn't trade the Lumberton Division, hand-me-down rails, leaky teakettles and all, for the whole Pennsy system with the President's easy chair thrown in. He was about to climb his desk and grapple with man mountain Pursifoy, when I put in my two-bits worth.

"You've got an hour's lay-over in Uriah tomorrow," I said. "Take it up with the general offices."

I'd meant to calm Pursifoy down, but it looked like I stoked his fire. I thought he'd blow a gasket.

"Tomorrow!" he howled. "You mean I gotta spend another day in this fleabag?"

"You could walk," suggested Michaels, "and trim off a few pounds of fat-back."

The tenderfoot calmed down a mite.

"When does your rattler leave?" he asked.

"Tomorrow," the Old Man pointed out, like Pursifoy was full grown only below the eyes, "is Sunday. Grab yourself a couple of hours extra beauty sleep and be down to board Number three at nine. You'll have lots of company, Trailbreakers going to convention at Uriah."

The Super meant it kindly. Pursifoy traveled around the country lecturing on "Uncle Sam's Nephews"—he'd told the Lumberton folks about a Down-East State where a man dassn't kiss his wife or take a drink on Sunday—and Michaels figured Pursifoy could work up a talk on the Trailbreakers. And stop beefing about the timetable.

TO BELONG to the Trailbreakers, you people must have come out in the '50s, by grass freight or 'round the horn. Some who could join, didn't, feeling high-toned because grandmother was a schoolteacher before she married somebody who'd struck it rich. But folks who were proud grandma took in washing to help her man get a start, signed up, and every mountain town and county seat had its Trailbreakers' Hall. By the time the kids were grown, life was easier and the big blow-out every year was the Trailbreakers' Convention. This time it was held in Uriah and so many bought tickets that we hooked a couple of extra coaches on Number Three's regular two and the combination baggage-smoker.

The U. N. & S. to Uriah is in the mountains most of the way. Our engines ride sand upgrade and their brakes coming down. Number Three's packed cars put such a heavy load on Dan Price's old American-type 4-4-0 locomotive that Michaels cut off the parlor car we usually carried. Pursifoy boiled over, but finally bought a coach ticket when he found it was that or wait still another day in Lumberton.

The Trailbreakers hadn't chartered the train, but so many of 'em were aboard that they got to thinking they had. Bob Milestone who ran the Lumberton tannery had the Buck twins, Jim and Kid, off the schooner *Bounding Bess,* were late and had to sprint to grab the tail gate as Number Three pulled out. Figuring on getting up a poker game to kill time to Uriah, they were miffed to find an oversize tenderfoot holding down the last seat in the smoker. Pursifoy had a grouch on and didn't hardly hold out the glad hand. He gave the Trailbreakers an icy stare and kept his feet on the other cushion. The boys milled around in the aisle for a minute, not expecting to find a hog travelling on the passenger tariff. Then Jim Buck, the red-headed twin, walked over and grabbed Pursifoy's number 12's by their shoe laces and lifted them off the cushion.

"If these peewees are yourn', stranger," Jim said politely, though his face was flying storm signals, "I'll be plum tickled to heave 'em up in the baggage rack for you. Or if they's jest wuthless junk somebody left here, I can tote 'em down to the door and toss 'em off'n the car."

The Trailbreakers laughed and a lot of them crowded around, knowing Buck's hair-trigger temper and hoping for a little action. They were disappointed. Pursifoy slammed his feet on the floor and stared out the window. Milestone and the twins sat down, laid Bob's store-bought valise on their knees and started a game of freeze-out. The fat man couldn't keep his eyes away. First they sort of swivelled sideways in his round face, then he turned them full on the cards. Pur-

sifoy looked over Kid Buck's shoulder into his hand and he cut his tongue loose.

"You can't win without brains," he said, his tone like vinegar. "Why didn't you play the Jack?"

Milestone laid down his cards. "Care to play a few hands of draw, stranger?" he invited.

Pursifoy took him up. He was still sore and figured to turn the laugh on his seatmates. The Professor reckoned himself quite a card shark, honest and all that you understand, just quicker thinking than the other fellow. It looked like a good chance to get back his extra expense in Lumberton.

"I'll oblige," Pursifoy told Milestone. "But none of your penny ante stuff!" I play two-bit poker."

ED HAMMETT, braking on the head end of Number Three, told me about it. He was riding in the smoker while the train rocked along in the deep woods between Fernandina and Hibernia, an hour's run without even a crossroads or flag stop. Ed heard Pursifoy sound off and leaned over the back of the seat to watch the game.

The first hands were pretty fair all around. Then with about twenty dollars on the table, Pursifoy drew a pat royal flush. He was so excited he didn't raise Bob Milestone, but called and reached out to scoop in the pot. The twins threw down their cards, but Milestone held his.

"Hold on thar, stranger," said Bob. "You come in no better'n second best."

"My good man," replied Pursifoy, his hand itching for the money, "You don't know the rules! A royal flush beats everything."

"Not in Evergreen County, it don't," Milestone told him. The tanner hauled a card out of his wallet. It was dog-eared some, but the printing was plain and it read:

A LULU BEATS A ROYAL FLUSH

The fat man snorted. "What's a lulu?" he demanded. But you could see he was impressed by the printed word. He drew his hand back, say about an inch.

"I got one," said Bob and laid down a full house of deuces and treys.

Pursifoy was fit to be tied. He yelled so loud Ed Hammett figured the windowpane was a goner. But all the Trailbreakers swore their grandpappies played lulu and finally the tenderfoot simmered down.

The game went on, with Pursifoy playing 'em close to his vest and on the look-out for more shenanigans. Just as Dan Price up in the cab whistled for Hibernia, Ed Hammett saw the fat man draw two to fill a lulu. The Professor raised the limit and winning hands musta been dealt everybody, for the twins and Milestone came right back at him. The limit went around three times. Ed said there was over two hundred dollars and Kid Buck's watch in the pot.

Jim called with four Queens. Bob showed a high full, but Kid Buck had corralled all the aces in the deck. The redhead shoved the pile across the board.

"She's all yourn, brother," he 'lowed.

"No, you don't!" howled Pursifoy. "This hand's mine! I got a lulu." And he nigh wiped the cards in Kid's face.

"It sure is aggravatin'," said Milestone, "us havin' to play cards with such an ignerant feller. Look, Mister!"

Bob hauled out the card again, but this time he turned it over. On the back it read in big black letters:

ONLY ONE LULU IN A GAME

The window went then, sure enough, and the seat likewise, before the boys got Pursifoy persuaded. There wasn't another seat empty and the tenderfoot wouldn't sit with a Trailbreaker anyhow. He stood out on the platform, the kind we had on the old wooden coaches, with no safety gates. Writing dudes rave about the scenery along there and sports spend a heap of dough outfitting to fish Big Injun Creek, but to Pursifoy it was as pretty as a cinder pile. He was mad clear through and wanted no piece of Evergreen County.

Milestone borrowed an old powder box Ed Hammett was taking home to build a box trap and propped up the seat. The boys sat down careful but the zing had gone outa the trip. Folks hereabouts rile quick and cool off about the same. The three weren't proud of piling on a lone tenderfoot, muscle-bound at that. After a spell Jim Buck stood up.

"Fun's fun," he said, "but finaglin' a dude and then razooin' him is carrying it a mite far. I'll have a look-see if the tenderfoot is holdin' a grudge."

Jim was cat-footed from years of sailing the *Bounding Bess* across the Lumberton bar, but as he turned to the door, it was all he could do to keep his feet. Number Three stopped with locked brakes screaming then started again with a jerk that like to have snapped the couplers.

ON Sundays, when we had no freight service, the maintenance crews made their heavy repairs. Nat Duggan took his section gang to Mile 94 with orders to replace the trestle girders with heavier steel. The bridge was flat-bedded, with no members rising above the rails, resting on a central pillar in midstream. Big Injun Creek ran quiet but deep underneath. Duggan studied the time card and figured he could change one panel between each passage of trains. With an early start and good luck, the first new beam would be in place before Number Three was due. Nat laid the replacement steel along the ends of the crossties over the Creek to be handy when needed, rigged scaffolding and set to work.

Bad luck came up first rattle out of the box. The nuts on the first panel were rusted fast to their bolts. Wrenches slipped on the formless lumps. To chip the bolt heads with mauls and cold chisels would take too long, for the working period before Number Three arrived was the shortest one of the day. Duggan found a center girder in good shape and moved his crew there.

The bolts slipped out smoothly. With the whole gang straining on pinchbars, the girder was pried out and the new steel slipped into its place. Duggan glanced at his watch; the job was ahead of schedule.

"Take five minutes, boys," he called.

Their bare torsos shining with sweat, the crew laid down their tools and set up a shout.

"Water boy!"

Barefooted Petey Wills came running across the trestle, toting the pail. Kidlike, he clowned. When the first man put out his hand for the bucket, Petey danced back, missed his step and went over the side, pail and all. The boy could swim like an eel, but Big Injun Creek runs through a swamp above the trestle and the water tastes like an old boot.

Duggan fished Petey out of the creek with a rope end and pointed downstream.

"Take the path along the crick. There's a good spring under that big rock at the bend," the foreman directed. "Run now, the boys are thirsty and you'll dry quick."

Petey's tow head bobbed in and out of the manzanita bush. He was almost at the spring when he disappeared. The crew heard his yell, thin and high with pain and terror.

"I-I-I-E-E-! I'm bit!"

DUGGAN jammed a first-aid kit into his pocket. "Gimme the snake killer!" he yelled. A gandy dancer held out the Jacob's staff, an ironshod hardwood pole, used in checking the grade. Snatching it, the foreman lit out, skipping four crossties at a jump, and hit the path with his throttle wide open. His gang watched him reach Petey, then his pole thrashed wildly in the brush, striking in all directions.

"There's a whole mess o' them! Duggan cried. Rattlers will gang up sometimes in dry summers and it's bad medicine to come on them unbeknownst. The foreman's six-gun roared, pumping lead into the slithering sand eels.

Duggan called for help. "Bring your shovels, boys!" His voice altered suddenly. "One got me!"

The section gang tore down the path, promising the snakes hell with the hide off. Even the flagman left his post.

In the cab of Number Three, Dan Price checked his orders. "Section gang working at Mile 94." Coming around the curve leading to the straightaway to the bridge, the engineer whistled and cut his speed. The track was clear, no flagman in sight. Dan thought nothing of it, our overworked gandy dancers were always being yanked off scheduled jobs to handle slides and washouts. Number Three headed out on the span at twenty miles an hour.

Nearing midspan, the locomotive tipped downstream and the track had a soft feel, as though the rails were rubber. From his window, Price saw the crossties dipping toward the abandoned scaffolding and sensed his peril. The train's motion had jarred the unbolted beam off the pillar, throwing the full strain on the rail above. Instinctively the engineer closed his trottle and yanked his airbrake lever.

Even as his hands moved, Price reversed

himself. Stopping meant bringing the full weight of the engine upon the weak spot, snapping the fishplates linking the rail ends. The locomotive, toppling sideways, would drag the packed coaches into the deep pool of Big Injun Creek. Dumping sand for maximum traction, Price opened his throttle to the last notch. The engine's great driving wheels spun, shooting sparks at they fought for a grip on the rails. Drawbars banged like a gun fight as they yanked the cars. The coaches pitched and rocked across the sag, gathering speed. The last truck rolled to safety as an overstrained fishplate, broke; the track hung over the water like a torn ribbon.

Still blind mad, Pursifoy noted nothing until Number Three's jarring stop slammed him against the coach door. When Dan Price yanked his throttle open again, the fat man was flung backward, teetering over the steps, grabbing frantically at air. The car dipped over the sag, tilting outward. Pursifoy lost his balance.

Opening the door, Jim Buck saw the Professor swaying on the platform's edge and lunged for him. His fingers brushed the falling man's coattails. Arms and legs waving wildly, Pursifoy cleared the bridge and splashed head first into the dark pool. Jim grabbed the hand brake to save himself from following and watched for Pursifoy to come up. He saw something that turned him cold.

AS Number Three shook the trestle, a girder Duggan had laid temporarily on the crossties slid outward, inching toward the edge. Buck watched, helpless. The steel tipped, seemed to hang in air a moment, then shot downward, caromed off the scaffold and crashed into Big Injun Creek in the very spot where Pursifoy had sunk. Jim yanked the bell cord, shucked off his coat and dived.

You can bet any deep pool in cloudburst country is bottomed with snags and boulders. Jim tangled with a waterlogged cedar stump that ripped his shirt and plowed its mark across his back before he pulled loose. On the bottom Buck found Pursifoy, unconscious. The girder pinned the fat man down, and but for a boulder, he'd have stayed under until the eels ate him. One end of the steel was buried in mud, the other lay a few feet higher, on the stone. Jim's lungs caved under water pressure as he tugged Pursifoy toward the boulder until he could pull him from under the girder. Buck wasn't in much better shape than the Professor when they finally broke the surface together, with Jim holding the other's face to the air.

Then there was help a-plenty. Number Three was stopped on the far bank and the passengers spread out along the trestle, searching for the men overboard. Bob and Kid jumped in to help them ashore. You'd find all kinds of folks in the Trailbreakers and in no time there were doctors fixing up Jim and Pursifoy, and Duggan and Petey Wills, too.

Next morning in Uriah, while folks were making a great to-do about Jim, Bob Milestone hunted up a printer for a rush job. When the Trailbreakers' Convention opened in the Opry House, Milestone was standing right beside the ticket taker, only he was passing out cards. Folks read 'em and said, "Yessiree Bob, tell Jim to count on us, we'll sure be thar." It made Milestone feel better about that poker game, for the new cards read in big type:

TONIGHT! HEAR PROFESSOR
PURSIFOY'S LECTURE
JIM BUCK SAYS IT'S A LULU!

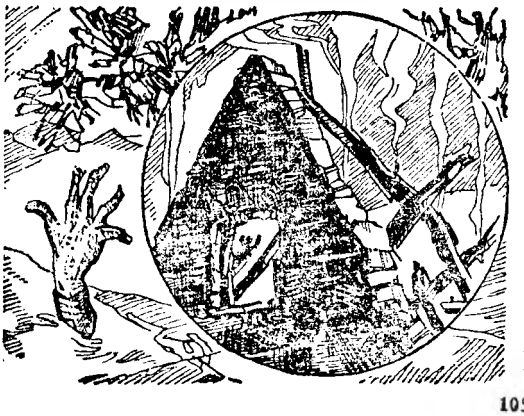
MEN who wouldn't DIE!

by George C. Appell

Thing of the Spirit

THE spirit fires the flesh, and it must die before the flesh gives out. William Gilliland had more spirit than sense, and during his long life he used every spark before he finally collapsed under the weight of sixty-two soul-scorching years, a martyr to ambition, a mould for lesser mortals.

Discharged from the British Army in Philadelphia in 1758, he married and moved north to the Champlain country, where he established a real-estate venture of several thousand acres. A bateau overturned in the Hudson and his daughter, aged six, was drowned. It was the first sadness, excepting the sad love affair which had induced him to join the army in 1754. After 1776, the British posted him for one hundred pounds; the Americans branded him a traitor, each side jealous of his holdings. The Americans ravaged his land, arrested him and tossed him in jail; the British advance up Champlain in 1777 completed destruction of all buildings and equipment, gardens and orchards. On his way to repair damage and start again, he was re-arrested and jailed again. Then New York confiscated 8,500 of his acres. Released from prison, he entered a partnership to ship lumber to Canada; his partner ruined him and he was locked up in debtors' prison from 1786 to 1791.



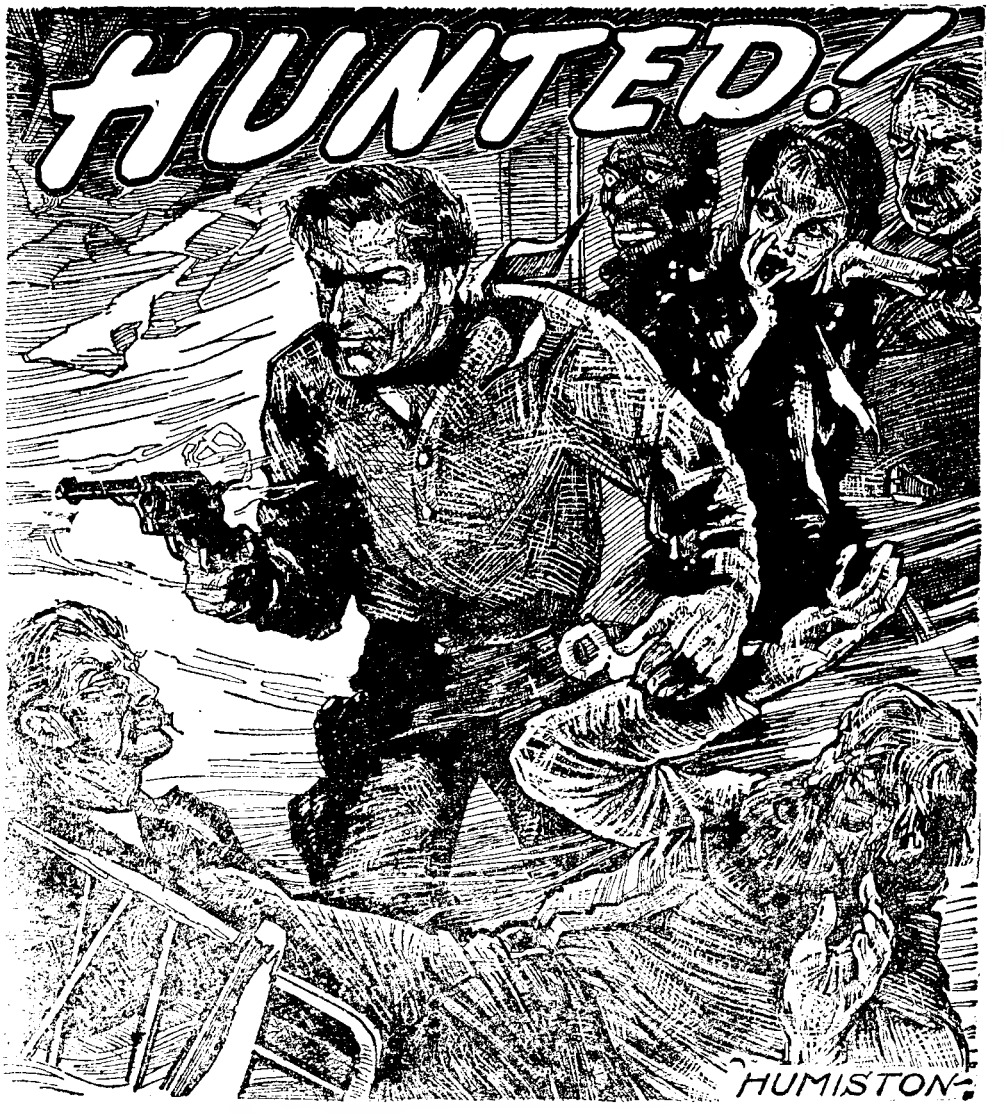
Released from that incarceration, he tightened his belt, set his jaw, and went back to the land he'd developed from scratch. It was desolate waste, now, but doggedly he started another land venture with a new partner. Physically weak, his mind off-balance, he wrestled with the future as he had fought all his life. But this time—mercifully, perhaps—he lost. In a February blizzard he started for his partner's home and never came back. Much later, his frozen corpse was found in the snow-hung woods, and from the signs on the ice, he had dragged himself a long, long way before death ended the futility of a brave existence.

Part III

THE STORY SO FAR

ARIZONA soon after The War—Northern cattle interests represented by Colonel Arnold, whose attitude towards the Southern Bevarts, Claytons, etc., is one of contempt. Jack Rodiker, a rider, is accused of killing Craig Arnold and Arnold's widow swears she saw him do it. Rodiker takes to the outlaw trail, and while rewards pile up for him, is never captured.

Later he comes back since he has heard that Cora Arnold has returned from the East and his avowed purpose is to make her admit her testimony about the murder was false. He thinks no one will recognize him, and finds that the reputation he has had wished on him leads Jerym Bevarts to make



By GORDON RAY YOUNG

"Author of "Crooked Shadows," etc.

You Never Know, Reward Money Sure Changes Folks!

him a proposition about robbing the Bevarts' bank to cover up Jerym's defalcations. Rodiker makes Bevarts put his offer in writing, and immediately an attempt is made to murder him. Then he meets Yank Arnold's daughter, Kate, back from school in the East, and is attracted to her, though awed by the many lies she tells. She recognizes him as Rodiker, though he calls himself Jackson, and after he and she meet after the tragedy at a nester's home, she says her father is ill, has no one he can trust and asks him to work for them.

Rodiker recognizes the irony of his position—Colonel Arnold's rewards are still posted for him—but accepts, telling himself he'll only wait till he can confront Cora Arnold.

XIII

RODIKER was reshoeing his horse when Sam walked to the blacksmith shop and said, "Miss Kate want dat you come ter the house. T'ree men ridin' up frum town-way."

"What of it?"

Sam wiped at the sweat on his black moon-shaped face. "De colonel am sick a-bed an' she doan' want him pestered by meddlesome town folks lak a sher'ff askin' erbout dem Walterses."

Kate met Rodiker on the veranda. "If it is somebody from town you tell them the colonel isn't home."

He fingered a loose button on his shabby vest as he gazed at her. "Why not the truth once in a while?"

Kate made a face at him. She was sunburned to the raw but there was compensation in the fresh summery dress, glove-tight about the waist and the skirt flared stiffly. Her hair was braided and coiled around her head. She was small-boned and not tall but she was high-headed, like a thoroughbred. She said, "I won't have him bothered when he is sick."

" 'Sick' ought to be enough."

Kate shook her head. "The colonel wouldn't like that. He thinks sickness is a kind of—of—well—lack of courage. He won't want anybody to know. Don't you understand?" She smiled to make the explanation more lucid.

"Did he tell you to say he is not at home?"

"He is asleep and won't know."

"The dogs will wake him. He'll ask who came."

Kate frowned with perplexed thoughtfulness as she turned about, and a starchy rustle whispered along the hem of the dress that Old Johnny's young wife had labored over. Dogs were sprawled here and there and would bark. She looked toward Rodiker and nodded assentingly:

"I never thought. I told you I am not very smart!"

He was alone on the veranda with his thumbs in his belt as three men rode at a walk around the wide-lace-dripping palo verde. The dogs raced out and yapped, but no one gave them attention and, the day being hot, they lolled out their tongues and got into the shade again. The riders came close before they pulled up, and the man with the sheriff's badge on his gray vest said, "Howdy."

Rodiker looked at him, then at Dougal Bevarts; and after that at the third man who wore a star-pointed badge. It said, "Deputy."

The sheriff was a large, red-faced and puff-bellied man, sluggish, and rather sad-eyed with the signs of too much whisky, habitually. "Afraid of me," the colonel had said. Rodiker could see how that might well be so, though fatty indolence probably helped the sheriff to be even tempered and not hunt trouble. He gazed at Rodiker and asked casual-like, "You are Jackson?"

Rodiker said, "Yes."

A wide smile came on Dougal Bevarts' dark face and lingered with a look of friendliness as he said goodhumoredly:

"From what I've heard, I figured you as eight feet tall and three across!"

Dougal had the Bevarts' heavy features, but an easy devil-may-care manner distinguished him from other men of the family; and though above thirty, he hadn't yet settled down and liked to gamble.

The sheriff asked, "Col. Arnold home?"

"But sick a-bed and can't see anybody."

"Now that's regrettable," said Dougal Bevarts, sounding sympathetic; but the deputy, a man with slabsided jaws, yapped, "Conven'ent!" with such animosity that Rodiker eyed him and demanded:

"Meaning just what, you?"

The silence was heavy then. It was the silence of a small flame creeping toward an open powder keg. Rodiker's hand had dropped from the belt and hung, palm-back, on a level with the gun's low-slung butt. Words wouldn't have increased the challenge that was offered.

Rodiker heard a soft sound in the hall behind him. He knew that Kate had put herself there to peer through the door's crack and overhear, and he thought she was opening the door wide but he wouldn't take his eyes off these men to look around.

The sheriff suddenly blurted, "God A'mighty. Jackson, we didn't come for trouble!"

"Hell, no!" said Dougal Bevarts, leaving his lips parted in a fixed grin that showed big white teeth.

Then Dougal and the sheriff, with quick movement, pulled off their hats and the deputy politely touched his as their eyes went by Rodiker, and he knew that Kate was in the doorway. He didn't turn his head but heard the stiff rustle of the starched skirt, and she was beside him when she said coolly, "How do you do? Won't you light down, Sheriff? The colonel is sick and can't see anyone, but he had just told me to tell you that Mr. Jackson here will talk to you for him."

Dougal looked like he hoped she would remember him, but she spoke only to the sheriff; and the sheriff didn't leave the saddle, but, hat in hand out of respect to Miss Kate, he said:

"Jackson, you can tell the colonel it is this way about them Walters boys. When we heard they had been strung up, me and Joe here—" he indicated the deputy—"and some other fellows rode out. Now ord'nar'ly law ought to take its course. But we heard how them rustlers had shot Marl in the back and tramped a baby to death over at the Badden place. We rode over there and got the straight fac's from the Baddens.

"They told how on account of the Lazy S horses that the colonel thought the Bevartses was mixed up in it. So today we come along out here with Dougal, who wants to explain that the Walterses were damn' hoss-thieves an' deserved hangin'! And it sure is a fac', ain't it, that if the Bevartses had any kind of a hand in the deal they wouldn't have let the Walterses use Lazy S horses? That right, Dougal?"

"Sure is, Sheriff!" He looked more at Kate than at Rodiker in adding, "You tell Col. Arnold from me that if he hadn't hung 'em, I would have! I figure they was trying to rustle such a big bunch of your cows that the herd got away from 'em and broke into that cornfield and killed the little baby. We've had trouble with them Walterses down our way. And Miss Kate, you tell your father from me that I'm tired of folks trying to make trouble between him and us Bevartses. Will you now, please?"

"I'll tell him," said Kate coldly.

There was some silence then until Rodiker asked, "Anything else?"

"W'y, no," said the sheriff. "But you tell the colonel, Miss, that I hope he gets well right quick."

"And you tell him for me," said Dougal, smilingly, "that even if our families are not friends, I, for one, would like to be. And I mean to fix things, too, the best I can!"

They slowly neck-reined their horses about, all eyes lingering on Rodiker as they turned because there was mystery in how this rough-looking stranger had become important to Col. Arnold.

A SABER in its scabbord and two ponderous horse pistols in cowhide holsters hung on the wall, where there was also the portrait of a sweet-faced girl whose evenly parted black hair swung down and back over her ears. She looked like Kate's older sister and was her mother.

Col. Arnold sat by a window with a pillow behind him and a bottle of whisky at his elbow. He had been sleeping and now wore pants over a nightgown, and beaded moccasins were on his feet. His breathing was labored, but his head was stiffly erect with an angered hawk-look in the sunken eyes.

Rodiker pulled his hat and stopped just inside the door. Col. Arnold said, "Take a chair." Kate was on a stool by her father's side. The colonel sipped a spoonful of whisky from the glass he held, then ran his fingers through the long thin grey hair. He said, "Smoke if you want."

Rodiker said thanks, but didn't make a cigarette. He laid his hat on a knee and drew his feet back alongside the chair, rubbed the beard on his chin. Kate had already told about the coming of the sheriff and Dougal Bevarts.

Col. Arnold drew hard for breath in saying, "The Bevartses do what harm they can, then try to lie out of it. Next to cowardice, I hate a lie." His deep-set eyes were fixed on Rodiker for as long as it would take a slow man to count ten. After that he sank heavily against the pillow and gasped in saying to Kate, "You'll have to explain about going to Woodward. I—I'm just out of breath."

Her eyes swung in a startled side glance toward Rodiker, then she stood up, passed her hand gently over her father's head and suggested, "You are so tired. Hadn't we

better go downstairs? I'll tell him there."

The colonel closed his eyes and nodded, then said, "Give him plenty of money."

Rodiker stood up. The colonel opened his eyes, put thumb and finger to his mustache, gasped somberly, "Don't ever get old and sick and useless!"

DOWNSTAIRS, Rodiker sat on his heels before Kate's chair on the veranda and eyed the fired end of his cigarette as he heard:

"When papa said he'd send you to Woodward, I didn't dare let on in any way that you, of all people, wouldn't want to go to meet Aunt Cora!

Rodiker's eyes lifted and seemed expressionless.

"But he can't go. I am worried to death about how unwell he is. It's hard to find anybody to take Marl's place. Heretofore, he has looked after the range himself. I mean he has been like his own superintendent. Now he'll have to send instructions by men who come and go. And it worries him for that's no way to run a ranch, and he has three ranches! The Big A, of course, is the most important. But about Cora, you won't refuse, will you?"

Rodiker's eyes dropped. He took a long time, then looked up again and said quietly, "No, I won't refuse."

"Old Johnny could be sent but he likes whisky too well to be trusted in town. Sam's out of the question. He dislikes her anyhow. She once called him a 'nigger'."

Rodiker rubbed out the cigarette, tossed it aside, spoke carelessly. "Wonder why she's coming West again?"

Kate looked at him, then toward the sky; she fiddled with a ribbon bow near her throat and after that pulled the stiff skirt lower on her knees and glanced toward Rodiker, who made aimless marks near his toes with a burnt match stick.

"That is another thing that troubles papa. Aunt Cora is coming, she says, to arrange a settlement. Heretofore, she has left every thing in his hands. Now she says she wants her share." Kate added tiredly, "It's her right, I suppose. But to break up and divide a big ranch is nearly always—well, maybe not ruinous, but injurious."

Rodiker, thinking of Dougal Bevarts' plans, said, "I 'spose so."

Kate flashed out with, "Craig was a fool ever to marry her!" Her eyes brightened angrily. "She wasn't Western! She hated it out here and complained all the time. She wanted him to sell and leave. They hadn't been married long, either. I never liked her!"

"So? Why not?"

Kate's was a mild confusion at having said what she did, then laughed a little. The laugh was forced. "Perhaps because she complained so of my manners! I was growing up like a wild Indian! I wasn't ladylike! I think she persuaded the colonel to send me East to school! And she lied about me. What she said wasn't as bad as what I did at times, but untruths hurt!"

Rodiker said, "I wouldn't know."

He said it so matter-of-factly that the irony was hidden, but presently it burned through the silence; and Kate exclaimed, "Oh, she wouldn't have deliberately done what you are thinking, no! She told little lies. But about you—that was a mistake. You know how one cowboy looks like another a little way off!"

"A little way off, and going fast with my back to her, too?"

"Yes."

"Then how the hell did she read the shoulder brand?"

And, having said that with unloud anger, he walked away.

OLD JOHNNY had been sent for the Baddens and brought them with their meager household goods piled on the wagon, the two work horses trailing. A plough was tied down and overhanging the endgate. Rodiker eyed the plough as if it were an enemy's implement of warfare. Everywhere it gouged the earth it ruined the range.

The Baddens were soddenly sad and weary.

Kate took Mrs. Badden into the ranchhouse and Bib Sam, who wouldn't lift a hand to wait on a cowboy, pumped and carried water for Badden to wash all over with.

The next day Old Johnny took the Baddens on the The Bend where Col. Arnold had a fenced-in alfalfa ranch, and a small bunch of Herefords, by way of an experiment to improve the range breed.

XIV

RODIKER followed Kate into the little room that served as an office. The safe's heavy door was partly open and she swung it wide, pulled out an unlocked drawer. The drawer was filled with evenly stacked gold pieces.

She took out $40, and asked if it would be enough, then pushed the drawer in and gave the door a swing that didn't close it. Kate said, "It's never been locked that I remember. I doubt if the colonel knows the combination now."

She handed him the money, then sat at the desk and fingered among the ledgers for one of this year's date, opened it and made an entry.

"The colonel likes figures. To me they are squirmy little devils, always playing tricks."

The item in the ledger was to "J. Jackson for expenses to Woodward and return."

"You'll want to fix up a little," Kate told him. "Hair cut, anyhow. And new clothes. She'll never believe the colonel sent you if you don't look fixed-up. Aunt Cora likes handsome men, and she is a rich widow. Maybe marrying her would be one way to get even!"

Kate quickly added, "I'm sorry!" as she saw his glower, and her hand fluttered appeasingly, then caught as his arm. "Don't be mad, though you ought! I'm just a loose-tongued rattle brain!"

He turned on his heel and made no reply.

Kate came out of her trance-like thoughtfulness, set the ledger in place and went toward the veranda. The dogs were barking at a rider in skirts, but astride. She let the horse walk with head-down laziness as she looked about interestedly. The wind was up and the brim of her hat flapped and loosened hair floated free. It was copper-colored hair. Her skirts were whipped and shaken about. She didnt bother with the skirts. The bright calico dress looked new and was utterly unfit for a saddle. The girl paid no attention to the yapping of the dogs and rode up close. Kate stood by a post and the girl looked steadily down at her.

Kate didn't know the girl but she knew the brand. It was a Lazy S, and a very fine horse. The saddle was of stamped leather,; it had a silver horn that wasn't rope-burned. The bridle had silver chains. At least, they were bright as untarnished silver.

The Lazy S rider said, "'Lo." Just that, with an air of unconcerned friendliness.

Kate, curious and half amused, replied, "Why, good morning."

"Afternoon," corrected the Lazy S rider. "You're Katy Arnold?"

"And won't you light down?"

"I've heard about you nearly all my life. Used to see you sometimes when I was little. I'm Sue Clayton."

Kate caught her breath at the effrontery of a Clayton girl riding in like this; but after all, Kate didn't mind the effrontery—it was simply surprising. She smiled and repeated the invitation to dismount.

Sue cocked her head in a birdlike tilt and studied the small trim dark-eyed Arnold girl, then stated, "You don't act snooty at all!"

"I'm glad your opinion isn't unfavorable!"

Sue regarded her searchingly, then nodded. "Sunburned some, but you are pretty."

Kate flushed, astonished and rather pleased. Sue herself was sun-browned, straight-eyed, with even features, and the naturalness of an unshy child; but she was more than a child: she was a woman, tall, full-breasted, with a manner of calm fearlessness. She was pretty, too. Kate felt a twinge that was not kindly in thinking what the older sister, Bess, must be like.

"I am glad to meet you, Sue. Won't you light down?"

Sue said, 'It's nice of you to lie like that. You ain't glad to see me. Our folks ain't friends."

Kate tried to look serious but her eyes crinkled and laughter bubbled. "But maybe we could be friends if we got acquainted!"

Sue shook her head a little. "The colonel's a Yank. We're Texans. You're rich. We ain't —though after Bess is married to Zig Bevarts, we'll be related to rich folks too." Sue slapped the horse's neck "He's Zig's. This saddle, too. I borrowed um to hunt some mules. You seen any mules awanderin' around up here? That's why I come."

Kate studied that, then shook her head and, knowing it wasn't why Sue had come, said, "It's a long way for mules to stray!"

"Ain't it?" Sue agreed, then drew a long breath and smiled as she sighed, "I don't lie very good, do I?"

Kate smiled back at her. "It takes practice."

"The truth is I was cur'ous about you and the ranch here, the big fine house. I borrowed Zig's outfit to hunt mules that ain't lost, and come. That's honest fac'!"

Sue watched to see if the "honest fac'" was distrusted and, assuming that it was believed, she dismounted easily and with grace in spite of the bunglesome skirts that billowed in the wind. Sue was tall, straight, in no way embarrassed by the presence of the colonel's daughter and, having looked at Kate's trim figure, asked, "You wear a corset?"

"Why, yes. Of course."

Sue nodded acceptively but said, "A girl like me can't wear a lady-like rig. I'd rather breathe easy than be wasp-waisted." And with no change of tone or facial expression, she went right on to ask, "Is that Jackson fellow that brought you home from town around here when I could get a peek at him? I'm just cur'ous."

Kate's thought flew about like startled birds in a storm. She believed the girl had come for one reason and one only: to see not "that Jackson fellow," but Jack Rodiker; and, not knowing what to think, Kate thought the worst, because nearly all of her life she had heard the Claytons suspected of cattle stealing, had heard often of Tex's drunkenness, and believed that the girls were not much, if any better, than low white trash. Sue had just now sounded as if bragging about her sister marrying into the Bevarts family when once there had been talk of how loyal this Sister Bess was to her outlawed sweetheart. All that was changed now. Reward money changed people. The Bevartses, as Kate had learned by gunfire, were Rodiker's enemies and she thought this girl was here now on Zig Bevarts' fine horse and saddle, inquiring for "that Jackson fellow," to make sure he was who the Bevartses thought and plan some trap.

Kate asked with scorn-tipped sharpness, "Have you Claytons thrown in with the Bevartses to catch him?"

"Catch who?"

"You know as well as I do!"

Sue looked at her with such profound staring that Kate saw as clearly as if it had been spoken that Rodiker's name was in her thoughts; then Sue moved staringly nearer and said in wonderment: "You know? *You?*" Her eyes brightened menacingly from thoughts that became words:

"You Arnolds 've trapped him here! Where is he?"

Kate answered defiantly, "Where you and the Bevartses won't find him!"

Sue thrust out both hands and closed them on Kate's neck and shook fiercely, "Where is he? You tell me or I'll kill you, you little snake-headed devil! You woman-tricked him into comin' here!"

Kate hadn't a chance to say anything now; and she pulled at the fingers which were as tight as a wet rope on her throat as Sue, with increasing fury, shook her and made fearful accusations and threats.

When she took a hand from Kate's throat and slapped her, Kate jerked free of Sue's one-handed grasp and fought back with cat-clawed fingers. Cloth ripped and seams gave way. They struggled like clumsy wildcats, snatching and slapping, pulling hair, tearing clothes and trying to kick and scratch; and when they grew so tired they were ready to drop, they weakly hung together for rest, and breath hissed in their mouths.

Rodiker saw the horse and read the brand before he came cautiously around the veranda's corner and stopped short.

Kate said to Sue, "There, you crazy fool! That's him!"

Sue looked across her shoulder, then stepped back, her arms as limp as if broken, and shook her head to clear the loose hair from her eyes. Her new dress in which she had wanted to look her best was torn; one shoulder was bare with shredded rags a-dangle. Her hat had fallen off and her hair was wild. Blood trickled from a scratched cheek.

Kate was as dead-beat and more rumpled; her waist had been torn wide open and buttons ripped off. The frilled corset cover with interlaced blue ribbons showed. The skirt, pulled from the belt, had a bedraggled appearance and her braided hair looked like a witch's mop. She was too angered to be embarrassed, and said to Rodiker, "Come here!" Her hand moved as if throwing something to indicate the horse when she added, "Zig Bevarts sent this Clayton girl to make sure if you were here!"

He thought, *not Sue!* then remembered Slim's treachery; and when Sue came near and stood in wide-eyed staring within a hand's reach of him, he didn't give a sign of recognition. She knew him, of course; and also knew him for the bearded man she had talked with in the twilight on the Santander; and now she asked with hurt puzzlement, "Why didn't you tell me?"

He said quietly, "Ask Slim."

"'Twas Slim sent me!" She was closer now and her eyes glowed angrily. "Ronnie's been put in jail for horse stealin' an'—"

"Who put him there?"

"—Slim sent me to tell you it's a trap for to catch you when you try to get him out!" She hurried the words:

"Slim said some folks think you are back and had the sheriff grab Ronnie for to bait the trap. There's a guard ever' night. Slim's one and Bill Brody too! I hate him! How Slim knew you were here, he wouldn't say, not even to me he tells ever'thing to! But somehow he did know that you are that Jackson fellow and here at Old Yank Arnold's!"

"Does Bess know?"

"Bess know what? That you're here? I don't guess so; but ain't you got sense enough to forget Bess? Though if she did know she wouldn't tell on you!"

Sue's hand carelessly wiped at the tickling trickle of blood on her cheek; then she looked with no concern at the red stain on her fingers but, as if reminded, turned toward Kate and asked him:

"How it come you trust *her* more than me? You didn't let me know that night we met, but her—she knows!"

He pulled a handkerchief and wiped at Sue's cheek as he said, "She's guessed. That's all."

"That's all?" Sue gasped, absently taking the handkerchief from him. "*All!* When Yank Arnold 'll make any man rich that kill you?" Sue swirled about to face Kate. There was only one conceivable explanation, and Sue angrily accused her: "You're in love with him!"

Rodiker said, "Hell!"

Kate's dark eyes flashed. Her hand in unconscious modesty was pulling to hold together the open waist, but she dropped the hand stiffly to her side, and it became a fist. The jealousy in Sue's voice was unmistakable and challenging. Kate almost said, "Yes!" and wanted to say it, but instead told Sue:

"I don't believe he did what people say and—"

How Kate would have explained, no knowing, because Sue broke in. "And *I* don't care what he's done or not done! I love him! I've loved him from the time I was big enough to know one boy from another! When I love a man he's mine! You understand? I'd 've took him away from Bess if I had to shoot her! Or you, too!"

Sue's jealousy had sensed a rival and that was her way to give warning, backed by a fury-look and Kate, with scorn-edged quietness, inquired, "And the man has nothing to say about it?"

"Not if I want him, he ain't!"

After that no one spoke for a while. The wind whooped as it shuffled gravel and twisted the palo verde's fringed drapery. The horse, with ears forward, put its nose down to the nose of an inquiring pup.

When Rodiker asked, "But what of Ronnie?" Sue misunderstood and said, "He's just a kid, and sweet, but he knows I used him only to practice on. I told him so!"

"No, no. I mean who accused him?"

"Bill Brody!"

"And he's still working for the Bevartses?"

"Not reg'lar, no. He's got a two-bit-sized ranch of his own over South and a beef contract to feed Indians, I hear."

"And the sheriff arrested Ronnie on Brody's say-so?"

"His dep'ty did. That long-nosed Joe Roberts. I sent word I'd claw his eyes out—him an' Bill Brody's both! I never could un'erstand why the Lord didn't put Bill Brody in a snake's shape, like he belongs! Are you goin' to stay on at Yank Arnold's?"

In asking that of Rodiker she turned suspiciously toward Kate and watched her as he said, "For the time being."

SUE shook her head in studying bewilderment. "It beats me!" Then she told Kate, "You dirty—trick him an' next time I'll tear all your clothes off and stake you 'Pachy-style ona ant hill!"

Ironic sweetness hummed in Kate's "Good day, Miss Clayton. It has been such a pleasure to meet you—" Then fiercely —"and to scratch your face!"

Sue's head fell into the studying birdlike

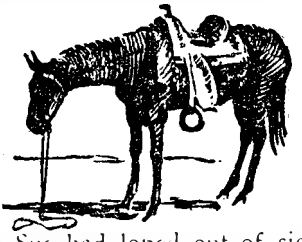
tilt and, after dabbing Rodiker's handkerchief to her cheek, she nodded.

"One thing, you didn't squall or run. You ain't as big as me but you stood and fought, so I won't take back what I said about you bein' pretty. But you won't be if you Arnolds trick him so he's hurt!"

"Just you don't tell he's here!" said Kate.

"Us Claytons don't tell tales. Not even to each other, we don't! We're Texans!"

Rodiker helped her into the saddle. She tucked her skirts high about her legs as she said, "I'll tell 'em at home I fell off an' got drug. I got the scratches an' torn clothes to prove it! Had a time catchin' the horse again. Here, ain't you goin' to kiss me?"



When Sue had loped out of sight Kate watched Rodiker's solemnness. He stood with thumbs in his belt and his eyes fixed afar, and the set of the jaw muscles was distinguishable under the beard. His thought was of Slim and the warning, and he believed it but there was no lessening of the hurt-hate for the man who had been his best friend.

Kate's eyes were not laughing though she smiled tauntingly to say, "She goes after a man headlong and swinging a wide loop—the same as after a steer! I always thought you used bait and coaxed and appealed to his chivalry. That's how they teach you in a ladies' school Back East!"

Rodiker's eyes turned slowly. "She's just a fool kid."

Kate's smile went away. She put both hands to her gaping waist. "And is Bess Clayton marrying Zig?"

"If she wants. I mean if he wants her!"

As he walked away her eyes followed from under a tight frown. When he was out of sight she shook her head a little, drew a long breath and let it go with a sigh-like sound, then shrugged a shoulder. After that her small sharp teeth came together and Kate told herself, *Sue Clayton won't get him! Not away from me!*

XV

OLD Johnny limped through the starlight leading one of the colonel's favorite horses, a high-headed, lean-legged black gelding. He told Rodiker:

"Miss Kate said fur you to have him. He's purt' near a house pet. You treat 'im easy now. Hand-raised an' dog-gentle. When you leave 'im in the stable at Moheela you tell 'em to grain 'im, an' none of that musty ol' hay of theirn!

"And I don't envy you none meetin' that Miz Cora Arnold! Bet the colonel's glad to git outa goin'! He never liked her."

Rodiker's "No?" was softly inquiring.

"Hell, no! She's sulky as a wet hen in a thunderstorm!"

"He *never* liked her?"

"Not from the first sight of her."

"How do you know?"

"I fit all through The War as his ord'ly. I can read him like a big-print book!"

Rodiker cinched the saddle, let his hand slide along the horse's neck. "Did you ever hear her tell about how her husband was killed?"

"All I heard tell was that right after the killin' she went tearin' home from the piñons in the buggy. The team run away with her but it run home. She was tur'ble scairt, natur'ly. Fellers went out after Craig's body and a couple headed this way to tell the colonel. Craig was shot in the back."

"Funny he'd turn his back to a man on a Bevarts' horse, don't you think?"

"I reckon. An' you can do me a big favor if you will. My stomik is upset these days an' from time to time I need a smidge. Will you bring a bottle?"

Rodiker rode off. The black was a pacer, alert and eager, as easy-gaited as a rocking chair; and Rodiker sat with head-up brooding.

Wariness kept him alert but his thoughts clustered about Ronnie. One thing sure, the fore-thoughful and far-seein' Old Jerym had guessed wrong. *I'd let him stay till hell freezes!* Rodiker told himself, meaning that if Ronnie broke jail he would be outlawed, too. *Just a kid, younger than I was!*

Bill Brody's was a name that hurt; not as much as Slim's, but it also now had the

significance of betrayal. *No trusting anybody!*

Then he thought of Sue. "Just a kid," was maybe true but not the whole truth; grown up, she still had the same frank passion as when she had fought against having her arms pulled from his neck. And pretty; pretty as Bess or prettier. But there was Judas-blood in the Claytons, and no matter how much Slim might try to redeem himself, he had done what wasn't forgivable.

He rode into Apache Flat and looked toward where he had shot Pete Croy out of the saddle, and beyond that place he had overtaken Slim. He went by the spot where the buggy stopped and remembered Kate's being tricked into the belief that he, Rodiker, had led the murderers.

Far-seein', the Bevartses! Which reminded him again of Col. Arnold's guess that he, presumably "Jackson" by name, was also an outlaw but an enemy of Rodiker's. *It's all right to be an outlaw if Yank Arnold can use you!* So far Arnold had been too sick to make much use of the outlaw. *I'll make him sicker soon!*

As he rode up the grade and again saw the light burning late at Whitman's his thoughts once more gathered understandingly around Kate. In spite of swift recurrent doubts, he trusted her and had a perplexed wonderment that he did. Her admission of childish admiration for him was a favoring influence because he, too, had always remembered the colonel's pretty child whose pained ankle made her faint—or so he had thought. That she had schemed coquettishly seemed amusing now, though his vibrant wariness wouldn't let him forget that she was tricky with lies and could be dangerous. She had scorched his neck with a quirt and ordered him hanged when she thought he had run Arnold cattle in on the Baddens. He admired her for that.

He didn't pause at Whitman's. People there would mention to others that he had been by, and if word got about he might be laid for again. He also rode wide of Moheela, not leaving the horse stabled there, as Old Johnny expected, then using the stage as the colonel had instructed.

After rounding Moheela he returned to the stage road where he pulled the horse into a walk, taking it easy for he knew that he could make it to Woodward by midmorning and not rattle a spur. From midnight on he began to pass freighters, the jerkline drivers rocking in a doze on their seats as the teams plodded over the familiar road.

AT SUNUP he looked down from the red hills and saw Woodward, still some two hours away: it lay all spradled out like a lot of toy blocks on a rumpled carpet that was mostly buff colored. The town was larger now than when he had been in with beef drives; and drawing nearer he saw the checkered effect of city blocks, and the jackstraw outline of the stock yards, and the track side's stilt-legged water tower which lowered its hollow beak to puffing engines.

Outside the town he dismounted, pulled his shirt and concealed his revolver by hanging it under his arm, then fastening the holster's end thongs about his waist. He stowed the belt in a saddle bag. The rifle was still in its scabbord but would be left at the stable.

He hadn't a watch but knew the time was near 10 o'clock when he dismounted in the livery stable's wide runway.

A fat man with a straw in his mouth sauntered up and said, "Howdy," taking notice of Rodiker's hard looks and the splendid Arnold-branded horse that was a long way from home.

Rodiker said, "Col. Arnold sent me to meet some woman relation of his due on the afternoon train. She's fussy, I hear, so I want to hire a pole buggy instead of going back by stage."

The fat man chewed his straw. "Col. Arnold, heh? Who's the relation?"

"Sister'n-law."

"She comin' back? Well now, ordinary, I'd want a pretty good deposit, but for the colonel 'tain't nec'sary." He looked Rodiker up and down and grinned. "At first I wasn't sure of you. You didn't look the kind of man to be on that kind of horse! Not spruce enough."

"I'll be spruce by train time," Rodiker told him and walked away, thinking some of what the colonel would say about hiring a buggy here to return all the way to the ranch. *By the time I get back with that woman I won't care what he says!*

Rodiker went to the Ace restaurant for

breakfast. He had flapjacks, an inch thick steak that was scorched outside, raw within —the way he wanted it—and three cups of coffee and three spoonfuls of sugar to each cup.

After that he felt pretty good, relaxed and sleepy. He smoked a cigarette at the table and decided that he had better spruce up. Cora Arnold might not want to go in the buggy with somebody who looked like a ruffian.

Wagons were pulling through the street's dust-filled ruts and the wind was beginning to dance up and down; there was a lively bustle on the sidewalks with many women moving about, one down-reaching hand always holding long skirts in a side sweep, lifting them not quite ankle high.

In the general store he bought a pair of new pants, an iron cloth blue shirt, some underwear and socks; the boots he wore were as good as money could buy, but he laid down $12 for a new black hat. He didn't like its newness, although his weather-darkened band helped take off some of the unworn look, and he would work the hat over with punches, pulls and by sitting on it.

The heavy breakfast made him thirsty and on the way to a barber shop he stopped for a bottle of beer. One wasn't enough.

At the barbershop he took a bath and changed clothes, then waited his turn at the chair. He said, "Hair cut, and take off the rough edges of these whiskers."

The little barber absently said, "You bet!" as he flirted with a lady in a yellow hat who smirked in sidling by.

Rodiker closed his eyes, stretched his legs, relaxed; he was pleasantly drowsy and let himself drift. When he opened his eyes the barber was stropping the razor and talking politics with a couple of fellows. Rodiker moved his hand to the side of his face, then sat up abruptly; one cheek was as smooth as his palm and chalkwite; the other side of his face was untouched. If he had done what he felt like he would have knocked the barber through the window, but there was no way now of changing things.

The barber asked perkily, "Feel better, won't it, to have all that wool sheared?"

"But the skin's white. Whiter than a scared girl's face!"

The little barber tittered, "That's what fools all fellows that shave their beards. But I got skin stain—it's really hair dye! —that'll fix you up till you get good and brown again."

When he had been "fixed up", as the little barber called it, Rodiker thought he looked like one of Big Sam's near relatives. It wasn't that dark, but the stain on his cheeks having been given a deeper-shade than the tan on his forehead, the barber, in a fluttetr of artistic effort, darkened the forehead. The darkened forehead then made the cheeks appear lighter, so they were again rubbed with cotton dipped in hair dye.

Rodiker moved out on the street with his fingers feeling inquiringly from one side of his face to the other, and he paused repeatedly to peer at his reflection in store windows. Presently he felt a little amused satisfaction in the thought, *At least now I don't look like that fellow Jackson the Bevarts are laying for!* All that was left to mark him as "Jackson" was the old brown vest, now very shabby in contrast with his new duds.

In a store that sold hand-me-downs he asked if he could buy a vest without a suit, and the pale sickly clerk studied as if trying to decide on Rodiker's nationality, then said that he had some fancy vests that came without suits. From an assortment of a half dozen, Rodiker reluctantly chose one. He changed his tobacco, papers, nubbin of a pencil and the envelope containing Old Jerym's "agreement" into the pockets of a brightly beaded buckskin, which was the only one of the lot big enough to fit. For that he paid $6, being glad it was second-hand and showed wear, having been taken in as part payment on a new outfit.

The train was due a little after 2 p.m., but long before that time Rodiker sat on his heels with his back to the red boards of the station and listened to the enigmatic chittering of the telegraph. People gathered by train time. A hotel bus rattled down and backed up to the platform. A short man in a Prince Albert was seeing off a ruddy cattleman; both were well likkered but gravely dignified even if slightly unsteady.

The train whistled at the edge of town and came plumed with smoke around the curve. The station agent, wearing black

sleeve protectors that reached to his elbows, ran out with flimsy fluttering in his hand as the train rolled bumpily to a stop and the engine panted with a long-drawn breathing. Heads were stuck from windows, watching people get on and off. Roped trunks tumbled from the baggage car, and all the while the bell tolled as slowly as a church bell at a funeral. Presently the conductor's "All 'bo-*ard!*" rose above the greetings and partings, and the train began to chuff-chuff-chuff away. The conductor swung aboard the last car as casually as if stepping onto his own back porch.

A dozen passengers left the train, mostly men, and all the women had escorts. Rodiker had never been nearer to Cora Arnold than years before when he peered at her through Tex Clayton's 'dobe doorway; and now there wasn't any woman standing about alone and looking for someone to greet here.

He was sure she hadn't come, but walked over to the trunks and read the tags, finding Cora Arnold's name.

A short man in a high celluloid collar, swallow-tailed coat and brown derby, came up and with glib ease asked, "Are you by any chance from the Arnold ranch? Mrs. Arnold's waiting over there."

The drummer led Rodiker to the shaded side of the station where Cora Arnold sat on the drummer's up-ended sample case with her own travelling bag at her small feet.

She didn't rise but looked steadily at Rodiker's dark face as he stood hat in hand, and he wouldn't have known her—not from the vague memory he had of what she looked like. She wasn't sullen, or as Old Johnny put it, "sulky;" and she was larger than Rodiker remembered, much bigger but not fat, and still had a prettiness that was slightly startling. Her eyes were blue as turquoise, with the hard glaze of turquoise that has been polished; her face was a bleached white and now powdered. The features were as even as if chiseled. The hat was a dark blue, almost black, and he hadn't remembered that her thick hair was red but it was now. She held a folded parasol in gloved hands and wore a tan alpaca coat that covered her from throat to feet, and the coat was stained with soot and had fine cinders in the creases.

WHEN she had looked him over with much the appraisal of a slave buyer, Cora Arnold asked, "What is your name?" Her voice had a low silky huskiness, not unpleasant but strange.

"They call me Joe."

She smiled quickly: "And sometimes 'Jose'?"

"*Si. Señora.*"

Cora Arnold's smile had hardened and she told him quite coolly, "You are very handsome, Jose."

The little drummer's laugh was a kind of snort. He blurted, "You do beat all!" and sounded displeased. Then he tipped his hat and clapped it on his head again with, "G'bye, Mrs. Arnold—if I can have my case!"

She stood up. He lifted his heavy sample case and with petulent abruptness turned away and started off. The sample case was heavy; he had missed the hotel carry-all; it was uphill and a long way to the hotel. On the train she had offered invitation and given promises, or so he had believed.

Cora Arnold stared up at Rodiker as she inquired about the colonel, not looking as sorry that he was ill as she said she was; then she asked with a hint of playfulness, "You know, don't you, Jose, that you are working as much for me as for him?"

He wasn't rattled but she thought he was, and smiled at the hard set of his face, never dreaming that he said to himself, *She's within arm's reach!* and she didn't see that his hands were knotted into fists.

She said, "I like your vest," and fingered the edge of it. Perfume that set his nerves a-tingle came into his face. "Black and red beads. Very artistic—" and, lifting her eyes, added—"Spaniards are, aren't they? How tall you are! And is the colonel all alone at the ranch?"

"His daughter is home."

"That brat!" The words flashed on the instant and with temper, but she peered at his unchanging face and smiled, "Perhaps you like her?"

"I am just a hired man, *Senora.*"

"It sounds nice to be called *Senora!* And what are we going to do? It's too late for the Moheela stage, isn't it? Anyhow, I wouldn't go today. I'll stay at the hotel tonight. I'm tired. You'll have to find a

cab. Or don't they have cabs in this miserable country? And there are my trunks."

When he told her that he had a buggy and they could start this evening and drive through the night, avoiding the heat of the day, she laughed at him. "Ah, that would be pleasant, but miss my sleep? There was no Pullman west of Kansas City and I didn't shut my eyes last night. I feel I've been drawn through a knot hole and must look it too, don't I?"

Rodiker found a dray and helped the man with the trunks. He sat on one and Cora Arnold sat on the seat under the striped umbrella as they drove to the Claymore hotel.

He helped her from the seat and she at once took off the alpaca, gave herself a little shake, smoothed the dress about her hips, straightetned and walked ahead of him into the hotel. Her dark skirt was below ankle length but didn't drag, and her corseted curves stood out with apple-like fullness. Men watched and she knew it, and she cared as a show girl cares when on the stage.

A porter followed her upstairs and Rodiker turned to go into the hotel bar, but Dougal Bevarts lurked at one side of the bar's doorway, his eyes following her on the stairs; so Rodiker, without a pause, went on to the street door.

He soon was telling the stable man that the buggy wouldn't be used until tomorrow. The stable man looked him over and said approvingly, "Danged if you ain't spruced up! Don't look like the same feller, and I'd never a-took you for a Mexican—not with that beard on! Have you heard the news?"

"Not particularly, no."

"You know about the Rod'kers, or at least Jack."

"I've heard things, yes."

"W'y, you know, I reckon, 'twas Jack shot Miz Arnold's husband a few years back. The ol' colonel's been after him ever since!"

"But what now?"

"A brother of Jack's was caught hoss stealin' lately. Just a kid, so they locked 'im up instead of hangin' the pup. Last night somebody broke him outa jail! Shot up Slim Clayton, who was on guard. Dougal Bevarts rode in a while ago and he says there's some talk that it was Jack Rodiker himself that got the kid out! You people out to the colonel's better watch sharp. It's said Jack Rod'ker has swore to kill him too. Bad lot, them Rod'kers."

XVI

RODIKER avoided Dougal Bevarts by staying away from the Claymore and went to a rooming house where he sat for hours on the side of the bed. His thoughts were cool and steady, but decision evaded him. Ronnie was an outlaw now. In spite of Cora Arnold, that was mostly in his thought. Now his mother would suffer as if she held hot coals in her palms, and the once broad back of his high shouldered father would bend a little more. *Who got him out?* was unanswerable.

Couldn't even be guessed at. Nobody who was trying to help Ronnie would have shot Slim, yet somebody had.

Although he had been sleepless the previous night, it was near dawn when he turned in, and he slept until well past noon; then he stood before the mirror with rather the feeling that he didn't know himself as he ran a hand over his dark cheeks. When he had dressed, the beaded buckskin vest made him feel outlandish; it was ornate and flashy, and he hadn't a liking for trappings of the kind.

He went into an empty restaurant. Blue bottles hummed against the warm windows and a hefty waitress came from the kitchen. She had freckled arms, a wide freckled face and grinned at him from across the table as he sat down. "Lots of excitement, ain't they?"

"I've been asleep."

"W'y, ain't you heard Dougal Bevarts married Cora Arnold this mornin'? They left for Moheela a while ago. She looked mighty purty as they drove by with a spankin' pair. 'Magine her marryin' Dougal Bevarts! That sure is romance, ain't it?"

Rodiker pushed back his chair, rising.

The fat stable man was a-quiver. "I wondered where you was! I told Bevarts straight out he couldn't have the buggy 'cause I was savin' it for Cora Arnold, and he said that's who he wanted it for!"

Rodiker saddled, strapped on his revolver, examined the rifle, making sure the magazine was full and a cartridge lay under the hammer. The bridal buggy had left at noon.

THE stable man was all for Col. Arnold and called it a damn' shame that the Bevarts would now grab off half the Arnold property. He said, "An' Dougal must've planned for trouble 'cause he had two men with him here in town, and when he drove out with her they tagged along. One's called Mack. Don't know the other. Both rode Lazy S's."

The first miles from town were upgrade toward the lumpy red rocks that often had the sunset glow of fresh blood. Dougal Bevarts wouldn't have any fear of being chased, but probably would push the team hard, being that kind of man. He had come to town with more purposes that Rodiker suspected, and had carried out that purpose.

Rodiker met a rickety wagon piled high with crooked wood and asked the ragged Mexican if he had seen the buggy. The woodchopper gravely pulled the bone-studded horse to a stop, and was ready to discuss the fact that he hadn't seen it.

An hour later Rodiker turned into a barren yard before a small adobe that the weather had gnawed to near ruin. Ragged tots huddled in the doorway to peer, and a ponderous Indian woman waddled through them.

Yes, the buggy and horsemen had stopped; they used water from the well without asking, and had driven on without thanks. There were two men on horseback with the buggy.

Some miles beyond Rodiker came to a roadhouse that was back from the road and lay under deep bluff-cast shadows though it wasn't yet sundown. Old outbuildings straggled off and sagged in disrepair, and were followed part way by a broken fence of upright sticks that had once guarded a garden. Dougal Bevarts wouldn't stop with his bride, not at this unclean place, but three horses were at the hitching rack, and it was on one of those horses that Dougal had ridden to Arnold's with the sheriff. Rodiker couldn't read the brand from the road but he could recognize a horse he had seen as readily as he remembered a man he had once taken notice of.

He turned from the road and moved along at a walk, with his hat shadowingly over his eyes and his eyes struck here and there, searching for signs. All three horses at the bark-stripped rack were Lazy S's. Dougal's was the best and carried a finer rig than either of the others.

Rodiker dropped the reins when he left the saddle and without a pause started for the door where a chunky man looked out.

The chunky man shouted back over his shoulder, "Hey, Mack! Here's that Jose!" Then he stood aside as Rodiker entered, but spoke jeeringly. "Hiya, Mex! Lookin' for somebody? Couldn't be a lady you've lost, could it?"

Rodiker's swirling glance took in the room; it was dim, not large, with low ceiling and a pine-board bar from window to dirty window across one end. The floor was hard-packed earth.

Two more men were in the room; one was behind the bar and, by the vague light of the dusty window, his round face looked fatly swoolen and sullen under the flat-crown black hat. His hair was Indian dark and coarse, covering his ears, and he wore a dirty buckskin vest from which much of the bead design had dripped away from broken threads.

The man called Mack was on the drinking side of the bar and stared at Rodiker, and wasn't amused by his partner's joshing. "A Spaniard named Jose," Cora Arnold had told Dougal Bevarts; and this was the man and Mack didn't know him but uneasily sensed something familiar.

The jocular man said, "Was you scairt to show up at the weddin'?"

Rodiker's thumb went over his shoulder, indicating the horses outside as he asked, "Where's Bevarts?"

The question had a jerk to it; and the jocular man threw away his goodhumor, put on a scowl, stuck his fists on his hips and demanded loudly, "Can you tie that! Yank Arnold's greaser talkin' like—"

Rodiker hit him; the blow flashed up from the hip and wasn't a fist for he struck the fellow's throat with thumb and fingers spread, knocking breath out of his windpipe as his head rocked back, then the fingers closed chokingly. The fellow tugged at Rodiker's grasp but couldn't break it, and Rodiker banged his head rapidly against the 'dobe wall as if using the head for a knocker.

For a long moment Mack stood in dazed glaring as he watched his husky companion being batted as a man might bang a dummy about; but something in Rodiker's size and

strength and quickness jarred up delayed recognition with the shout of "Jackson!"

At a glance Rodiker had known him for one of Zig's companions in the barroom fight and was ready. He flung the beaten man away, letting him fall as a drunk man topples, then spun about with his revolver hip-high, cocked and pointed; but Mack was already dropping with limber-kneed sag when his fingers slipped from the partly drawn gun, and broken glass clattered on the rock-hard floor.

The sullen half-breed leaned heavily on the bar to look over and down, then straightened up and spoke softly:

"Eef I know you so queek to draw, I let heem be shot, but—" He shrugged a shoulder. The round fatly swollen face hadn't a flicker of change as he asked, "You hav' dreenk?"

From somewhere he brought out a bottle of good liquor and, wordlessly, they drank together from tin cups.

The half-breed gave his name as Enzo. He didn't know anything about Bevarts having passed in a buggy with a bride. These men, with an extra horse, had stopped a little while ago. They laughed about how a big jolt had been handed Col. Arnold.

Enzo said stolidly, "I do not ask queestions." Then he commented, "Harry Hand there, he weel not be so funnee for a long time, uh?" In as muffled monotone as a bumblebee's drone, he explained that this was his brother-in-law's place, and the brother-in-law had taken the family to a funeral, so he, Enzo, was in charge for today.

"Me," said Enzo proudly, "I am a blacksmeeth. Ho!" He showed the swollen muscle of his doubled up right arm.

Rodiker covered his impatience with attentive listening and heard Enzo say as if regretful, "You are not Mex'can, then?" After that he asked, "Thees man Jackson?" The unreadable black eyes rested on Rodiker's hair-dyed face.

"He works for Col. Arnold and the Bevartses don't like him."

"He is your freend?"

Rodiker smiled, nodded.

Enzo said, "You, huh?"

"Yes."

The inscrutible eyes carefully studied Rodiker, then Enzo grunted, peered over the bar at the men on the floor who were stirring as drunks do when awakening with headaches. He rounded the bar, stooped from one to the other, taking a gun from each, then returned and, putting the guns out of sight, rested his elbows on the bar and said placidly, "Now I bet you they be good. They Beel Brody's men. I do not like Beel Brody now."

Rodiker asked why, but Enzo didn't reply to that; he dropped his voice and spoke softly, "Thees Col. Arnold, do you theenk he ud pay good to know how he lose cows?"

"Ride over and talk with him."

"You talk to heem. Say to look good in Los Muertos Canyon but go careful!" It had grown darker than twilight, but Rodiker saw the enigmatic shrug as the half-breed asked, "Maybe he pay sometheeng, eh?"

"I'll tell him all you've said."

"'G'bye," said Enzo.

"Adios,' said Rodiker, leaving.

NIGHT was near, but that wouldn't mean darkness—not under the translucent purple of the star-bright sky. He had lost time and hadn't learned anything except that Dougal Bevarts, having left his horse in the care of the two men, had driven on. He wondered some that Enzo had taken his part, but nevertheless guessed that the half-breed was pretty much of a scoundrel and could look out for himself when the two Bevarts —or rather Bill Brody!—men lifted their broken heads. The evasive way he had referred to Los Muertos, wanting money, suggested to Rodiker that the stolid half-breed was selling out somebody; but as the chance of getting money was slight, he perhaps was doing it for spite.

Rodiker hadn't any doubts about Bill Brody being a rustler, in cahoots with the Bevartses; and perhaps Old Jerym had trusted him enough to confide that Rodiker was back in the country and had suggested using Ronnie to bait the trap. Old Jerym must feel bewildered at thinking Rodiker (no matter if under the name of "Jackson") was now high in Col. Arnold's favor. Jerym himself may have urged the hasty marriage to secure property enough to bolster his bank in case Arnold should make known why Rodiker had been summoned back into the Santsander.

When I catch that buggy I'll ask questions of them both! he told himself.

Two horsemen showed up ahead, their night-darkened figures bobbing at the trot. Rodiker met them with right hand half raised in a sign of friendliness as he stopped and asked if they had met a buggy ahead.

"Bevarts and a woman, yes," said one of the men.

"Ten to twelve miles back," said the other.

RODIKER put the black pacer into an easy lope. The night air was fragrant with the scent darkness draws out of the desert, and Rodiker, for a time, pulled his hat, liking the breeze on his face. He thought of Cora Anold's exciting way of lure and promise, deliberate with invitational hints at more than friendliness, all of which was woman-bad and not to be trusted; but it didn't seem the kind of evilness that would lie to hang a man she had scarcely seen. His fingers closed in the horse's mane. *I'll get it out of her somehow!*

Near ahead a jack rabbit crossed the road with lance-thrown quickness and a larger darker shape hurtled in pursuit. In two winks of an eye the coyote blended with the darkened shrub-dotted earth, but Rodiker's hand had unconsciously touched the rifle's stock, such was his instinctive sympathy with the pursued.

The empty high-wheeled freight wagon creaked and jolted as the eight mules dozed along; and the bearded freighter whoa-ed up with careless pull of line as Rodiker, hand half raised in the sign of friendliness, hailed him.

Yep, said the freighter, he'd pulled out for a buggy three-four mile back afore the Redburn crossin'. Hadn't rek'nized Doug Bevarts but might 've been him. Was a woman with him.

Asked if there was fresh news about the jail break, he put a hand to his beard, holding it back as he leaned to spit. "Don't rightly know, but I heared Bill Brody's offerin' a small size reward. Slim Clayton ain't bad hurt much. Just shot in the laig. I was out to the Claytons. Swopped some mules."

With a burst of feeling, "That Rodiker kid never no more stole one of Bill Brody's horses than I stole the chunk that's missin' out of the moon!"

"Why you so sure?"

"Hell afire, them Rodikers are hones' folks!"

"How about Jack?"

"He jus' shot a cantankerous Yankee!"

"In the back, they say!"

The freighter demanded, "Who the hell air you?"

"Name is Jackson and I work for Col. Arnold!"

"Hope you burn in hell with me shovelin' the coal!" the freighter shouted, then he yelled at his mules and they went jolting on.

Rodiker hurried, now sure of the chase. When he splashed into the ankle-deep spread of the Santsander at Redburn Crossing he let the horse drink, then took it easy on the upgrade. Moheela was less than fifteen crooked miles ahead and the buggy team tired, and the newly married couple might like the cozy slowness of the team's tiredness.

It wasn't long before he expected to see the buggy when he rounded each succeeding curve, and at times he paused, listening, but there was no sound of hoof-throb or harness-jangle in the stillness. He rode faster, uneasy at the thought that Bevarts may have labored the team on as if aware of being pursued. When Moheela's few lights lay ahead at the foot of a descending curve, he met another empty freight wagon.

No, the freighter said, he hadn't seen any buggy and team; hadn't seen a soul since pulling out of Moheela. When Rodiker explained that he had tried to overtake Dougal Bevarts to give him a message, the freighter said:

"W'y, maybe he turned off there at Redburn's to go to Calisto. It's a deuce-sized ranch Dougal's got. I hauled in there onct about a year ago. If you'd watched the road for wheel tracks you could have told."

When the freighter's wagon rumbled on, Rodiker dismounted, pulled the saddle, letting the horse breath easily, then turned the blankets when he resaddled and rode at a walk.

He had never heard of Calisto, and wouldn't turn back to ride in the dark through country he didn't know, not when the buggy had gone so many miles from him.

He told himself that he'd somehow soon get to Mrs. Dougal Bevarts, and she would tell him things.

XVII

THE dogs knew the horse and didn't bark when Rodiker reached the ranch before sunup. He turned the horse loose in the corral and made his way to the bunkhouse, pulled his boots at the doorway and went quietly to his blankets where he lay on his back with hands folded under his head. He was dog-tired but sleepless. His thoughts were still being woven and unraveled, much of the time about Ronnie, but he couldn't shut out Cora Arnold.

When the straw boss sang out the bunkhouse was still dark though the sky was dawn-streaked. Men stirred and grumbled meaningless complaints. Rodiker hadn't closed his eyes. He didn't get up for the breakfast call.

The black horse indicated that he was back and soon Col. Arnold sent Sam to ask where was Cora Arnold.

When he first had a good look at Rodiker, Sam opened his mouth wide, then closed it noiselessly but retained a pop-eyed stare, wondering at the change from an unkempt beard to the smooth-faced dark hue.

Rodiker said tonelessly, "I'm a dude now," and felt of his cheeks, again needing a shave.

"Huccome Miz Ahnold ain't wid you?"

"The lady had other ideas."

He stamped into his boots, slipped on the vest, made a cigarette. Sam eyed the brightly beaded vest and beamed approval.

"Dat sho' am a styl'sh garment, Mist' Jackson."

Rodiker's palm rasped his beard. "I'll trade it for a shave."

The big Negro's grin widened like a split watermelon. "You jes' funnin'."

Rodiker emptied his pockets, folding and sticking Old Jerym's agreement into a boot top, then tossed the vest to Sam.

"Try it for size."

"You is earnes'?"

Sam proudly slipped on the vest. It was big but not big enough to meet in front of his bear-shaped body, which didn't much matter and he beamed at himself in the piece of looking glass on a shelf by the door.

"Even-steven," said Rodiker.

Sam went to the bunkhouse kitchen, borrowed the cook's razor, and returned with hot water and yellow soap. Rodiker sat on a backless chair with a flour sack tucked under his chin and had the carefullest shave of his life. After that Sam brought a pint tip cup of stale black coffee and admired himself in the looking glass while Rodiker smoked thoughtfully.

"Sam, between friends, what do you think of Cora Arnold?"

Sam, under the influence of Rodiker's gift, looked about cautiously before he confided. "She jes' white trash in fine clez!"

Rodiker murmured encouragingly, "I'll go along."

"I neber say dat to nobody b'foh, an' I'll say I neber said it 'f you say I has!"

"Fair enough. But what gave you the idea?"

"I seen her onct lovin' up a fella frum town. She seen me see her an' she came later an' say, 'You dirt' black nigger, doan' you dare say boo erbout me?' "

"Who was she making up to?"

"Dunno. Jes' a young fella in city duds dat come wid visitin' folks. I kep' my mouf shet kaze if a white lady call you a lyar, you is!"

"She ever try to make up to the colonel?"

"He'd a-tuk her head off! He's a gent'-mun, suh! An' his own brudder's wife?" The big Negro's eyes clouded wrathfully. "Huccome you talk lake date erbout the colonel?"

RODIKER met no one in the house and went up the stairs; the door was open and the colonel, dressed except for boots and hat, sat in a chair without pillows and stared from a window. He turned and frowned toward Rodiker as if at a stranger, then the frown relaxed and, ignoring the changed appearance, he asked matter-of-factly:

"Where is Mrs. Arnold?"

Rodiker was still in the doorway, his thumbs in the front of his belt and the straight back gave him a high-shouldered look. He said quietly:

"She married Dougal Bevarts in Woodward."

Rodiker had braced himself for wrath, but silence followed. Col. Arnold didn't move, not even a muscle twitched as he gazed at Rodiker. He seemed still listening to the words that had been spoken. A dog near the colonel's chair stirred and bitingly nosed for fleas, and when he sprawled flat

again a pin's fall could have been heard.

Then the colonel turned on his chair, lifted a cigar box lid, took up a cigar and studied it, now on one side, now on the other. At last he bit the end of the cigar, spat, put it in his mouth and bit down hard. After that he pulled slowly at one side of his mustache, then looked up to say with military bruskness:

"Come in. Sit down. Let's hear."

Rodiker took off his hat and went to a chair near the table where he sat bolt upright and spoke quietly:

"I rode into Woodward and met her at the train. It was too late for the stage back. I offered to bring her in a buggy but she wanted to stay overnight at the hotel. I went to a rooming house and slept until about noon. In a restaurant I heard they'd married and gone. I come on back."

The colonel again didn't move for a long time, then silently offered the box of cigars. Rodiker shook his head. "Thanks," he said, and pulled papers and tobacco from the shirt pocket. When he struck a match he first offered it as a light for the colonel's cigar, but Col. Arnold said, "Thanks," and shook his head.

As he put the flame to his cigarette he saw that the colonel was smiling; it was a cold tight smile, and bitter, but so meaningful that Rodiker forgot the match until fire nipped his fingers. He dropped the burning stick and put a foot on it.

Presently the colonel asked, "Anything else?"

"Not much. But Bevarts must have had it all planned ahead and was ready for trouble because two men were with him, and rode part way back. I saw Lazy S horses at a road house and stopped to inquire though the buggy had gone on. There was a set-to. When my beard came off, my face was so pale the barber put hair dye on it, and these fellows mistook me for a Mexican. A half-breed who called himself Enzo took up for me and the Bevarts men quieted down.

"This Enzo asked would you pay for information on how you lost cows. He mentioned Los Muertos Canyon. I said I'd tell you."

"I've never seen him to know him, but Enzo has the name of a bad breed, and probably does know, first-hand, how I've lost cattle. Los Muertos is off my range, but we'll ride down there one of these days and look around. You didn't get much sleep last night."

"I dozed in the saddle."

"I hear my horse came back in first rate shape. And you rode him all the way into Woodward and back?"

Rodiker said, "No need for him not to be in good shape."

The colonel eyed him studyingly. "But most cowhands are horse-killers."

Rodiker's mouth twisted a little, barely smiling. "You told me I wasn't a cowhand!"

The colonel nodded and put the tips of his fingers carefully together, seemed making sure they were placed just as he wanted them, then removed the cigar and examined the end he had chewed. He continued to look at it as he said:

"I surmise that Dougal Bevarts went Back East to court her and learn just how much of the Arnold property is hers. That is why she decided to come West again and demand an accounting. I suppose that Dougal and Old Jerym have figured that the marriage ought to put their shaky holdings back on their feet, including that bank. I would give half of what I own to smash Old Jerym!"

He spoke with such vehemence that he was again breathless, and now his chest heaved as he gasped like a man tired by running.

A commotion started among the dogs in the yard and the hound that had been by the colonel's feet got up and went scrambling out of the room and down the stairs to learn the cause.

The colonel showed no interest at all but soon Kate, in a fantastic get-up, came followed by two men who made a mild clatter with spurred boots and scrape of chairs when told to take seats. They sat down and gazed with awkward admiration at Kate, who wore a loose swaying dress of as many colors as a shattered rainbow and there was the glittering jangle of bright metal and cheap jewelry about her. She had heard what to expect of Rodiker's appearance from Sam and now showed no surprise though she looked at him with interest until the colonel said, almost at once:

"Your Aunt Cora has married Dougal Bevarts."

Kate cried, "Oh!" as if struck hard from

behind. Then turned on Rodiker and told him, "I don't believe it!" But she did and asked, "How on earth?" After that she whirled toward her father. "Does that mean —will the Bevartses get—oh, does it?"

Col. Arnold plucked at the tuft on his lower lip as his eyes slanted toward a far corner of the ceiling. "Would I give up my brother's property to men who hired him murdered?"

Kate's glance turned uneasily toward Rodiker as she left the room but he didn't see and sat stiffly taut until introduced to the two men.

Neither was old and both had the sunburned leathery skin and bulging thigh muscles of horsemen. It was a tribute to the former range boss, Marl, that the colonel was using the two of them to do his work.

One was a bronzed Swede, his clipped hair being white enough to look grey, and the china blue eyes were sheltered behind perpetually narrowed lids; his thick shoulders were egg-round and his neck drooped. His name was Tom Small.

Frank Pierce was thinner, darker, straighter, with a way of staring suspiciously. His mouth was crooked and tight; bad temper seemed to lie within him like hot coals under ashes. Rodiker took note that he was left handed, with a hand-stamped belt and holster, and wore girl-leg spurs.

Both knew of Rodiker as "that man Jackson" who had licked Zig Bevarts and friends in a town fight, had shot Pete Croy when Pete and others tried to dry gulch him, had ordered the Walters brothers hanged after turning them into Badden's barn and smoking them out. So it appeared that this mysterious stranger was all of a sudden some kind of right hand man to the colonel.

After handshakes, Frank Pierce said, "The talk is, Mister, that you are a range detective."

Rodiker impassively answered, "A range detective that says so wouldn't be much use, would he?"

Frank Pierce stared before he replied, not pleasantly, "We're all Arnold men! It's like you didn't trust us."

Rodiker said, "I draw wages to do as I'm told. I've not been told to tell anybody what I do."

Tom Small rubbed both palms on his knees and nodded. Frank Pierce kept staring at Rodiker as if at somebody he didn't like but met unyielding eyes, and so looked away. The colonel watched but made no comment, then offered cigars.

The two foremen talked business under the shadow of cigar smoke, and Rodiker listened. Tom Small said somehow cows kept drifting south. Frank Pierce said fiercely that line riders needed hauling over the coals. There was talk of grass and water, and about pushing the herds to higher ground for summer feed. Rustling was going on, and Frank Pierce said he'd like to get his hands on anybody that dared touch an Arnold cow with a hot iron.

The colonel didn't mention Enzo or Los Muertos Canyon, though the canyon was nearest to San Miguel Ranch, where Pierce was in charge.

With business over, the conversation got around to Ronnie's escape from jail. Frank Pierce said, "I don't see how it could've been any friend of them Rodikers done it 'cause they and the Claytons are close as hand in glove. Slim's known as that Jack Rodiker's best friend."

Tom Small commented with slow thoughtfulness, "That seems so right it spoils the report that Rodiker himself is back and got his brother out."

Frank Pierce grinned. "Wisht he was back, Colonel! I'd sure like some of that reward of yours. It still stands?"

"And will until he's hung!" said the colonel.

Tom Small was untalkative; now he blinked a few times, shook his head, rubbed his palms on his knees, then took the cigar stub from his mouth and said carefully, "I'm not a very smart feller. But Bill Brody is a Bevarts man, and a friend of the Claytons, so even if that Ronnie kid stole one of his horses, why would Bill Brody have him drug to the hoosegow?"

Nobody commented, and Tom Small sucked again on his dead cigar butt.

WHEN they had gone Col. Arnold was breathing hard and looked tired. He sternly said, "Damn this thing of being less than half a man!" and sat on a couch that was overlaid with Indian blankets. He lay back wearily but couldn't get his breath and sat up again, erectly. He said, "Don't misjudge Frank Pierce by his bad temper. He

has worked for me since he was a boy and he is brave; loyal, too."

Rodiker sat solemnly silent, scarcely listening as he remembered how the colonel had said Cora Bevarts would not get any of his brother's property.

After a time the colonel said, "I have some plans for you but they will wait." He asked Rodiker for the whisky that was out of sight on a shelf, then drank no more than a thimbleful and gave the bottle back without comment for Rodiker to return to the shelf. The colonel drew his breath as if laboring up hill and for a long time stared at the portrait of the young dark woman on the wall. He looked around to ask:

"Do you think Rodiker is back in the Santsander?"

"Wouldn't surprise me none."

"That means the Bevartses are trying to use him against me, and will do what they can to protect him. Don't you think?"

Rodiker said, "Sounds logical."

"Ask Kate to come, will you?"

Kate was in the kitchen talking with Old Johnny's good-looking, pleasant wife and wasn't wearing the gypsy dress. She rubbed her peeling nose and told him:

"After Sam showed me that vest, I thought I'd fix up too. I wore it at a school doin's called a fête, and shocked the pinch-nosed, knock-kneed old heifers who look after something they called 'morals'. One of them told me I must be full of sin to want to look so wicked. But after I learned about Cora today, I didn't feel like playing I was queen of the gypsies. And you've made Sam perfectly worthless! A while ago he was strutting around out there and talking to himself. And Old Johnny's drunk as a hoot owl, so did you bring him some medicine for his 'stomik'?"

"It was in a saddle bag but—"

"If you buried it ten feet deep, be all the same to him!"

It was something over an hour later that Kate ran with stumbling haste to the corral where Rodiker was scratching between a colt's ears, and called:

"Oh, come! Papa's downstairs and can't breathe and Sam—I don't know where, damn him!"

He climbed the logs and jumped down beside her, but she stood perfectly still and almost trance-like as she said:

"It's Aunt Cora marrying like that! I've always hated her!"

Col. Arnold was downstairs at the office desk with a hand to his throat, and his sunken eyes had a dull perplexed stare as he asked brokenly, "What is the matter with me? I can't—can't get my breath!"

Kate told Rodiker, "Upstairs, please!"

He stooped and lifted the colonel who let one arm fall laxly over Rodiker's shoulder, but held a long brown envelope in the other hand. There was no weight to his body; all the tall erectness was skin and bone and he gasped like a man who is suffocating.

Kate said, "He would come down here to look for—" Then she broke off and ran ahead on the stairs and, anxious but unflustered, waited at the top.

Rodiker helped her undress and put the colonel to bed.

XVIII

THAT night Rodiker pulled his boots, making ready to turn in, but a noisy crib game was going in the bunk house, so he stepped outside with a cigarette to think things over and saw a shadow move furtively at a corner of the kitchen.

The cook was among the crib players. Rodiker flipped his cigarette upward, carelessly letting it fall and splash sparks. That, he knew, would keep the prowler from again peeking for a long minute or two, then he went on sock-covered tiptoes into the unlighted kitchen and, looking through the back door, saw the shadow-shape pressed close against the kitchen wall and peering around the corner. He couldn't tell whether or not the man had a gun in his hand, but said, "Get 'em up!"

Hands flew overhead as the man turned, and Rodiker stepped from the dark doorway to move nearer. That brought him into the starlight and the kid gulped, "Jack!"

Rodiker at once reached out and jerked the boy to him, looked quickly into Ronnie's wide-eyed face and said, "Go to the stable!" and gave a shove. "I'll meet you there!"

Ronnie crouched as he started off, and Rodiker's long-reaching hand fell on him again and straightened him up:

"Walk like a man! Don't hurry! Never look on the dodge!"

Ronnie tried but with a tired hobbling

scrape of boots, and he glanced back often in crossing the open starlit space.

Rodiker went into the bunkhouse and put on his boots. The crib players were having a boisterous time. He came in and left unnoticed.

At the stable Rodiker at once lit a lantern and hung it near the door. Ronnie backed into shadows and protested, "But somebody'll see!"

"And be seen if they come. And won't think anything is up, not with a light going. Never act scared!"

"Well, I am!" said Ronnie.

Rodiker gazed at the tired, gaunt, worn-out kid, then led him toward the rear of the stable beyond reach of the lantern. He asked, "How'd you know to find me?"

"Slim."

Rodiker's curse blasted Slim. "Who shot him?"

"He shot himself!"

"Good!"

"I'm hungry, Jack. I'm starved! I never stole Brody's horse. He loaned it to me. He said, 'Here, you ride him for a week or two. Do him good.' Honest, Jack. You don't believe me?"

Rodiker's face had a hard, unrevealing set as his eyes narrowed down on the kid's face. "Of course I believe you. But about Slim?"

"He shot himself so I could get away and—"

"Himself? You mean on purpose?"

The kid nodded, then took off his hat and ran fingers through his hair, and looked up anxiously:

"He said you'd understand. Said for me to come to you and tell you why he done it. He said he wouldn't let Old Jerym trap you like was planned. First, he offered me his gun to shoot him in the leg or arm, but I wouldn't. He said he couldn't let me just walk off because then ever'body would suspicion him of lettin' me go, so he said he had to be shot. Didn't need to be bad hurt, he said, but he'd have to have a bullet in him some place."

"The ornery fool!" Rodiker murmured, not bitterly.

"The only chance he had was when Bill Brody—they kept watch together at night—went up town for a drink. Slim planned it out and told me to ride off on his horse up the river, then turn him loose and he'd go home. He said nobody'd look for me over near Yank Arnold's any more 'n they'd look for you here. He said you called yourself 'Jackson,' and had fooled Old Arnold into thinking you was ace high! I'm hungry, Jack. I come on foot from the river and haven't et since supper in jail that night."

Deep shadows lay about them. Rodiker sat on his heels and gazed blankly at his brother, now on the dodge; and Slim had put him there, but with the loyalest of intentions possible.

"Where'd he shoot himself?"

"In the leg. Half way above the knee. He said he'd miss the bone. I seen him, then skedaddled."

"I'll be damned!" Rodiker muttered.

Ronnie squatted down and rubbed his toes. His feet hurt. He had walked miles on high heels and his feet were so swollen he couldn't pull his boots. He had tried earlier this evening after he got to the water trough and drank all he could hold. He had wanted to soak his feet.

"Jack?"

"Un-hunh?"

"How come you are here at Arnold's?"

"It's safest."

"He'd kill you!"

"He's sick. I carried him up to bed this afternoon when he couldn't walk." Rodiker paused reflectively. He had carried the colonel with gentleness, helped put him to bed, helped pile the pillows high behind him so he could breathe, and had brought in the whisky that Kate measured with a tablespoon into water.

"Why didn't you choke 'im?"

He thought, *I didn't want to,* and wondered at the thought. Of course, he had no liking for Yank Arnold; but, somehow, the feeling was slipping away that Yank Arnold had joined up with that Cora woman to put the blame on him. She'd maybe fooled Yank Arnold.

He told Ronnie, "You don't hurt helpless folks."

"Slim said for me to say to you that nobody knows you're back but him and Old Jerym. He said Jerym had hinted some to Bill Brody to get him to rig the trap, and there's talk around about you. He says Jerym is scairt to death of you. Why?"

Rodiker shook his head, not replying.

Now that Cora Arnold had married into the family, Old Jerym wouldn't be so scared: there would be money enough to hold the shaky Bevarts' credit on its legs.

"Jack?"

"What?"

"Can I get something to eat?"

In the bunkhouse kitchen there would be bread, and cold boiled potatoes ready for breakfast frying, and some canned stuff, all of which was food in a way but not the right kind for a starved kid brother; and if detected getting it, there would be questions, suspicions, talk.

Rodiker asked, "Can you lie good?"

"I don't know. I never could fool Maw and she larruped me when I tried."

"All right, this lie is that you don't know who shot Slim. Next, you got lost and straggled in here because you had to have water and was hungry. And I caught you. You don't know me, but you 'fessed up to being the Rodiker kid because you never stole Bill Brody's horse. He loaned it to you. Now come on."

Rodiker shoved the kid ahead of him into the kitchen.

Old Johnny was huddled by the stove, shivering with teeth a-chatter as he sipped hot coffee. The night was warm but the whisky had pulled all the marrow-heat out of his old bones and he had the "ager" as he called his hangover shakes.

His goodlooking wife was placidly about her work and smiled with childlike quickness at Rodiker, then gazed in kindly surprise at Ronnie, who looked like a kid tramp.

Supper was long over, but Rodiker said, "If it's not too much trouble, fix this boy up with something to eat. Anything filling. And, kid, go out to the pump and wash up. White people live here!"

THE only lighted lamp downstairs was in the kitchen, and Rodiker, as if half blinded, made his way to the stairs, then more readily on up to the open door of the colonel's bedroom. Sam sat glowering near the foot of the bed, not wearing his gaudy vest.

Kate sat on the bed, holding her father's hand; and he, with easier breathing, kept his head on the banked up pillows as he looked toward the doorway.

Rodiker said, "I just found that Rodiker kid wandering around here, tired and hungry. I'd say he's lyin' when he says he don't know who shot Slim Clayton. He says Bill Brody told him to take the horse and ride him for a week or two, then had the kid put in jail for horse-stealin'. He says the talk is that his outlaw brother is back in the Santsander, and Bevarts and Brody used him—the kid, that is—as bait to draw the outlaw to the jail. We've got the kid ourselves now, and maybe we can use him for bait to draw Rodiker."

A little frown had tightened Kate's forehead as if she were trying to read too small print, then astonishment fluttered over her face: she wanted to laugh but was fear-chilled too, and though shadowy smiles trembled and went quickly away, his quiet audacity made her solemn.

Sam had jumped up bulkily and his heavy voice rolled in incoherent mutters about the Bevartses and Rodikers being up to devilment; and his mumbling had such an uncanny feeling of invoking curses that Kate told him sharply, "Be quiet!" Sam stared at her as if awakening, shut up and sat down, working his fingers together as if showing how worms squirm.

The colonel gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling as he asked, "Do you think Rodiker got him out?"

"And shot his best friend to do it? Though from what I've heard of the fellow, perhaps so!"

"Good Lord!" Kate exclaimed, then pressed a palm to her mouth.

Sam's rolling rumble announced, "Nobody kain' tell me he doan' know whar he come to when he done come heah. He am a spy, dat what he am! Spy!"

Kate said, "Since we've caught him, who cares? Where is he now?"

Rodiker told her, "In the kitchen being fed. If he don't eat like he's starved, I'll agree with Sam that he is a spy. If he does, he's just a hungry kid that's in trouble."

Sam nodded, pleased by what seemed agreement with his own idea, and was more pleased when Kate said, "Sam, go down and watch him eat. That way we'll know."

"Then bring him up here," said Col. Arnold.

Kate's eyes widened as she heard Rodiker say with easy carelessness, "No need for me

to wait, Colonel. You know more about questioning folks than I do." With that, he left.

SAM pushed the sullen half-grown kid into the room then threw up his palms and shook his head. "Eat? He done et us outa termorrow mornin' brekfus'!" He scowled at Ronnie. "What foh you come prowlin' 'round heah?"

Kate pointed toward a chair. "Let the boy sit where the colonel can talk to him."

Ronnie looked at her but was sullenly expressionless. He sat in the chair Sam placed, stared between his knees, and wouldn't answer when Col. Arnold asked, "How did you happen to come here?"

Then Sam blustered, "You bettah talk, you hear! I sho' lak to break youah worfless neck!"

"Sam, please!" Kate pointed toward a chair and Sam went to it.

Again the kid looked staringly at her, and his voice was low. "You are Miss Kate?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothin'."

"And you are Ronnie. I saw you a long, long time ago and remembered." She was untruthful but sounded kindly; and coaxed, "Tell the colonel why you were put in jail and how you got out, won't you, Ronnie? Please."

The colonel lay with a hand raised to his thin white hair and watched the Rodiker boy in puzzled thoughfulness: a goodlooking lad with hard-set jaw and strong face; he was colt-awkward and gangling but had big bones, and when he lifted his eyes they were steel-blue and straight.

Ronnie said defiantly, "You all wouldn't b'lieve me."

Kate's voice was kindly. "Perhaps we will, Ronnie."

"No more," said Ronnie, glaring at Col. Arnold, "than you'd believe Jack. He never killed Craig Arnold. I know he didn't. I tell you, I know it!"

"Hach, you! Dat no way ter talk to—"

"Be quiet!" said Kate. "Go on, Ronnie."

Ronnie's mouth was closed tight until the colonel asked, "And how do you know he didn't?"

"He told our Maw he didn't. We don't lie to Maw. First place, she knows if we do! Next place—aw, what's the good of talkin' to you! You keep offerin' money for people to kill him an' 'f he wanted he could've killed *you* long ago! An' ought've done it, too!"

SAM'S big hands fidgetted into fists and he growled. Kate said, "Ronnie!" sounding shocked, and was. The colonel said nothing. Ronnie glared sullenly, then looked down between his knees. The colonel's fingers moved with slow twisting among his long grey hair and he looked inquiringly at Kate, but she was studying her fingernails and thought the colonel must hear the pounding of her heart.

Then the colonel spoke matter-of-factly: "You've said things that interest me, Ronnie. Why doesn't your brother want to kill me? In his place, I think I would."

Ronnie blurted, "That's 'cause you're not the man he is!"

Sam rose out of his chair. "I'll choke you foh dat!"

"Sit down," said the colonel. "This boy is saying what he believes. That's honest."

Sam growled, "But it ain't truff!"

The colonel moved on the pillows, looked at the ceiling, put his fingertips together, said, "I won't ask who did get you out of jail, but do Brody and the Bevartses think it was your brother?"

It was then that Kate suddenly held her hand to her throat as if afraid to breathe: all at once it seemed to her that Ronnie looked so much like his brother that anybody would notice the resemblance; but she tried to reassure herself by thinking it was only because she knew the relationship that it seemed so obvious.

Ronnie sullenly said, "Dunno."

"You realize that you are being hunted?"

"I know."

"The last place you would be looked for is here, don't you think?"

"Yes."

"And you didnt steal Bill Brody's horse?"

"No."

"You want to keep out of people's sight for a time?"

"Guess I do."

"You can stay here. Nobody is going to guard you. You can leave when you want to."

Ronnie swallowed two or three times and looked from the floor to the colonel and

back again; then he raised his eyes to Kate, stared at the glowering and puzzled Sam.

Kate asked softly, "You trust us, don't you?"

Ronnie's "No" was quiet, firm, frank.

Sam growled, "You bettah!"

Ronnie said with hurried thoughtfulness, "I'm purt' near like Jack and can't trust nobody, but I got no where to go, or how to get there if I did. My feet hurt till I can't hardly walk. Fellows 'll be hangin' around our ranch up in the mountains a-lookin' for me like they've done for Jack. To get anywhere I'd have to steal a horse, then I couldn't say I never stole one. What I want most awful bad is for Maw to know I'm all right. I mean accordin' to her notion of what is right."

Ronnie was bedded down in what had been used as an upstairs storeroom. Sam illnaturedly shifted stuff about, making place for a pallet of blankets, and he was grumpy about bringing a bootjack.

When he did, Ronnie couldn't start the boots, however he tried. Sam stood by and scolded because cowboys always wore tight boots, wanting folks to think they had little feet; but either his sympathy was moved, or he wanted to show his own strength, and he worked, tugged and twisted, but the boots were stuck.

Sam made a swipe at the beaded sweat on his forehead:

"Haf ter cut 'em, boy."

Ronnie protested. He hadn't money to buy more and couldn't go barefooted; but the boots had to come off. So Sam slit them with a razor-edged knife. When he saw the swollen blistered feet, the big Negro felt admiration for a boy who had that much pain and didn't whimper. He went into the kitchen and came back with beef suet that he softened over the lamp chimney and rubbed on the kid's feet.

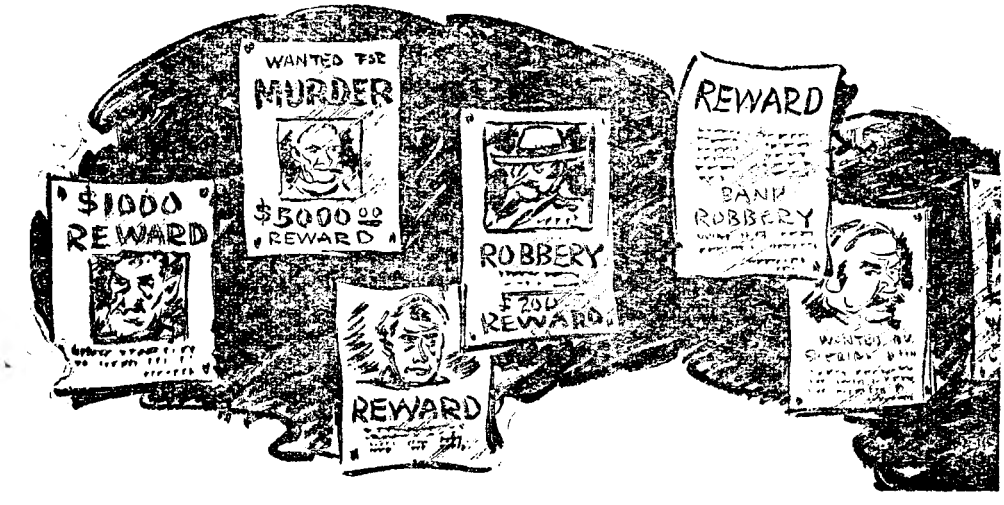
"I thought you didn't like me," said Ronnie.

"I doan'. You is a Rodiker an' we is Arnold's. But you is ouah guest an' we're perlite. A'so, you is got grit in youah gizzard ter talk up to de colonel lak you done."

When Kate asked her father if he was keeping the boy as bait to catch the brother, the colonel lay back wearily and did not reply at once, but presently said:

"I'd like to meet the mother of those Rodiker boys."

(*Part II in the next* SHORT STORIES)



Cotton Dane Was Determined to Forget That He'd Been Both Gunman and Gambler

GIVE THE MAN A CHANCE

By CADDO CAMERON

THE rider halted where the cow trail emerged from a thicket. Before entering the open prairie he glanced to right and left and looked hard at Rancho San Pedro buildings and corrals sprawling in the midday sun a short distance beyond. A spot of color caught his eye, a girl in a bright dress. His long face sort of grinned to itself and he rode on.

"Looks like everything is all right at home," he said half aloud. His grin twisted slightly to one side, off balance, bitter. "Home. . . . What's that?"

After an absence of three weeks, Cotton Dane's apprehension that all might not be well at headquarters was a natural thing in this day and region—the early '70s in the so-called Bloody Border Country, that part of Texas lying between the Nueces and Rio Grande where organized society had lost its grip and organized lawlessness held the reins. Men had been known to return home and find the place in ashes, or in the possession of bandits. Moreover, this tall horseman with the alert blue eyes and extremely light hair had lived his life on the frontier and long before he joined the San Pedro outfit a few months ago, harsh experience had taught him the value of vigilance.

Experience had taught Cotton Dane something else, too. It had taught him that a man's past won't die a natural death: that he must kill it himself, if it needs killing, and it dies hard. In camps and saloons up and down cattle trails from the Gulf to Nebraska and wherever cowmen gathered, lurid stories were told about the escapades of Cot Dane

and his cronies, some of whom were gamblers and desperados widely known and heartily detested by peaceable citizens and highly respected by the frontier underworld. Now, he had cut loose from all that, changed his ways because he wanted to and for no other reason, but the stories dogged his trail. When Old Tandy Walker, owner of the San Pedro, jumped at a chance to hire him Cot knew that his reputation as a fighting man got him the job rather than his well-known skill in the handling of horses and cattle. He often wondered whether it would always be that way. Would he always draw the jobs that called for shooting and killing, if need be? Would the boys in the bunkhouse always walk light and talk softly around him as if he were likely to explode? Would he ever see the day when good citizens showed him the respect due their equals, rather than the respect due a dangerous man? At times he doubted it cynically. Of course, he could go away and lose himself; but, damned if he'd run from his past!

THREE people were seated in the shade of a chinaberry tree in the ranchhouse yard: lean and craggy Tandy Walker himself, Clay Burton—one of his old cowhands, and his black-haired daughter, Patsy Ann. They saw Cot Dane when he entered the prairie leading his packhorse. The men stopped talking. The girl's crochet needle paused in the middle of a stitch, an unfinished red fascinator hung motionless in her hands. Quickly she put the needle to work again, faster now. Her eyes studiously avoided the rider as he walked his horses easily over the curly mesquite grass that carpeted the prairie and her lips set in tight lines of disapproval.

Tandy Walker heaved a sigh. "I'm mighty glad to see Cot comin' home a-ridin' straight up," he declared. "Nowadays, whenever I set a boy off to ride sign alone in the brush I half expect him never to come back."

Old Clay Burton snorted. "Huh! What I mean—you give that there white-eyed wildcat plenty ammunition and he'll ride straight up through hell and come home without a blister."

Cotton Dane dismounted at the long low stable which tied onto the stockade corral and went about the business of unsaddling and putting up his horses. He rubbed them down and carefully examined their hoofs and leg joints for thorns. A little *Tejano* boy and his sister came running from the row of thatched cabins where San Pedro *vaqueros* lived with their families. Cot roughed them up playfully, then sat one astride each of his horses.

Tandy Walker watched all this with approval. "Cot is a cowman from who laid the chunk and I ain't never seen a better man with horses. Too bad he had to go and get such an infernal reputation for cussedness."

Patsy Ann glanced quickly at her father. "He didn't *have* to get that reputation. It wasn't forced on him. He earned it."

"Fiddlesticks!" snapped Clay Burton, a privileged person by virtue of long and faithful service. "Cot's reputation is one of the best things I like about him. Only, he won't talk, daggone him. I'd give a pritty if he'd tell me about the time he shot up the Bee Hive in Fort Griffin all by hisself, and how he tree-d them crooked tinhawns in—"

The girl interrupted sharply, "Cotton Dane was a professional gambler and will be again, and he's a gunman, and *you* stick up for him."

Old Clay cocked an eye at her. "Cot was, ain't is, and won't be. But he won't talk, dadblame him."

"Besides, he's a killer," she added scornfully.

The grizzled cowhand shook his head. "He ain't no more—maybe never was. Now, take me. For better'n twenty year I been a-honin' to perforate that there S Bar U polecat, Lum Tucker, so I proposition Cot to learn me his draw. He swears he ain't got no draw no more. Says he's gotta use both hands to pull his six-shooter now, 'cause a old blue bronc stomped him and busted his shoulder a while back. He cain't be a killer thataway."

Tandy Walker chuckled.

Old Clay crossed his knees and hung his hat on the toe of his boot. "But I'm afraid that there cotton-top *can* lie some. This is how come. He lands here to go to work and he ain't no more'n dropped his beddin' in the bunkhouse when one of the boys blows up a paper sack and pops it playful behind Cot's back unbeknownst when he ain't lookin'. The durned fool that done the poppin' bats his eyes like a fella will and when they come open he ain't behind Cot's back no more. No, sah-ree. He's face to face with

Cot and Cot's six-shooter is a-pokin' him in the paunch. So Cot Dane is a liar about bein' crippled."

"Who made that fool play?" asked Tandy.

"Me."

"What did Cot say?"

"He allows he's plumb sorry."

"And what did you say?"

Clay Burton grinned sheepishly. "I'm a durned sight sorrier'n he is, and *I* mean it."

The girl didn't laugh with her father. Instead, she declared caustically, "Cotton Dane was a card sharp, too."

"Hold on, Sis," drawled the old hand. "He ain't no card sharp now, maybe wasn't neither. Here I am, clean busted and needin' money bad, so I asked Cot to learn me how to fix up a private and personal fistful of tickets and deal 'em off'n the bottom. He allows he cain't do that no more 'cause a horse done bit his hand. Then he has to waste my time a-tellin' me what all it taken to gentle that bitin' horse, durn him!"

Tandy Walker chuckled.

Patsy Ann gave him a reproachful look. "Don't forget, Papa, that *you* hired the man and brought him here to live with good boys who've never done the things he has. Some of them are bound to look up to him and try to imitate him. He'll have a bad influence."

"From what Clay says, Cot ain't workin' his influence none to speak of," drawled Tandy. "Here he comes."

Clay Burton cocked an eye at the girl, a wise old eye. "Now that I think of it—I've seen a flighty bronc eat sweetenin' out of a woman's hand and get to be as gentle as a pup, the daggoned simpleton."

Patsy Ann's needle flew. It jumped six stitches.

AFTER carrying his bedding-roll and rifle to the bunkhouse, Cotton Dane walked toward the group under the tree with his gun-belt hanging on his arm. Although he never ventured far from his weapons, he did not wear them to the ranch owner's house.

Cot was greeted cordially enough by the men and Patsy Ann was impersonally polite. Hat in hand, the light color of his hair and eyes exaggerated by a deep tan, he stood for a moment grinning down at her. His thin, sharply etched features were a gambler's mask that hid his feelings while she now looked at him as she always did—as if, perhaps, he were an outlaw horse, a dangerous beast having certain good points who would be handled firmly, but from a safe distance. That hurt, though he did give her credit for making no apparent effort to hide her feelings. In that respect she was more honest than he, since he wouldn't let her know that he'd give anything to win her faith and trust as he had long ago won the confidence of so many men and women of the frontier underworld.

Cotton Dane sat on his heels, rolled a cigarette and made his report to Tandy Walker. He talked with the enthusiasm of a young man in love with his work and he carefully left the dangers and hardships encountered to the imagination of his listeners. They'd see the partially healed gash on the side of his neck and wonder how he got it. He'd let them wonder.

In a low, soft voice with the suggestion of a drawl he described the condition of the range and its waterings, gave a tally of the sleepers and mavericks he had branded, told of catching and doping wild cattle for screw worms, tracking and returning stock that had drifted too far from the home range, related the pursuit and shooting of a scrubby mustang stallion that was stealing San Pedro mares, gave a count of wolves and panthers he had killed, and he located accurately pens that he had found hidden in thickets—evidently used by thieves. Though he wasted few words, it was a lengthy recital for he had covered a lot of ground in three weeks doing the routine work of a brush country cowhand. Patsy Ann listened as intently as the men. Her hands lay idle in her lap. He liked the way she was looking at him now.

Cotton Dane crushed out his cigarette. A scarcely noticeable change came over him. His voice wasn't quite so mellow, his light eyes were touched by frost.

"Over on Javelina Creek," he continued, "I counted fifty carcasses a week or ten days old when I got there. Skinners are workin' the Big Pond waterin', too. Twenty-odd carcasses there, not so old. I trailed the thieves a pretty far piece toward the Border, but they kept on goin'. Six of them."

Tandy Walker cursed under his breath. Killing cattle for their hides was one of the crimes of the Bloody Border Country. Time and the Texas Rangers would eventually

put a stop to it, but meanwhile cattlemen sustained frightful losses.

Cot sketched a map on the ground. "Right about here in Black Brush Canyon I ran onto three thieves. They had gathered two hundred head and were shapin' up a herd. Reckon they aimed to hit the old Lipan trail to Mexico. It crosses the canyon not far from there. I took the stuff and drifted it back to Lone Oak Prairie and dropped it. They're in several different brands, all SP cows. Here's a tally of them."

He went to turning the leaves of his tally book. The two old men exchanged quick glances.

Tandy Walker stroked his mustache, and inquired, "What happened to them three thieves?"

Dane didn't look up from his book. "One of them got away," he said quietly. "Last I saw of him he was a-headin' for the Rio Grande in a mile-high cloud of dust."

PATSY ANN made a little sound, like catching her breath. Turning to glance at her, Cot saw the effect of his off-hand remark about the fate of the thieves. Her face was cold and her body seemed to have tensed in all its lines as if she were now looking down into that lonely canyon, watching one man dig a hole for the bodies of two whom he had killed. Her eyes avoided his. He shrugged slightly, expressively, a gesture prompted by injured pride rather than indifference to the girl's opinion of him. He continued his report to her father.

At its conclusion the old man nodded with satisfaction. "Strikes me that you covered a right smart slice of scenery, Cot, and done a mighty fine job of work."

Patsy Ann spoke up frigidly, "Did you have to kill those men?"

"Yes," answered Cot Dane quietly.

"Tell us about it," urged Clay Burton.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not."

From the side of his eye he saw that the girl was looking hard at him, with a puzzled frown. What did she expect of a man in this wild country? Did she want him to be like the tenderfeet back East where her folks sent her to school? Why didn't she stay there! Did she want him to say that he was sorry he had to down those thieves, and make a liar and a hypocrite out of himself?

Tandy Walker went on to say, "You ain't been havin' all the fun, Cot, not by a jug full. While you were gone a bunch of bandits tried to take us apart and—" He described a raid on headquarters two weeks ago. It was quite a fight. Though such attacks were not uncommon in this Border country, the San Pedro had never before experienced a raid of like proportions and daring.

Tandy concluded, "It happened that several of the boys were here, so we handed them *bandidos* a lickin' they won't forget. Figure we winged some of 'em and we got one for keeps. He's planted up yander under that old mesquite."

Clay Burton quickly added, "He's a red-headed cuss and he'll heft about a hundred sixty all in one chunk. His off ear is cropped and he's packin' a slash on the nigh side of his head from eye socket to the point of his underjaw. D'you happen to know anybody in that brand?"

"Yes, I knew him," replied Dane, casually.

"Huh?" grunted Clay.

"You did!" exclaimed Patsy Ann.

"Yes."

"What was his name?" she demanded.

Cot grinned with one side of his mouth. "Hard to tell. He shed names like stock sheds hair and he put on new names like a cow grows her a new coat."

Silence.

So they suspected that he had lied about knowing Red Wallace's name. What of it? That was *his* business, his and Red's. Maybe Red had some folks and wouldn't want them to know how he died. Cot never had any use for Red, but that made no difference now.

"Anyhow," said Tandy, "they didn't get what they come after."

The two men and the girl looked at Cotton Dane, saying nothing. He rolled another cigarette. Though Cot had not exactly lived by his wits, his wits had often kept him alive, sharpened as they were by life in the underworld where men and women devoted so much time to out-thinking the other fellow. Those wits were working now. He knew that his work at the San Pedro had substantiated his reputation as a top hand in a lawless country, but nothing had occurred to kill his reputation as a lawless man. Folks like Patsy Ann didn't give him much

credit for behaving himself for six months. He couldn't particularly blame her though, since she had lately returned to the frontier after seven years under the refining and softening influence of an Eastern school. Cot needed an opportunity to prove himself beyond the shadow of a doubt. He wouldn't wait for that opportunity. He'd make it, and now thought that he saw a chance to do it.

Through the smoke of his cigarette, Dane looked at old Tandy, and said quietly, "Inasmuch as they didn't get what they came after, they'll be back before long—back in earnest when you ain't expectin' them."

"How do you know that?" sharply asked the girl.

Grinning dryly, Cot told her, "It's just common sense. And besides, I know how the average bandit works. Don't forget that I've slept in the same blankets with many an outlaw in my day."

"I won't forget," said Patsy Ann.

"Maybe you're right, Cot," admitted Tandy Walker. "What d'you think we ought to do?"

"Everybody knows that you sold off a bunch of beef steers a while back and those Fort Worth buyers received and settled here at the ranch," answered Dane. "It's known that you always demand hard money, too. You shouldn't keep twenty thousand in gold here. It's bandit bait."

"May I ask how you happen to know that it's still here?" inquired the girl.

"I've got a keen nose for gold," dryly answered Cot. "Likewise, the San Pedro has fifteen Mexican *vaqueros* and six American hands and every last one of them talkin' about it."

Old Clay Burton stroked his chin. "You been talkin', too?"

"No."

"Figured you hadn't. You *won't* talk."

Obviously, Tandy Walker wasn't particularly pleased with this blunt criticism from his new hand. "Yes, I know it's risky to keep it here, but I can't spare men to carry it more'n a hundred mile to San 'Tonio, not with the way we're havin' to guard every *manada* of mares and remuda of saddle stock and ride the range night and day to keep 'em from stealin' us down to the bone. It'd take ten men to get that money out of the country."

"It would," agreed Cot, "and they'd have to fight their way out. Spies are watchin' this place. Comin' in today I saw two of them. If I were in your boots I'd send the money away with *one* man, no more."

Tandy snorted. "Huh! Where would I find a man who's damned fool enough to tackle *that* job all by hisself?"

"I will," quietly answered Cot.

"You-U-U!" exlaimed Patsy Ann.

The way she said it brought hot blood to Dane's forehead and temples, but, for an instant only. Then he paled down to the line of his tan. His light eyes were touched by frost again. He ignored the girl, spoke directly to her father in a low, calm voice devoid of feeling.

"You'll be gamblin' fifteen or twenty thousand dollars which you can well afford to lose for the safety of your people here," he said. "I'll be gamblin', too."

"Gamblin' your life," growled Tandy.

DANE shrugged. "Not that. I'd be riskin' my chances to build a reputation as an honest man, which might mean more to me than the money does to you. If I should get robbed and escape with my life I'd never live it down. People would always say that it was a put-up job."

Again Cot saw the girl frowning at him in that puzzled way. Tandy Walker hesitated, thoughtfully stroking his mustache.

Dane struck quickly, fighting to make the opportunity he needed. He prodded the old man as if there were a green cloth and poker checks between them. "I'm bettin' my stack, Tandy. If I lose I'm afoot a hundred miles from water and the buzzards will pick my bones. Are you callin', or are you just a shade shy of nerve?"

"Nerve, hell!" exploded the old Texan. "I'll think it over."

Cotton Dane arose to his full height. A tall man, he looked even taller now, and aloof. "If you haven't got anything else for me to do right now, think I'll go and catch up that buckskin I was workin' on and shake the wrinkles out of him."

"Go ahead if you're a mind to," said the old man, "but you better quit monkeying with that outlaw. Like I done told you, he's killed one man and tromped the lights out of another one."

"He didn't kill or tromp me," Dane said stiffly.

"Uh-huh, you rid him one settin'—his first saddle that was," conceded Tandy, "but 'tain't no sign he won't get you yet. He's a smart devil and a born killer. Been plumb spoilt to boot. Sooner or later I'll get good money for him from some fella for contest ridin'."

Cot's light eyes went cold. "You'll do the little horse dirt if you sell him into that kind of a life. He'll soon learn to hate everybody. If you give him half a chance he'll make some man a mighty good friend."

Tandy Walker didn't like that. There might have been words, if Patsy Ann hadn't spoken up, "Why have you taken such a liking to that killer horse?"

Dane looked her squarely in the eye. One corner of his mouth pulled down in a bitter grin. "Maybe it's because he and I have things in common."

He turned and walked away. From the shadow of the chinaberry tree, two men and a girl looked at his long straight back and the proud set of his head.

"He's an aggravatin' cuss," said Tandy Walker, "but I'd sorta like to give the man a chance."

"He has had his chances in life—many of them," declared the girl.

Old Clay Burton bristled. "How in hell d'you know what he's had? Er—excuse me, Pat."

The girl got up and went into the house.

A SHORT while later horse and man regarded each other warily from opposite ends of a hard twist rope in the circular corral behind the stable. They were alone in there. Cot had hazed the saddle stock from the horse pasture into the corral, roped out the buckskin and turned the others loose. Before going away he had asked Tandy to leave the wild bronc in the pasture with gentle horses.

Walking slowly down the rope, Dane talked to the buckskin as if it were human and a friend. "D'you like livin' with civilized folks? Kinda hard to get used to, ain't it?"

The buckskin's powerful neck was arched, its little ears pointed straight at the man and he didn't make a move that escaped its large intelligent eyes. A black stripe ran from its black mane to its black tail and Cot had already named it "Streak."

The tall horseman went hand-over-hand down the rope. "Take a good look at me, Streak," he drawled. "You'll see that I ain't one of the *vaqueros* who tried to beat the life out of you when you showed 'em that they couldn't stay on top of you."

The horse flinched. Cot paused momentarily. "Don't be so daggoned suspicious of everybody just because most folks are afraid of you. Use your head!"

He saw the horse measuring the distance that separated them, calculated its chances. There was no fear in its eyes. Only a smoldering fury bordering on hatred and the vigilance of a beast that had lived its life in a wilderness peopled by enemies. He went on, grinning and talking softly. Suddenly the horse reared to lunge and strike. In front of Cot and above him flashed the deadly teeth and hoofs that had torn the life from one man and crippled another. If the great springs in the animal's hindquarters were allowed the fraction of a second in which to uncoil twelve hundred pounds of fury would crush him, tear him apart. He gave the rope a twirl and a jerk in the right direction at precisely the right instant. Thrown off balance the horse fell heavily on its side. Cot stood still, looking at the fallen and momentarily shocked fighter. He breathed a little faster now, for although this was no new experience to him he always figured he had been lucky to escape what he considered the most frightful of all weapons of destruction.

Cot shook the rope. "Get up, Streak," he said quietly. "You ain't hurt a particle. You've got to learn that this rope and I are boss—sorta like the rules a square man's conscience makes him obey."

The horse got up. It stood with feet spread, neck and head held low and extended in a straight line. Tremors in its mighty muscles rippled beneath its hide.

Cot Dane walked down the rope, pausing occasionally. There was neither fear nor anger in his voice; just soothing and sympathetic overtones and a faintly tragic undertone.

"No hard feelin's, old boy," he said. "I understand. A long time back I knew a boy whose folks were killed by Indians. A neighbor took him to raise. Sure made that button work for his keep. When he was thirteen goin' on fourteen he ran off and went

up the trail with a herd, wranglin' the remuda. He got a beatin' when he came home. He ran off again. When he came home that time he was packin' a gun and a heap of experience. He didn't get a beatin' then. He got somethin' a sight worse."

The horse tossed its head, snorted violently.

Cot went on talking. "Stories had come down the trail about that boy, some of them damned lies. He'd gone clean to hell, they said, and wasn't fit to run with decent folks. He went to a dance. No girl would dance with him. He went to meetin'. The old parson prayed for him—The Top Sinner—callin' him by name before everybody. That did it, Streak. The boy went away from there with hell in his neck. Just like you, he was. He never went back. He never went back because the only folks on his home range who had treated him white were wild fellas and boys who wanted to be wild, and girls who didn't give a damn. It's been thataway ever since, wherever he's gone. Yes, Streak, I understand. Reckon I'll have to move on again. And if I can raise the money to buy you, damned if I don't take you with me."

TALKING easy and taking his time that way, Cotton Dane at length saddled and rode the horse. He rode it outside in the pasture for fear that it might pitch into the stout corral and break its neck, rode it without once touching its slick hide with quirt or spur, rode it while it pitched like a maniac horse and he let it go until it could scarcely lift a hoof from the ground. He, too, staggered when he stepped off.

Breathlessly, he told the buckskin, "You gave me a damned good fight, fella. No hard feelin's."

Cot led Streak back into the corral, unsaddled and rubbed him down with a gunnysack. Though the horse's hide twitched at the unfamiliar touch, it was ridden out and didn't have the strength to fight much. Dane went to the bin and got a box and gave it a feed of corn. After a while the buckskin sniffed suspiciously at the corn, picked up a few grains, then lifted its beautiful head and looked at the man with something akin to wonderment in its bloodshot eyes.

Cotton Dane smiled. "Sorta hard to believe, ain't it, Streak? I understand."

GOING into the stable with his rigging Cot caught a glimpse of movement in the end stall adjoining the corral. He dropped his saddle and sprang back. Jerking his six-shooter down from where he had hung it on the corral, he looked through a crack in the log wall where the chinking was gone.

Patsy Ann!

They met at the door. In her right hand, hanging at her side, she held one of Tandy's heavy revolvers. Obviously taken aback and angry at having been discovered, the girl went to pass him.

Glancing down at her pistol, he drawled, "Shall we shoot it out, or talk it out?"

Cot kind of liked the challenging tilt of her head as she looked up at him. "Aren't you going to ask me what I'm doing here?"

"No, I'm not. That's your business."

Patsy Ann went on a bit defiantly, "I saw that horse kill Tony. I'd hate to have it kill another man, so I hid in a stall and watched through a crack. I can shoot. I'd have shot the horse to keep it from hurting you. Once, there in the corral, I almost did."

"Don't," he said firmly. "Don't ever shoot that little horse for what he's doin' to me. He fights fair and square in the only way he knows how to fight. Between him and me it's man-to-man."

He paused, then added in a cold and impersonal voice, "And he fights me because I'm what I am, not because of what I used to be."

The girl stepped past him. Without looking up, she said, "As you told the horse, don't be so daggoned suspicious of folks. Use your head!"

Cot stood there for a moment, then it dawned upon him. "You listened!"

Color flooded Patsy Ann's neck and ears. He couldn't see her face. She walked on.

Shortly after supper Tandy Walker came to the bunkhouse and called Cot outside. The old man talked fast as though he was embarrassed and in a hurry to get it over with. "Far's I'm concerned, there ain't but one honest bank in the country and that's Louie Oppenheim's in San 'Tonio. When d'you want to get started?"

Again Cotton Dane's face was a gambler's mask. For a long moment his peculiar eyes remained fixed on the old man's face, but his mind's eye saw the dawn of a new day over

a new world. It was breakin' light in a world where decent folks didn't make a proud man eat dirt simply because he had raised a little hell in his time. He was about to take his first step in that new world and he wouldn't trust his voice.

"Changed your mind already?" asked Tandy. "I thought you was a gamblin' man."

Although this was, perhaps, the big moment in Cotton Dane's adult life, he greeted it with the outward nonchalance of his kind. He grinned, and drawled, "Soon as I can catch up a fresh horse I'll hit the trail."

"Mornin' is time enough," said Tandy, and went back to the house.

Cot ambled over to the horsetrough and sat down. He rolled a cigarette, kind of wishing that he could go and have a talk with Streak and tell that outlaw buckskin what had happened to him.

ON THE way to breakfast the next morning Cot gave Clay Burton a sealed letter which he had written the night before. "If you don't see or hear from me within a week from today, give this to Tandy, will you? Don't mention it to anyone before then, please, and don't lose it."

Dying to ask questions, the old cowhand promised. He put the letter in the inside pocket of his vest and pinned it there with a mesquite thorn.

Mounted on the toughest horse at headquarters Cotton Dane took it easy like a drifting cowboy going no place and in no hurry to get there. But Cot didn't feel as easy as he looked. In fact, the fifteen thousand dollars gold in his saddlebags probably weighted more heavily on him than it did on the tall roan he was riding. A shot from ambush was what he feared most. This was rolling prairie with mottes of timber and brush thickets which, in later years, would overflow the land and make of it an ocean of chaparral. He couldn't avoid all the thickets and trees. But long and intimate companionship with danger had sharpened his senses to the point where the flitting of a bird in a tree, the rustle of wild hogs in the brush, the stealthy movement of a deer through chaparral, or the unnatural shape or behavior of a bush caught his attention and demanded closer scrutiny. He had great respect for the nose and ears of his horse, too, an animal bred in this country. By correctly interpreting its behavior while still within five miles of headquarters he discovered another rider sitting his horse in a clump of huisache north of the trail, a long rifle shot away.

Gambling that the man wouldn't hit him if he tried, Cot rode leisurely on. He kept an eye on his back trail, though, and when topping out of a sag caught sight of the rider leaving cover and coming his way.

Dane had expected this. The spy would follow him for a given distance to make certain that he didn't turn off the main trail, then another would pick him up or the two would pull a robbery. With so much at stake, Cot resolved to play safe if he could. Just over the crest of a sharp rise the road swung around a small thicket. He quickly got down and led his horse to cover in the brush, left it there and hurried back to the trail where he crouched behind a bush and waited. The rider halted on top of the ridge. After a moment he came on at a trot.

Cotton Dane sprang into the road ten feet ahead of the horse. "Stick 'em up!"

The animal shied and reared and the big red-headed rider had all he could do to keep his saddle. Cot was right on top of him so that he got no chance to make a break. The horse calmed down quickly and the rider cut loose a string of oaths.

Dane motioned with the barrel of his six-shooter. "Shut your damned mouth and pile off!"

The big man had the face of a fighter. He glared at Cot for a moment as if calculating the odds against him, then stepped down stiffly. "If this is a stick-up, you're wastin' your time, stranger."

"It's my time," snapped Dane. "Drop your belt. Now, strip your horse naked."

"What the—?"

"Strip it if you want to save your riggin'!"

The man went to unsaddling and Cot picked up his gun-belt. Presently, Dane said, "All right, Red. Now, point that plug towards the San Pedro and give it a cut with your quirt. That's where it belongs and it'll go home. Quick, or I'll ear-mark you, so help me!"

The San Pedro horse made dust up the hill. Said Cot, "Take out after it, Red. Maybe you can catch it."

The big fellow stood there, frowning.

"Say, looky here!" he blurted. "Ain't you Cot Dane?"

Cot grinned, holstered his six-shooter. "Yes, and if you run onto any of your boys tell them that what they *tried* to get from San Pedro, I've *got*—right here in my saddlebags. Just tell 'em that."

The outlaw's chin dropped. "I'll be—! Listen, Dane. I got an idea. Red Wallace got his'n in that raid. Our outfit needs a ramrod. Why don't you— "

Cot interrupted, "Much obliged. Maybe I'll look you up. You'll find your gun-belt down the trail a piece, hangin' on a bush. So 'long."

No sense in wasting more time here. Dane hurried into the thicket, got his horse and hit the trail again. He left the big outlaw hunkered down by his saddle, smoking and thinking things over. Cot waved a hand at him, hoping that he had no more trouble with the next spy he ran onto.

MEANWHILE Old Clay Burton puttered around headquarters, doing chores, fixing this and that. His mind wasn't on his work, though. Cot's letter bothered him. It rode heavy in his pocket, tormenting a husky curiosity that was born with him, grew up with him and kept on growing when he stopped. Along toward noon he pulled out the envelope and looked at it, around behind the stable where nobody could see him. He turned it over, and—

"Why, durned if her flap ain't come half a-loose. Mmm-huh— Reckon I'd better open it up and seal it good. That's what Cot would want a fella to do."

The old-timer opened the letter, held it at arm's length and laboriously read it. Suddenly he swore a big oath and hit a high trot for the house.

Tandy Walker, Patsy Ann and her mother were in the living room when Clay clumped in. Holding the letter in a shaky hand, he burst out breathlessly, "Cot give me this to keep under cover for a week in case he don't come back. It busted open and I sorta peeked at it accidental-like. Here, Patsy Ann, *you* read it!"

She read aloud, *"Taking the money away from headquarters won't keep the bandits from raiding you again unless they find out that it is gone. That redhead you killed was the leader of a gang. A while back I heard him say where his bunch holes up when down in this country. It is not much out of my way. I'll go by there and let them know that I've got the San Pedro money. They will—"*

Patsy Ann's voice broke, trailed off.

Clay Burton growled an oath.

Old Tandy's big fists clenched on the arms of his rockingchair. "Go on, honey, go on—won't you!"

The girl bit her lip, continued to read in an unsteady voice, *"They will think that I stole it. None of my old crowd know that I've gone back to working stock. As far as they know I'm still banking a game in Monterey. I'm gambling that I can bluff this thing through. If I do not, I want you to know what happened to your money and me. Thanks for trusting me. So 'long, folks. Cotton Dane."*

On the last sentence Patsy Ann's voice had dropped to almost a whisper. At *Thanks for trusting me* she burst into tears. She fled from the room, one hand clutching the letter.

Wide with wonderment, Old Tandy's eyes followed her. "Well, I'll be eternally—!"

The girl's mother nodded her silvery head at him. She rocked gently back and forth, hands folded placidly in her lap.

Clay Burton's eyes were fixed on the door through which the girl had fled. He cleared his throat, and drawled, "Now I'm damned glad I've got a bump of curiosity big enough to hang a saddle on. Nobody don't need to fret none. Cot Dane will come a-rackin' home with bandit scalps on his belt."

THE sun had about two hours to go when Cot Dane turned left into the Travis Canyon Trail. Ever since leaving the San Pedro he had jogged along on a road that eventually joined the main San Antonio-Corpus Christi stage road, and in that distance three spies had picked him up. He disposed of the second as easily as the first and in the same manner. The third dropped him when he turned onto the canyon trail and Cot grinned to himself at thoughts of the outlaw's surprise. In all probability the fellow was already bothered by failure of his nearest partner to show and, accordingly, would head back along the main road to find out what had become of him. Having

learned, he'd no doubt burn the breeze to their canyon hangout. Dane hoped that he would be able to finish his business and get away from there before this happened and he also hoped that, with the way the bandits were patrolling the country, there wouldn't be many of them left in camp. In fact, he was gambling strong on that.

Red Wallace's hideout proved to be a small rock cabin deep in the canyon, probably built and abandoned by an early pioneer. Cot reined in a short distance away and looked the place over. There was no one in sight, though smoke curled up from the chimney and two horses under saddle were staked on the spring branch that trickled down the floor of the canyon nearby. Only two—Dane heaved a small sigh of relief.

He hailed the cabin, "Howdy, up there! Anybody home?"

No answer from the house.

"Howdy, Mister Dane!"

That voice jerked Cot half around in his saddle. Over the top of a nearby boulder partially screened by brush, he faced a man with a rifle. Dane instantly recognized the fellow and inwardly cursed his luck. Of all the outlaws he had ever known, why in hell did he have to meet this one—the worst of the lot!

Nevertheless, he called out cordially, "Why, howdy, John! Mighty glad to see you."

The man came lumbering around the boulder, a burly fellow with the face of a sheep and the body of an ox. A fugitive from the East who had lost himself in the West, this crook floated in the dregs of the frontier underworld. It was well known that he'd stoop to any crime. He was universally disliked and distrusted. The underworld tolerated him because of his amazing skill with weapons and lack of scruples, which made him useful at times, and his ingratiating manner which flattered many of the aristocrats of crime. Cot had never known a more dangerous fighter with any weapon, or none at all. The fellow frankly admitted that he wasn't a smart man, thus deceiving some people into thinking him even dumber than he was. His Western name was John Smith.

Dane's wits were working fast, had to do it. Since any man was likely to come out second best in a fight with John Smith under any conditions, Cot knew that he'd have to out-think the crook and himself choose the time and place and set the stage for the trouble which was certain to follow his play with the money. Accordingly, he said he'd like to stay all night here under cover.

The big outlaw bobbed his head and rubbed his knotty hands together. His voice always sounded as if he were fearful that someone else would hear it. "Of course, Mister Dane, of course you *must* stay. If the law comes around, just leave 'em to me. I ain't smart like you, Mister Dane, but I know lots of ways to make a good law out of a bad one."

John Smith had known Cot as one of the elite of the underworld and therefore fawned upon him. He hovered around and got under foot while Dane was unsaddling and was at the point of laying hold of the heavy bags before the harassed cowman succeeded in diverting his attention to something else. Cot wiped sweat from his face and it wasn't the heat. Trying to shake off this tail-wagging crook was dangerous business, for he sometimes flew into childish and illogical rages when he would maul, knife or shoot without warning or reason. Dane wanted to keep him in a good humor and utterly devoid of suspicion until the time came to act.

Smith's companion met them at the door of the cabin, a lanky fellow named Joe Wilson. Cot judged him to be just average Border riff-raff having no more intelligence than John Smith himself.

AFTER supper, Smith placed a bottle of Pine Top whiskey and a tincup on the table. Cot hunkered down with his back against the wall. The others sat on a bunk directly across the room and they smoked and talked and drank a little. Over in a corner on a nail a crippled old lantern sputtered at moths and things.

John Smith did most of the talking. He talked about everything and nothing in particular until Cot at length concluded that the man had something special on his mind and was trying awkwardly to get around to it. Once or twice he made vague reference to "a job, a big job." Dane grew impatient, even anxious, for some of the other bandits might very well come in before he had fin-

ished here and got away; but he knew that it would be plain foolish to rush things when dealing with a man as dangerous and erratic as John Smith.

Finally, when he could get in a word, Cot asked carelessly, "A while back you mentioned some job, John. What is it, if you don't mind sayin'?"

"Yes, I did, Mister Dane." He looked craftily about the cabin. "A couple of weeks ago a bunch of us boys, Red Wallace was our boss, we—" And John Smith described the raid on the San Pedro.

Cot Dane now wore the mask of a professional gambler. He said coldly, "It strikes me that you bungled the job."

The obsequious crook's triangular face pouted. He dropped his voice to a husky and confidential whisper. "It was all poor Red's fault. Maybe I shouldn't say that, but its' true. I wanted him to let me go into the house alone. When I crack a crib, Mister Dane, there ain't any noise. I take all the noise out of everything in the place, even the cat if they've got a cat. But poor Red wanted to shoot up the ranch Western style. He was soft."

Though Cot Dane had rubbed elbows with all manner of men and life had otherwise hardened him, his back pressed against the wall as he drew away from the brute across the room. He wished the cabin were wider.

Nevertheless, his voice didn't reflect his feelings. "Interestin', John, but what has all this got to do with the job?"

John Smith went on to say that the money was still at the San Pedro, that spies were covering the place and that the ranch wouldn't be expecting another raid so soon. He wanted Dane to lead the gang in a second attempt.

"I ain't got the brains to plan things and lead men like you can, Mister Dane, and we ain't got nobody else that is fit to do it," whined the crook. "I love to do the work—things that *you* wouldn't do, but I need a smart man like you to say where and when and fix up getaways and hideouts. I hope you'll throw in with us, Mister Dane. Of course, if you don't, the boys and me will tackle it alone—*my way.*"

Cotton Dane gazed at the toes of his boots. His thoughts raced and they were painful thoughts to endure—*tackle it alone —my way*— Cot saw this murderous devil stealing through a house that was never locked, moving as silently as an evil spirit, armed with a knife and the strength to kill without a sound. Patsy Ann, her mother and Old Tandy slept in that house.

Dane wished for a hat to hide his eyes. He knew what they must look like now. Never before had he wanted to kill a man without giving him an even break. Even break, hell! He wouldn't gamble those San Pedro lives on his skill with a gun. He wouldn't take that gamble even with the odds in his favor. Now the odds were heavy against him. He was no match for John Smith.

Cot grinned at the bandits, and drawled pleasantly, "I'm sure much obliged, John. Of course, you know that I've never bossed a bunch like this one. I'm no stick-up artist. I'm a gambler. But if we can make a swap on how to split the gatherin's, I reckon maybe we'll do business."

John Smith nodded at Jake as if he had just done something to be proud of. He hastened to say, "We won't have any trouble about that, Mister Dane, and when this job is finished we'll find some more, won't we?"

"Why not?" said Dane.

He shrugged carelessly. The time had come to bet his cards, such as they were. The big crook was wholly off guard now. Dane got up slowly. Carefully he kept his hand well away from his holster, for although John Smith needed plenty of time to think out an unexpected thing, his physical reflexes were so trained as to be lightning fast and a perfectly innocent gesture might set them in motion.

Cot would play it safe until after he had told these bandits where he got the money in his saddlebags. Then, if he should lose his gamble and never leave here, John Smith wouldn't go and raid the San Pedro again. He reached down to the bags. From the side of his eye he saw the crook lean forward, hungrily watching every move. He took out a small buckskin sack, snugly filled and tightly tied with a thong.

Carelessly tossing the sack to Smith, he said, "There's a little surprise for you, boys. Open it, John, count it and split it between you."

John Smith's stubby fingers fumbled at the thong. Joe eagerly moved closer to him.

When he got the sack open in his right hand, he poured gold pieces into the palm of his left.

Cot Dane laughed softly. "You're a little slow, boys. I've got every dollar of that San Pedro money!"

Their heads jerked up. John Smith looked squarely into the muzzle of Dane's six-shooter!

"Don't move!" barked Cot. "Don't try it, John. I'll kill you! You're good, but you're not good enough to down me when I've got the drop."

Ridges formed on the crooks' low, wide forehead. His dull eyes showed confusion, lack of comprehension. His amazing reflexes had been caught napping and he needed time to think this thing out. Not for an instant did Dane take his eyes from the man, for he knew what was bound to happen in a moment.

Meanwhile, he snapped, "Joe! On the floor on your face, arms stretched."

Joe obeyed.

Cot told him, "I'll tie you so that you can work loose after a while and—"

John Smith's fingers moved on the sack, ever so little. He had thought it out. That's all Dane saw. He shot the man, shot him three times—fast. Even while the crook was falling backward onto the bunk, dying or dead, a bullet from his gun grazed Cot's thigh!

FOUR days later Cotton Dane again rode onto the San Pedro prairie. In the shade of the chinaberry he saw a spot of color. He grinned. That told him everything was all right at home—home! He smiled straight across his thin face.

Cot rode right up to the tree this time. He spoke to Patsy Ann and her mother, laughed aloud at Old Tandy Walker's whimsical greeting and sprang down. Dane handed him an envelope from the Oppenheimer Bank. Afterwards, he turned to the girl. She was standing now. The light that he saw in her face was the dawn of a new day for Cotton Dane, ex-gambler. He placed his hands on her shoulders, firmly, proudly. Neither spoke. It wasn't necessary then.

Presently, Cot glanced at Tandy and the white-haired lady who sat with hands folded placidly in her lap. She smiled at him.

"Some day," he declared, "when maybe everybody knows that I've buried my past good and deep, I'm goin' to marry your daughter."

The old Texan glanced up from the paper in his hand, surprised-like. "You don't say!"

Cot grinned, nodded.

Patsy Ann smiled. She nodded, too.

The Story Tellers' Circle

Buffalo and Australia

THERE'S only one thing about a buffalo you can be sure of and that's its general size. It's a cinch that no one secretes one of the critters in a hip pocket. But like Neil Martin's "Frisco" McKinney, the rest of buffalo lore doesn't come quite as easily.

In "Action at Lostman's Bluff" adorning this issue of your SHORT STORIES you'll meet buffalo and "Frisco" McKinney. But it seems to us that in this yarn its author has used a few facts about Australia not generally known in this country.

The following lines by Neil Martin do some explaining.

"Buffaloes in Australia? Do I hear someone rise to remark 'Tain't so!' Well, there definitely are buffaloes in Australia's Northern Territory. And here's how come:

"Back in 1926, a group of optimists envisioned a cotton empire on Melville Island. To do the heavy plowing, and what not, they imported a large number of water buf-

faloes from Timor. The cotton project failed, and the buffaloes were transferred to the mainland, where they promptly went bush. Today, large herds of them roam the coastal districts of the Northern Territory, and are hunted for their hides. Occasionally, small herds drift with the rainy season through the creek bottoms to the high grasslands of the interior, where they are promptly knocked off by the cattlemen.

"Speaking of cattlemen: the Australian cow-hand is almost identical with his American cousin, except that he doesn't carry either a gun or a lariat. Neither does he wear chaps. On the trail, he uses dogs to keep the herd together. Instead of a lariat, he uses a short-handled whip, with a rawhide lash ranging in length from twelve to twenty feet. In the South, he invariably is white; but in the North he will most likely be black or yellow, while the 'station bosses' or foremen will be white. But whether white, black or yellow, he is the equal of any cow-hand in the world, either in riding bucking horses or bulldogging steers. While droving, he carries his provisions in a 'tucker bag' strapped behind his saddle, along with his 'billy,' which is a quart can with one flat side.

"His vernacular, too, differs from that of the American cowman. To him, cattle are 'bullocks,' regardless of sex; a herd is a 'mob,' mavericks or unbranded cattle are 'cleanskins,' and an outfit is a 'plant.' If he used a chuckwagon, he very likely would call it a 'tucker cart.' Incidentally, a round-up, in Australia, is a 'muster.'

"Before the war, the total count of all cattle in Australia was about fifteen million head. Queensland is the great cattle state, with six and a half million head. The Northern Territory and Northwest Australia rank second and third. Holdings are enormous. The world's largest cattle station, Victoria Downs, covers approximately eight and one-half million acres, while its close neighbor, Alexandra Downs, has seven million acres. All range is held under lease, although the lessee may hold in fee simple a 'station homestead' ranging in area from one hundred and sixty acres to several square miles.

"About the middle of April, when snow sometimes falls in the hill country of the South, the cattle are driven down to the

foothills, for mustering, where each owner cuts out his own brand. The cattle range all winter on the plains, and are rounded up—or mustered—again in the fall, when calves are counted, cleanskins branded and fat beeves selected for market, after which the others are driven back to the 'snow leases' in the mountains, where salt licks placed at strategic points keep the stock from drifting too far during the summer.

"And that is, I believe, a fair picture of the Australian buckaroo."

Neil Martin.

—o—

Anybody Here Tired of Texas?

"WHEN this story," worries Caddo Cameron, "shows up in the stack of manuscripts on your desk, Mr. Editor, sure hope you don't take one look at it and go to whistling that song, 'I'm Tired of Texas.' Maybe you wonder why I don't stay away from that country between the Nueces and Rio Grande. In many respects there are lots of better countries, (my apologies to the good citizens of Laredo, Alice, Eagle Pass, Pearsall, Cotulla, Carrizo Springs and other garden spots, who won't agree with me), but, for a writer of my type of story who likes to feel that nothing occurs in his yarns which was improbable in the time and region in which the story was laid, Old Southwest Texas is made to order.

"For example, when Cotton Dane tells about catching some cow thieves with the goods and killing two of them, I'm glad to know that he was a piker compared to men who actually rode that range. Let's glance at a few historical facts.

"Fifteen thieves were caught with cattle on Palo Alto Prairie and *fifteen* thieves were killed. . . . The Sheriff of Nueces County wires for Rangers, stating that five ranches had been burned in the past week. . . . Eleven men killed in one raid by phony American vigilantes. . . . Jesus (pronounced Hasoos) Sandoval, a Texas-Mexican, and his partner ran onto thieves and hung four to one tree. . . . After stolen stock, Ranger Captain McNelly invaded Mexico with thirty men and killed no telling how many thieves, including General Juan Flores of Las Cuevas. . . . A man and his two sons

trailed stolen horses into the range of the American outlaw, King Fisher. They met a stranger at a corral who politely invited them to stop and visit. While they were tying their horses he pulled a gun and shot the three of them. . . . We mustn't forget the morning when Oakville woke up and found eight men hanging on one of the town trees. . . . And there's the bridge near Corpus Christi that usually had a man hanging on it and they were changed at frequent intervals!

"The foregoing are just a few incidents that I recall offhand, gleaned from history and personal contact with the sons of men who pioneered in that country. Only a comparatively small percentage of such episodes were ever recorded. The fact that the lower Rio Grande area is now a rich and law-abiding region is a fine tribute to the courage of the strong men and women who lived through the hell of its early days, and fought to make it what it is."

Caddo Cameron.

The Shooter's Corner

(*Concluded from page* 5)

round to mark the shape of the ends of the finished cup, and bring it down to these lines with a file. Be sure and work it a little egg-shape instead of absolutely round at the ends.

The crown may be left rectangular in shape or it may be filed oval to match the outside shape of the cap. When finished, it should be cemented and screwed to the stock. Incidentally, the crown can be made diamond, triangular, or any other shape that may be desired. The butt plate may be made in similar manner except that instead of the crown, the face of the black side should be heavily checkered with a three-square file.

The white plastic may also be used for the base of sling swivels.

We're about out of space, so—next issue let's take a gander at inletting plastic designs into the stock, and perhaps other odds and ends on "dressing up" that rifle!

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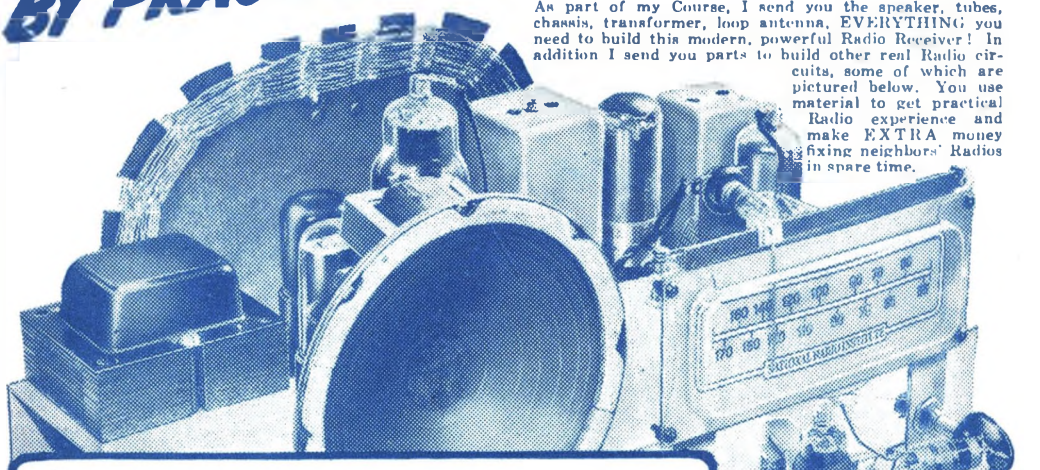

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Address .....

City ..... Zone ..... State .....

☐ Check if Veteran

Mason's New ZIPPER Shoe Skyrockets your SALES and PROFITS!

ZIPS ON
ZIPS OFF

Customers everywhere eager to buy these unique "Zip-On . . . Zip-Off" shoes RIGHT NOW!
Top quality glove-soft leather . . . Mason craftsmanship . . . astonishing Zipper shoes lead record-breaking Mason line of over 200 superb styles of dress, work, sport shoes for men and women, with Leather Jackets, Raincoats, and other fast-selling items. A line that maintains Mason's 44-year reputation for LEADERSHIP.

POWERFUL NATIONAL ADVERTISING

Powerful National Advertising in SATURDAY EVENING POST, GOOD HOUSEKEEPING . . . scores of other powerful National Magazines . . . paves the way for you.

SALES POTENTIAL TRIPLED

Cash in NOW. Help the people in your territory get highest quality, most comfortable exclusive Feature footwear they can ever buy for the money. Give them exclusive Personal Fitting Service and help yourself to a sweet, steady, ever-growing income!

GET SAMPLE OUTFIT *FREE!*

Sell the great Mason ZIPPER Shoe and hundreds of other newest styles and models! Get Big FREE Sample Outfit! Be first in your territory!

SELL MASON'S GENUINE RUBBER RAINCOATS

Sell fast. Big profits for you! Guaranteed waterproof in heaviest rainstorms . . . thousands of customers all around you.

MASON'S LEATHER JACKETS

Keep profits rolling in with these soft, pliable, yet tough and warm, long-wearing Leather Jackets of specially dressed hides. Low Price — amazingly liberal commissions for you!

MASON'S MANY ADVANTAGES!

100,000 Pairs of Shoes!

You draw on our stock of 100,000 pairs of fine shoes in over 200 different styles *plus* immense daily factory-output. What a selection . . . *exact* size and width with perfect fit in the wanted style and color . . . *every* time! More shoes than your customers could find in many stores combined!

EVERY MASON SALESMAN AN EXPERT SHOE FITTER

Learn to fit every customer through Mason simple, accurate, easy-to-learn methods. Mason TRAINS YOU and makes you a Foot Expert and Certified Shoe Fitter. Mason helps you build a Big Money-Making, Permanent, Repeat Shoe Business!

DON'T DELAY - MAIL TODAY

MEN AND WOMEN WELCOME COMFORT

Air Cushioned Velvet-Eez

Show men and women exclusive Air-Cushioned Velvet-Eez shoes that cradle foot on 10,000 tiny air bubbles! Many report they sell on six out of every ten calls!

CLIP and MAIL COUPON NOW!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-94, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

RUSH me your great New Free Sample Outfit. Include your Automatic Selling Plan and send the book 5,000 Salesmen wrote for me. I want to become a Foot Expert and Certified Shoe Expert . . . and start making big money fast. Send everything FREE and Prepaid.

(My own shoe size is.....)

Name .....

Address .....

Town ..... State.....

MASON SHOE MANUFACTURING CO.
Dept. M-94 Chippewa Falls, Wis.