# Short Stories

Twice A Month

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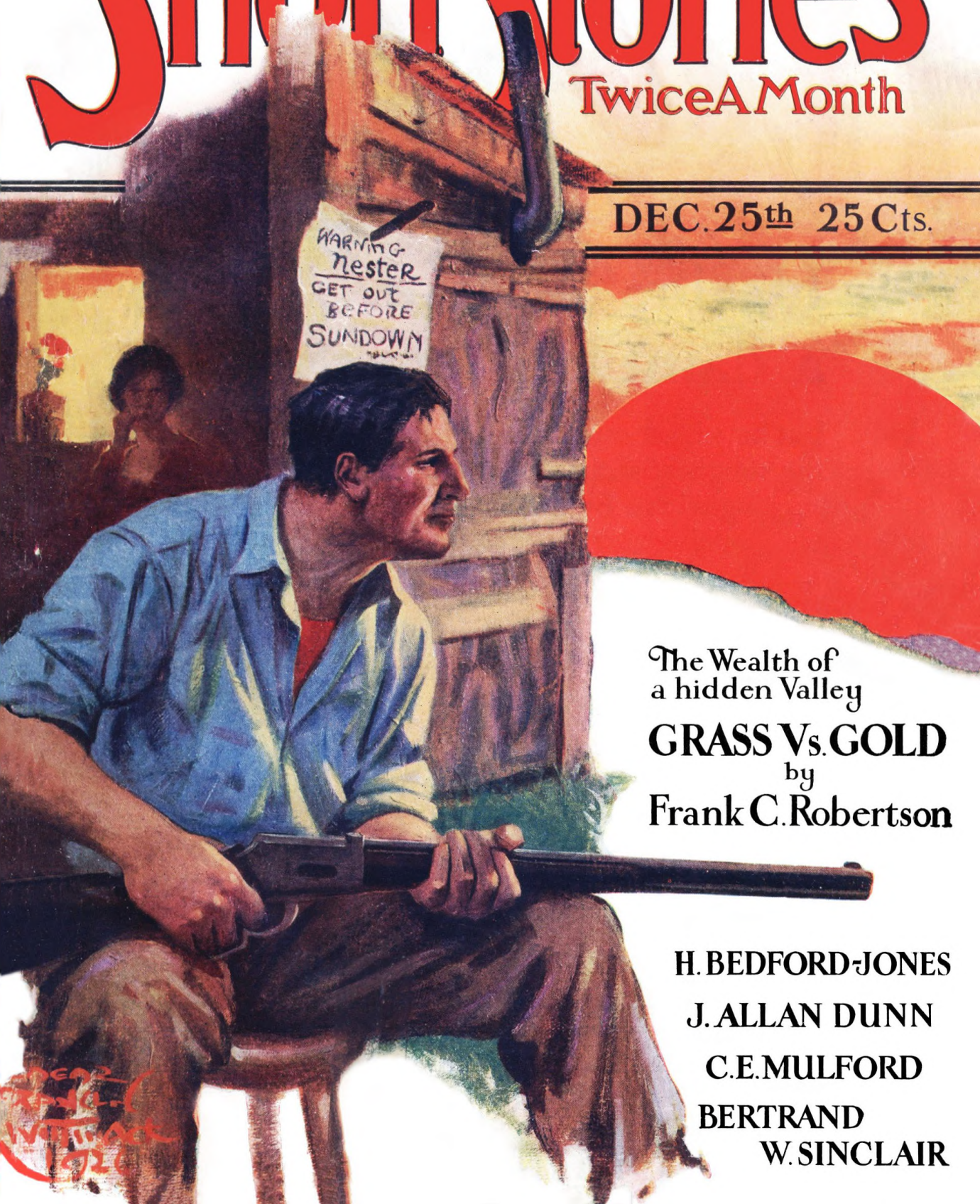


The Wealth of a hidden Valley

**GRASS Vs. GOLD**

by

**Frank C. Robertson**

**H. BEDFORD-JONES**

**J. ALLAN DUNN**

**C. E. MULFORD**

**BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR**

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# Short Stories

Vol. CXVII No. 6 — Whole No. 505

HARRY E. MAULE, EDITOR — D. McILWRAITH, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

## STRIFE

FOR most of us this hectic life is much too full of everything including trouble, and we feel that we would give almost anything for a little peace and quiet. And yet on second thought who would want to pay the price of stagnation just to be allowed to live in ease? For out of strife is all progress born.

Perhaps one of the most interesting examples of this is the peak of progress reached by the great West within less than three quarters of a century. Because the Western cities as they are today in all their prosperity and modern development are the direct result of a clash of interests which went on from the time the white man first claimed the land from the Indians. Before the Indian fighting was over there was strife between the cattlemen and the miners. In hundreds of places where cattle were run, mineral wealth was discovered and a contest for the land was inevitable. From such a situation, incidentally has Frank C. Robertson written his complete novel in this issue of SHORT STORIES entitled "Grass vs. Gold." Then there was the contest waged for years in every part of the West between the farmer coming west in his covered wagon to take up land, and the cattlemen who needed great stretches of unfenced range for their cattle. The same with the sheepmen who also claimed the land for their herds. Strife, always strife, much of it selfish, short sighted and stupid, but always in its main sweep tending towards progress.

And so with our personal lives. Much as we desire peace we cannot have it, if we are to advance. Personal combat isn't often necessary these days nor is rancor an inevitable companion to our striving. But strive we must and it takes as much hardihood, as much courage, as ever it did to settle a contested quarter-section of land.

THE EDITOR.

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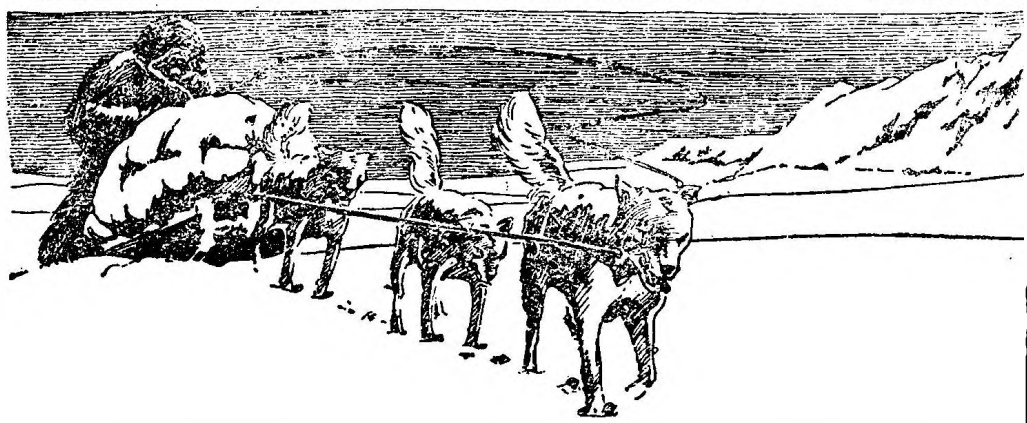

***A complete novel of a terror, new to the mighty North---***
***and of the mightier forces that combatted it***

# TERROR OF THE SNOWS

*by*

## Edison Marshall

## THE PRESTIGE OF THE SCARLET

A story of the Mounted's Farthest North

*by*

**HARWOOD STEELE**

## JOHNNY-BEHIND-THE-ROCK

**Bear Paw Range Story**

*by*

**BERTRAND SINCLAIR**


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TWICE A MONTH

Short Stories

DECEMBER 25th 1926

# GRASS vs. GOLD

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

*Author of "For a Friend," "Where Sky and Sagebrush Meet," etc.*

IT WAS A LOST VALLEY, BUT IT CONTAINED A SECRET AND A TREASURE WHICH THREE SETS OF CHARACTERS WERE DETERMINED TO SOLVE AND TO WIN. WHAT WOULD BE THE OUTCOME WHEN GOLD LUST AND OUTLAWRY MET THE INTERESTS OF MEN WHO WANTED HOMES IN THE WILDERNESS TO SOW SEED FOR GENERATIONS YET UNBORN

INSIDE her dingy tent Della Root crouched and listened fearfully to the conversation going on outside. Every night for a week now it had been going on, and the girl knew for a surety that her father's resistance was crumbling. He was being won over by the insidious propaganda of the gigantic, swarthy faced plow shaker.

"You'd be a plumb fool to keep on diggin' ditches t' water other men's farms when there's thousands o' dollars' worth o' gold dust that's yore's fer the takin'," Geary insinuated softly.

"If I could be sure," Andrew Root almost whined.

"Sure? It's a dead mortal skinch," Geary retorted. "Besides, what've yuh got to lose? Yuh been sub-contractin' for twenty years accordin' to yore own tell, an' what've yuh got? A miserable little gyppo outfit—a few horses, tents, an' some half wore out machinary."

"That's true," Root allowed, "yet I can make a livin', an' this other is a gamble."

"Hell of a livin' yuh make," Geary sneered. "Look at yore daughter—ain't had a new pair o' stockin's fer six months."

The crouching girl glanced down at her much mended hosiery, and a blush suffused her face. Yet she felt it was far better to endure the poverty and dirt of the construction camp than to listen to the blandishments of this uncouth stranger.

"Besides," Geary was droning on argumentatively, "this ain't no gamble. I tell yuh the gold was found by a prospector in the days of the old gold rush, an' it was the richest ever found in the Pahsoneroi Mountains. Then these three army deserters that I been tellin' yuh about got wise an' murdered the prospector. Right after that the gov'ment got after 'em an' they had to leave. It was from the last one of 'em that I got the location, an' he died right after that."

"But how come he to tell you and nobody else?" Root reiterated. It was the objection he had been urging for the past week.

"Well, I'll tell yuh frankly then," Geary said after a pause. "I got in trouble an' got sent to the pen. The old codger was doin' a life term, an' we got to be friends."

For a long time there was silence. With beating heart the girl hoped that this confession would decide her father to have nothing to do with Geary. But his next words killed her hope.

"It sounds convincin', an' if the gold is there an' can be got at—" Andrew faltered.

"With yore horses an' machinery we can easy do what them deserters couldn't. We can bring water around the mountain, put in a hydraulic, an' wash it out in a hurry. We won't need nobody but just us, yore wife an' Delly."

"By George I'll do it!" Andrew Root surrendered at last. "I'll give up this contract, fire the men, an' we'll pull out right away."

Fear settled over the tensely breathing girl with a strange, numbing feeling. Never had she felt such fear of a human being as she had felt toward Black Geary from the first day of his arrival. In the main the men who followed construction work were harmless, and she had long ago learned to put them in their place if they were not. But Geary was different. He had not ignored her. Indeed, at sight of her his eyes lighted up with a strange fire that she could not understand—simply because she knew nothing of the primitive woman hunger which dominates the mind of a man long incarcerated behind iron bars.

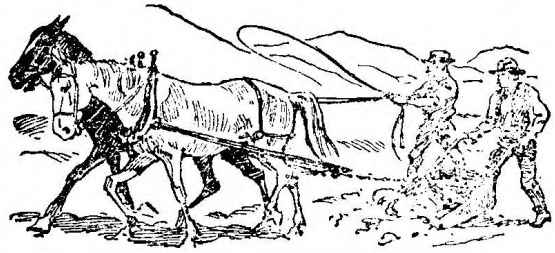
He had seldom spoken to her, thereby giving her no chance to repulse him; but she understood that he was prevailing upon her father to take them into a veritable wilderness, where she somehow sensed they would all be helpless in his power.

She could understand the reason for her father yielding to temptation. Practically all of her life had been under the dingy tents of a small "gyppo" construction outfit. Wherever there was a big construction job going on, whether road grading, canal building, or work of a similar kind there was Andrew Root with his small outfit to take a sub-contract whereby he did the work and the main contractor drew in the profit.

Root was known as a loose dirt contractor—principally because he never had the means to tackle the harder, but better paying jobs. His outfit usually consisted of a heavy Number 5 grading plow, three or four Fresno scrapers, a portable water tank, primitive blacksmith tools, and tents enough to house his family, his men and his horses. His wife did the cooking and his crew came and went. But for years Andrew Root himself had toiled amid sun and dust until his wrinkled hide had taken on a soil color that could never be removed. He moved the dirt at so much per yard, and his only friends were rival gyppo contractors as poor and weatherbeaten as himself.

In times of winter, or when construction work was slack the Roots would move to the outskirts of some town, but as a rule they continued to live in their tents to save rent. Therefore the only people with whom Della associated to any extent were the rough, uncouth graders who worked for her father, and were guaranteed their pay by the head contractor. Few of them were interested in the silent, calico-clad girl who slipped about the tents. But many of these transients were men who had seen much of the world, and they all held to a bold, independent philosophy of life. The girl listened much to their talk, and in a way became wise. Also she learned a greater self-reliance than more carefully reared maidens usually manage to secure.

But she knew that Andrew Root had never prospered, never would prosper—no more than the hundreds of other gyppo



contractors who made it possible for a few big contractors to take big jobs and get them done cheaply and quickly. There had been times when Andrew had fretted peevishly and complained that Della ought to have more schooling. The girl did not know just how deeply that feeling went but she sensed vaguely that dim yearnings for better things for himself and his family occasionally stirred in Andrew Root's soul. There had, indeed, once been possibilities in Andrew Root. No wonder, then, that he had listened to this glib tale of easy gold.

Black Geary had limped into camp looking for a job. The outfit was then working in hard pan, and no man on the outfit could hold the handles of the big plow as it loosened dirt for the Fresnos. Geary had voluntarily gripped the plow handles,

and the powerful plow horses could not draw the plow fast enough to shake him loose. He had got the job, and soon after he had got Andrew Root interested in the deserters' mine.

Della got up and went outside. She wanted to be alone, and she was accustomed to taking long walks alone through the gray sages that stretched away for miles in every direction from the big, forty foot deep canal which, when completed, was to change the worthles desert to a rich land of farms and cities.

The girl drew a deep breath and gazed away to where a rising moon changed the dingy sage to a magic forest of silver bushes. So she had often looked, and a familiar ache came to her heart. For years and years they had been slaving to make it possible for other people to have homes. Were they never to have a home of their own?

It was not dreams of luxury or finery which filled the girl's mind. She wanted comfort; she wanted a house—and she wanted land with lots of water on it. She had had her fill of dust and aridity. She wanted never to see a water tank again.

After all, what if there should be gold which they could get? It would mean education, cleanliness and the ranch which she had always longed for. She suddenly began to grow mildly excited. Her eyes brightened, and a bit of color came into her cheeks.

She heard a cough. Black Geary had come out of her father's tent and was eyeing her from a distance of less than ten feet. For the moment he had removed his pipe from his mouth and was holding it in one hand. The top of the bowl gave off a dull glow that struck her fanciful mind as symbolic of the evil fires within the man's nature. His eyes were dwelling on her slim figure.

At her gasp of resentment Geary chuckled. "Did ye know I'm goin' t' deck ye all out in silks an' feathers one o' these days?" he asked her.

Unable to think of a suitable answer Della shook her head in hurried negation and darted away. She regretted almost instantly that she had not retreated inside her tent. What if he should follow her?

She glanced fearfully back over her shoulder, but Geary was still standing there with his hands on his hips with his filthy pipe tipped at a cocky angle in his repulsive mouth.

He laughed aloud as the girl broke into a run.



## II

THE long drive was nearly over. For days Della Root had sat upon the hard spring seat of a wagon with a pair of heavy, greasy lines in her hands. Three wagons was held sufficient to haul the gyppo outfit to the scene of the great venture for gold. On the lead wagon, behind four horses sat Black Geary; his pipe eternally in his mouth, and the crafty, cruel smile playing upon first one and then the other corner of his mouth as the pipe shifted. Next came Andrew Root and his wife with another four horse team, and behind them, catching the dust from all three slow moving vehicles came Della.

For a long time there had been no road. Many times the men were obliged to cut out trees for the passage of the wagons, or again build bridges, or occasionally dig short dug-ways where no other means of getting along could be discovered. It had been hills and canyons so long that the girl longed for a sight of level land.

She had lagged a short distance behind the other wagons, and they suddenly turned a bend and disappeared from sight. It was nearly time for the night camp and she did not hurry. Then, when her own wagon rounded the bend, she gave a gasp of startled pleasure.

Here, where she had least expected to find anything of the sort, was a beautiful little valley. It was not more than a mile wide, and scarcely three miles in length. There was no forbidding sagebrush growing upon it, no noxious weeds. Everywhere was a thick, luscious growth of green grass, ankle high.

Near the head of the valley stood a grove of beautiful trees, the outer edge curving gracefully into the nook made by a projecting ridge. By the more luxuriant growth Della guessed there was water there, a spring or a small creek. She fell instantly in love with the place.

"Oh, what a place for a ranch," she breathed.

The other wagons were heading for the grove of trees, and by the time they reached it Della had caught up with them. A hundred yards away she suddenly discovered a small, tidy log cabin, with a stable a few rods in the rear. She experienced a pang of disappointment that somebody else had preempted the valley.

She caught a glimpse of Black Geary's face as he crawled down from his wagon, and it was surely murderous.

"By Gawd, if somebody else has got in

here ahead of us—" the man said ominously. Della saw that he had buckled a gun belt around his waist, and a heavy revolver swung in the holster.

"Is—is this near the place?" Andrew Root queried.

"It ain't more'n a mile from here—right up that gulch," Geary growled, "I'm goin' to investigate that cabin, so git yore rifle ready an' if yuh see anybody sneakin' around drill 'em."

Della felt a flash of foreboding as her father reached behind the seat and brought forth his rifle, which he held nervously across his knee.

Geary slouched across to the cabin and disappeared. Five minutes later he came out. He looked relieved, but his face still wore a frown.

"Ain't been nobody here this year," he said, "but whoever built this cabin built it solid an' left things inside that means he intends t' come back."

"An' if he does?" Root queried.

"He'll be wise t' stay away," Geary growled ominously.

Della agreed silently that the stranger would at least be wise to be careful.

"Do you suppose somebody else has —?" Root faltered, not quite daring to name the thing he dreaded. The gyppo contractor had made a very real sacrifice in coming thus far. If failure awaited him he would have a hard time getting back and making ends meet until he could get a new contract.

"Not a chance," Geary assured him. "If anybody found this mine they wouldn't be pullin' out till they worked it. An' there ain't been no ditches made."

Root heaved a tremulous sigh of relief.

"We'd better camp right here till we look around an' git settled," Geary decided.

They made camp hurriedly, with a strong undercurrent of excitement. Mrs. Root, who always took things as they came, because there had been no other alternative in her life, was the only one to more than nibble at the food she prepared.

Long after she had gone to bed Della heard the men talking in low undertones of what they proposed to do.

Long before daylight Root roused his wife to cook breakfast. The men gobbled down their food as the first streaks of daylight broke up a cloudy sky, and then they were away.

Della took care of the horses, rounding them all up, and staking one, her pony, Banty, and letting the rest have their liberty again. For a time the horses grazed on the succulent grass of the meadow, and then they sought the shade of the trees to browse in lazy content.

Della was almost happy. She wanted to gallop Banty madly over that level meadow from one end to the other. She wanted to

explore every ridge and gulch that lay within sight. She even wanted to plant a garden. But she had to help her mother in the tedious business of establishing a permanent camp.

Again and again she was brought up by her mother's plaintive repetition. "Will he like it this way, I wonder?" The query always referred to Black Geary; never to Andrew Root. It served to make Della realize just how much the family was dominated by this fellow who only a short time before had been merely her father's hired hand.

The men returned at night tired and feverish with excitement. They had not yet found the gold deposit which Geary was sure was there, but the man was confident that their search would be rewarded the next day.

It was.

Andrew Root came dashing into camp; stumbling and falling in his haste to impart the news. "It's there, Ma! It's there!" he yelled. And in his hand were a number of tiny particles of gold.

Root was too much shaken by the discovery to do any more that day, but it had a different effect upon Black Geary. Now that the vague doubt which must have rested in his mind had been removed, he became more his natural self. He rolled his sleeves above his hairy forearms and went to work. Once more Della found his gaze occasionally resting upon her in the old half fierce, half amused way. Her fear of the man returned.

But soon things began to happen which demonstrated to her that she must do something more than fear. Both her parents were utterly under the sway of the fellow, and she realized that they would be helpless to oppose anything that he might do if they were not. But somebody would have to oppose, and that somebody could only be she. The very first time the man snapped out an order to her she refused to obey it.

"Huh?" The fellow was amazed. He paused with his hands on his hips and regarded her cynically. She would have felt easier had he shown more anger.

"All right, girlie, I'll do it myself," he said. "One o' these days, though, yuh'll be jumpin' every time I snaps me finger. Git me?"

His confidence daunted her.

"We'll git to work tomorrow on our ditch," he said to Root. "There's a good sized creek in a canyon over that ridge, but by goin' a mile or so up we can bring all the water we need in here."

"But wouldn't it be better t' file a legal claim on this first?" Root demanded.

"No," Geary thundered. "We couldn't hold it all, an' we don't want nobody up here takin' part of it, an' mebbe pullin' some law dodge to beat us out o' the water or somethin'. Besides, there ain't no danger o' anyone comin' in here."

Root was not convinced. Nor did he guess that Black Geary's real fear was because he was an escaped convict, with five years of a prison sentence yet to serve if apprehended.

"If this fellow who built this cabin should come back, then what?" Root asked.

"Leave him to me," Geary said darkly. "We'll move into the cabin, an' one o' the women will always stick around. If he comes they'll tell him that we've jumped his place. They kin talk to him till I git here. After that he won't bother none."

Della's heart turned cold. Geary meant to murder the man who had built the cabin, and she and her mother were expected to aid and abet him in the crime. If they refused she knew Geary would exact vengeance from somebody.

## III

THE work of bringing the water to the placer mine began at once with tremendous energy being shown by Black Geary, and with Andrew Root trying to hold the pace as best he might.

"Gotta git her done an' have that bar washed out 'fore snow flies," Geary declared grimly.

Della had visited the rocky bar at a fork in the gulch which was said to contain so much of the precious mineral. She had to own that the sight of the vast potentialities gave her a thrill; yet she derived not half the satisfaction there as she did from contemplation of the pleasant little valley, where she was already building a ranch in her dreams. There she could picture houses, barns, corrals, fat stock, growing hay and grain and beautiful gardens.

She found little time to dream, however, because it was her job to take things to the men as they were needed. They had run a rough survey for the proposed ditch, showing that there was sufficient gravity to get the water high up on the bar. Once there, there would be sufficient force to annihilate the entire bar in a short time. The job, however, presented great difficulties. The canal had to be built through rocky ground, and the biggest job of all was to put in a diversion dam in the mountain torrent.

Della had to admire Geary's tremendous strength and efficiency as he got things done. By rights they should have had three men to help them, but Geary came near taking their places himself. At the same time his brutish figure in overalls and grubby undershirt which he seldom changed disgusted her.

Busy as he was the man found time to jibe her about the day when he would have her tamed. He made no secret of his intentions concerning her when they got the gold.

"Yuh'll like me, honey," he predicted.

"I'll despise you," she retorted.

"I kin tame yuh, never fear—an' I'll shore enjoy doin' it," he laughed.

"You never will," she told him forcefully. She no longer shrank from such encounters. She feared and hated the man more than ever, but knowing that she would have to face the issue with him sooner or later she tried to gain strength by combating him whenever he began his taunts. As yet he had not laid hands upon her except to touch her casually and pass on when there was no opportunity for her to resist.

Then, one day, Della found her longed-for opportunity to do a little exploring. She rode to the lower end of the valley, glorying in its possibilities; then, leaving Banty to graze around, she climbed on foot

to the top of a pinnacle that overlooked her valley.

She found a smooth stone and sat down, gazing afar pensively with her chin cupped in her hands. She had been day dreaming so for a considerable time when the rattle of disturbed stones a short distance below brought her sharply to her feet.

Fifty feet below her was a man toiling up the slope. He was in his shirt sleeves, and was perspiring freely from his climb; but his face wore a cheerful grin.

In one swift glance the girl took in his whole appearance. The big hat and high heeled boots if nothing else were enough to betray his vocation. His tanned face, and eyes that were slightly squinted from gazing much at far distant objects testified eloquently to long days spent in the open.

He stopped and called cheerfully. "Don't drop a rock on me, because it'd be an awful roll to the bottom."

Della was unaware until that moment that she was clutching a small rock in her hand.

"Maybe the top of this hill belongs to me," she retorted.

"Gosh, I hope not," he called back, and renewed his climb.

He laughed cheerfully when he reached the top, and mopped his face with a big blue handkerchief. Della saw that he was older than she had thought. He might be, she thought now, nearly thirty. Yet his face was boyish and pleasing.

"It's an awful climb to git up here but the view is worth it," he stated. "It always was a favorite place with me."

Della felt her blood turning cold. Was it possible that this gay stranger was the man who had built the cabin; that he was the man Black Geary meant to murder if he came back?

"I saw your pony down there an' I climbed up here to see if I could find the rider," he said as she continued to maintain her silence.

"Do you have to locate every stranger you see or hear about?" she demanded.

"No," he grinned, "but when the stranger proves to be as attractive as you it's not a bad rule."

Della suddenly became a bit self-conscious. She was not shabbily dressed, but she knew her clothes were cheap and not always becoming. Around the gyppo camp she had been generally indifferent to her personal appearance. She was always neat, but there had been no person whom she particularly wished to impress. She found herself wanting to be good looking in this man's eyes.

"How do you happen to be here? I ain't seen any strangers for a long while—ain't seen any in fact," she blurted out, and instantly feared that she had said the wrong thing.

"You've been here a long time?" he parried instantly.

"Well, a few weeks."

"Livin' here?" he asked with an undeniable frown.

Della nodded.

"Close to the cabin up there?"

"In it," she acknowledged, wondering if he would fly into a rage at the news if he were indeed the man who had built it.

"Yes?" he murmured. "You're too young to be a homesteader yourself. Has some of your folks filed a homestead on it, perhaps?"

"Yes, yes, my father," she said hurriedly. "We—we found it abandoned and we moved in."

She found him looking at her so steadily, and with a quizzical grin barely playing upon his lips that she went on desperately.

"It'll make the most wonderful ranch. We can raise all the hay we need out here on the meadow; there's lots of range, and timber to build everything we want."

"It's a long way from civilization don't you think?" he countered. "There's no real road out of here—an' before you can raise hay you'll have to have water."

"We can git water from the creek over that ridge. The—the men are building a canal now."

She saw the look of disappointment cross his face. "Have they got much stock?" he asked.

Della shook her head truthfully. "We—we'll git the stock later—after we git the place fixed up."

"Well, I'll have to admit that this is something of a wallop to me," the young man confessed. He was grinning still, but the girl saw that there was no glow of fun in his eyes. "My name is Howard Jerome—not that it matters—an' I happened to build that cabin you folks are livin' in."

Because she already suspected it Della could not pretend surprise. "I—I'm sorry," she faltered.

"I knew I was late," he admitted. "The government only gives a fellow five months' absence from his place during the year, an' I'm seven months away all right. I suppose that makes it jumpable. But I sure did figger to make this an A 1 cattle ranch."

"You have cattle?" Della asked sympathetically.

"Well, yes," Howard admitted hesitantly. "Fortunately, they're on trail, an' yet a long ways from here."

Della felt something beating within her breast that she thought must be her conscience. He was taking this very hard, and it was a shame. Yet if she did not turn him back some way he would discover what her father and Geary were really after, and Geary would kill him. Indeed, she was sure the man would kill any interloper on sight to prevent his discovery of their intention. But she could not help thinking that if Howard Jerome could only stay life would be much more interesting for her. In her heart she knew that she would never be permitted to build her dream ranch, but she could watch it growing under his capable hands.

"I feel very sorry for you," she said.

"Oh, that's all right," he said absently after a moment in which he was thinking deeply. "It just occurs to me that things may not be as hard as they seem."

"No?" Della was becoming frightened again.

"No. Of course your father, or whoever it was did the filing, had to file a contest against me. I could fight it and maybe stand a good chance to win. I haven't been overdue long, an' I had a good excuse. I gather, too, that your folks really jumped me before my time was up —the old wagon tracks comin' in here told me that much. But I don't want to have trouble." He paused, thinking, and the girl waited for him to go on.

"Now you say your folks haven't got cattle yet. I don't suppose they've filed on all the land in this valley. If there's any left I'm goin' to file on it, an' then make them a proposition to help build the canal, and buy their hay till they can git cattle of their own. What do you think of it?"

"It won't do," Della protested, very much frightened.

Her alarm was so real that Howard realized it was no light thing.

"Anyway, there'd be no objection to me seeing your folks an' making them a proposition, would there?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, there would," Della said urgently. "You—you mustn't go up there at all. Don't ask me why, but please, please go back."

Without being conscious of what she was doing she took both of Howard's arms in her firm, supple fingers and shook him gently in an effort to convince him somehow that he must believe her without asking for too much explanations.

Howard was convinced of her sincerity, and he sensed that it was for his safety, and not her folks' interests that she was pleading. He felt himself strangely moved. Something in this girl's clear, intelligent eyes appealed to him mightily. In his busy life he had had little time for women or girls, but here, he thought, was exactly the type of girl for a man to marry if he wanted a partner who would stick to him through thick and thin, and carry her own part as well.

"Well, if you feel so strongly about it I'll go back," he said regretfully. He saw a look of vast relief flash across her face, but a moment later he was puzzled as he saw a look of almost hopeless despair take its place. This girl, he knew, was in trouble of some kind.

"Well, I'll leave you alone on your pedestal—or pinnacle I should say—" he said with affected gayety. "But you'll shake hands with me, an' we'll be friends won't we. And you'll tell me your name, too, won't you?"

"Yes," she said with a somewhat dreary smile. "My name is Della Root." She gave him her hand, and he held it longer than was at all necessary. A burning color came over her face, as her nerves responded to his firm grasp, and the eloquent look in his eyes.

Howard dropped her hand abruptly and began his descent of the hill. The girl watched him as he went down gracefully despite the high-heeled boots which made his descent a hard one.

The one man, she thought, who had ever interested her. There had been something in his eyes which told her that if she was with him much they would become more than friends. Yet he had come and gone, and she had sent him away—had lied to do it. She gulped as something stuck in her throat. At that moment she hated Andrew Root and the gold as much as she hated Black Geary.

At the foot of the hill Howard Jerome mounted his horse, and after a moment's deliberation swung around on the back trail. There was a bit of a cynical, unmirthful grin on his face.

"The girl's all right. She's a thoroughbred through an' through, an' she's honest," he murmured aloud. "Just the same there's a bunch of crooks up there, an' I'll

bet my hat it's the Picket-pin gang."

He rode on, brooding. There were few organized gangs of outlaws left in the West, but here and there in such wild regions as the Pashomeroi were shifting bodies of men who made at least sporadic ventures in crime, and fled back here where they were reasonably safe.

The summer before, when building his cabin, Howard had heard of the Picket-pin gang, and had even talked with its reputed leader, "Duke" McBride. He had little doubt now that McBride had seen the advantage of this practically unknown valley and was making it a sort of depot, if not headquarters, for the gang.

"There's this much to it," he mused grimly a little later on. "If it's the Picket-pin gang they won't hardly have dared to file a contest against me till they made sure with a bullet that I wouldn't appear against them. I can find out at the land office at Bailey if it still belongs to me, and if it does——"

## IV

BELIEVING that she had averted a tragedy by sending Howard Jerome away Della felt relief in one way, while in another she was filled with frenzied impatience. Much as she had come to love the little valley she wanted the men to get their gold and get away from there before someone else came along to tempt them to do murder.

The gold now meant less than nothing to her. She feared its possibilities for harm, however; because she was becoming reluctantly convinced that it was turning her father's mind. Heretofore he had been a reasonably kindly parent, but now he seldom spoke to her without a growl or a curse, and the look in his eye was strange and disconcerting.

Della knew there was no chance to get her father away until the gold question was settled, and then she sensed that Black Geary would have to be reckoned with. The man was becoming daily more arrogant, and she was convinced that the huge amount of work he did each day kept him from bothering her more than he did.

She wanted to take her mother into her confidence regarding the stranger whom they had dispossessed, but she dared not. Mrs. Root would undoubtedly tell the tale to her husband, and she knew that Geary would get it then, and he would be angry.

She cheerfully did the work they assigned her, but most of it was too hard for her strength, and she still had idle moments to spend exploring the country with her pony.

On one of these exploring trips she made the discovery that still other men knew of what Geary had named "Deserters Valley." Pausing to rest her horse on a climb to the top of a high ridge she saw two men suddenly appear in the saddle of another ridge half a mile to her right.

Immediately spurring Banty into a thicket of aspens she interestedly watched

the maneuvers of the men. She saw them quickly draw back as they sighted what she knew must have been her father and Geary at work. Then they changed from the course they had been going and she guessed that they were riding up to where they could inspect the ditch that had been made.

Changing her position cautiously Della once more sighted the men, so close at hand that she flung herself from her horse and clasped her hand over Banty's nose lest he give them away. She could see their faces plainly, and hear the drone of their voices, though most of their words were indistinct.

They were dressed as cowboys, as Howard Jerome had been, but they were older, harder looking men. One of them she saw had cruel eyes and a weak chin; the other man's face was regular and handsome, but with such an expression of ruthlessness upon it that the girl involuntarily caught her breath with fear. Once she heard the man with the weak chin address the other as Duke, but the rest was indistinguishable.

She found that the two men entered the gulch close to the gold bar and rode on down until they were near the cabin, where she lost sight of them.

Had they noticed anything out of the way at the gold bar? Geary and her father had done some work there with pick and shovel, but Geary had been careful to obliterate the signs. Still there were undoubtedly tracks around, and the strangers might have keen eyes.

Della turned back and approached the cabin from the other side.

"Any visitors today, Ma?" she queried casually.

"Visitors? No. What do ye mean?" her mother asked suspiciously.

"Oh, nothin'. Just seems like it would be interestin' if somebody did come,

though, don't it?" Della said carelessly.

"Well, it sure wouldn't," Mrs. Root said curtly. "I b'lieve Black Geary would kill anybody who come here to get our gold. An'—in a way—ye can't blame him. Don't you let the men folks hear ye longin' fer comp'ny."

"But ain't it ever occurred to you that somebody *might* come here who didn't know anything about the gold, an' didn't have designs on it?" Della objected.

"You can't never tell," Mrs. Root said darkly. "They'd be sure to see what the men are doin' an' they'd want t' file claims at any rate, an' Geary says that would be the same thing as robbin' us."

"You don't believe everything that Geary says do you?" Della asked sarcastically.

"Don't forgit it's Geary who is makin' it possible for us to git this stake an' do the things fer you we've allus wanted to do fer ye," Mrs. Root snapped.

"I'd rather do without than take anything from him," Della retorted with equal heat.

"He's not very purty while he's toilin' out here to make a fortune fer us, but when he gits the gold an' gits dressed up he'll be good enough even fer you, my lady," her mother said angrily.

Nothing was to be gained by such a quarrel and Della picked up her father's rifle and went out. She had learned to shoot fairly well, and she kept the table fairly well supplied with fresh game, a welcome change from the plain food they had brought with them.

That night she studied the men's faces closely and decided that they knew nothing of the presence of the strangers. She knew, too, that the strangers must have gone back the way they had come. Was it ominous or not?

She had been given strict orders to report at once if she saw anybody, and she knew that she would get in serious trouble if they ever found out she had seen someone and not told about it. But she had not told about Howard Jerome, and never intended to. Who the other strangers were she had no idea, but until they did more than look around she determined to hold her peace.

## V

THREE days later Della found Geary coming toward her on his return from work. There was an anticipatory grin on his ugly face, and she would have turned away had he not called to her. Then she saw that he was dragging behind him a poor, fuzzy, yellow little animal which she at first thought to be a pup.

"Look here what I brung ye for a playmate," he called cheerfully, reaching back and seizing the little animal cruelly by the scruff of the neck.

The animal's eyes were red with fright; it was clawing desperately, but Geary's hold was so tight that it was half strangled, and its tongue protruded painfully.

Moved by pity for the helpless creature Della sprang forward and seized the animal by the fore paws to rescue it. Geary released his grasp and instantly its jaws snapped together, the sharp little teeth sinking deep into the tender flesh of the girl's hand.

With a scream Della dropped the pup and it darted for the brush. But Geary struck out with a great hand that caught the creature on the side of the head and knocked it rolling for twenty feet. Before it stopped rolling he had it again by the scruff of the neck.

"Ye cannot fool with this critter like it was a dorg," he chuckled. "This here is a full blood he-wolf pup that I dug out of his den this afternoon."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Della demanded angrily, holding up her bleeding hand.

"Did give yuh quite a nick didn't he?" Geary said more with amusement than sympathy as he pinioned the squirming pup against his side with his elbow and took the girl's fingers in his.

"Here, lemme see it," he ordered, raising the hand toward his face.

Before she had any idea what he intended doing he ejected a stream of tobacco juice from his loose-lipped mouth that completely covered the wound and splashed back to her wrist.

"That'll fix it," he chuckled. "Nothin' like tobaccer juice t' keep down blood poison."

Della jerked the hand free and raced toward the pool where the horses watered. with a gasp of relief she thrust in her hand up to the elbow and washed the yellow contamination away. When assured that she would not pollute the other hand she washed out the wound as best she could. Later she permitted her mother to bandage it rudely.

Geary had chained up the wolf pup, and was already busy with its "training." Each time the frightened, tormente little creature tried to bite he would bowl it over

with a slap of his huge fist. It was the first lesson of many that the girl was to witness in the days that followed, until the wolf pup learned not to retaliate. Geary named the pup Judas.

At supper that night Geary dilated humorously upon Della's haste to rid herself of the tobacco juice.

"Like as not she'll git blood poison now," he predicted.

"I don't care—I'd rather have that than anything on my hand that came from your filthy mouth," Della flared, unable to longer stand the man's taunts.

For once Geary was goaded out of his chuckling confidence. An angry look came over his swart face. "Ye would, eh?" he said furiously. "One o 'these days, me gal, yo're goin' t' git plumb used to my mouth. Sabe?"

"Della, that's no way to talk," Mrs. Root reproved.

"An' it wouldn't have hurt you to have left that tobacco juice on," her father joined in. "It's the best thing in the world for a hurt of that kind. If you git a bad hand on you now you'll wish you'd behaved yourself."

Knowing that it was useless to fight back Della swallowed her humilation and left the table.

When she saw Geary again the next morning his anger had passed. He greeted her with a coarse joke, and then inquired as to the condition of her hand. It was sore and swollen, but she would make no complaint.

"I ketched that wolf fer you because I figgered yuh was lonesome," he said. "He'll be lots o' company fer ye when I git him tamed. Some people say ye can't tame a wolf, but I know better—I tamed one once till he'd eat outa my hand."

"This one has already eaten out of my hand," Della said with sardonic humor.

Geary laughed appreciatively. "I'll take that all out o' him," he promised.

"If he is just to be a pet for me please turn him loose—or kill him," Della requested.

"Not on your life," Geary refused promptly. "Not only is he goin' to be a pet fer you, but mebbe a sort o' object lesson."

Della knew well enough what the man meant, but when she overheard him warning her parents what would happen if the wolf pup were turned loose she dared not risk it herself.

Many times in the days that were to come Della cried for sympathy with the abused Judas. It was not long until Geary taught it not to bite, though its lips always curled menacingly whenever anyone came near Furtively Della tried to make friends with the little beast. At first it was slow process, but it learned to endure her touch, and later on seemed to really enjoy her caresses, and whined with eagerness whenever she came near. But Geary continued to treat it with needless abuse.

Meantime the work on the canal was progressing rapidly. The men were blind to all but their labor, and the strain was beginning to tell upon Andrew Root. Della wondered what would become of them if her father should die, of worse, lose his mind.

Despite her efforts to conceal the fact her injured hand was getting worse. It was soon so swollen and inflamed that it was noticeable, and her mother's remedial treatment only seemed to make it worse. There was soon very little that she could do, and she was not even able to hunt with the rifle. Her spare hours she spent with Banty roaming around the country.

Then one day she unexpectedly came face to face with two horsemen—the two she had seen spying upon the camp. Before she could turn Banty the men had spurred beside her, and the larger man grasped her bridle reins.

"Well, my beauty, where do you come from?" he asked.

"Let loose of my reins," she ordered.

"Oh, don't be in a hurry to go," he said reproachfully. "Purty girls are too scarce up here in these mountains for us to let one like you git away too easy."

Cold, stark fear settled over the girl. She found herself unable to frame words.

"What are you folks doin' in here anyhow?" her captor demanded.

"It—it's none of your business," she managed to retort.

"Spunky little vixen, eh Duke?" the chinless man grinned.

"Seems to be. Just the same I figger she's goin' to tell me what the game is down there," Duke replied.

"I'll tell you nothing," Della said.

"Has Jerome himself been up here lately?" Duke asked.

Della gave an involuntary start. "No. Why?" she added before she could check herself.

"We was just wonderin' how long it would be before he brought his cattle up here. Looks like he was more ambitious than we thought. Didn't think he'd be fool enough to try to make a real ranch out of this."

"Why—why can't we make a real ranch out of it?" Della demanded upon a flash of inspiration. The men apparently suspected nothing of the gold. If she could keep them thinking of a ranch it might save trouble in the future.

"Mostly because it won't be healthy for the men who try to make it," the man called Duke smiled sardonically.

"And it won't be healthy for anyone who tries to bother us," Della retorted spunkily.

Duke laughed as if in appreciation of a good joke. "We were goin' down there to tell yore folks they'd better move out, but I believe you can make a better talk for us than we could ourselves. So you tell 'em they've got just three days to git out of here."

"They'll not go," Della declared.

"You might add that they won't git any help from Howard Jerome because he's goin' to change his mind also."

Della was thinking rapidly. The mention of Howard Jerome convinced her that these men were only would-be ranchers who were sore because Jerome had beaten them to the valley. They apparently thought her people were only working for Jerome. Would it be better to let them continue to think so, or should she tell them that her people had no connection with Jerome?

"You can't run no bluff on us, an' if you try any funny business you'll get hurt," she told them boldly. She decided not to mention Jerome herself. If these fellows thought that he might arrive with more men so much the better. Anything to keep them from starting trouble.

"We'll take chances on that." Duke laughed. "An' when we come we'll try to see that you don't git hurt. In fact I'll make it my special duty to take care of you."

There was a timbre in his sinister laugh which made the girl hate him violently. That laugh held the same note as Geary's chuckle. Were all men brutes, she wondered?

"I'll take care of myself, don't you worry," Della said defiantly. "So will the rest of us."

"Well, you just tell 'em that we have used this range here for the last ten years, an' that we're not goin' to stand for nesters movin' in. If any of your men folks have ever heard of Duke McBride they'll know enough to move out peacefully while they can."

The fellow had released his hold upon her bridle and Della instantly took the opportunity to depart. She could see no way to avert a tragedy. Duke McBride had impressed her with his determination. He was not a man to make threats lightly. On the other hand Geary would not be driven out easily. There was little to choose between the two men, and she would not have cared greatly to see them destroy each other, but she knew that her own family could not hope to escape unless they broke with Geary.

She had to tell of seeing the men this time, but she waited until Geary had gone to bed before she told her parents what Duke McBride had said. Her father's face worked convulsively.

"By God, I'll kill any man on sight now who tries to come between me an' this gold, after all I've gone through to git it," he said. He picked up the rifle in his skinny hands, and Della shrank away in fear as she saw the insane glow in his eyes.

"But, father, there's more than two of these men. You and Geary can't hope to fight them all. And if they come they'll surely find out what you are after, an' then the valley will be full of gold hunters. You can't kill them all."

"I'll never give up. I'll have that gold or die fightin' for it," the man mumbled.

"I've been thinkin', Father," Della said gently. "I believe that if you went an' filed a claim on that gold bar that you could hold it, an' the law would help you. Regardless of Black Geary it's what you ought to do. Let's hitch up in the mornin' an' go file on it."

"No; it won't do—Geary says we wouldn't be able to hold anything," he declared obstinately. "We'll fight for what we got. I'm goin' to tell Geary now."

Half an hour later they called Della. Geary seized her roughly by the shoulder. "Tell me all about this," he commanded. "Jest what did them fellers say? What did they look like?"

"Let loose of me and I'll talk, but I

won't if you keep twistin' my shoulder," she said.

"Damn you, yuh've been too damned lippy an' independent with me lately," Geary rasped. "Some o' these days I'll break an' tame you like I have that wolf pup." But he released her, and at her father's order she again related details of her meeting with the two men, except that she did not mention the name of Howard Jerome. That, she felt, might lead to the discovery that she had once talked with him without reporting it. Besides, there was nothing to be gained by it. She had turned Jerome back, and he, at least, was safe.

"We'll keep our rifles by us, an' Della will have to keep a close watch in the daytime," Geary said. "When them birds come we want to make sure that none of 'em gits away alive."

There was no sleep for Della that night. Tragedy was surely stalking abroad. It threatened her as well as her parents, and she was convinced that no matter who won, Black Geary or Duke McBride, she and her family would lose. Murder had once been committed on account of that gold according to Geary, and the curse of that old crime still lingered.

If only there had been no gold there. If she could have taken Howard Jerome to her father with his proposition of partnership to build up the valley how different everything would have looked! She could only dream of that, however; knowing that it could never be a reality. But she was surprised that Howard Jerome's image was always so clear in her imagination. And the mere thought of him caused strange stirrings within her that she could only dimly understand.

## VI

THE two days that followed were tense ones. Root and Geary continued their work, but they apparently had seen the desirability of misleading anyone who saw their ditch. They altered their plan to make it appear they were taking out a ditch for irrigating purposes. At the same time Geary made certain changes about their camp designed to give them an advantage if they should be attacked.

Della was supposed to be watching for the enemy, but no one paid a great deal of attention to her in any other way. Her injured hand, which had gone so long without proper care had taken another change for the worse. In the excitement and suspense of wondering what was going to happen next the girl herself scarcely noticed it.

The third morning she mounted Banty and rode away as usual in the direction from which McBride might be expected to come. Somehow she believed the fellow would keep his word and not come until after the third day, and so when out of sight she turned her pony and rode through the timber until she was once more near the lower end of the valley, near the pinnacle.

She turned Banty loose, and seating herself on a log half debated with herself whether or not to make the climb to the top. She now carried ner hand in a sling, and the dull, throbbing ache of it discouraged needless exercise and she sat still.

Of a sudden she heard a stick crack, and springing up her eyes widened at sight of Howard Jerome smiling upon her from a distance of twenty feet.

"Didn't mean to alarm you, Miss Root," he said engagingly.

"What are you doin' back here?" she demanded, a strange sort of dryness in her throat.

He came forward, placed one foot on the log she had been sitting upon, and draped his gauntleted buckskin gloves across his knee with a smart snap.

"Well, I found out it was necessary," he told her cheerily. "You see I went down to the land office in Bailey to look over the records an' I found there that my claims have never been contested; there have been no other filin's made on this valley, an' so my rights still stands. Naturally I came back."

Della was trying hard to think, but making little headway. All she could see was that his presence added one more complication to the dangerous situation that existed.

"What do you propose to do with us?" she asked.

"I don't know. Frankly I want to have a talk with your father, or whoever is runnin' things here, an' find out what the idea is in locatin' here an' diggin' a ditch without filin' on either the land or the water.

Do you suppose you could enlighten me?"

"I can tell you this," she said dully, "you'll be killed if you try to enter this valley."

"My gosh! Are your folks as bad as all that?" he said whimsically. "You, at least, don't look so ferocious, but of course I know the Picket-pin—" He broke off abruptly and stared at her wounded hand.

"Say, that's a bad lookin' mitt you're carryin' there. What caused it?" he demanded.

"A wolf pup bit me," she informed.

"Here, let me see it," he ordered tersely, and before she could object he had taken it out of the sling and removed the unclean rag with which Mrs. Root had bandaged the wound.

"Girl, this needs attention right now," he said sternly. "By rights you ought to have a doctor, but I suppose there ain't one nearer than Bailey an' that's a hundred an' fifty miles. But my pack horse is right back here a ways an' I can fix this up some myself. You come with me."

Della wanted to protest, but some way she could not. Presently he was unpacking a pack horse.

"You haven't even washed this with an antiseptic," he charged.

"I wash it in soap and water an' my mother puts mutton tallow salve on it, but we haven't anything else," Della said.

"Hm-m—not so good," he said doubtfully. He poured water from a keg, built a small fire and soon had the water boiling.

"Look here, I can't stay here, an' if they see the smoke—" Della began to protest.

"Never mind all that. This hand has got to be dressed properly," he said with cool determination, and added carbolic acid to the water from a bottle among his things.

"Yuh'll have to grit yore teeth because I'm sure goin' to give that wound a cleanin' an' it'll hurt."

And the cleansing operation did hurt before he was through with it. Several times he drew little exclamations of pain from the girl, but she endured valiantly. Howard perspired copiously in his efforts to be both gentle and thorough. After he was satisfied that the wound was thoroughly clean he painted it with iodine, and then handed the two bottles over to her.

"You keep these an' take care of that wound every day till it gits well. If it should git worse you make 'em take you to a doctor whether or no," he said firmly.

Della rubbed her wet fingers over the iodine and discovered that the yellow stain could not be removed. Her eyes widened in fright.

"They—they'll see this, an' then they'll know I've been talkin' to you," she breathed fearfully.

"Why not?" he asked quickly. "Why are you afraid your folks will know I'm here." A romantic idea had entered his head. Perhaps this girl was herself a victim of the Picket-pin outlaw gang with which he knew he had to try conclusions sooner or later. Might he not rescue her from their clutches and then return to have it out with them? He realized fully that he would be under a decided handicap in the coming conflict if the girl were there in danger.

"I can't tell you, but please, please go away from here," she pleaded. "Come back next year. Then, I'm sure, we'll be gone."

"I don't want to come back after you are gone," he said earnestly. "Look here; I ain't so much in the dark about your people as you might suppose. This land belongs to me, an' I already have a cattle outfit trailing in here with a bunch of hard-bitten punchers. We'll fight for our rights, but you mustn't be here. You don't belong with such people. Leave them an' come with me. I'll take you to Bailey, an'—an'—take care of you."

The girl had suddenly become cold. "I don't need anybody to take care of me, an' you'll find my folks will be able to take care of themselves if you try to run us out."

"You mean you won't leave these people?" Howard demanded, his tone, in turn, growing chilly.

"They're my own father an' mother—I certainly won't leave them."

Howard began repacking, and the girl watched him doubtfully. She was tempted to tell him that her folks had been threatened by other people also, but that was directly against orders and could, she thought, only serve to further complicate matters. And she resented his offer to take her away. Other men had offered to take her away from the life at a gyppo camp, and she understood the full meaning of their proposition. She was bitterly disappointed to think that he could hold the same thoughts.

At last he had his horse repacked, and he turned to the girl. "It would be foolish for me to go on in now, but when I come back I'll have men enough to establish our rights. You can take that message to the men in there. But I hope you'll influence your own folks to git away before that time."

He swung on to his horse, gave the leading rope on the pack horse a jerk, and for the second time Della saw him ride the way he had come.

Presently Della walked slowly over to Banty, and mounting him turned toward home. Howard Jerome's unexpected return meant that something must be done. Regardless of the outcome of Duke McBride's threats her father and Geary could no longer hope to carry on their mining operations in secrecy. She knew that she could never make her father understand it. Thoughts of gold had turned his mind, and he was completely under the influence of Geary.

Only one hope of avoiding disaster remained. That was to see Geary and make him see the folly of his undertaking.

## VII

BEFORE seeking Geary Della found a bit of bandage to wrap loosely about her hand, and also carefully hid the two bottles which she had intended to give back to Jerome, but had neglected to do simply because she had forgotten it.

On her way out she passed the wagon wheel where the wolf pup was tied. Despite the brutal treatment it had received it had thrived under the ample food supply which Della had contrived to give it. She spoke to the pup kindly, and though there was no wag of the tail, such as would have been expected from a dog, Judas got up and came toward her as far as his wire would permit.

Apparently the wolf had been half starved when Geary found it. Now Della was amazed to see how straight its wobbly legs had become. The hair was smoother, and the tiny, sharp teeth were grown stronger; less like needles but conveying more menace.

Della laid her hand gingerly on the wolf's head, and petted it lightly. He made no effort to bite. She believed there was even a look of affection in its eyes.

"Poor little creature, I suppose you hadnt' ought to be allowed to run at large, but I'm goin' to turn you loose anyway one of these days if things don't change," she crooned softly.

"Ye are, are yuh?" demanded a gruff voice. Unnoticed Black Geary had been standing on the other side of the wagon.

Della drew back fearfully, the wolf pup snarled viciously and withdrew under the wagon to escape the toe of a punishing cowhide boot.

"Yuh'll turn nothin' loose, me gal," Geary said. "Yuh'd just as well understand that yo're goin' to be my woman just as soon as we git this gold an' I find time to train ye—mebbe before if the notion so takes me, an' I'm feelin' about that way right now."

"I'll die first," Della said defiantly. "An' you won't git this gold like you think, either," she added, anxious to get his mind on something besides herself.

"Won't I? What do you know about it?" He seized her roughly by the wrists. The end of the bandage she had wrapped loosely about her sore hand got between his fingers and he gave it a jerk which tore it away. The freshly dressed wound with the yellow iodine stain was revealed. The man stared at it unbelievingly.

"Where'd yuh git that iodine?" he demanded.

"None of your business. I got it," Della said sullenly.

"You come with me," Geary ordered, and dragged her over to the cabin by the other wrist.

"Mrs. Root, yuh got any iodine in the camp?" he thundered.

"No," came the astonished reply.

"Had any lately?"

"I should say not."

"Know anything about where Della got this?"

Mrs. Root stared amazedly at her daughter's hand. "That ain't like I dressed it this mornin'!" she gasped.

"Come clean now," Geary rasped. "Where'd yuh git that medicine, an' who dressed that hand for you?" His grip on her wrist tightened until she screamed with pain.

"Make her tell," Mrs. Root urged, half hysterical herself.

"Oh, I'll tell—let me go," Della surrendered.

Geary loosened his grasp, though he still maintained his hold on her. His lips twisted into a triumphant grin at this, his first victory over the girl.

"I got it from the man who built this cabin, an' who owns a lot of this valley," Della said hurriedly. "He's gone back now to git a lot of men, an' he's comin' back to move us off."

"He is, eh?" Geary queried sardonically.

"He is. And you're foolish to think you can dig gold here without other people knowin' about it."

"Did you tell him about the gold?" the man asked ominously.

"Of course not. What do you think I am?" Della replied, but her voice trembled with the justified fear that he would not believe her. His sneering laugh was not reassuring.

"Well, yuh've disobeyed orders, an' yuh've prob'ly ruined our chances to make a fortune to make the best of it," he announced. "Hereafter I'll discipline yuh myself, an' I'll see that yuh don't play us no more dirty tricks."

"Geary, Della is my daughter," Mrs. Root reminded, at last convinced that he was going too far.

"That's all right, but she's goin' to be my woman, an' I'm in charge o' this camp —don't forgit that. My word is law around here," he retorted grimly.

Yet the man was obviously mentally upset, and his somewhat sluggish mind was undecided what to do. The cabin had two rooms and he suddenly dragged the girl into the back room and threw her half way across it.

"You stay there till I go up an' git yore dad," he ordered. "Don't you dare let her move from that room," he added to Mrs. Root.

"Mother, we must git away from here —away from that man at once," Della urged frantically when Geary had left.

"You keep still," her mother ordered. "Sometimes I'm afraid of him myself, but you had no business not tellin' us everythin' right away. Your father will have to decide."

In vain Della argued, pleaded. She knew in advance how useless it would be to appeal to her father, and she knew now that there was only one way to save herself from Black Geary—and that was by flight. It was going to be hard to desert her parents, but she was sure that only destruction awaited them if they remained under the spell of Geary and his story of gold.

She regretted intensely now that she had not made a clean breast of matters to Howard Jerome and appealed to him for aid. Her only hope now was to escape as soon as possible, and make a belated appeal to him to come back.

## VIII

GEARY had not been gone an hour until he was back with Andrew Root. The former contractor was furious at what he regarded as his daughter's perfidy in having dealings with the enemy.

"You'll behave yourself after this, Miss," he ranted, and proceeded to lecture the girl until he was out of breath.

"The point is this," Geary broke in finally. "Lettin' this feller git away means that we've got to postpone our minin' till we git rid of him, or them. I reckon he's in with them other birds she saw the other day."

"He is not," Della denied. "He owns this land."

"He won't own it long," Geary said grimly. "There's been men killed here before an' there will be again. We'll hold this same as it was a ranch, an' then take out the gold later on."

Della saw the spasm of disappointment that shot across her father's face. Visions of quick wealth had been too much for him.

"You may even have to go file a claim o' some kind on this," Geary said to Root. "I reckon, though, that this is unsurveyed land an' we have a squatter's right where possession is nine points in the law. For the present we'll just keep a close watch an' go on with the ditch same's if nothin' had happened."

"An' Della—what about her?" Mrs. Root inquired humbly. At last some vague suspicion that the girl might be in danger seemed stirring within her, but she knew better than to openly oppose Geary's decisions.

"She can't be trusted an' I'll keep her by me—in the daytime," Geary said with a leer. "I reckon you folks'll do well to see that she stays where she belongs at night." The man lighted his foul smelling pipe and lumbered out.

"Della, you got to be more careful," the girl's mother advised. "Geary is all right when he ain't crossed, but if yuh make him mad I shudder to think what he might do."

"He's let me know plain enough what he intends to do," Della said dully.

Mrs. Root's eyes began to open, and for

once it seemed that the glitter of gold did not blind her. But whatever she meant to say went unsaid. She turned to her husband and stopped his renewal of the lecture by curtly telling him to wash for supper. That sudden change was Della's first breath of hope.

She slept in the back room where Geary had ordered her to be kept prisoner, while her parents had their bed in the front room. Della's inclination, after retiring, was to cry. With darkness everything seemed hopeless, and to it was added her terror that Duke McBride and his own men might come now at any moment. Whatever the outcome of that might be she felt that there was little hope for her or her parents. Yet, spurred on by a grim resolution she choked back the sobs, and listened for the sounds that would let her know when her parents were asleep.

It was a long time before her father's grumbling voice was silenced, and an hour more before she dared to move. The only way out was through the front room, and not only did she have to win past her parents, but there was the always present danger that Black Geary might hear her. If he did she knew that she could expect no mercy from him.

At last, dressing herself as warmly as she could, she opened the partition door and crept out with her shoes in her hand. To her tremendous relief she got outside without difficulty, and stopped to put on her shoes and lace them. As she straightened up she very nearly emitted a shriek of terror at a white clad figure before her. Then she realized that it was her mother, and the older woman's fingers were on her lips.

"Where you goin', Della?" Mrs. Root queried in a husky, frightened whisper.

"I'm goin' away. Mother—for help. Oh, Mother, I can't stay here with that awful threat of Black Geary over me. Please, please, don't give me away."

"I—I — don't know, honey. Mebbe me an' Andrew made a mistake. In the beginnin' at least we meant this gold mostly for you, but there was a man killed for it once, an' Geary once served time as a convict. I'm afraid Della. I'm afraid it's all cursed, an' I'm afraid of Geary."

"Mother, that's just why I must git away," Della pleaded. "This man who dressed my hand, Howard Jerome, is honest. He'll help us. If I can git away I can find him an' he'll come back. Why, I'd sooner think he'd let us have some of that gold than Black Geary."

"But it's dark, an' you haven't a thing to defend yourself, honey. You'd git lost, an' then what would you do?"

"I'll take Banty, an' I'll be all right," Della promised, gaining confidence from her mother's very uncertainty.

"I'm afraid if you stay here that—yes, go ahead. No, wait. I'll git you somethin' to take along."

Crouching in the shadow of the cabin Della waited nearly a quarter of an hour for her mother to reappear. Finally the older woman came out with a small sack of food, and pressed into her daughter's hand also a five dollar bill and two silver dollars.

"All I could git, honey," she said. "Now you come back to mother just as soon as you can—when you git help."

It was hard for Della to keep from breaking down altogether. The two women clung to each other for a moment and then Della hurried away, fearful that one of the men might yet wake up and stop her.

Banty raised his head and nickered as she approached the place where he was staked, causing the girl another momentary panic. The saddle had been left close to the tree to which the pony was staked and the girl threw it on hurriedly and cinched it up. But not until she was a quarter of a mile from the cabin and galloping freely down the valley did she dare to breathe easily.

At that she was far from confident as she rode along. Once out of the valley the trail looked unfamiliar to her in the dim starlight. She had been over it only once, but she dared not tarry. There were other horses at the camp, and she felt certain that Geary would pursue her some distance at least. Strange, eerie night noises gave her more than one start, but her life in a gyppo camp had given her self reliance to a high degree. Neither the mountains nor the darkness in themselves held any terror for her, but she knew that there were human enemies around, and there was always the probability that she might encounter some of them.

Daylight found her well along, and to

her relief she recognized a landmark almost at once. As yet she was on the right way. But how soon would Howard Jerome leave this trail? How far was he ahead of her? Another twenty-five miles and she would be out of the worst of the mountains, but then she would have no idea which way to go. He had mentioned the town of Bailey, but she knew there was small chance that his outfit was coming from there. Yet anything seemed better than remaining in the clutches of Black Geary.

She rode on for another two hours, crowding Banty to his best speed, and pausing only when she noticed that the pony was badly winded. She had hoped in that last desperate ride to come up with Howard, or to at least find where he had camped for the night, but there was no sign of him.

While Banty grazed and rested she ate a cold breakfast from the supply her mother had given her. There was only enough left for another meal she noted ruefully, but that was not her mother's fault. It was all there was in the house, and there had certainly been no opportunity to provide more. She was thankful for even that much, but Bailey she knew was at least a hundred miles away, and she knew of no closer settlement. She could not blind herself to the fact that her situation was full of peril unless she could find friends some way.

It was late in the afternoon, and after she had despaired of overtaking Howard, that she rode unexpectedly upon two men who had stopped by a small spring to rest their horses. She could not have avoided them if she would, and she rode up to them boldly. They got to their feet and stared at her with lively curiosity. Both men were strangers to her.

"I am looking for Howard Jerome's outfit," she stated evenly. "Could you men tell me anything about it?"

The men exchanged glances. "Sure we can," one of them replied. "Do you know Howard?"

"Yes. He was up in—in Deserters' Valley yesterday, and I have been tryin' to overtake him."

Again the men exchanged significant glances.

"You ain't far behind him at that," the same speaker said. "Too bad yuh just missed him, but it's only about ten miles to camp an' we'll show yuh the way."

"Oh, do you men work for him?" Della asked eagerly.

"Certain, shore," and both men laughed.

They left the main trail at once, and at the end of nearly two hours' hard riding they suddenly rode into a perfectly concealed camp. It was still light enough to distinguish faces. A fire was going, and one man was cooking supper while four others lounged about comfortably. At their approach one man got up and came forward. To Della's horror that man was Duke McBride.

## IX

DUKE McBRIDE was as surprised as Della, but a significant glance from one of the men who had guided her reassured him while it brought greater terror to the girl.

"Well, well, if this ain't the purty nester girl from the mountains," McBride smiled. "Delighted to have you call on us. Git off an' make yourself at home. Supper will be ready in a few minutes."

"Your men told me this was Howard Jerome's camp," the girl said in a curiously dry, strained voice.

"Well, miss, they didn't exactly lie about it. You see we fully intend to join with Jerome's outfit either today or next day." The words were reassuring, but his sardonic tone and manner was not.

"How far is it to his camp?" she asked.

"How far is it to Jerome's camp, Spot?" McBride questioned of a pock-marked giant who was an interested listener.

" 'Bout twenty miles," was the reply.

"Which way is it?" Della demanded.

"Thinkin' o' goin' on there tonight?" Spot asked.

"I certainly am."

The men all laughed uproariously as at a good joke. The chinless man who had been with McBride came forward and put his hand on her. The next moment Duke McBride struck the fellow's arm down viciously.

"None o' that, Spicer," he snarled, and the chinless man slunk into the background.

"You'll have to stay here tonight, miss; but you don't need to worry because nobody is goin' to bother you," McBride said. "I reckon you don't know the straight of things up here so I'll enlighten you. We, me an' my friends, have got business up here in these mountains, an' we don't want any cattle outfits or settlers comin' in, see?

"Now Jerome has sort of challenged us by comin' in an' buildin' him that cabin an' filin' on a homestead an' a desert claim

up there, an' then sendin' you folks up there to develop it for him while he brings up his cattle. The truth is we ain't a-goin' to let them cattle come in."

"You said you was goin' to chase us out, too, but you haven't done it," Della retorted.

"I gave you three days, but I meant more. You see I figgered you'd send word to Jerome which is why I had Bigbee an' Swasey watch the trail. When they seen Jerome go in we figgered he'd make a play to fight us up there, which is why we're down here. When he takes his riders an' goes back up there in a hurry we play a lit-

tle game with his cattle. See how easy it's goin' to be for us?"

Della was stunned by this revelation. McBride and his men were laboring under a mistake, but she saw clearly enough that it did not lessen the danger of her own people though it included Howard Jerome as well.

At the same time she comprehended that McBride was making a grave mistake. Howard was not going to take his men into the mountains and leave his cattle at the mercy of these men whom she now knew to be outlaws. The McBride gang was due for a surprise there. At this conclusion it also dawned upon her that had she been successful in overtaking Howard the outlaws' plans would have worked perfectly.

"Now, she thought, if she could only find Howard Jerome with her news he would be able to foil the outlaws, and then take care of Black Geary. But the very fact that Duke McBride had spoken so frankly indicated clearly that he did not intend to let her go on.

"You are outlaws," she charged suddenly. "I won't stay here." She touched Banty with the spurs, but as she expected the reins were gripped by strong hands.

"Sorry, but we'll have to keep you with us, unless you can give some good reason why we should let you go," McBride said, and his men snickered.

The girl's eyes dropped and chanced to rest upon her sore hand. It gave her an idea.

"I've got blood poison in my hand, an' I've got to git out to Bailey an' find a doctor," she said plaintively.

McBride stared at her hand with manifest unbelief, but when she unwrapped the bandage and displayed the wound he was more than half convinced.

"Damn!" he swore heartily. Outlaw leader that he was he had scarcely the heart to keep a person from the doctor when the consequences were so dangerous as this.

"Well, you'll have to stay here tonight at any rate," he growled. "Git off an' let me see what I can do for that hand."

Della had no option but to obey. While McBride dressed her hand with almost as much skill as Howard Jerome had shown, she saw Banty unsaddled and taken away to the outlaws' horses.

"I can tell better about this hand in daylight," McBride said. The girl noted that he was inclined to show her much more consideration on account of the wound than he would have done otherwise.

Once she overheard him remark to Spot, "Took a lot of nerve for that girl to start on a ride of that kind by herself."

"But she was huntin' for Jerome—don't forgit that," Spot retorted.

Despite her anxiety Della managed to eat the not badly cooked food that was offered her. Later McBride ordered two of the men to set up a small tepee tent which they had along but were not using. They made a bed for her in the tepee, and she retired with the assurances of McBride that she would be unmolested. Being exhausted from her long ride she soon fell asleep.

She was awakened by the men stirring about the fire outside. It was scarcely more than daylight, and as she felt so utterly in their power she decided to stay where she was until they called her out. By the clatter of tin dishes she presently knew they were having breakfast, and later she heard them saddling up, and some of them rode away.

Getting to her knees she pushed the canvas aside slightly and peered out. Was it possible that there could be a chance to sneak away while they were not looking. That hope was doomed to immediate disappointment as she saw the man Bigbee hunkered down a few yards away. He, obviously, had been left on guard.

A few minutes later she saw McBride himself coming toward the tent, and getting to her feet and making herself as

presentable as she could she stepped out to meet him.

"Go down to the creek there if you want to wash," he said curtly, and tossed her a towel and a bar of soap.

The creek was heavily lined with brush and small timber. The girl was quickly out of sight of the camp, and the temptation to make a dash for freedom was almost overpowering. For a moment she was poised like a young deer ready for flight, but the futility of it impinged upon her brain before she did anything rash. Alone. and on foot, in a mountain wilderness, miles from anyone who could help her she sensed it would be useless. And she was sure that McBride would quickly follow and overtake her if she did not quickly return.

The cold, mountain water freshened and invigorated her immensely. She thought that McBride gave her a faint glance of approval when she came back.

"Eat your breakfast, an' I'll have another look at that hand," he said.

After she had eaten she was able to face the outlaw chief with a degree of confidence. He dressed the wound thoroughly with only a word or two of comment until he had finished.

"It's got to be taken care of, but there's no blood poison yet," he said judicially. "As soon as I git a little time I'll take you to a doctor—if it still needs it—but right now you'll have to content yourself right here."

"And if I don't?" Della queried evenly.

"I can spare Bigbee here to watch you," McBride said, watching her closely.

The thought of being left alone with any of the outlaws, saving possibly McBride himself, was terrifying to the girl. McBride seemed to read her mind.

"If you'll give me your word not to leave here you'll be left alone. It wouldn't be anything but suicide for you to try to leave anyway, because we ain't leavin' no horses. Will you give it?"

Della was silent a moment; then she said, "Yes, I'll promise."

Half an hour later she was left alone. Her first care was to verify McBride's statement that no horses would be left. In dumb misery she sat down. She knew well enough that she could not leave the place even if she had not given her word. She might walk back to the place where she had encountered the two outlaws, but she could never make it back to the mountain valley on foot, nor could she hope to reach Bailey. And she had no idea where Howard Jerome's camp might be. There was nothing to do but content herself as best she could, as Duke McBride had advised. She knew that if she once gave way to panic she would be done for.

But there was the always present fear that some of the outlaws might take it into their heads to sneak back. There was the worry about her folks, and now a strong fear that something might happen to Howard Jerome.

The day dragged by monotonously. Because she had nothing else to do she built a fire and cooked herself a dinner which she did not eat. Always there was the temptation to run away, but always her commonsense was strong enough to overcome it. To run would be foolish and perhaps fatal, but if she stayed there was a chance that when she did escape it would be with some probability of success. She might at least get a horse, and some way she believed that Duke McBride would not let any real harm come to her, for a while at least.

An hour before sunset she heard someone coming, and withdrew into her tent. Two men rode up, and when she recognized them it was too late for her to leave the tent. Again a terror that was purely physical gripped her. One of the men was Spicer, the chinless associate of Duke McBride, but he was obviously a prisoner of Black Geary—and in mortal fear of his life.

"Now, yuh damned worm, if the gal ain't here I'm goin' t' wring yore neck like a chicken—an' it'd serve yuh damn' well for tryin' to make a prisoner outa me," Geary said hoarsely.

The man was well nigh insane with rage, and Della realized that she was likely to see murder committed on the spot if she did not show herself.

## X

OUTWARDLY calm, but inwardly quaking Della stepped out of the tent. Geary was actually surprised to see her, and his jaw dropped for a moment before clutching at the perpetual pipe.

"So yuh are here, huh," he snarled.

Della glanced about swiftly and nervously. If only more of the outlaws would

return—if only she could find some weapon to defend herself. Death, anything, was preferable to falling into the hands of Geary now.

A few feet away she saw a long, sharp butcher knife where she herself had placed it after washing the dishes. With a sudden, swift bound she had it in her hand. Geary gave an ugly laugh.

"Think yuh can hurt me with that?" he sneered, and began to dismount.

"I can at least kill myself before I let you touch me," Della panted as she began warily to retreat.

Geary swung to the ground and slowly began to advance. Della gave an appealing glance at Spicer, but that outlaw was thoroughly cowed by the man he had attempted to make a prisoner. Then she continued to move backward, but there was strategy in her quick movements.

Though she perhaps had the courage to use the knife on herself as a last resort she was too much of a fighter to give in easily, and if she could not keep out of the way of Black Geary she meant first to try to use the knife on him. But as she retreated she moved in a circle around the outlaws' camp. She was aware that Geary was gradually getting closer to her since he could move faster forward than she could backward. And she knew that the moment she turned her back to him he would quickly overtake her. His lips were parted in an evil grin. He believed she was bluffing with the knife, but he preferred to move carefully rather than take chances.

At last Della reached the place toward which she had been maneuvering—she was between Geary and his horse. It was now or never. She suddenly flung the butcher knife at her foe, blindly; and whirling, raced for Geary's horse. The animal was a roan workhorse, but it had once been a saddle horse, was easy to ride. As she knew, it was capable of considerable speed.

She seized the reins with her well hand, and without troubling to divide them over the horse's head, reached for the saddle horn with the same hand. Her toe touched the stirrup and she scrambled into the saddle as she saw Geary plunging toward her a few feet away. Things were happening almost too fast for her to follow, but she saw blood trickling down the man's wrist from his forearm as she pulled on the reins and implored the roan horse to start.

Then Spicer, in an effort to get out of the way, spun his horse to the right and Geary collided violently with it. The big-ex-convict was off balance and he went sprawling for six feet to come down on his hands and knees.

Della had the roan horse on a run before Geary regained his feet. Her heart was in her mouth as she saw him start to draw his gun. Then he changed his mind, dragged Spicer from his saddle and climbed on to the outlaw's horse.

The girl realized it was to be a desperate chase. She had no chance to choose her course, and now she realized that she was going in a directly opposite way from the one she had come in on. She could do no more than take the best route that opened before her.

Fortunately for her Geary was clumsy on his feet, and it required some little time for him to mount the strange horse. Being a much larger man than the outlaw he had dispossessed, the stirrups were much too short for him. Neither was he anywhere near as good a rider as the girl. Della pushed her toes into the stirrup leathers at the top of the stirrups and found them to be about the right length. Then she gave all her attention to guiding her mount through the timber.

Much of the time she was out of sight of her pursuer, and the roan workhorse with her lighter weight seemed capable of holding his lead indefinitely, unless she should come against some unexpected obstacle which would make her turn back. She leaned ahead and scanned the way ahead of her with painful concentration.

Several times she narrowly avoided riding into some blind pocket from which it would have been impossible to escape.

Twice Geary fired shots which went overhead. His intention being, she guessed, to scare her rather than hurt her. She lost all sense of direction soon after the sun went down, and could only hope that with the approach of darkness the man would give up the pursuit. It seemed to her that it would never get dark, and when it did begin to get that way she found her danger of getting into a cul de sac increased.

Then, plunging wildly down a steep, timbered covered slope, the roan horse, no

longer as supple in the legs as he had been in his youth, stumbled and fell. The girl crashed to the ground with terrific force and lay there unconscious.

The roan horse scrambled to his feet and still in terror of whatever was behind raced on, while Geary, guided by the sound of the horse's flight rather than by sight, swept on by in pursuit without having seen the fall, or the girl who at one time was not twenty feet from his horse's hoofs.

At the bottom of the slope was a deep, narrow canyon down which the roan horse turned. Two miles or so farther down Geary overhauled the animal and discovered the empty saddle. The man cursed loud and furiously, and the pain from a throbbing though not serious knife cut in his forearm did not conduce to a milder temper.

It was thoroughly dark by this time, especially in the shadows of the timber. To search for the girl now was out of the question. When he had relieved his feelings somewhat by an orgy of cursing the big criminal began to think more collectedly.

There had never been a doubt in his mind that he would be able to work his will with the girl whenever he got ready. He had delayed partly because he did not wish to spoil the pleasure of anticipation, and partly because he needed the help of the Roots to get the gold he desired. He would have been perfectly willing to murder the girl's parents if it became necessary, but he had cherished no such thoughts for them. His reaction toward them was indeed one of easy contempt. When it was all over he meant to give them as much of the gold as he thought they ought to have, and then take their daughter.

Della's dislike of him had afforded only a perverse sort of pleasure until his discovery that she was in communication with outside people. That had made him angry, but when he awakened to find that she had fled the valley in the night he had become insanely furious. He had knocked Andrew Root down, and threatened his wife before catching a horse and starting in search of Della. He had ridden for several hours when the thought occurred to him that he had been fooled by a girl's whimsy—that she would never dare to go away alone. He had returned confidently expecting to find her back home. Convinced again that she had indeed gone, he had taken up the trail with even more anger than before.

He had been obliged to camp for the night before finding any sign of her, and the next day he had suddenly been held up by the man Spicer, who had been sent out to the trail to watch for Howard Jerome. Believing that Geary was only a farmer or ranch hand employed by Jerome Spicer had no hesitancy about stopping him. The outlaw had given the command to halt with a grin, and with no other idea than having a little fun with his victim while he made him give up valuable information.

After half an hour of this baiting Spicer had found himself a very much surprised outlaw when the huge, swarthy man had suddenly leaped upon him recklessly and knocked the gun from his hand before he could use it, and then shaken him until his teeth rattled. Under pressure of the massive fingers of the man Spicer had admitted that he knew where the girl was, and made the further admission that he was a member of the Picket-pin gang of outlaws.

The last had been good news to Geary. If it was only a gang of outlaws he had to contend with he did not worry greatly. He could settle the question of possession of the valley with them, and then go ahead with his work. He had completely terrorized the chinless Spicer and the fellow had not dared to misguide him to the outlaw camp. Geary had been a little afraid that he might be led into a trap, but he had made it so clear to Spicer that he would surely die at the first sign of treachery that he had approached without fear. And with his supreme confidence in his own ability fear was really foreign to his nature.

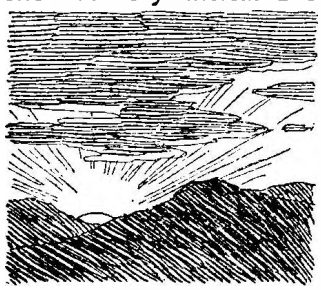
Then Della had daringly and unexpectedly managed to elude him. Now as he stood and cursed, he had no other thought than that the girl had jumped from the horse in the shelter of the darkness and was hiding in the timber near by. But he had the good sense to know that he stood no chance of finding her until morning.

By this time the outlaw he had conquered would probably have communicated with his fellows, and if Della had told them of the gold, and he believed that she had, there was danger that they might get to the valley ahead of him. He could never permit that. If he had to chose between the gold and the girl he would take the gold.

He roared the girl's name a few times, and added the advice that she would surely die in the mountains if he left her alone, but of course there was no reply. And

after a desultory search he mounted the roan horse, and leading the other one set out to find his way back to the main trail, at the same time steering clear of the outlaw camp. The girl he would have to leave to the mercies of nature or the Picket-pin gang if any of them happened to pick her up.

IT WAS several hours before Della regained consciousness. At first she was conscious only of a sharply aching head, and did not realize where she was nor what had happened. But gradually memory was restored to her. She experienced a spasm of fear that Black Geary might find her at any moment and she crouched breathless. Then, as the abysmal silence convinced her that she was alone she realized that considerable time must have passed since her fall. As yet she was very unclear about most things in the immediate past. Geary had been chasing her, but she could not locate herself. The time spent at the outlaw camp seemed as unreal as a dream. The only thing to do was bide her time until daybreak, and that seemed a fearfully long time in coming.



XI

ALL day a herd of range cattle, nearly a thousand in number, had been moving steadily forward under the guidance of six riders, with a cook and a horse wrangler to boot. Everything that Howard Jerome owned was tied up in that herd of cattle.

Son of an old time cattleman he had, upon his father's death, found himself holding the title to a mortgaged ranch, and some cattle on a range that was decreasing so fast that its total disappearance was a matter of only a few years.

Realizing his inability to pay out on the property as it then stood Howard had gone in search of a new home. The memory of a former deer hunt in the Pahsomeroi Mountains had taken him to the mountain valley where he had exercised his homestead and desert right. There, he felt confident, a future cattle ranch with unlimited range could be established.

Returning to his home in the fall he had at once proceeded to close out his holdings there with the exception of the cattle. Starting north early in the spring his cash resources had been pitifully small. About enough, in fact, to pay his men the remainder of the season.

He was aware that he could not put up hay enough that summer to feed his stock through the winter, but there was a great, open desert to the southward where he could manage to pull through, provided he could get the cattle fat before fall. That he had confidently expected to do with the virgin grass of his mountain valley. He had had his misgivings concerning the Picket-pin gang of outlaws, but he had not believed it possible for them to go so far as to jump his claims until he had reached the valley in advance of his men and found other people in possession there. And upon finding out that those trespassers had no shadow of legal right there he would have taken steps to have them ousted at once had it not been for one thing—the girl he had met there.

It was a hope that he might yet avoid trouble which had taken him there the second time, but his interview with Della had convinced him that it were useless to hope for compromise. He had returned to his trail herd with the determination of going in as quickly as possible with his entire crew and having it out with his opponents once for all. But knowing the tactics of the Picket-pin gang as he did, he was not leaving his cattle unprotected as Duke McBride had surmised he would do.

Neither was he expecting immediate attack. Yet all that day the slowly moving herd of cattle was under surveilance of furtive riders who kept carefully out of sight and from time to time reported to Duke McBride.

The reports of these men, and the failure of the man Spicer to report had made it certain to McBride that he had guessed wrong. Jerome, for some reason, was leaving the settlers in the valley to take care of themselves. With only a couple of men left with the cattle it would have been an easy matter to handle the men and remove the cattle where Jerome would have a hard time finding them. In fact McBride planned that when Jerome found his cows and calves, the stronger stuff of the herd, the steers and dry stuff would be disposed of. It would be a blow from which Jerome could not easily recover.

But a full crew of eight men, reasonably alert, discouraged the kind of foray McBride had planned. It required a change of campaign. The midnight raid he had

intended might be successful, but it would certainly be dangerous.

With one man left to try to spy upon the camp of the cattlemen McBride and the other four waited at their rendezvous for word from which they now expected little.

The sudden arrival of Spicer in great agitation told them plainly that something out of the way had happened. Hurriedly the man told of his adventure with Geary, and the subsequent disappearance of Geary and the girl. The man had to submit to a severe grilling before McBride would swallow the yarn.

"An' you don't know whether the girl got away or not?" McBride demanded in a tone that betrayed his secret disappointment. The man was not a monster, but he, too, had been strangely stirred by the girl who had been brought to his camp, and he had nourished hopes.

"I don't know, but I couldn't see a chance for her to dodge that big feller," Spicer said truthfully. "But there's one thing yo're all wrong on. Them people up there don't know a thing about Jerome. The big guy was plumb stumped when I tried to pump him about Jerome. On the other hand after he bowled me over he tried to find out if the girl had give something away about what was really doin' up there."

Duke McBride asked a few more pointed questions, and then lapsed into a thoughtful silence. He was a real leader, and his men waited respectfully for him to declare himself.

"Did any of you ever hear of a lost gold mine here in the Pahsomerois?" McBride suddenly asked.

"There was a yarn," Spot said presently,

"about three deserters from the army havin' killed a man over a gold find up here, but I never took much stock in it."

"But the story was that the deserters were arrested an' sent up for life—I've heard it from old timers," Bigbee spoke up.

"I've heard the same thing," McBride said slowly. "I'm half inclined to believe Spicer is right. That girl was lyin' to us about goin' out to find a doctor. She didn't have blood poison, an' her hand had been well dressed. But everything indicates that she was runnin' away. Now if this big fellow was afraid she'd give somethin' away that they was doin' up there, an' was as desperate as Spicer says he was, they've got somethin' up there besides a nester's claim."

"Yuh don't suppose—" Bigbee said tremulously.

"I don't suppose a damn' thing, but since there ain't much chance of doin' anythin' with Jerome right now I say we'll ride up to that valley an' find out what it's all about," McBride declared crisply.

## XII

IT WAS eleven o'clock the next day when the point men of the Jerome herd gazed in astonishment at the figure of a girl weaving toward them down the side of a high ridge. Sometimes she would trip and fall; other times she would recover herself by grasping a bush or the low swinging limb of a tree, but she was patently on the verge of exhaustion.

"Hold the cattle to the left—don't let 'em git scared an' stampede," Howard Jerome called to the other point man, and touching his horse with the spurs he urged the animal up the side of the ridge at a pace that quickly took its wind, but which brought him to the side of the exhausted girl before she completely collapsed.

He was almost up to her before he recognized her. "My God, Miss Root! What are you doin' here?" he exclaimed as he flung himself from the saddle and caught her in his arms.

"I—I started out to find you," she gasped.

"In these mountains?" He refrained from saying that it was a crazy thing to do, but he thought it. The wonder of it all was that she had succeeded.

"I had to. I had to have help or——"

"Why didn't you tell me when I was up there?" he demanded. And then, feeling infinite pity for her he began to apolo gize; but before he could finish a sentence she had fainted in his arms.

Picking up the girl he began the descent of the hill to where his men were already curiously gathered. One of them he dispatched in a hurry for water, while he proceeded to try to revive the girl. Della opened her eyes before the man returned, and presently to the vast relief of the cowboys, she grinned.

"How did you git here, Miss Root, an' where is your horse?" Howard asked kindly.

"I've had a time," Della confessed. "First I met two fellows who told me they were your men an' would take me to your camp. Instead of that they took me to an outlaw camp."

"Near here?" a cowboy interrupted.

"Not many miles from here. I—I had to promise Duke McBride that I wouldn't leave, an' I was afraid to on foot. Then Black Geary came. I managed to git on his horse, but he chased me for miles on another outlaw's horse till it got dark. My horse fell an' knocked me unconscious. It was way in the night when I came to. I waited till daylight an' then I started out. I was afraid I wouldn't find anybody," the girl explained lucidly enough, though her talk brought little understanding to her hearers.

"Why, you poor little cuss you," Howard murmured and unconsciously tightened the grasp he had maintained around her shoulder. Equally unconsciously the girl sighed and still further relaxed.

A moment later, however, Della sat sharply and tensely erect, and the strained look came back in her eyes. "Geary must have gone back to the valley, an' I'm afraid now he'll murder my folks. Please come back with me, an' help."

"Sure we'll help you," Howard said gently. "But first you've got to have some care, an' then you can tell us more about it. You see we ain't able to follow yuh. We don't know this Geary person, an' I was under the illusion that Duke McBride was the man who had planted you folks up there."

"No, no," Della objected with widened eyes. "We——"

"Not just now," Howard cut in. "Slim go overhaul the cook an' have him cook up something right now. We'll be along purty quick."

He assisted the girl into his saddle and then climbed on behind her. The other men went back to the cattle and Howard guided the horse slowly to where the camp was supposed to be, a mile or so ahead.

They found the cook, a bald headed man of forty by name of Watson, already cooking dinner while Slim assisted slightly and talked more. Slim was quite unable to get over the unexpected appearance of a girl, and he stopped talking to stare at her as Howard lifted her from the saddle.

But Della had not waited for food and rest before telling her story. On the way in she had explained to Howard Jerome the exact details of her family's movements from the time they had first become acquainted with Geary.

"An' to think that I made the mistake of thinkin' you belonged to that outlaw gang," Howard said miserably.

"I'm ashamed that I didn't tell you everything as soon as I learned that you had the best right in there. But I was afraid."

"For me?" he asked.

"Yes-s," she admitted, and he felt a quiet thrill of pleasure.

"This Geary must be a plumb brute, but I reckon we'll dehorn him before we git through," he promised.

But the details of the operation were not so easy to work out. The news that the Picket-pin gang was camped in the immediate vicinity of his cattle and were planning a raid on them was disquieting. On the other hand he realized that the girl's fears for her parents' safety were justified when dealing with a man of Geary's character.

And he was thrilled, too, by the knowledge that there was gold close to the cabin he had built, possibly it was upon his own land. But a moment's reflection was enough for him to decide that it did not belong to him. If Geary had discovered it then it belonged to Geary, subject, of course, to any arrangements the fellow might have made with the Roots; unless there were other sufficient reasons why Geary was not entitled to it.

After dinner had been served to those present Howard persuaded the girl to lie down and rest. Then he sent Slim back to the cattle with word for part of the boys

to come in and eat, and then relieve the rest. Under the circumstances it was not safe to leave the cattle unguarded for a minute. Meanwhile the horse wrangler had brought in the cavvy, and Howard caught his own best horse, and another good horse for Della.

"There's liable to be serious trouble with this Picket-pin outfit," he told his men. "They want our cattle, but more than anything they want to keep us out of that valley I located up there. With a law abidin' outfit up there these mountains won't

be safe for 'em any longer. We've got to figger on a fight."

"We understood all that befo'," drawled Hub Mallory, the foreman.

"We can't leave the cattle, but somebody has got to go on to the valley. There's people up there who are in danger."

He gave them some history of the valley, without, however, mentioning the gold. There was none of his men that he could not trust, but he felt that they would all be better for the business in hand if they knew nothing of it.

"The way it strikes me is that there's more danger up there than there is here," Hub stated judicially. "'Cordin' to this girl's story they figgered on most of us goin' up there an' then raidin' what was left. They know we ain't gone which is why we been let alone. Whoever goes up there will likely meet up with 'em."

"An' if we take most of the crew up there they'll find it out an' make their raid here anyway," Howard asserted.

In the end it was decided that Howard and Slim Jefferson should accompany the girl back to the valley, while the others brought the cattle as fast as possible.

With a good horse under each of them, and two pack horses with beds and supplies the three set out as soon as Della was deemed able to travel, she herself doing the deciding. But in spite of her eagerness and determination she was glad to make an early camp and take a long rest that night.

She was touched by the consideration shown her by the two men. Duke McBride had treated her well enough in a way, but he had let her know that he was master and such treatment as she received was by way of concession only. That, in fact, was the kind of treatment she was used to getting at home. But both Howard and Slim treated her as an equal. Any display of forced gallantry would have been distasteful to her, but they provided for her wants because they were better able to do it than she was, and they considered her the one most vitally interested in a dangerous undertaking.

They were on the trail early the next morning, and thanks to the night's rest Della felt as capable as ever. In spite of her recent misadventures her hand was much better. Howard had offered her an extra six-gun which the outfit carried, but she had declined the offer with the statement that the only weapon she knew how to use was a rifle. They had stowed the extra six-gun away in one of the bed rolls and a rifle under her stirrup leathers.

"Yuh might need it, yuh know," Slim told her with a skeptical grin.

The sun had dropped behind the horizon before they reached the mountain valley, but they kept on, riding single file, until they reached the top of a low divide and saw the valley stretching away vaguely before them.

Della tried vainly to conceal her agitation. "I—I'm afraid," she murmured. "Geary would kill my folks I know unless he thought they might be useful to him."

"That's just it," Howard said with assumed cheerfulness. "We know he can't get along without 'em, so they'll be safe."

He was by no means so certain in his own mind. Both Geary and the outlaws had had time to reach the valley long before. Anything might have happened in that time, especially where gold was the stake.

"We'll have to make a dry camp tonight, an' then I'll ride in an' see what I can find out," he said presently.

"I'll go with you," Della insisted, and he could not change her mind.

"Then there ain't a bit o' sense in me bein' lef' behind," Slim contended, and so the three of them continued their ride along the edge of the valley. They stopped once to leave their pack horses in a well concealed place, and when within half a mile of the cabin they left their saddle horses and Slim, much to that individual's disgust.

Slowly and carefully Howard and Della advanced toward the cabin over ground every foot of which was familiar to both of them.

They had covered about half the distance when the sound of a woman's scream at the cabin brought them sharply to attention.

## XIII

BLACK GEARY had returned to the cabin in a murderous mood. He was convinced that Della could not have got away in the first place without the connivance of her parents. That meant that they intended to double-cross him some way. He believed that the man who had dressed the girl's hand was primarily responsible. Doubtless the fellow had convinced Della that they would be driven out, and would get nothing unless they made terms with him, and then Della had in turn convinced her parents.

He knew well enough that his hold over the Roots would be gone if they ever found out that the proper thing to do was to file a claim on the gold bar. There was his,

handicap. A gold rush would bring officers, and that meant that he must leave.

One thing alone now gave him hope. He had guessed that the man who had conducted him to where Della was was also an outlaw. If she had inadvertently fallen into the hands of an outlaw gang they would see to it that there was no filing done. Therefore, before dealing drastically with the Roots he decided to wait for the other people to show their hand.

However, the look on his face showed little of this restraint when he strode into the cabin upon his return. It was after dark, but the Roots had not gone to bed. As he threw open the door the man and woman inside cowered back in fear, though they had been expecting him, and Root had his rifle across his knees.

"Did you find her, Geary?" Mrs. Root quavered.

"I did," Geary replied harshly.

"Wh—where is she?"

"Where she won't be tryin' no more funny work again," the fellow laughed brutally, content to let them think what they would of his statement.

Mrs. Root gave a low moan and sank to a bench, covering her face with her apron. Root seemed dazed, unable to comprehend.

"She'd overtook them people she talked with before I found her, an' I reckon told 'em about the gold here," Geary stated. "However, I learned that they're outlaws, so they'll only try to run us off."

"Geary, my wife tells me that you made it so our girl had to leave," Root spoke up thickly. "Now are you tellin' me you've attacked an' murdered her?"

"You can think what you damned please," Geary rasped. "You people will do just what I say at all times or I'll sure bump you off."

Suddenly Mrs. Root threw her apron from her face and darted across the floor, screeching incoherently and clawing at the enemy. Andrew got to his feet, fumbling with his rifle.

Geary seized the maddened woman and swung her easily between himself and her husband. Root dared not shoot, and in a moment Geary grabbed the rifle by the barrel and jerked it out of his hands. He jammed the woman down upon a chair, and reversing the rifle stuck the butt against Andrew's breast and sent him spinning against the partition wall.

"Listen": the man said harshly. "I could kill yuh both easy as not, an' it's up to you whether I do or not. Are yuh goin' to take my orders, help me whip them outlaws when they come, git some o' that gold for yoreselves, or shall I finish yuh off right here?"

They implicitly believed that he meant exactly what he said, and, too, Root's disordered mind still was lured by the mention of gold.

"We never meant yuh no harm, Geary. Della sneaked out while we was asleep. We'll do what yuh say," Root promised.

"What about you?" Geary demanded of the woman, the only one he feared.

"We're helpless—we gotta do what you want," she said sulkily.

"All right. Tomorrow we'll move out o' here. But try no runnin' out on me before that time because I'll be expectin' it," Geary declared, and slouched out, taking Root's rifle with him.

The Roots spent a miserable night; not daring to move for fear of Geary and each blaming the other for the plight they were in, and for the fate which they believed had overtaken Della.

"I mean to kill him the first time I git a chance," Mrs. Root declared dully. "I'll do that much for Della.

"Woman, yo're a fool. He's too much for us, but once we git this gold we'll report him to the law an' he'll hang," Andrew said.

"You're the one that's crazy—you an' your gold! Think he'll let us git out of this alive, let alone havin' any gold, after what he's done?" his wife retorted.

"I don't know, I don't know," Andrew droned. "The gold—we gotta think o' that first of all. But I'll watch him."

Geary came before daybreak, demanding that breakfast be cooked. When it was over they began preparations to move, the Roots not daring to ask any questions as to where they were going, nor why.

Under his direction they loaded the wagon which they used to haul their tools about, with bedding and a week's supply of food, and then Geary made them drive it over the ridge to where they intended to divert the water into the uncompleted ditch. This being as far as they could take the wagon, they carried the supplies on their backs a considerable distance up the creek through a dense thicket of small trees and brush to an open space only

large enough to contain their things and give them room to walk about them. Then, for the first time, he deigned to tell them what it was all about.

"We gotta fool them people when they come—make 'em think I ain't got back yet. You people will continue to live in the cabin, and I camp up here. When they come you won't make any resistance, but you'll tell 'em when they ask that yo're huntin' for gold all right. Yuh'll tell 'em that this ditch is just a bluff, an' that the gold is here where we mean t' put in the dam. That'll bring 'em up here in a hurry, an' as yuh know there's a lot o' dynamite planted here t' shoot this rock across the creek. When they git here I'll be watchin' an' blow 'em to hell."

"You expect us to help you murder—?" Andrew began, but paused as his wife nudged him vigorously in the ribs.

"It's our only chance to git any of that gold, an' that's all that's left to us now," Mrs. Root said earnestly.

"The gold. Yes, we've got to have that gold," Root admitted.

Geary smiled grimly as he listened to their talk. He could almost guess at their conversation as they drove back to the cabin. Mrs. Root, he knew, contemplated treachery. Their usefulness to him was about at an end. It would be hard to wash out the bar alone, but it could be managed some way if he could not get other help. The immediate problem was to deal with these men whom Della had encountered. And that, he felt, could be handled very nicely. Long before he had planted dynamite under the cabin, with a thin, concealed wire leading from it to an equally concealed battery hid in the brush a few hundred feet distant.

If he knew human nature at all, and he prided himself he did, there would first be a conference in the cabin between the Roots and the other people. A simple touch of a button and that crowd would trouble him no more.

He followed the Roots almost back to the cabin, and stationing himself where he could spy with safety he waited for developments.

Almost as soon as the team was unhitched Andrew Root departed up the gulch toward the gold bar. Geary chewed at the stem of his empty pipe and waited. Less than half an hour later he saw seven men emerge from the timber a short distance from the edge of the meadow. They galloped rapidly across the open space and up to the grove where the cabin was located. They were well spread out and obviously ready for any kind of a reception.

Geary was not the least surprised when he saw Mrs. Root go out to meet them. He could see her talking excitedly; then he saw the leader of the gang get off his horse, and give his men very obvious instructions to have a look around. Then the leader and Mrs. Root went into the cabin.

It was not just what Geary wanted or expected. With a muffled curse he beat a retreat. It would not do to be discovered, but he could not use the battery anyway until more of his foes were in the cabin.

## XIV

MRS. ROOT'S first inquiry naturally was regarding her daughter, and Duke McBride as naturally parried the question with another as to her personal appearance and the reason for her disappearance.

"She run away from here to escape a brute named Geary. He follered her, but come back without her. I'm sure from what he says that he murdered her," she informed.

It was then that Duke ordered his men to look around the place while he talked with Mrs. Root.

"You won't find Geary here, but I can tell you where he is if you're men enough to avenge the wrongs of a poor family that ain't done no harm to anybody," she said.

"We happen to be lookin' for that very man, Ma'am, an' furthermore this place belongs to us, so the boys will look around," McBride said firmly.

"But my girl?" Mrs. Root demanded.

McBride seated himself on a bench and frowned. "I did see your daughter," he said. "She came to my camp. While we were away this man Geary came. He was seen by one of my men. They went away together. We thought they had come back here. If they haven't—" He stopped with a gloomy shake of the head that was not all affected.

"Then he has murdered her! Oh! Oh! May he burn in hell till—" the woman suddenly fainted.

It required ten minutes for McBride to revive her.

"Be as calm as you can, Ma'am," McBride advised. "There's a chance that he has only hid her somewhere, an' if he has we'll find her. But first we got to know where he is so we can git him."

"I can tell you, but I can tell you, too, that he's a devil. He expected you men to come an' he's layin' for you."

McBride gave a nervous start. "Why didn't you say so before?" he demanded.

"He ain't right here. He told us to tell you when you come that he'd be up on another creek where he's got a gold mine."

McBride certainly picked up his ears at that. "But why did he tell you to tell us?" he wondered.

"Because he wanted to git you over there where he could blow you all up," she said.

McBride suddenly became livid with anger. Regardless of the presence of the woman he swore whole-heartedly, and vowed vengeance. But he did not lose track of the main item.

"Is that really where the gold is?" he demanded.

"It was just a lie. I ain't seen no gold," Mrs. Root answered stolidly.

"Look here woman: we can help you an' will, but you've got to come clean first. This is our ground an' we got to know where that gold is."

"Will you help find my girl if I tell you?"

"We sure will," McBride promised eagerly.

"An'—an' will yuh do the right thing by us—give us our share o' the gold?" she insisted, not entirely unforgetful of the lure that had brought them to the valley.

"H-m, if it really pans out, of course," he agreed.

He got the whole story then, though the excited woman was incoherent at times. The outlaw leader was more excited than he had been for years. He knew that he must work fast. Geary would have to be eliminated, and then they would have to turn their attention to Howard Jerome. The cattle outfit simply could not be permitted to enter the valley now.

His men had again gathered outside the cabin, but it was getting dark. It was no time, he decided, to tell his men about the gold. Time enough for that later. He contented himself by informing them that Geary had brutally murdered the girl, and that Mrs. Root would conduct them to the fellow's hiding place.

"Didn't you find my husband?" Mrs. Root asked.

"Nary a sign of anybody, ma'm," Spot replied.

"He could just as well show yuh," she said. "You men wait here an' I'll go git him. He's up—" She stopped suddenly, and Duke McBride sensed the reason why.

"Just wait here, boys, till me an' this lady finds her husband. Maybe you'd better git you somethin' to eat."

"You're welcome to our grub," Mrs. Root assured them. McBride had mentioned dressing Della's sore hand, and after that she had no doubt that these were the men Della had gone out to find. Now that they were going to help her get revenge upon the monster whom she now saw in his true colors nothing was too good for them.

McBride urged her to mount one of the men's horses but she declined, preferring to walk along by the side of McBride's horse.

It was then beginning to get dark, but the skulker in the adjacent timber was still able to see what was going on. He followed the man and woman up the gulch, heard her shouting for Andrew, and as it grew darker he heard finally Andrew's hoarse voice in reply. Then the three were congregated at the end of the gold bar.

Geary's face was distorted by fury, though he had expected the Roots to do this very thing. He fingered the trigger of his rifle nervously. He was minded to commence pouring lead immediately, but finally curbed his temper. It would be better to wipe them all out together.

He followed them back to the cabin, and established himself again by his battery. But again he was disappointed as McBride called his men outside. There was a hurried conference, and then two of the outlaws went for the horses that were grazing on the meadow a short distance away. It began to look as if they would never all get into the cabin.

When the horses were brought up the men all mounted, but it was discovered that there was no mount for Root.

"You stay here with the woman, Spicer—yuh ain't much good nohow," Duke Mc-

Bride ordered, and Spicer gave up his horse to Root.

The men clattered away, and Geary had no difficulty guessing their objective. He waited until they were out of sight, and then yielding to an impulse he approached the cabin. Mrs. Root was there, and she was the one primarily responsible for the treachery. And he was sure that the man left behind was the fellow he had previously intimidated when following Della. They would not be hard to handle, and if, when the others returned from their fruitless search, they should find these two bound and gagged in the cabin they would be pretty certain to all gather in or near the cabin long enough for him to blow them to destruction.

Mrs. Root had just started to clean up the mess of dishes left by the men, and Spicer was trying to quizz her about the gold mine when Geary appeared in the doorway. Mrs. Root took one look at the grim expression on the face of the ex-convict and knew instantly that the fellow was wise to her plan to have him captured. She read murder in his eyes, and all the old fear of him came back. As the .44 in his hand came up to cover Spicer she shut her eyes and screamed at the top of her voice.

The next moment Geary leaped across the floor and clapped his hand over her mouth.

"Shut up or I'll choke the life outa yuh," he ordered. He hurled her violently into a corner of the room, and then turned his attention to the dumbfounded Spicer. "Unbuckle yore gun belt an' let it drap," he ordered, and was obeyed.

"Now take that piece o' string layin' there an' tie the old woman to that table," he continued.

Spicer leaped to obey. He had tied Mrs. Root's hands behind her and was dragging her to the table; then he paused and his lower jaw dropped. The sight of still another stranger in the doorway was perfectly disconcerting. The direction of his gaze caused Geary to whirl toward the door also.

Howard Jerome slightly misinterpreted the scene before him. At the sound of a woman's desperate scream he had bounded toward the cabin, easily distancing the girl. But as he reached the door and saw a man manhandling a woman his attention centered upon that man rather than the other man in the room. He had sighted both men, and for all he knew there might be others. It was no time for preliminaries. One of Spicer's legs offered a perfect mark and he fired at it.

Wise enough to dodge immediately after pulling the trigger Howard jumped back. The bullet from Black Geary's gun ripped into the door jamb close to his head and showered him with splinters. He stepped back in, firing from the waist; but Geary's hand swept the coal oil lamp from the table, plunging the room in darkness and spoiling his aim.

A moment after that Howard collided violently with the leaping body of the huge ex-convict. Howard was no dwarf, and knew how to take care of himself in any ordinary rough and tumble, but he had not the weight to resist such a catapult. He was knocked backward to the ground, and only just managed to retain his grip on his gun. The back of his head collided with something that made him see stars.

Howard sat up quickly but dizzily, but his assailant was not pushing his advantage. Indeed, he saw the blurred form of his foe just disappearing, while from the other side Della came running.

"Howard! Howard! Are you hurt?" the girl gasped anxiously.

"No, I just got bumped. We—we've got to git your mother out. She's inside there, an' the cabin's afire," Howard answered shakily.

But Mrs. Root had managed to find her way outside, and Della flew to her. The girl's arms went about her mother, and it was not for a minute that she observed that her embrace was not returned.

"Why, Mother, what's the matter?" she exclaimed.

"My hands is tied, Della—an' I thought you were dead."

"Mother, has Geary—has he done—anything—to—to pa?" the girl faltered, while with nimble fingers she sought to untie the string around her mother's wrists.

"Yore pa has gone to guide the men to where we thought Geary was hidin', but he just come back, Geary I mean, an' made the man who stayed behind tie me up. Then that man there came in an' shot Spicer instead of Geary," Mrs. Root explained breathlessly.

"My God, did I git the wrong man?" Howard queried weakly. His head was beginning to clear, and suddenly he rushed back into the cabin, almost falling over Spicer as he did so, who was dragging himself to the door.

The fire caused by the overturned lamp was spreading rapidly along the dry walls of the cabin. Howard seized the one

bucket of water in the house and dashed it on the flames, but with no appreciable effect. He next attacked the flames with his coat, but the smoke strangled him, and he was forced to retreat.

The two women suddenly realized that the fire was seriously threatening the cabin, and joined their efforts with those of Howard, but ten minutes of desperate fighting demonstrated that the cabin was doomed. Not until then did Howard pay any real atention to the man he had shot.

"You say this fellow was being forced to tie your hands, Mrs. Root?" he demanded.

"Yes. Black Geary had a gun on him," was the reply.

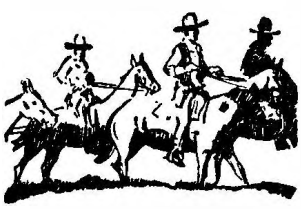
"But who is he?" Howard wondered.

Della took her first look at the fellow. "Why, this is Spicer—one of Duke McBride's men," he said.

"A Picket-pin outlaw, huh," Howard said grimly. "My mistake was in thinkin' the other fellow belonged to the gang, too. Where's the rest of your outfit, Buddy?"

Spicer lay sullenly silent, but Mrs. Root looked her amazement.

"Della, you told me you was goin' for help. Seven men come tonight, an' they had seen you. This man was one of 'em. What do yuh mean talkin' about outlaws?"



"They are outlaws, Mother. This is Howard Jerome, who is our friend," Della answered.

"But I thought they was the ones," the worried older woman said. "Why, the leader said he had dressed that hand o' yours."

"He did. That was Duke McBride, Mother—the man who gave us three days to git out of here."

Mrs. Root began to sway from side to side and moan. "I showed that man the ridge up the gulch that Geary calls the gold bar," she said. "If they're outlaws, too, what'll they do to us?"

Howard was once more in complete possession of his mental faculties. He realized that there were two women in dire peril unless he could get them away from the valley.

"We've got to git out of here at once," he said. "Not only is Geary still at large, but me an' Slim can't fight the whole Picket-pin gang."

"An' leave the valley to these people?" Della demanded. It seemed to him that there was a tinge of regret in her tone.

"Only for the present," he explained patiently. "We'll come back with the law at our back."

"But—my father? He is with those men?"

"You take your mother an' go back tc Slim. I'll see what I can do," Howard suggested.

Della vetoed it instantly. "You don't know pa. I guess we'll have to go leave him, but—" She stopped abruptly as they heard the thud of horses' feet.

"They're coming back," she said. "They've seen the fire." Suddenly she realized what it would mean for them to fall into McBride's hands. She caught her mother's arm on one side, while Howard grasped the older woman by the other arm, and they ran toward Slim and the horses. But the excitement had unnerved Mrs. Root at last, and she impeded their progress. They were scarcely out of sight when the horsemen dashed up to the cabin.

"Go ketch Jerome—he just went that way with the women. He shot me," they heard Spicer fairly scream.

The men gathered in front of the burning cabin while Duke McBride hurled a few rapid fire questions at the wounded outlaw.

"Come on boys, we've got to git Jerome," McBride yelled and put the spurs to his horse. Spot and Bigbee were close beside him, but the others were a moment later getting started.

And then there was a terrific roar. The burning remainder of the cabin was obliterated in a great cloud of smoke that shot skyward like a great, inverted pyramid. An instant after the mass of smoke was broken by falling chunks of fire as bits of the debris came down in a shower. Yells and cries of anguish punctuated the noise made by the falling wreckage.

Howard and the two women crouched together under a tree while small particles of the destroyed cabin fell about them. They could scarcely see how the people nearer the cabin had escaped at all.

A moment later, however, they saw three men riding furiously toward them. Howard pushed the women behind the tree, and tried to conceal himself, but without avail. He was sighted by Duke McBride, and the outlaw leader suddenly reined his horse, brought up his six-gun and fired. The bullet slapped into the tree beside Howard's body. The cowboy had fired at almost the same instant, but he, too, had scored a miss by a scant margin.

Then Spot was on one side of the tree and Bigbee on the other. To resist further, Howard realized, was to endanger the lives of the woman.

"Don't shoot again," he called to McBride.

"Drop yore gun then," the outlaw commanded, his white, even teeth flashing a grin of triumph.

Howard allowed his six-gun to fall to the ground and faced his enemies with cool indifference. Inwardly he was plunged in gloom. Had Duke McBride not known of the gold the situation would have been serious enough; yet Howard felt that the outlaw would at least have spared his life after seeing to it that he did not return to the Pahsomerois. But with a gold mine of much promise at stake the situation was different. McBride or any other outlaw would not be likely to let anyone go free to set the law on him with so much at stake.

And Howard was more concerned about the women, or about Della at least. He realized suddenly that the girl meant far more to him than his own life. His arm suddenly went about her protectingly, and she fitted into his sheltering arm.

Their one hope now was Slim Jefferson —a hope that proved short-lived. For Slim having left his horses to see what was going on, and seeing the cluster of people under the trees had got too close and suddenly found himself covered by a gun in the unwavering hand of the villainous Spot.

## XV

DUKE McBRIDE took only time enough to make sure that there were no more of Jerome's men about, and then herded the captives back to the ruins of the cabin. It was a ghastly scene, one that should have satisfied even Black Geary's blood lust.

Two of the outlaws were dead, and another was pinned to the ground under a bit of burning wreckage, and was obviously dying. Spicer had fared better than any of the others, and had escaped with only minor injuries in addition to his wound. To add to the horror of the scene were the mangled bodies of the outlaws' horses.

"What damn' fools, to keep dynamite in the house!" McBride raved.

"There wasn't any. I know there wasn't," Mrs. Root denied hysterically.

Howard attempted in vain to shield the girl from the sight of broken men and horses.

"Pa must be here somewhere," she cried. "Let me find him."

"Shut up," Spot roared harshly. "The old pill couldn't keep up with us comin' back, so he'll be all right."

"This is a mess," McBride said stormily. "Half of the gang wiped out, an' this on our hands."

"You'd better listen to a compromise, McBride," Howard said.

"Compromise hell! Any time we compromise it means we git beat out of this gold, an' we don't," the man retorted.

"Strikes me the population o' this valley needs thinin' out some more," Spot said brutally. "We can handle the women maybe, but these other fellers are a damn' liability."

"Well, tie 'em up to a tree for the present, an' tie 'em damn' solid," McBride ordered. "We got to see what we can do for Swasey."

Spot and Bigbee carried out the order while McBride himself watched the women. Then the men returned, and Spot stood guard over the women while McBride and Bigbee turned their attention to the two wounded outlaws. There was still enough burning debris and wreckage lying about to make it almost as light as day.

The outlaws had for the time being forgotten Black Geary, and they had not at any time perhaps taken him very seriously. Jerome and his outfit was what concerned McBride most, and he felt that despite his own losses he had the cattlemen foul.

The air was suddenly shattered by the report of a rifle. Bigbee, kneeling over Spicer at the moment, keeled gently on over and lay still while Spicer implored someone to take him off.

At the first shot McBride and Spot leaped madly for the nearest place out of the revealing light. Wham! came the rifle report again, and Duke McBride with a curse on his tongue stumbled and fell.

Spot alone gained the sheltering darkness. He paused to return the fire, but the assailant was invisible. It was too much for Spot. He had seen all of his companions stricken down, and this sudden death that seemed to lurk on every hand struck temporary terror to his soul. He suddenly shoved his gun back in the holster and took to his heels, crashing blindly into trees and

bushes while perspiration largely inspired by fear, half blinded him.

The man brought up sharply when he spied three horses that he had almost missed, the ones ridden by Howard, Slim and Della. That recalled him to his senses. He untied them quickly, mounted one and went on leading the others. His course was taking him along the edge of the meadow in the fringe of timber, the same way Howard, Della and Slim had come in. Presently he discovered the two pack animals. His spirits began to rise. With an outfit of this kind he could live in the hills a long time if necessary. The man Geary would see to Jerome and his friends, and there might be a chance for him to ambush Geary in turn. He might not be able to stop Jerome's men for a while, but he could gather a gang of his own and take care of them; then work the gold mine in peace. With all five horses in his possession he decided to wait where he was till things had a chance to settle down.

But a moment after Spot's hurried departure Black Geary came charging out of the brush. Della had already reached Howard and was tearing at the ropes that bound him with feverish, frantic fingers. Geary was upon her before the first knot was untied and hurled her aside. He swung his clubbed rifle with the intention of smashing Howard's skull. The man had gone berserk with gold madness.

The girl gathered herself and rushed back in time to grasp Geary's arm and deflect his blow. The gun butt struck Howard a glancing blow on the shoulder, inflicting a painful but not serious injury.

With a grunt Geary let the rifle drop and turned his attention to Della.

"I'll break you o' suckin' eggs right now," he snarled. "I'm goin' t' tie yuh to that wagon wheel till I tend them birds, an' then yuh'll do as I say or I'll whip the life outa yuh," he told her heavily.

"You'd better kill me straight off, because you can't never conquer me," she panted defiantly.

It was no easy matter for him to handle her, for she fought back with all the strength of her vigorous young body. Finally, however, he seemed to have her backed against the wheel. Then, suddenly, he let go with both hands and emitted a yell of surprised agony.

He followed the yell with a string of bitter oaths while he tore and cuffed at a small, snarling object venting a long contained hatred by viciously clinging to the calf of the oppressor's leg. For at last Judas had seen his chance while his tormentor was struggling with the one thing that had ever been kind to him. The wire holding the wolf pup was just long enough to permit it to fasten its teeth in the man's tender flesh, and those teeth were long and sharp.

The moment the man released his hold Della darted back to Howard and Slim.

"Git away! Run! For God's sake git to the horses an' go back an' git our boys," Howard told her.

"But he'll kill you," she cried despairingly.

"He'll kill us all if you stay," Howard argued.

"'Tain't no lie, sister. Our only chance is fer yuh t' git away an' bring Hub Mallory an' the boys here on the run," Slim added.

No thought of obeying them entered Della's mind. She knew Geary too well, and knew that they would find only dead men when they returned if she did get away. But she had many times thought of what she would do if Geary ever attempted to do what he now seemed bent on, and always her thoughts had had to do with a rifle. A rifle bullet alone she felt could check the man's career. She remembered that there was a rifle under the stirrup fenders of her saddle. If she could only get that——

She broke and ran with all the speed she could muster, and was almost lost in the darkness again before Geary finally released his hold on the wolf pup's throat and hurled its inert body the full length of the wire. He glanced around for the girl and just managed to catch a glimpse of her. There was no time to bother with the men if he was not to lose her, and they were tied up anyway. He lumbered away in pursuit, but the agile girl was able to hold her own.

Breathless, weak and gasping Della reached the spot where they had left their horses. And then black despair settled over her when she discovered that they were gone.

Only one chance appeared to remain to her—to dodge the enemy and make him lose sight of her in the trees and darkness. Heretofore they had been running along the edge of the meadow where the timber was broken by open spaces. Now with a final desperate spurt she raced up hill into the thick timber.

Geary was still in pursuit. She could hear him pounding through the timber recklessly, and she realized that she could

not long hold the pace. She heard the man stumble and fall; his oaths did not tell her that his mangled calf was hurting him and impeding his progress, but such was the case. Then she saw a huge black stump that was burned out on one side. With a prayer that he might overlook her she dropped into the burned out cavern. And Geary passed her by and disappeared despite the frantic beating of her heart and her painful efforts to suppress her loud breathing.

## XVI

IT SEEMED to Howard and Slim that their one chance now depended upon Mrs. Root. They were sure the woman was unhurt but she was in hysterics and their appeals made no impression upon her whatever.

Then Howard saw a man crawling painfully toward them. He could make only a few feet of progress and then be obliged to stop. Each time his head would drop to the ground, and it seemed to them that he would never come on. At last Howard could see that it was his arch-enemy, Duke McBride; but what the man's present intentions might be he could only guess.

At last, after what seemed ages to the tied up men, Duke McBride reached Howard's feet. Ensued another age while the outlaw chief rested, and then he began to fumble in his pocket. With tremendous relief they saw him produce a knife.

But would his strength last long enough for him to use it? The suspense dragged their souls like the teeth of a harrow.

The outlaw got one hand upon Howard's knee, and after a bitter struggle that must have been torture to him he dragged himself to his knees and slashed once, twice, three times.

"There, damn' you," he croaked, and slumped to the ground, dead.

It was not difficult for Howard to release himself after that though one arm was strangely numb. Then with the knife he managed to quickly liberate Slim.

Slim bent over and folded the dead outlaw's arms over his chest. "Ole boy, we'll git yuh a clean shirt an' plant yuh proper jest as soon as we find the girl an' git that shootin', dynamitin' side-winder that's pryin' up all this hell," he said.

They were to reckon with the blood-mad Geary sooner than they bargained for.

"There's some guns scattered around here, an' we're liable t' need em," Howard murmured, and stooped to look for McBride's weapon. But either he had dropped it when he was shot or it had fallen from the holster during his weary crawl to cut them loose.

They started to move toward the bodies of the other outlaws, but Howard reached out and brought his companion to a halt.

"Stop!" he muttered. "He's comin' back, He can shoot us before we can find a gun. As we were!"

They "froze" to the [illegible] where they had been roped, hoping that the absence of the ropes might not be noticed in the darkness.

Geary came limping forward somewhat hurriedly. He could make out the two prisoners as he had left them and for the moment he failed to observe the body of the dead man almost at their feet.

"I'll learn you damn' fools to come in here an' try to bust up my game," he said loudly.

He all but stumbled over the body of Duke McBride. "What the hell?" he demanded, and stooped over to have a look.

Then Howard and Slim were upon him. Their combined assault bowled him over but they failed to pin him to the ground. For the first time they fully realized his tremendous size and strength. One huge paw caught Slim by the belt and with a seemingly careless swing he tossed the cowpuncher several feet away. Then with a bound he was upon Howard.

Howard side-stepped the gigantic ruffian, and a moment later he shot his left into Geary's jaw and got away again. He knew he had far greater speed than his big foe, and Geary was handicapped also by his lacerated leg. On the other hand Howard could do little with his right hand on account of his bruised shoulder.

Then Slim was on his feet and fighting mad. "Jest fer that yuh big bloke I'm gonna bust yuh wide open," he declared as he rushed in blindly.

Geary paused in his tracks, and without making any effort to block Slim's wild swing took it squarely in the face. It did no more than rock him back on his heels. Then, before Slim could recover his balance, a difficult thing to do with his high-heeled boots, Geary landed a mighty blow to the puncher's jaw and Slim passed out of the picture.

Realizing that now the fight was entirely up to him Howard faced the rushing giant grimly. He must depend upon his footwork absolutely until he could get a chance to get his hands on a gun. It was no easy thing to do there where it was just dark enough to obscure the many pieces of

broken wood—and worse—that fairly strewed the ground. Had it been lighter he might have found a gun without difficulty, but the foe certainly gave him no time to grope around.

More than once Howard felt the man's clutching fingers, but each time he managed to jerk loose; while again and again his hard left hand smashed into the fellow's brutal face. He realized presently that Geary was tiring and slowing up. Already badly winded from his chase after Della Geary was finding himself weakening badly. For the first time he realized that he might not succeed in getting his hands on this enemy and crush him as he wanted to. Then for the first time since the fight started he thought of the six-gun at his hip.

Howard had been watching for his opponent to attempt to draw, and he saw the fellow's hand go toward the gun. Instantly he stopped and started a vicious kick at the man's hand. The hard toe of his boot caught the under side of Geary's wrist; the gun flew up and back over Geary's shoulder. For the second time that night Geary emitted a yell of pain, and grabbed his wrist. In an instant Howard was running toward the ruins of the cabin.

"Damn yuh, git off me," he heard somebody croak, and guided by the sound he found the wounded Spicer vainly trying to rid himself of the incubus of a dead man across his chest.

Frantically Howard turned the dead man over and his hand came in contact with the handle of a revolver. In a flash he jerked it out and whirled just in time to meet Geary once more bearing down upon him with a hoarse bellow of insane rage.

Howard pulled the trigger three times—and he knew that each shot went home—before he brought Geary down. At the last shot the big form of the ex-convict sprawled heavily forward across Spicer.

"Heck, I ain't no cemetery. I wish they'd quit pilin' their dead folks on me," that worthy whined.

Thoroughly sickened by the night's ghastly business Howard reeled against the nearest tree. Presently he saw a vague form rushing forward with wildly swinging arms, and he wondered if there was still another man to fight and perhaps kill.

"Lemme hit 'im again," begged the strange figure, and Howard sighed with relief as he recognized Slim's voice.

Presently Slim was made to realize that the fight was over.

"It looks like we shore whipped 'em proper, but where's the girl I'd like t' know?" he asked.

"She should be on her way out to the boys, but this brute followed her. If he did catch her—" Howard paused as the horror of the thing impinged upon his mind. He turned Geary over, but the man was dead. There could be no information from that source, and he let the body roll back upon Spicer.

"Come on, Slim, we've got to find out if she got away," Howard urged.

"Don't leave me alone with them corpses," Spicer pleaded.

"Reminds me I may need a gun, an' you prob'ly got one," Slim said. He found the gun and dashed after Howard while Spicer cursed and cried impotently.

By accident they ran across the horses that had belonged to McBride and Bigbee. Hastily mounting they rode on to where they had left their own mounts.

"She must have got away," Howard said hopefully.

They rode to where they had left the two pack horses, and found them missing. Completely puzzled they looked at each other helplessly.

"She wouldn't have took 'em all," Slim stated the obvious.

"One outlaw got away," Howard mused. "Either him or Geary——"

"If it would only come daylight," Slim lamented.

"You go on back an' git some of the boys," Howard said decisively. "I've got a hunch that Della is still here, an' I'm goin' to stick."

He rode slowly back to the destroyed cabin and its gruesome sights, only partly concealed by the darkness. The range he had been prepared to fight for meant nothing to him now; neither did the gold mine with its presumably fabulous wealth. The one thing in the world that mattered was a slim, courageous girl.

He found Spicer still cursing his luck, but Mrs. Root was better. He shouted the girl's name at the top of his voice but there was no reply. To hunt for her in the dark was a waste of time, so he turned his attention to the men. All of them were beyond help except Spicer. He carried Spicer to a clean, open place and to the best of his ability cared for the outlaw's wounds while Mrs. Root stood by and declared

again and again that her husband and daughter were both dead; that the gold had killed them, and would destroy anyone who had anything to do with it.

The long night ended at last, and with the coming of daylight came Andrew Root. There was a great lump on his head where he declared he had been hit with a gun in the hands of one of the men he had undertaken to guide the evening before, but his mind was fairly clear.

"When they saw the cabin afire they turned back, an' one of 'em said he bet they was bein' double-crossed. I said he was a liar, an' then I got hit. That's all I know," the contractor explained.

Howard explained things to them as best he could and assured them that Della was safe and had gone for help. He could not believe it himself, but it served to steady them. Then there were six dead men to be buried, and that had to be attended to at once.

Root caught up one of his teams and a grave large enough for all the outlaws was dug out with plow and scraper. They returned to where the cabin had stood, and were just in time to see five horses coming out of the timber.

With an exclamation of relief Howard recognized his own horses. But on one of the horses rode a dejected looking outlaw with a badly pock-marked face. On another was Della Root.

The three people on the ground ran to welcome the girl, but it was Howard who assisted her from the saddle. Her arms went about his neck, but he noticed that one small, capable hand held a six-shooter.

"My Lord, girl, where have you been?" he asked her with a palpable tremor of excitement in his voice.

"When I got away from Geary last night I found these horses, but I found this man, too. He had me helpless before I knew he was there, an' then he made me go with him," she explained. "I guess he figgered on finishin' up what Black Geary had begun."

"But how did you manage to—to beat him?"

A trace of a smile appeared on Della's face. "You remember that gun you wanted me to carry an' I wouldn't?" she asked. "You packed it away among the dishes. When we stopped to git breakfast this man made me unpack. Said he had just as well start breakin' me in."

She paused and Howard glowered murderously at Spot.

"I knew where the gun was an' I got it an' pointed it at him," she finished simply.

"But—but it wasn't loaded. I took the shells out," Howard exclaimed.

"I guess he didn't know it, Howard," she grinned.

Spot's angry, surprised jerk made them laugh, and brought a taunt from Spicer to his recent fellow in crime.

"Never mind, you boys will both be doin' time soon," Howard assured them.

"Not me," Spicer predicted. "There's still a premium fer state's evidence."

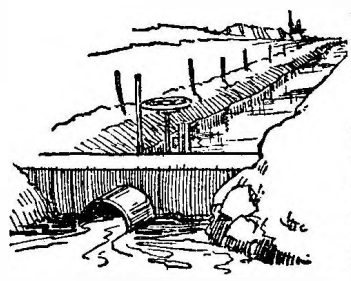
An hour later a hastily prepared meal was over and Andrew Root commenced to speak.

"It looks like you had a right in here all right, an' I don't object to yore cattle, but I want some assurances that yuh won't beat me out of my gold mine," he said.

"You're welcome to it," Howard assured him. "I'll even help you finish gittin' the water out because the canal will serve to bring irrigation water to the meadow next year. You see all Della an' me wants is to make a real cattle ranch out of this valley."

"You an' Della? Yuh mean——"

"That we're goin' out to Bailey to git married as soon as the boys git up here," Howard smiled. "You'd better go along an' file a claim on your gold bar."



"But me an' ma only wanted that gold t' do somethin' for Della," Andrew frowned. "Now if she marries you it'll ball things all up." Then his face suddenly brightened.

"I know how to fix it. We'll both file an' go pardners on it."

"Shall we?" Howard asked Della.

She shook her head. "Make dad keep it. We'll stick to our ranch." She watched him narrowly. She loved this man, but she realized that she really knew little about him. Would he show disappointment, she wondered? Had the gold lust perhaps gripped him as it had the other men who had come to the valley.

"That's the stuff!" he exulted with an enthusiasm that she knew was real. "You keep your mine, an' I hope it pans out a million, but I've already beat yuh out of everything you folks have got that's worth while."

The gyppo girl smiled contentedly. Her dreams were to become a reality.

# THE HIGH RIGGER

By J. ALLAN DUNN

*Author of "The Horizon Hunter," "Outmatched," etc.*

A STORY IN J. ALLAN DUNN'S BEST VEIN SHOWING THAT ADVENTURE AND MANY A TEST OF COURAGE HAVE NOT PASSED IN THE PACIFIC COAST FORESTS, EVEN THOUGH LUMBERJACKS HAVE BECOME TIMBER MECHANICS AND WAYS OF LUMBERING HAVE CHANGED

JOHN FLEMING, lumberman, was the victim of a form of fear that had been part of him since he could remember, against which he struggled in vain, a fear that oppressed and depressed him with the dread of being known as "yellow."

This was the fear of high places. It came upon him with a swift rush of vertigo, a paralysis of nerves, a flood of nausea that left him a clammy, trembling wretch, clinging for safety or crawling to it, his manhood broken down, shame driving him to solitude.

None doubted his courage in the crew with which he worked after he came back from the war. He had won citations there, risen to a sergeantcy. In the trenches he had known fear of another kind, born of an active imagination—the instinct to run and hide, the terror of sudden death. This he had conquered, banished it utterly, as thousands of high-strung comrades had done.

It was only when he was on a height, suddenly conscious of it, that the Thing attacked him, vanquished him before he could rally his will against it. He could birl a log, ride it through white water, leap from one to another with absolute coordination, without a suggestion of giddiness. His fear did not interfere with his work, he was acknowledged one of the best of the crew; yet he knew that it lurked within him, hiding its time, a demon that could turn him in a moment from a man of splendid body, of superb efficiency, into an abject, trembling coward, an object to be laughed at, pitied, scorned.

It came to him in dreams sometimes, the fear of falling—falling to some frightful doom. He would wake sweating and shivering, hoping that he had not called out and betrayed himself. After he came back from the war he hoped that he had acquired strength to overcome it, but the dreams recurred and he felt that the weakness was still there.

He talked about it with the Company doctor one day, a kindly, elderly man. After his confession he sat in the chair across from the other, miserably awaiting a verdict.

The doctor relit his pipe, puffed gravely, manner and voice sympathetic.

"You're the victim of a phobia, son," he said. "There's a long name for it I'll not inflict upon you. The scientific names of ailments always make them sound worse than they are.

"It's a common and sound theory that all things come to us through our senses, rousing emotions to which man, as opposed to the beast, applies reason. The brain cells summon memory. In a coward these recollections may stimulate the emotion of fear, in a bully, those of hatred. You are neither.

"In the trenches you won out with the rally of pride and patriotism, the desire to prove yourself brave. A man may hear or see something that causes him to fly into a rage, but he tells himself that it is not wise to do so. He uses discretion. His conscious self controls the automatic functions of his subconscious.

"But there are certain phenomena, such as this fear of yours, that are inherent, protoplasmic, handed on through the generative cells; persistent, though they may not manifest themselves in every generation. Terror of darkness, horror of snakes, your own fear of high places. It may come down from ancestors who lived in trees, or perched in them after sundown for fear of prowling monsters, waking night after night in the fancied danger, or the actual danger, of falling. Our cousins, the apes, still have it. It attacks simultaneously, paralysing your ganglia, short-circuiting your nerves, eliminating brain processes. It isn't anything to be ashamed of, any more than near-sightedness."

"That's an explanation of it," said Fleming. "What I want to know is can I get the best of it?"

The doctor's pipe had gone out while he was talking. He lit a match, regarded the flame contemplatively before he applied it.

"If," he said between puffs, "you were stimulated by some complex emotion or ambition strong enough to control your subconscious and this was threatened by your phobia, I should say that you had a good chance of mastering it, of rallying your will to assume leadership while the other forces offset each other. And, once having won out, the chances are good that the thing might vanish, at least diminish.

"In the meantime," he rose and came over to Fleming, giving him a friendly slap on the shoulder, "why worry about it? You don't have to climb trees or walk along cliffs in your present job. If you know a lion is certain to attack you, you keep from jungles and menageries. My advice to you is to stop bothering about it, don't herd the thought or memory of it—and stay on the ground. Outside of this, you're a hundred per cent normal. I wish I had your physique. Good luck to you."

The interview had not done him much good. It confirmed the conviction that he was haunted. If anything it made him moodier, though there were plenty of times when he forgot all about it, in the sheer joy of work, of boon companionship, laboring through the long day, sleeping quietly through the nights.

Through the winter, as trees were felled, swampers prepared the skid-roads, scalers gauged the cut, teamsters sledded the logs down to the river over the iced ways, while the snubrope men eased them down the declines; the fear was dormant. Spring was heralded. The rains came, the river broke its frozen bonds and the crew went gaily to its banks and prepared to spill the great rollways where the logs had been piled high, sidewise to the stream; making ready for highwater to commence the drive.

Fleming had hard work to keep up the study on his course in engineering mechanics. He turned in with the rest, too tired, too exhausted for anything but replenishing sleep. One thing he saw clearly, that lumbering in the Eastern states was played out. The sleds now carried as much as a hundred sticks to the load where once five logs was the limit.

So far, this was his trade, the extent of his experience. He talked with others of the vast stands of timber still on the Pacific Coast, of the methods employed there, vastly different from these in their mechanical development. There he might put in practice what he had learned from his course, advance in engineering, become a boss. He thought of it in the scant intervals between active labor, sometimes for a few moments before slumber and digestion drugged him.

Then the Thing leaped out of covert.

The winter had been a severe one. It was approved practice to break down the rollways by teasing and prying out the lowermost and outer log on a rollway, when the upper tiers were apt to come crashing, roaring down to the river bed, there to lie on the ice until the flood waters bore them off, or be carried away by the already running current. Now ice had welded the logs together and nothing short of destructive dynamiting would stampede the ways. They had to break them out from the top, tier by tier, timber by timber.

Fleming was assigned to the work, heaving with his heavy, steel-shod peavey, putting the strength of his shoulder and back muscles into it, loosening the grip of the

ice, sending the big trunk rolling down to the bouldered beach. He worked forward from the rear of the huge stack to the rivermost log and paused for a moment to wipe the sweat from his eyes.

The river was breaking up. Brown water showed in widening channels amid the gray ice which the great balks helped to crush. He looked down from the combined height of rollway and steep bank and instantly the fear possessed him from head to foot, with paralysis of nerves, with overwhelming nausea and giddiness. Instinctively he thrust the shoe of his peavey deep into the bark and clung to the pole, his head bowed, shivering, bathed in clammy sweat, the strength out of him.

The man beside him saw him sway, sprang forward, boot-calks sinking in the logs, giving him secure footing, catching Fleming's shoulder in the grip of his strong fingers, holding him, easing him down till he lay on the top of the stack, writhing, groaning in agony of spirit. The Thing, its dastardly end accomplished, was retreating, skulking off.

"You sick, buddy?" asked the man with rough but ready sympathy.

"I guess I am," muttered Fleming. "I'll have to get off of here."

He refused assistance, clambering down hazardously, his face haggard, gray with his experience. The busy, alert foreman was close by.

"Hurt?" he asked crisply. He needed all his men. The river was going out, the logs had to be got into the water.

"I got a spell of dizziness up there," said Fleming dully. "I'll be all right in a minute. It happens to me sometimes."

The boss looked at him sharply, but without suspicion of the real cause.

"Bilious, I reckon," was his verdict. "I git that way myself at times. It'll work off. Soon's you can, roll them loose logs inter the stream. She's breakin' up fast. We'll lose highwater, first thing you know. Better not go on the ways again."

Fleming nodded, went to work. The fear had passed, but the memory, the shame of it, were still vivid. The incident did not pass undiscussed. He was known as a good man. Little things make up the riverman's talk. He overheard one verdict that seemed to be generally accepted.

"Touch of that damn gas, I reckon. He got it good, they say. Got a *"Craw dee Gare"* on top of it. Much good thet does a man."

That shamed him too. But he did not contradict it. The rollways were broken out, the drive started. The logs reached the sawmill boom down river and he was paid off. He did not join in the general celebration. His turkey was packed and he took the first train out for Boston, then New York.

Two weeks later he was on the Pacific Coast. A week more and he was in Washington, the last stand of Big Timber. He was through with the pineries. Now it was Douglas fir, giants of first growth, with some cedar and hemlock.

He applied at an agency. The agent asked him swift questions, surveying his strong, supple figure, his hands, with quick appreciative appraisal; using terms unfamiliar, though he guessed their meaning.

"You ain't a high-rigger? I could land you pretty. What are you? Hook-tender, chaser, choker setter? You don't look like a fireman, or a donkey puncher. I can use any of 'em. Fallers, buckers and swampers."

"I'm a good axman or sawyer. I'll take a swamper's job if I can't get anything else."

"Axman! Fallers we call 'em out here. You come from Maine? You'll find things run different here. All right. Six a day and found. Good chow. First class camp. Radio in the bunkhouse. Ten dollars fee in advance. There's your receipt. Show it to me in the morning. Meet me at the depot. You go out tomorrow morning with a crew to Olympia. Ship in from there. Now then, next man."

## II

ALOUISE WOOD—her real name was Alice Louise, she told Fleming—was the daughter of the manager of the Company's store. She was an out-of-doors girl, a woodswoman, slender but athletic, bronze-haired and gray-eyed, intensely interested in the life and activities of the Camp, knowing so much about its workings that Fleming was amazed at her. Aside from the girls he had met during the preparations for his going overseas, the ones he had met in France, most of those that Fleming had known had been backwoods types, or the hybrid women of the rivertowns.

Alouise was different, mentally alert, up-to-date. At first he hardly knew what she looked like. He was normal enough, not shy, but the Thing had created within him an inhibition that kept him away from intimacy with the opposite sex. Suppose a girl he cared for should discover him a coward?

Probably he would hardly have spoken to her, since she did not wait upon the men, had not her father been an old white water wanigan man of Maine and Northern Pennsylvania. He recognized Fleming as akin in race and spirit and made him welcome, spinning old yarns to which Fleming listened patiently enough, gradually coming out of his shell at the girl's frank friendship.

The first thing he knew he realized that he was in love with her—and that she liked him. He took her to the dances at the cross-roads and their acquaintanceship ripened.

He was not without rivals, plenty of them. None serious until "Spider" Reeves appeared upon the scene.

There was nothing derogatory about the nickname. It was chosen not because of his personal appearance but because of his occupation. Spider was a high-rigger, a hero in his way, handsome and debonnair, as became his calling. He had an infectious gaiety, a devil-may-care swagger, a ready twinkle in his brown eyes, a way of wearing his well-cut clothes that caught the feminine eye—and held it. Beside him Fleming felt a serious, almost clumsy clown at times, when Reeves sang the latest songs or showed Alouise the newest steps.

It was a new world Fleming was in, lumberman born and bred though he was, and its unfamiliarity at first estranged him.

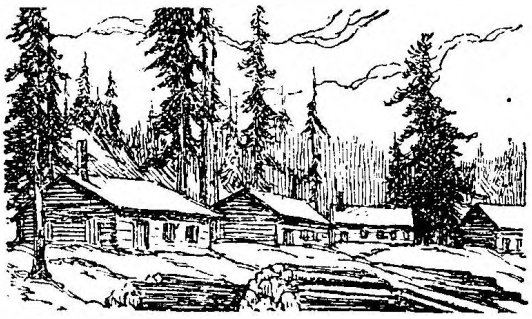
Here were no rushing streams with white-water rapids, no jams, no wanigan crew or shanty men, no ice, snow only in January and that not enough to stop operations. There was no birling of logs, no riding of them, no clearing up the banks after the first rush of the drive with the picked 'rear' outfit, laughing at mishaps, racing each other while the bateaux darted here and there to keep the logs moving.

All was mechanical, or nearly so. Once they built skidroads on the Pacific Coast, corduroyed them with small logs and the bull teams—twenty-yoke of patient oxen—tolled the timber down them. Then came donkey engines and cables to supplant the oxen and the bullwhacker vanished from the skidways. Now they built a standard gauge railroad into the new area, taking in six-drummed donkey engines especially designed by mechanical engineers to move the big timbers over the rough lands of the Douglas fir forests. The old ground-lead system was done away with, where, no matter how swampers cleared roads or snipers shaped the butts like sled-runners, the logs would hang up and cables snap, with loss of life and time. High-lead logging was the order of the new day and the lumberjacks became timber mechanics.

There were still failers and sawyers but drag and link-saws run by machinery, working vertically and horizontally, threatened to oust these.

The men had to have a knowledge of rigging, of mechanics. There were railroad crews, graders, bridge-builders tracklayers and operating crews. Blacksmiths and donkey and doctors and punchers. Specialists everywhere, hookmen, high-riggers, choker setters and firemen. Of the old-timers there remained the swampers and snipers, woodbucks and loaders, whistle punks to signal the action of the cable, filers, the bull cook and his flunkeys.

Efficiency and speed, aided by machinery. Electricity and gasoline for motive power. A radio in the bunkhouse, a garage for the men's own cars that carried them to the cross-roads dances. Bathhouses, a laundry, a drying room. Five hundred men in camp, married many of them, family cottages, a school and the



store. The men worked only eight hours a day. The old rallies, the fight from early dawn until after dark to get the drive going, to use the ice while it lasted for the sledding, and beat the thaws; all were gone. The timberjacks shaved, bathed and dressed in store clothes after hours. There was no more singing of chanteys while steaming clothes hung on poles about the blazing fire, clothes wet from a dozen immersions where life was risked in the icy torrent among charging timbers; no legends told of Timber Spooks

and Wood Demons, of great achievements in dam breaking or riding rapids. Those who stayed in the bunkhouse played rummy while the phonograph ground out Broadway ballads and foxtrots. The latest films were shown twice a week. There was a surgery and an emergency hospital.

The glamor of the pine woods logging was missing, the burly rivermen, red-shirted or mackinawed, poling and peaveying, breaking out the rollways or the key-log of a jam, the fights and feasts; all that was like a dream. Saltpork and beans, sourdough bread and molasses were replaced by a menu that included fresh salmon and green peas.

No more reunions at the sawmill towns, sorting of logs, the revelry that followed the pay-off, the wrestling, the often brutal settlements of physical supremacy. No more calked boots and stagged pants. The timberjacks wore one piece overalls, like garagemen.

There was one mill in the state, Alouise told him, that produced half a million feet of fir lumber for every eight hours its headsaws ran. The mammoth bull donkey engines—wood yarders—weighed thirty tons, handling steel cables nineteen hundred feet in length, one eighth of an inch short of two in thickness, hauling in logs at a speed of four hundred and forty feet a minute. The handlers had to know how to splice wire rope.

It was Alouise who helped Fleming to adapt himself. While her father lamented the old days of Bangor, of Saginaw, of runs on the Kennebec, the girl, with all the details of modern logging clear in her mind, talked of new methods with his new assistant. He did not know that she admired his gravity, his determination to go ahead, to master all the branches of the business. She was human enough, she liked to dance, to ride, to swim, to talk nonsense, but she was modern, energetic, womanly, but eager to accomplish something worth while. If she married a man it would be as partner-mate rather than housewife, though she kept house for her father.

As Fleming became adjusted some measure of glamor returned. The big up-to-date way of handling the lumber got into his spirit. He admired its efficiency and began to see his way to become a more important part of it than the mere swinger of an ax. He commenced to use brain as well as brawn, applying what he had book-learned, watching, questioning, taking up courses more directly connected with the business. There were many things to learn and he wanted a general mastery, but he had to take what practical opportunities came along.

From one man, born on the eastern slope, who took a notion to him, he learned the mechanics of block and tackle, lifts and leverages. He studied knots and splices as eagerly as an advanced boy-scout and became acquainted with the principles of rigging the lead cables and overheads that upheld the heavy butts and sent them along without drag.

There were the trees. The love of them was ingrained in him. It had made a lumberman of him in the first place. Sometimes, he fancied, the affinity might go back to the time of the Younger World, when he had acquired the fear that now never came to him, even in dreams. Those were held by Alouise.

They rode together through the forests, amid the enormous firs that towered on the slopes. There was inspiration among these giants though they were set to slay them, to bring them toppling down. But this was for the housing of men and his employments, the advancement of the age. They were no longer in the Younger World. Government reserving, wise timber men replanting. The ultimate mission of these trees must have been designed for their present purposes. Among the enormous trunks man's most powerful and ingenious machinery labored to an appointed end.

There were firs that towered three hundred feet, twelve feet in diameter at the stately pillar's base. Once chosen firs had furnished masts where the wind filled sails to waft the commerce of the world, to speed discoverers. The song of the sea was in their crowns. There was timber centuries old before Columbus sighted Watling Island. Now sail had gone and steam was passing, electricity was being harnessed from the waters that once ran to waste. All was advancement. And they, as they talked about it, idling their mounts through the aisles where the sun slanted, were part of it, one with it.

From the standpoint of romance the high-rigger was easily the outstanding figure. Reeves, with his likable swagger, his steady head and brave heart, spurred and belted, climbing with saw and ax up a straight shaft a hundred and fifty feet to rig a "high-lead spar," was a picturesque sight.

The high-rigger came to the area as soon

as the logging railroad was completed and the great donkey engines sledded under their own power to their settings. At each of these big trees were selected by the foremen, left by the fellers. Gallant sights were Reeves and his fellows, carefree as steeple-jacks, spurred like gamecocks, with a climbing rope attached to a linesman's belt, circling the tree, hitched up as the climb progressed, trimming the tapering column as they went.

High up, seemingly no larger than a woodpecker, Spider worked to forty feet or so of the top, chopped an undercut, sawed through, and then braced himself as the crown of timber and limbs and foliage swung out and went crashing down while the lopped tree swung in vast circles as he clung, riding it as a puncher forks a bucking bronco, swinging to its gyrations; nothing to hold him but spurs, a taut rope and leather belt, his muscle and his nerve. If he should be shaken loose, even if the rope caught, he might hang head-down, with a snapped spine. It happened. Insurance companies did not hunt for premiums from high-riggers.

Fleming, leaning for a breathing space upon his ax, watched Spider in fascinated admiration. But the sweat turned cold on his body as he watched, knowing what would happen to him if he dared such an ascent.

Or would it? It sometimes seemed to him as if his love for Alouise had exorcised the Thing. He remembered his talk with the doctor. If some all powerful emotion or ambition could stimulate him sufficiently to offset the immediate attack, allow him to summon his will, rally his reasoning faculties, it might vanish. He had both these things now.

When the term commenced and Alouise began to teach in the little school, he had idle hours in which he used to test himself. If he could climb, gaze down—but he must not do that at first. He got a belt and rope and spurs and, in some place where he would not be overlooked, he made his first timorous essays.

The trunk soared skyward above him to what seemed an unbiddable height. Fleming tested his rope and belt, clasped the trunk, set in his spurs and lifted himself, hitching up the circling cord and leaning back a little. It was much the way a South Sea Islander goes after coconuts. He made steady progress for twenty feet, then stopped, as he would to lop off a limb. There were none this low down. Presently he went on. Ten feet more. Then, for the first time in his attempts, he looked down.

Instantly the ground seemed to heave like the sea in a groundswell, the solid trunk to rock. He went faint at the pit of his stomach and vertigo attacked him. He fought it off, with a vision of Alouise. He dug in his spurs and held on, until the dizziness passed, reluctantly, sullenly, and the thwarted Thing within him sulked in temporary defeat.

Fleming gritted his teeth, set his jaw and went on to where a limb impeded progress. He did not look down again. Next time for that. Descent was not easy. He had not the trained agility of Reeves, clear as a gymnast. But he touched ground and stood against the trunk, still in his harness, his head against the bark, moist with effort and the clammy ooze of glandular excretion from sheer terror. He put up a little prayer in that moment, of thankfulness, of humility, of hope and petition.

Little by little he fought it out. It was his battleground, a tree trunk; the Armageddon of his spirit, and the trials were very real. He was gaining ground. The tests were not decisive. He made the offensive, expecting encounter, it did not come unexpectedly upon him. But he was winning. He had not spoken to Alouise about it. He feared her shrinking from him, knowing her own resolute way of facing things, her abhorrence of cowardice. She had wormed out of him something of his record in the war and shown herself proud of it. If he conquered, then he could tell her. The defeated fear would be a trophy. She would understand. She wanted a man to be strong in every way. She frankly admired the daring of Reeves. Reeves, inclined to be a will o' the wisp in love, sought out by other girls, attached himself to Alouise.

There were occasions when Fleming might have spoken, if he had not been obsessed by his weakness, times when he fancied Alouise gave him the opportunity, even made it, and wondered why he did not respond. After these she openly favored Reeves, only to check him if he showed signs of appropriation.

The trees nearest the railroad were logged off, the yarders moved back into the woods, a loading engine taking the trunks to the loader. Its track ran close to the spar tree, two great blocks on loadlines directly over the center of the car in use. Two lines were used, each with huge tongs. A pair of these gripped the front end of a log and yanked it free of the pile. The

tongs of the other set lifted the other end and the balk swung parallel to the car, the top loader signalling and the loading engineer lowering the log into place.

Back farther the last wedge was sledged home in a fir that was all of seven centuries old, a towering column of three hundred feet. It came down thundering, shaking the ground as it leaped as if in a final agony, the buckers swarmed upon it and sawed it into lengths of twenty-four to eight feet, bridge timbers and plank material, marked off for them by a scaler. The butt logs measured full twelve feet about the bark.

The hook tender swung his choker setters to a big log, the rigging was pulled down from the haulback line, the choker cable girdled the timber. A whistle punk pulled on his wire, a distant electric whistle tooted shrilly and the log moved in a slow roll, its nose lifting as it crashed down the line while the choker setters swabbed their foreheads and thrust a fresh "chew" into their lean jaws, waiting for the next set of rigging to come along. The monarch was down, its forest life ended, its real usefulness begun.

Spider was to rig a spar. There was more to it than the topping. After that he must reclimb with a light line and small block and, with helpers and the aid of a donkey engine—not a yarder—rig the guy-line and blocks. First the highlead block through which the main hauling line must pass, a shapen mass of wood and metal weighing fifteen hundred pounds, to be suspended a hundred and fifty feet from the ground, as high as possible for the maximum effect of the drag. Then a second block for the lead of the haulback cable. Sometimes smaller blocks for the rigging of loading lines.

The spar tree itself was stoutly guyed with heavy steel cables before the heavy blocks were hung, before the yarding, roading and loading engines came to their carefully appointed places. The last were mounted on sled runners of hewn logs and hauled into position. All in all it was an important operation.

But Spider was the central figure, watched as he climbed, watched as he yelled warning and the lookers on scattered before the top came rushing down, watched as he swung in dizzy circles, as he took up the light line, helped rig the big blocks and at the last came to earth, usually sliding down a cable as a sailor descends halyards, a smile on his face and a light in his eyes, running his fingers through his curly hair and singing.

## III

IT WAS Sunday afternoon. Fleming called at the store, which had dwelling rooms attached, and found Reeves ahead of him. Spider made a face at him, sufficiently friendly, but the look of a rival. The two men got along well enough though their temperaments differed.

"Alouise tells me she promised to go with you for a walk," he said. "You've got to take me along. Starting a new setting tomorrow and I've got to rig a spar. Never can tell what might happen. So you can't shake me. You can choose your own way but I'm tagging. You haven't got the heart to say no, neither of you. Suppose poor Spider gets a ride?"

"Don't," said Alouise. "Do you want to spoil our afternoon? You've never had an accident."

"I'm clever, that's why. But I've had a sort of hunch that I'm overdue, just the same," he added soberly. "Do I get a bid, or do I just naturally crash the gate?"

The girl looked demurely at Fleming.

"It's John's party," she said.

For a moment Fleming rebelled. He wanted Alouise to himself, he believed she would prefer it. He knew what Reeves would do in his place. Make some quick excuse, say something witty but eminently to the point that would make Fleming feel out of it, force his hand for withdrawal. He had the right of way. He glanced at Reeves and Spider grinned at him.

"Not afraid of me, are you?"

The girl flushed. Fleming tried to speak off-handedly.

"Not yet. Glad to have you along, of course."

"Of course. Come on, we'll chirrup to the birdies, pick the pretty flowers. Take along some ice-cream and candy and guzzle it. Make a peaceful picnic of it. How about Rocky Glen?"

The girl had once said she wanted to go there and Fleming knew that Reeves remembered it. He was always scoring

small points. Fleming had meant to suggest it himself. He saw her face light up and acquiesced.

It was not far, a gorge between the steeper slopes where the trees did not find congenial soil, save for dwarf growth. There were bushes there with scrub oaks, birch ash and aspen and sumach. Berries. Flowers. A small cascade at the head, falling to a streamlet. Reeves insisted upon walking.

"I've got to climb all day tomorrow," he said. "Let me tread the good old earth while I can. Listen, Alouise, tomorrow's Armistice Day. You get a holiday. We poor timber mechanics have got to labor. Contracts are contracts. What is the mere memory of past glory? Fleming won't get a chance to wear his *croix de guerre* and I, a 'umble ranker, as the Tommies say, can't sit around and swap yarns of how we licked the Boches."

"You didn't tell me you had a decoration," said Alouise to Fleming.

"More chump he. Ee's a bloomin' 'ero. I saw the cross in his turkey bag. Made him tell the gang all about it. It wasn't much. I can climb trees but Fleming there climbed into cosy little machine-gun nests and chased out the Heines. Wouldn't think it to look at him, would you?"

Fleming laughed it off. Reeves was generous enough, but somehow gave the effect, to Fleming, of having deliberately underrated his own prowess. He thought the girl fancied so, too.

They picnicked in the shadow of big rocks at the foot of the cascade, Reeves keeping them in merry mood, telling of his escapades during the war that he seemed to have treated only as a medium for escaping onerous duty. Once in a while he told a story with a thrill to it, always related in the third person, with a laughing denial that he had anything to do with it that enhanced the suggestion of concealment. He made Fleming tell how he won the Cross, and the story came lamely enough.

"I'm not a hero," Fleming said.

"Tosh! Likewise spoofing. We'll prove it. We are in the trenches. Zero hour approaches. See that bush up there, covered with flowers? Those are plumes in the helmet of a Prussian officer, make him a general. Trophies for the applauding fair. I'll race you for 'em."

Fleming looked hard at him. Reeves laughed back.

"No wager on it, old scout. We're not breaking lances. Come on."

The bush was two thirds of the way up the steep side of the glen. Not so hard a climb. It was not like going to the top of a cliff, looking down. Alouise was looking on. She wanted the flowers, had said so. But he had a sense of being trapped, of imminent disaster. The Thing seemed to stir within him. He willed it down.

"Come on," he said. "Alouise, you start us."

They were off, clambering in short rushes, catching at bushes, scrambling over rocks, evenly matched, both in top condition, making for the goal. Slowly Fleming began to forge ahead. He was winning. Reeves had held the spotlight all the afternoon. This time——

He was within fifty feet of the flowers when the dirt gave way under his feet. He clutched at a bush and it came out by the roots. He dug the toes of his shoes, his knees and fingers into the shallow soil. slid to rock, weathered and treacherous. His legs shot into space. He was falling—*falling!*

One hand caught in a crevice and he was braked, drawing up his feet, twisting over on his back. He lost his grip and went slithering down, sidewise. The rock sheered off abruptly and he looked into space, far down to the brawling little torrent.

The Thing had him! He flung out arms and legs, but there was no strength in him. Waves of vertigo and faintness assailed him. He sprawled, slipping, slipping. In a moment he was going to fall. Black horror enveloped him——

He came really to himself at the foot of the falls again, vaguely conscious that Reeves had rescued him. He was lying on some turf, the girl wetting his forehead with her handkerchief. He would not open his eyes. Shame seared him. He heard Reeves talking.

"He isn't hurt. No bones broken. Hardly scratched. I got him just as he was going over. Might have rolled clean to the bottom. He'd fainted. Hanged if I don't believe he funked it. By Jimminy, we didn't get the flowers, at that! Back in a jiffy."

Reeves was going up the cliff again. It was no use shamming. He looked up.

He might have misread the look in her eyes, but he was miserable.

"I heard what Spider said. He's right. I funked it. I told you I wasn't a hero, Alouise. I'm a coward."

She was puzzled, grieved. He did not look at her again.

"He'll get your flowers for you," he said. "I'll be getting along."

She said nothing as he went, looking after him with the same perplexed, hurt gaze.

He had failed—failed! The Thing was his master. Failed before her and before Reeves, who had known that he had been frightened. He remembered now scraps of Reeves' talk in the descent, soothing, reassuring, condescending, as if to a terrified child.

This was the end of it all. Love and ambition. They had not aided him. He went back in utter humiliation, did not appear at supper, crawled into his bunk and lay there. Reeves came in late, chaffing the crowd.

"Anyone seen Fleming?" he asked. But he did not come over to the bunk. They had talked him over, Alouise and Reeves. They despised him.

He tried to get his time next morning. His foreman referred him to the superintendent, busy, harassed.

"Nothing doing, Fleming. We're behind time on contracts. You're not sick?"

"No, sir."

"When you signed on you agreed to give ten days notice or forfeit two weeks pay, outside of illness or accident. We have to make our agreements that way. We have our own to fulfill, under penalty. Your pay check is due in eight days, anyway. You can give notice if you want to —quit."

He put a sting in the last word that pricked Fleming's pride, numb as it was. He had forgotten the clause in the agreement. It was fair enough.

"You're a good man, Fleming. Got good reports about you. You ought to go up in this business. Studying I hear, asking questions. Don't be a fool. Think it over. I'll admit we need you."

That was some salve. Reeves would not gossip, he was sure. The girl was out of his life but— He hesitated for a minute and, as the superintendent turned to the field phone, walked out and got his ax.

The irony of fate detailed him to help with the spar crew. They needed expert axmen to trim stumps, undercut them so the steel cable guys could be anchored to them. The work was not arduous. For a while he stood idle. Spider was getting ready to climb the tree, laughing and exchanging badinage. If his hunch of being "overdue" persisted, he failed to show it.

Standing apart, Fleming saw Alouise come to the setting with her father. There had been some brief exercises at the school and then it was dismissed. The rigging of the spar was something worth watching, Reeves the principal actor. He did not look toward her. Reeves chatted with her, warned her back, showed her where the top would fall.

"It'll bounce and shiver its timbers," he said. "Get in the clear. Here's where the Spider gets busy."

He waved his hand, ran to the tree, jumped at it and clung, four feet up, before he began to climb with extraordinary speed, wielding ax and saw as he disposed of the lower limbs.

"Looks like Spider was out fer a record," said a swamper. "Made a bet likely."

"Bet a kiss with Wood's gal. He's sparkin' her. He's showin' off."

"Best high-rigger in camp."

"Watch him climb."

Reeves' actions were so smooth and coordinate, his muscles flowed with such lack of apparent effort that the usual jerky, inchworm manner of the high-rigger was missing. He went up the tree with the suppleness of a panther. As he lopped or sawed off the lower limbs he leaned back to the limit of his circle cord and the slack of his belt, spurs deep; seeming to stand braced backwards while he plied his tools, leaving the spar trim. This exercise rested his climbing muscles and, the moment the trimming was ended, he swung ax or saw to his belt again, the sun shining on their gleaming metal, and started up once more.

At a hundred feet he waved his hand again, taking his scarlet neckerchief to use as a banner. This was not bravado but a special salute for the benefit of Alouise, who stood watching him. She had looked, too, for Fleming, but he took care she should not see him. The night had brought counsel to Alouise. Fleming could not be the self-styled coward he proclaimed himself unless he had never earned that *croix-de guerre*. Reeves had suggested that, but the girl's good sense could not reconcile that idea with the fact that he had never mentioned it.

"Might have been caught off base with it some time," said Reeves. "Or—I'll bet you this is the solution. He got shell-shocked, that's why he funks in a pinch. Lost his nerve. It's a rotten shame."

His sympathy was word-shallow. The girl's went deeper. She had come close to loving Fleming, she was not sure that she did not love him for all the frailty that she had claimed to despise in any man. A tenderness leavened her thoughts of him. His other qualities took on their normal rating.

She resolved before the day was over to seek him out, to try and get his confidence. Why couldn't he have been more like Reeves, death-daring, reckless, climbing until he was only a miniature figure on a long pole, the strokes of his ax coming down to them faintly?

She wasn't in love with Spider, her woman's instinct told her that he was unstable as water, uncertain as the wind. But the sight of that gallant figure appealed to other feminine instincts in her, awakening to the sight of a man excelling in strength, taking grave risks with a light in his eyes and a smile on his lips.

Reeves' bandanna caught on the snag of an untrimmed limb, that jerked it from the light grasp he had upon it. It came fluttering down, scarlet in the sun.

"Thet's sure bad luck," said the swamper near Fleming. "Fer a high-rigger to lose anything while he's climbin', thet's the worst kind of a hoodoo. Allus works."

"Aw, what's a handkerchief? If it was his ax or his saw, now."

"You wait an' see. It allus works, I tell ye. Means his mind ain't on the job. Thinking of the gel instead of the tree."

"You talk like an old woman. He's up to his mark now, starting to undercut."

The tiny figure had lost individuality. As it swung the ax it looked like a marionette. They could see the blows fall, the dull sound of the chop coming afterward, then a bright chip sailing down, clean cut as a knife whittling.

Reeves had to score deep to ensure the proper fall of the top when he sawed-in opposite his cut. He had to judge every blow to a nicety; to gauge the wind, the symmetry of the crown, things instinctive enough to any experienced feller but assuming an acuter problem when tackled a hundred and fifty feet from the ground. The top would fall before he had sawed clean through, it would leave more or less of a nub that Spider, with due pride in turning out a perfect job, would clear away before he went down for his light block and tackle.

The little crowd of spectators and workers stepped back out of danger. Wood drew his daughter into standing timber. A falling top had vagaries, it was apt to spin; breaking boughs, sharp as javelins, might be flung in any direction, in a dozen.

Reeves finished with his ax, poured kerosene on his saw from the phial he carried and set to work; rhythmical, expert, swinging from side to side with his stroke, as easily as a sailor hauled to a masthead in a bosun's chair for scraping and slushing. His body strained back to the limit to permit of the free play of the saw, his knees rode the trunk, his spurs were sunk in the bark. His head was on one side, watching, listening for the first creak that would tell him the top was going. The wind was a bit gusty and that was a handicap. And he was bothered too with the loss of his kerchief. Someone had picked it up, but the idle jingle of the woods repeated itself to him:

*Look out when you climb the highhead rig*
*If you lose the little you lose the big.*

Silly stuff, all of it, the effort of a wouldbe woods poet who thought more of his rhymes than actual meaning. There were a lot of couplets to fit every job, *ax* rhyming with *backs* and *hope* with *rope;* just nonsense, but he couldn't get it out of his head. His sawing timed itself to it.

He wished he hadn't lost that silk bandanna. Marred his performance—a clumsy trick like that.

Ah! The almost severed top groaned, rocked a little. A puff of wind backed it from its intended lurch toward the undercut, then released it. It was going. Now he had to ride, to spin, hanging on with all his skill and strength. There she went!

Below, they saw the top teeter, start to fall, hang for a split pulse-beat and then seem to twist, to wrench itself free and come hurtling down. They saw, too, as the beheaded trunk started its wild circlings that something had gone wrong; some flaw of the fir, some trick of the wind had twisted the crown. The trunk had split

with swift and irresistible, unreckoned force. It flung Reeves off, breaking hand grip and spurhold, flung him backward with vicious suddenness. It had loosened the taut girdle of his rope and, as some men shouted and began to run toward the tree, as a girl screamed, his limp body, head down, began to slip. The rope circle had been big enough to clasp the fir at the base; now, unless the bark held it, or some projection of a lopped branch caught it, he might fall, to bring up with a jerk that would break his back—or might snap the cord.

Some shouted, more held their breath, gasping with relief when the cord braked, held, leaving the helpless figure hanging.

"Must hev cracked his skull agen the trunk when she split," said the swamper as the superintendent hurried forward.

"He's out," the super cried. "Who'll go up and get him down? Take up a line and block and put a bight round him, we'll lower him. Come on now."

No one came forward. An assistant rigger muttered something about a "hoodooed tree." Someone suggested sending for Hansen, another high-rigger, but he was at a distant setting.

"He's liable to die before we get him," said the super. "Hanging the way he is, with a cracked skull, maybe. Hasn't anyone here got the guts to tackle it?"

Alouise stood by with clasped hands, looking up at the limp figure. The tree still quivered. It had avenged indignity.

The men looked at each other. Few of them were climbers, most of them touched with superstition at the catastrophe.

"I'll go up."

The super wheeled to face Fleming, standing with set face, his jaws clamped until the muscles stood out upon it, his eyes luminous with purpose.

"Can you climb?"

The girl ran forward.

"You?" she gasped. "No——"

"He saved my life yesterday," answered Fleming. "I can climb. I've got an outfit at the bunkhouse."

"Where's your belt and spurs?" the super demanded of the assistant-rigger.

"I don't tote 'em when Reeves is on the job," said the man sullenly. "What's more, I'm married. I've got a wife and kids to think of."

The super turned from him impatiently. The bunkhouse was half a mile from this setting. He looked for a messenger, holding Fleming back.

"You'll need your wind," he said.

"I'll go." The girl was off at racing speed, running like a doe, light and swift of foot. She reached the bunkhouse, breathing fast but unspent, demanding of the flunkey leisurely sweeping out the place where Fleming kept his things. The man pointed to a wide shelf where the turkey bags were piled, marked with names or initials.

She found Fleming's while he fumbled, and ransacked it, gathering up belt and spurs, the stout length of cord with its spliced in snaphooks.

A leather case fell to the floor, opening as it fell. The flunkey picked it up.

"Fleming's craw-de-gare," he said. "Got his name on it. What's up, Miss?"

She did not answer him, but snatched the case from him and thrust it inside her blouse, leaving him stupidly scratching his head. Back she sped, sprinting at the last while Fleming ran to meet her and buckled on the outfit, the superintendent helping with the spurs.

"Are you sure?" she asked him. "I found your cross, John. Your name's on it. For bravery. You are brave, but——"

Her father caught her away.

"You're hinderin' things, Al," he said. "You've done your bit. Let him be."

Fleming read the message in her eyes. She loved him. She would have told him so, even then, let him know that she loved him whether he went or not, beseeching him not to attempt a fatal risk. Light flamed in his own eyes. Once more he was taking the offensive. He was going to win. Forces were rallying within him. Love, and the ambitions it had strengthened.

They gave him the line for attaching the block, the light pulley and the rope, attaching them carefully, escorting him to the tree. It was still now, quiescent.

It was a straight climb. He told himself he would not look down, not that he must not. His spirit was flaming high.

He felt the play of his muscles as he climbed, thankful for his tests and the experience they had given him in hitching the rope, for the lessons he had taken in rope-work. He was no high-rigger, probably never would be. That job was only a specialist's in the big business he meant

to master—was going to master—an accessory and aid, like the pilot to a ship. But he could climb, he could fasten the block securely, using the split to help wedge the hitches, and he could reeve through the long rope. Some one had given him a hand ax that he thrust into his belt.

Up he went, stopping to rest a moment now and then, leaning back. He knew that Alouise, with a prayer on her lips, was watching him, his cross over her heart that throbbed for his peril.

Up, until he could see the face of Reeves, blotched from the blood that had run into it, smeared with wet crimson on the forehead, the body limo as a partly filled sack, the limbs loose. He would have to go carefully, when he reached it, to fasten his pulley in place.

The Thing that had seemed to be cowed, made its sortie when he was within a dozen feet of Reeves. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead, trickling into his eyes. He wanted to vomit, the tree seemed to spin. But he fought it off. He had expected it, he was ready for it. It was only material fear, a weakness of the body. His will was master.

There came a cheer from below, faint but heartening, as he started on again. It flushed his blood into fresh circulation, recharged his nerves. Again the sound rose up.

He was up to Reeves now and then the supreme test came. His own body cord was unable to pass the other until he undid its snaps, putting it about the tree above Reeves'. Fleming clamped hard with his knees, drove his spurs deep, caught with one hand at the taut rope that supported Spider, got it clear—and then he was past. The block and long rope were free, its ground end carefully tended by the superintendent. He kept his eyes on the split, creeping up by inches.

He wrapped the loose rope in figure eights about the forking break, made fast, attached the pulley, reeved through the rope end, attached his ax to it for a weight and sent it gliding down, as the hurrahs came up to him.

His head was clear, the nausea was past. Exaltation flooded him. The Thing was downed. It had vanished, fled in ignominious defeat, the unfair heritage exorcised by his spirit. Never to come back. He knew that, even as he had known fear behind him when he charged the machine-gun nests at the head of his little squad.

He looked down. He saw the group of men, bodies dwarfed, squatty from the perspective, their faces turned upward, tiny spots of white. He saw Alouise, and he waved his hand.

He was not through yet. It was no easy task properly to fasten the bight about Reeves, securing it to his belt, to hold the senseless body while he unsnapped the body cord. But it was done at last and he gave the signal. Men tailed on the rope, easing down their burden.

Fleming leaned back. He was tired with his supreme efforts but he was jubilant. There was new strength and purpose in him. Again he looked down to see Alouise waving her scarf at him. The rope came up to him with a loop in it, into which he stepped.

The solid earth felt good to him. A litter had been fetched and Reeves was already being borne to the hospital. The doctor had pronounced him stunned. He would recover, rig spars again perhaps.

Men surrounded Fleming, shaking his hand, clapping him on the back. Then they stood back, for Alouise. Her eyes were glowing softly through happy tears. Her hands sought his breast, pinned something there.

"It's Armistice Day," she said with a break in her voice. "You ought to wear this. There is no cross for what you've done, but you——"

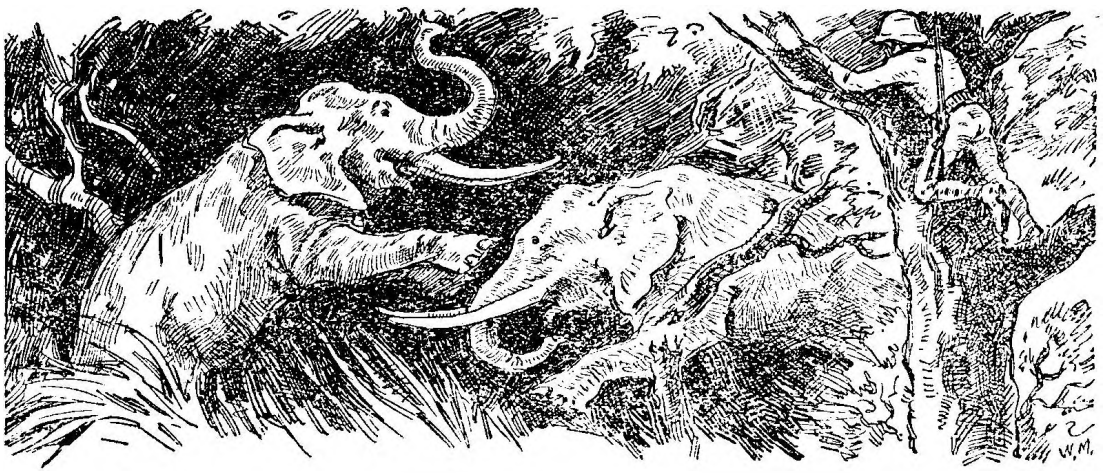
Fleming claimed his reward, given freely, for all the lookers on.

The super had sent for Hansen. Another tree had been chosen. Hansen stood ready, phlegmatic, unexcited by the accident. The work had to go on.

"I don't suppose you want to go up again, Fleming?" asked the super, with a smile.

"I don't think I'd want it as a regular job," said Fleming.

"I've got a better one for you. You're all of a man. Come to my office in the morning. You'd better take the rest of the day off. Come on, boys, let's get busy."



# THE SECRET PLACE

By PAUL ANNIXTER

THE STORY OF A WILD ROGUE ELEPHANT WHO TOOK SATISFACTION IN BEING A CHRONIC CRANK, AND OF A MAN WHO KNEW AFRICA AND THE ELEPHANTS OF AFRICA AS IT IS GIVEN TO FEW MEN TO KNOW THEM. THESE TWO WERE TO MEET IN DUEL IN A COUNTRY OF DESOLATION, OF DEATH AND OF UNTOLD WEALTH

FOR the second time that day the shrill trumpeting of the wild elephants came echoing from afar over steppes and jungled valleys to disturb El Robo in his mud-bath. In all the wild there is nothing so stirring, so insistent, as the wild elephant call—that prolonged and concerted trumpeting known to elephant catchers as the salute—which the wild herds make on certain occasions, the exact nature of which has ever been a mystery to man.

El Robo, being an elephant, could read the meaning of those sounds. They told of a ceremony, a ritual in honor of a monarch. A newly coronated monarch, a doughty and mandatory monarch, and doubtless a young one. All this El Robo read into that call, and it rankled him to the depths of his cantankerous nature. For he was by way of being a monarch himself, a monarch, however, of the untrammeled, the unsurveyed, recognizing neither law nor boundaries. He was an outlaw, or what is commonly known as a rogue elephant, as his name implied. That name had been given him years before by a Portuguese ivory trader in German East Africa, many hundreds of miles to the south, and it fitted him as well as his own hide.

El Robo was known, and generally feared and hated, from the Zambesi River in the south, to the unknown region of the Sudd in the north; from British East Africa to the Niam Niam country in the west. He was a trouble maker, as definite a case of criminal perversion as was ever known to the human family. His life had been typical of his kind. As a raw youngster of fifteen years he had been cast forth from his herd for ill-temper and general viciousness. A drastic measure, it would seem, but the wise old herd leaders had doubtless been able to predict even at that early age the bane of the young bull's future. Since that day more than eighty summers had passed over his head, and not one of them had gone to improve his disposition. The fact was, he had gone beyond redemption, for like all hermits, human or otherwise, he had lost his perspective. He could see nothing now, at least nothing worth while, but himself.

The life had not all been harsh and lean. There is satisfaction of a sort in simply being a chronic crank, with unlimited time to humor one's whims, with private mud-baths and undisputed feeding grounds, and neither law nor females to curtail one's peregrinations. El Robo loved the silence, the sense of aloneness, the constant watchfulness and dangerous exploration that composed his life. After all was said, he was what he was by choice. For he had known the other life, too. He had made a conquest of a whole herd on more than one

occasion in his prime, pitting himself victoriously against all the leading bulls. But of that he had soon sickened, and in a month or two months of lordship, his perversity of nature had set the entire herd against him according to the unwritten law of elephant rule; or else El Robo had simply wandered off himself, on some night of calling wind or moonshine, back to his tenantless hills and fastnesses.

As a result, he had become hated far and wide by his kind, by what jungle wireless there is no knowing, so that by the time he was a battle-scarred, yellow-tusked veteran of sixty he had but to show himself to a herd to call down upon himself all the challenge and anathema the elephant tongue possesses. And El Robo returned that hatred in full measure.

Solitude embittered his naturally evil nature, until the vicious light of the killer shone ever in his little red eyes. In the past thirty years he had broken every law and precept of his world. Had he been a human, a government would have concerted if necessary, to see to his execution. As it was, he suffered only the stigma and ostracism of his kind. His temper had become that of a peevish rhino, which by the way, is the worst in all the jungle. He would go through the jungle trails, rumbling and muttering, like a tank in Flanders, sending forth a blaring challenge which the herd bulls now scorned to answer. Or he would tear up huge trees with his tusks from sheer perversity, or wait days in a mud-bath or rich feeding glen, hoping some other bull would come and try to claim it. He would rather fight than eat. He hated not only his own kind, but man as well, and that was how he had come by his name.

But more than anything else, perhaps, El Robo hated youth, and the arrogance of youth. This, as the encroachment of age crept over him. The bitterness of all his nature rose at the sight or sound of the confident young twenty-five-year-olds just entering upon their amours and their conquests in all the happiness of normal gregarious natures. He had ended not a few of these youngsters' careers at the outset, by the wiles of the seasoned fighter, and his rancor ever grew as the years passed over him.

This that had roused him today was the salute to the strength and prowess of youth, his nameless elephant instinct sensed that. And the old rancor, indurated by age, surged through him once more, with the accompanying sense of his own near finish. He was already a centenarian. But fifteen years at best remained to him, years that would be increasingly lean and precarious, for it is not well for the aged to be hated and alone.

A spasmodic lunge brought the Renegade's mighty bulk heaving up from the river. It was only then that his gigantic size became manifest. It was as if the mud were giving birth to a mountain. El Robo stood over twelve feet high to the top of his great sloping shoulders and his trunk could reach seven feet beyond that. Had he been an East Indian elephant he would have undoubtedly belonged to the highest caste, and have been valued at a prince's ransom. But El Robo was an African elephant, that gaunt, vicious, almost prehistoric breed, uncoveted by man, in which there is little or no caste. Although he would have broken any scales in the world that tried to weigh him, he was useless so far as a helper to man was concerned, hunted only for his ivory.

Something hot and molten seemed to rise up and burst in El Robo's brain and his fierce pig eyes glowed red. Then his trunk flung upward, stiffened sinuously backward till it touched his forehead and forth across the drowsing jungle went his full-voiced challenge, a shivering blare that crashed the noon somnolence to atoms, whipped every sleeping thing to tension for a mile around. Birds fluttered through a million leafy arbors; the monkey bands ceased their aimless pickings, and huddled chattering together; even the drowsing, nerveless alligator, who has little more than the rudiments of ears, opened slit goat eyes at the quiver of sound, and inched stealthily toward the water. The sound carried true and far without a tremor, to the surrounding hills, woven with the very flesh and hate of the sender.

El Robo stood waiting for a space of moments, quivering throughout his limbs, half expectant, his great fan ears waving to catch the slightest echo, yet fearing the usual insult of silence. And then, from afar across the hills, faint as a bugle in some distant camp, came an answering challenge. El Robo plunged up the bank with a great puff of sheer surprise. This was youth indeed, a mere stripling doubtless, who had not yet learned, or was too arrogant to care, about the Renegade's ignoble record. Once more he sent forth his shivering blare. Then like a runaway freight car, or a house bounding on the wings of a great wind, his little eyes rolling with an unholy light, El Robo went

thundering down the trail.

No one who has not seen him prove it, can realize what speed an elephant possesses when he cares to use it. A fine running horse would have been unable to keep abreast of El Robo in the open spaces. In the tangle of thickets he would have been hopelessly lost. For El Robo neither stopped nor slackened. He snapped big trees off at their bases, and the small ones clattered backward along the slope of his mighty back. Like an avalanche he thundered full speed down a valley, his great feet plying with a cat-like surety, because of the wonderful conformity of his leg muscles. The earth shook beneath him, and again and again, at intervals, the renewal of the challenge was sounded.

The blood boiled in the Renegade's brain, so that the whole landscape was blurred in a lurid glow. Many months, more than two years, had passed, since he had locked with any sort of adversary in combat. All the banked up venom of his nature called for outlet; and the years of abstinence called for payment. Few young bulls of thirty could stand him off for more than a minute or two even now. He would reap a last revenge on this upstart, perhaps on the herd itself, assert his mastery one last time and sate the envy of encroaching senility.

THE herd was drawn up waiting when El Robo arrived. All feeding had ceased and the fighting circle was already in formation for every elephant knew what was coming. There are set laws and niceties governing such affairs in the elephant world, as strict as the duelling rules of man. The leader of the herd, a tall rangy young bull of thirty years, stood well apart from the others. Behind him, forming a sort of semicircle, were the other herd bulls and the leading cows. Contrary to general belief, it is the old cows, not the bulls, who lead the roaming herds throughout the greater portion of the year, except during the two or three months of the pairing season. In the African specie, these cows are tusked the same as the bulls and are almost as intrepid and as dangerous in combat.

The Renegade slowed his thundering advance to a walk and stamped belligerently into the waiting circle, raising his trunk again to renew his initial challenge. But ere he could utter a sound he was cut short, for the young leader had repeated the challenge himself with a brazen assurance that was staggering. For a space of moments El Robo stood rocking angrily from side to side, unable to utter a sound, for he had been intent upon blaring defiance himself. Perhaps his initial self confidence was rocked a bit by this evidence of the rangy leader's eagerness to press the issue, a purely psychological reaction. An arrogant and belligerent young monarch assuredly, flushed with his recent victories.

El Robo returned the defy with such heat that he ended in a squeal of berserk rage. This formality over, before the herd had done shifting to accommodate the fighters, the old rogue precipitated the combat by a sudden wicked charge that was minus all the dignity, if not the decent technicalities, of the game. His blood was like lava in his veins; something trickled like acid in his perverse brain. He shook his lowered head and his mighty seventeen foot tusks, each of which was heavier than a man and had shattered the tusks of a score of formidable fighters in his day, gleamed like yellow scimitars. A less mighty opponent than the young leader would have been thrown at the outset by that unexpected rush, but the youngster gathered himself with a tigerish swiftness and met it at an expert angle which enabled him to take up the shock with a bit of agile leg-work.

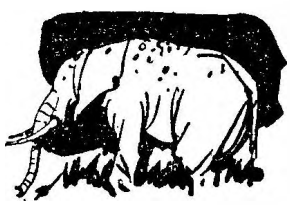
Then ensued that most awe-inspiring spectacle in all nature, the prolonged test of strength and endurance of the real monarchs of the jungle. The ground shook beneath their trampling feet. They lunged and trumpeted and bellowed; their rushes carried them again and again through the closed ranks of the fighting circle, sending the calves and young cows of the herd in squealing fright. They snapped off young trees at their bases as they crashed against them. The undergrowth was crushed and ground beneath them, and leaves and moisture fell from the nearby trees. A pair of stalking lions who had been lingering near in hope of a kill, forgot their kingship and slunk quietly away. Even a drowsing python was roused by the mighty vibration of sound, and slipped like a spotted horror through the tree-stems, toward safer hunting grounds,

and all animal-affairs for a mile about stopped at the expression of unleashed power that quivered the jungle air.

The two bulls were quite evenly matched. The young leader stood fully as tall as the Renegade, which was taller by a foot than any elephant of the Indian specie. But El Robo was the heavier, and the wilier in the tricks of the game. This, however, the youngster made up for in a greater resilience and agility. His long legs were as symmetrical as the smooth trunks of jungle gum trees, and the cat-like coördination and interplay of his muscles was miraculous even for youth. Each of El Robo's mightiest lunges failed to find a vital contact, and at each of these feints on the youngster's part, the Renegade's rage rose higher while his assurance ebbed an unconscious degree.

By the end of five minutes El Robo became aware that he had judged a bit rashly if not dangerously. His instinct told him that he would be put to the limit of his powers to carry off a victory here. There was nothing like trepidation within his brain-pan, for the elephant is too primitive and tremendous an organism to know fear. But he saw as soon as his wrath cooled, that here he was not going to be able to land a killing blow—that it would be a matter of strength and endurance. For the first time, perhaps, he felt definite proof of the encroachment of age, of the waning of his old craft and power, and that is a terrible realization for man or animal.

For a time the watching herd maintained silence, only ruckling with queer water-noises deep in their paunches or wherever it is these strange sounds issue. It was like the low murmur of enthusiasm that gradually rises from the spectators at a prizefight in the squared circle. They shifted backward and forward to accommodate the fighters, watching every maneuver with critical eyes, for the greatest of issues was at stake. Gradually as the battle grew ever fiercer, rumbles, squeals and trumpets of excitement burst from the encircling cordon; the old bulls rocked back and forth, waved their trunks and lifted their forefeet to thud the earth as the toxin of battle entered their blood. It was for all the world like the stamping applause from a ringside



An hour wore by, and a second hour was well along, and still no definite advantage for either opponent. Both had inflicted severe punishment, and the sides of each were gored and crimson. Blood trickled from their huge necks and shoulders, and ran down their forelegs. Their labored breathing and the heat radiating from their heaving sides could be felt many feet away. Like an invisible ether it inflamed the herd.

A third hour wore on, and the waning light of afternoon had given way to dusk and still the tide of battle had not taken a definite turn. By now the Renegade realized that he had tried all the tricks in his trunk, so to speak, as well as the limit of his strength.

And then the young bull suddenly exhibited some of the craft that had won him his place. In an unguarded moment he charged with a redoubled strength, wholly unlooked for. The unexpectedness of the thing overthrew the Renegade's balance, sent him crashing to the earth. The ring of watchers surged forward in a gray wave, but it was not the end. As the leader towered over him, El Robo came up suddenly with a sidewise lunge of flashing tusk that all but turned the tables, laying bare a great gash across the other's shoulder. But thereafter, it became evident that the tide of battle was slowly turning. The young leader was winning, not through craft, but tireless endurance and the power of instant recovery. The Renegade's charges grew weaker by degrees, until he was forced at last to play the pure defensive, while the youngster's attacks seemed not to have weakened at all. His inexhaustible energy was not to be resisted, and even when an opening presented itself now, El Robo was unable to take advantage of it.

It was a last desperate trick on the part of El Robo himself that ended the battle at last. Choosing a strategic moment he left his right flank purposely unguarded. The young bull saw as intended, but El Robo had misjudged his lightning agility. The leader wheeled and lunged with the shock of a catapult. In the darkness no eye could follow what happened, but there came the sound as of mighty boulders crashing together in a landslide, a rumble of pain and the Renegade was down. One of his yellowed tusks had split, and a half of its length snapped off from the shock of the side blow, while blood ran from his open mouth from a deep internal wound.

All saw as the young bull towered above him, that the battle was over. Some sig-

nal or intimation of defeat must have passed between the foes, for El Robo was allowed to rise. Then with head and trunk lowered in token of withdrawal, the Renegade backed slowly from the circle breathing and coughing stertorously, and into the dark of the surrounding jungle, leaving the young bull to blare his victorious trumpet to the night.

The sounds of the herd's answering salute stung and rankled in the Renegade's ears, as he limped away through the dew-drenched forest. He moved with ponderous slowness now, for his injuries were deep and serious. Before the end of an hour, standing in the thick dark of a deep wet glen, it came to El Robo that those wounds were final—that he was not to recover. How or whence this came, there is no telling, but his instincts knew, as infallibly as any premonition of the spirit ever known to man.

And out of that something came from the unseen and touched him. A call from the ether, no more, something from out the ancient herd-spirit of his kind, that pulled him irresistibly toward that final resting place, the Elephant Tombs, that had been chosen in ages past by the oldest and wisest of his race. It was an urge, mysterious and inevitable as the movement of the planets and the migration of birds, to find those secret fastnesses zealously guarded from man and all other animals, where the elephants go when the first warnings of death steal over them. That is why it is that no hunter in the wilderness ever comes upon the remains of elephants who have died from natural causes. Only by rarest chance are these secret burial grounds ever discovered; like the legendary burial reefs of the sperm whale of the south seas, they are always in the most remote and inaccessible places.

El Robo did not reason this out. Simply came the impulse to seek a last sanctuary. He did not know where the Place of Death was, only his mysterious elephant sense knew. But it was far and the time that remained was none too long. Following the urge, he set off southward through the wilderness, steadily and unhurried, toward the wild, mountainous region of the Kilimanjero, whence the call came strongest.

## II

NOW it happened that not only the jungle people had been disturbed by the titanic conflict in the wild elephant herd. From his safari camp only a mile down the river, Neil McQuestion, elephant scout and promotor for the British Ivory Syndicate in the hinterland, had listened with interest to the far wild trumpetings. As it happened he had been following the tracks of this particular herd for days, and from a background of knowledge gained in twenty years of jungle experience, he had read in the far sounds something of extraordinary moment.

McQuestion had been an outstanding figure in Africa since the days of the Boer War. Perhaps no living white man knew more about the ways of elephants than he; certainly none had had greater opportunity to study them in their native haunts. In his peculiar calling, he derived all the thrill an artist gets from the pursuit of his art, and back of that was good reason. McQuestion was one of the small handful of white men born in a generation, to whom Africa with her myriad diseases and climatic downpulls was innocuous. It was this that made him invaluable to his people. By some strange chemistry of blood, he throve where other men broke down in two years; to his tireless energy his company owed its far-flung outposts in this trackless land.

For two weeks McQuestion had been cruising about this particular vicinity with a half dozen black carriers at his back, watching, studying the signs of the elephant trails. He was not out on a mere elephant hunt. Something of far greater moment was actuating him. In his time he had been favored with strange insights into the elephant arcanum, both in India and Africa—into their rites and customs pertaining to mating, into their laws and formalities of combat, their punishment of criminals among their ranks, and the weird ceremonial gatherings that take place among the great beasts at certain seasons that are like prolonged and rhythmic dances. But there was yet something he had not seen, nor had any other white man in his knowledge, and it was toward this end he had been bringing to bear for months past, all the knowledge gained in half a lifetime in the tropics. In his mind certain deductions were beginning to take shape, but they were purely instinctive, and as yet too vague to indulge more than a quickening hope. That for which he hoped could only come about through the rare combination of patience combining with an exact coincidence.

The day before, when one of his carriers had come in with the report of El Robo's gigantic tracks seen along the river bank, McQuestion had gone forth and studied

the lone bull, all unknown, with the aid of a powerful field glass. He had marked the old rogue at once for the outlaw he was, and that afternoon when he heard the Renegade's challenge accepted by the leader of the distant herd, he had left his camp unaccompanied, and scouted on foot toward the scene of the battle. On his lean, seal-brown face beneath a battered sun helmet, a growing light as of coals fanned by a breeze had begun to glow, for it seemed just possible now that the thing for which he had so long waited might be about to transpire.

With the utmost caution he maneuvered to a point of vantage less than a hundred yards from the scene of the conflict, where, in the crotch of a giant forest tree he settled himself to wait and watch. Nearer he dare not go without putting the entire herd to flight, but from his high perch he could train his glass upon the distant battle, a scene such as few men have ever had opportunity to witness. But the struggle itself was not the thing which held McQuestion through those long hours; it was the possible result. Finally, the coming of darkness cut off all but the sounds of the distant battle; and still another hour passed before the mighty commotion quieted, and the high, strident blare of victory appraised McQuestion's discriminating ear as to the identity of the conqueror.

This was the moment for which he had waited, but now under the enshrouding darkness his purpose was blocked. He had not approached to within fifty yards before he sensed, rather than heard, the wild band melting away into the forest. A few faint rustlings, the distant snapping of twigs and the night had swallowed the great beasts completely and all evidence of their going. And with them the wounded rogue had also disappeared.

Standing in the trampled arena of the fight, nostrils tingling to the smell of fresh blood and dust, McQuestion sensed the mortal issue that had marked the end of that conflict, but no more could be done now till the dawn, so he made rough camp for the night and slept. With the first light of day, having left a sign by which his carriers might follow, he was off upon the lone trail of El Robo. That trail led him straight south, and it was marked by bloody signs, signs which increased rather than diminished as he went. Also he marked other things; for instance, that El Robo stopped neither to eat nor drink, and that he had traveled with total disregard of caution, facts which quickened the man's pulses with every mile.

The trail led directly away from the jungle lands toward what is known in the hinterland as the steppe-country—a desolate almost treeless waste that stretches through the East African interior about the base of Mount Kilimanjero and the southern Rift Valleys. A wilderness of lava fields, curious red earth and basalt rock, scattered with isolated mountains and extinct volcanic craters. McQuestion knew little about the steppe-lands, nor did any other ivory trader. The region was as arid and unconquerable as the sea. But for that very reason the blood throbbed in his veins as the morning progressed, for here, it seemed, of all places might lie the spot for which he sought.

He was a master tracker, and throughout the killing hours of midday heat he followed doggedly on, across a flaming and waterless land that stretched away to the little known mountains in the south. Sparse, decrepid vegetation clung amid the rocks, blighted from its battle for root-hold amid the layers of volcanic deposit. Where at intervals a few trees had succeeded in gaining access they grew gnarled and twisted, like the trees of high altitudes, lending themselves, it would seem, to the grotesque aspect of the landscape. Heat waves wriggled and quivered above the rocks like vague spirits of torment.

The question that burned ever more insistent in McQuestion's brain as the day advanced, was why any elephant should seek to penetrate this region, beyond the last tree line, beyond all chance of forage or water. The one answer seemed to be that the wounded bull was seeking a last sanctuary and McQuestion knew all that that might imply.

The close of afternoon found him more than twenty miles into the heart of the waste land, in a region untellably wild and sinister. Jumbled rocks lay everywhere as far as the eye could see; stunted, spear-like bushes lifted vicious heads aloft as if threatening all who dared penetrate their domain. Yet still the trail of the wounded bull led on into the south toward the far foothills of the Kilimanjero. McQuestion's small supply of food was already

nearly gone, as was the water in his canteen, but he gave no heed to that. Not for anything would he have turned back now.

Up the fissured side of an isolated crater, which commanded the surrounding country, he climbed as the last of the daylight waned. With his glasses he raked the landscape roundabout for sign of a familiar landmark, but the territory was all strange to him. All directions had come to look alike. The landscape was gutted everywhere by twisting ravines in the age old lava that had flowed from twenty score of fiery cones. Its conformations looked as if extinct monsters had crawled over the country while the slag was still hot. Then he saw that the cone he had climbed was no isolated peak as he had thought, but part of a continuous spur of rugged slopes stretching away to the southwest. The land had stirred in its sleep at some faroff time, shouldering up a ten-mile chain of peaks, and sinking the intervening chasms. And each of the peaks was a dead volcanic cone.

An early moon had risen from behind the eastern slopes, flooding the land in a weird milky obscurity. His body, taxed by now beyond all ordinary endurance, McQuestion could go no farther. His eyes were dry and rasped in their sockets, his body seemed banked with clinkers. Drinking the remainder of his water he dropped down where he was and lay for a long time like a spent animal. Before he knew it, the drunken sleep of exhaustion took him and he lay where he was without stirring the rest of the night.

The sting of the risen sun jerked him up at last, in full possession of his senses. He ate what food he had, and once more took up the trail of El Robo, which led now directly along the line of volcanic peaks. An hour later the trickle of water ahead of him sent a maddening thrill throughout his whole being, and drove him forward at a stumbling run. A tiny streamlet ran out of the mountainside, flowing doubtless from some lake imprisoned in the heart of the crater above. Flinging himself down beside the stream he drank long, then laved his parched face and neck. The water tasted faintly of sulphur from some deep laboratories of earth, but it was life. Not far above him he saw that the stream bed was crushed into mud by the passage of elephants—not one but numbers—and the trail of the wounded rogue was lost among them. The tracks led directly upward now, and McQuestion followed. The way was treacherous, pitted with slag, and deceitful as old honeycomb. Tempting footholds turned to pumice dust under his weight. The very mountain seemed armed against him with a malignant life, and the heat was already as if the ancient crater were only shamming the death of centuries. He gained the top at last, amid jagged teeth of lava that sliced his flesh and garments.

Here he looked down upon a nest of wild valleys and lesser craters, of a strange and curious formation. There was no end to them, each like the other, radiating from the base of the mountain, their walls of volcanic rock. Gnarled yew trees grew along the valley floors, and the only egress from them appeared to be narrow openings at the lower ends, old outlets for flowing lava ages before.

McQuestion began his investigations by falling down a rock-slide. He brought up at the mouth of a cavern, bruised and bleeding. The cavern seemed to lead directly into the heart of the mountain. McQuestion decided to explore it, and entered cautiously, but could not go far without lighting a fagot. The cavern led downward along a winding course. Penetrating odors assailed him as he progressed, as if the very heart of the mountain had gone corrupt. The thing that kept him pressing forward now was the renewed signs of elephant spoor he saw, and marks where the great beasts had scraped against the cavern walls in passing. What was it that brought them into such a place?

All at once the passage debouched around a turn and McQuestion found himself standing no more than a hundred feet above one of the valleys he had looked down upon. A precarious trail wound downward and flinging down his fagot, McQuestion followed on, a great and mounting excitement in his breast. This trail, too, had been made by elephants. As he neared the valley bottom, his instinct of the wild told the man that here was one of those rare spots of earth, which are still utterly wild and virgin, where the foot of man has never trod before, and few beasts. A forgotten place, a place of death, McQuestion felt all that even before he made his final unbelievable discovery.

The bottom of the valley was so narrow that the sun rarely entered it, the contours

of the hemming cliffs inexpressibly grotesque and remote. What he had taken in the dim light for a jumbled mass of lava formation littering the floor of the gorge, appeared suddenly to his starting eyes as a field of whitened bones. Yes, there was no doubting it. Elephant fossil—huger than any McQuestion had ever seen. It lay scattered along the gorge as far as he could see, some of it so ancient that the bones were honeycombed by time.

A hoarse cry broke from McQuestion's lips. The thing was well nigh unthinkable. Following those vague intuitive promptings of his he had come at last upon the very place he had sought so long—one of those legendary spots which every ivory hunter in Africa dreams of one day finding—an elephant burial ground, one of the Secret Places of the wild, untellably old, where a thousand generations of elephants had come to die. Beneath his feet, free as the light or the air, lay an almost unimaginable treasure of ivory, his for the taking! And no man knew but he. No other human foot had ever trod this valley floor.

What with the heat, exhaustion and the gnawing hunger within, McQuestion might well have gone daft at the wonder of the thing. But he did not. He was too inured to chance and hazard for that. Something of the chilled nerve and persistence that had made him what he was, whipped in instead, and with no outward sign to tell of the seething excitement that gripped him, he moved on down the valley, poking and peering here and there, climbing over colossal mounds of fossil. Only in his gray, sun-drained eyes, there was a growing light, a light such as only the magic of hidden treasure can inflame.

It was weird and there was no end to it. The heat became dense and well nigh intolerable and myriads of insects infested the place, mostly elephant flies. He picked his way amid mighty leg bones big around as a man's body, and traversed long arcades of arching ribs, seven feet high, with spread enough to form the framework of primitive houses. There were skull bones that looked like giant boulders, and scattered amid all were the giant tusks, uncountable, and still in perfect preservation.

Here and there caverns extended for considerable distance into the canyon walls, and these, too, were choked with the fossil. McQuestion was still picking his way amid the jumble of bones when from behind him came a sudden warning. Only the feeling that danger was near. Then a shadow came across the sun. Hard upon that the air was shivered by a braying as of trumpets and the crash of brass, and the ground shook with the rush of a mighty form.

Whirling in panic, McQuestion slipped and fell amid the bones. What he saw in that instant was a gray and hairy mountain of elephant flesh rising upward from the ground and thundering down upon him—a bull elephant with the eyes of a demon and one tusk broken sharp off! It was none other than El Robo. The old rogue had reached his sanctuary at last. For seven hours he had lain here patiently waiting the end, amid all these others whose skeletons lay around about. Like a fallen tree of the forest, or any of the natural things of nature, he had been waiting for the sun and the earth to take him back, while the spirit within him relinquished strand by strand the bonds of flesh. There was a nobility in it, a lonely majesty such as man never attains. Already the haze of death was dimming his eyes when this interloper, scuffling profanely amid the dead, roused him to a sudden consciousness of insane fury, brought him heaving and puffing to his feet. Just why, perhaps, he knew not; he only answered to the ancient and inviolable law of the Burial Place, that is bred into every wild elephant at birth—an instinct striking back to the ultimate sources. All his life he had done nothing but defy the laws of his kind, but *this* law could not be denied. He was doomed, and knew it, death had already touched him, but he could not lie at the end with this hated eavesdropper prowling amid the bones of his kind. He must hold, and rally for one last effort.

It was McQuestion's fall that saved him from immediate destruction. The great bull charged in a trice, with the terrifying whistling scream of an elephant in rage. But the hunter's body had slipped into a crevice amid the bones just as the tusker lowered his mighty head to crush him into a shapeless pulp. On either side of McQuestion a huge tusk drove downward amid the bones, as the bull pitched forward to his knees. The man seized one of the tusks in desperation and had just time to wriggle forth beneath the descending trunk and scuttle away on the farther side of the bone pile. But in that instant of

proximity his alert brain had registered the fact that the great beast himself could stave off death no more than an hour longer at best. Blood dripped in a welter from his open mouth, hot, sticky, slippery stuff; and the colossal neck and sides were caked with it.

Even in that predicament McQuestion had had the presence of mind to snatch up his fallen rifle. At a distance of thirty feet he turned and sent a Mauser bullet into the old bull's head—a deliberate brain shot. But to all appearance it had no more effect than a pea-shooter. The thing was incredible, but he laid it to his exhausted nerves. With a blaring trumpet that shook the narrow canyon like a liner's blast, El Robo came on again, huge blanket ears flapping, twelve good feet from tip to tip, trunk upraised and threshing the air like a whipping black-snake.

McQuestion ran. Ran for his life in cold panic. Like a harried rat amid the rubbish of an alleyway, he clambered frantically over the fossil piles, flinging desperate glances over his shoulder, for the old bull continued to come on, unweakened, tail stiff with wrath, wicked eyes blazing red.

What followed was the strangest game that ever a man played for life, since the dim and far off days when the cave-dwelling troglodyte matched ape-like cunning against the strength of the hairy mammoth. And the elephant was It. A thundering, bellowing terror that came ever on and would not down, though he coughed and bled in a flowing stream.

McQuestion was put to it, and called upon the last ounce of his endurance in that ghastly race. The beast had headed him down the valley toward the blind end and the man's horror was of being penned in some cul de sac. He tried standing his ground, shouting and waving his arms in the strident "*Ahai-Ahai*" of the elephant trackers, but he might as well have hallooed at a steam engine, for El Robo had never known the fear of man. McQuestion's one advantage was in his nimbleness. He tried to hide in crannies in the cliff sides and fool the monster, but always he was discovered; the little bloodshot eyes of the old bull were demoniac in their sharpness, and glowed with a red frenzy, a pitiless flame that defied death to go on.

Once again McQuestion halted to pump a deliberate shot. He saw the old bull tremble and go to his knees like a landslide, but he came on again, tusks thrown high, in his trunk a dead branch of a tree he had snatched up in his rage and threshed from side to side.

Again McQuestion knelt, and tried to shove the safety catch of his rifle forward for a final shot. It would not budge, for in his last fall he had bent it. The weird feeling came over him then that fate had entered the game against him like a shadowy third. It gripped and paralyzed him and all else was obliterated, nothing mattered. But on came El Robo, great tusks lifted to brain the marauder, huge flat feet raging to blot him into purple mud. He missed that time by no more than a foot and McQuestion was all but cornered. With a coolness that was but the numbness of catalepsy, the man dodged, made a deliberate dash across the open for a low cavern in the rockside. His plan was to take refuge there till the old bull died or took himself away, if the cavern were deep enough. He made it by the narrowest of margins. There was a rush like a windsquall at his heels, as he flung himself within. Then the hulk of the monster darkened the opening.

The great black trunk came in after him, searching the inner crannies of the place, while the man flung himself here and there in desperation to elude it. In those awful moments McQuestion knew the fear that turns men's very blood to ice, leaves them powerless. The old bull's hot breath blew like a blast in his face, while his trumpeting shook the rock walls, a new note in the call now, far-piercing and insistent. For El Robo in his hour of extremity, had forgotten his life-long grudge, and was sending out a call for the cooperation of his kind—the elephant's S. O. S. True and far it carried across the miles of desolate steppes, till it died in a thin far echo in the distance.

Meanwhile with tusks and great heaving shoulders he fell to gouging and tearing at the low cave entrance, all the strength of six tons weight behind him. Falling rock and earth showered down in clouds. A great mass of rock was suddenly loosed and crumbled downward, completely blocking the cavern mouth. And that it was, and that alone,

which saved McQuestion's life, as he always maintained in later years. For the rock mass was too great for even the old bull to heave aside, and gradually his mighty efforts grew weaker and weaker until finally, silence utter and complete, once more settled over the gorge.

IT MAY have been minutes or hours later—for time had little count in such an emptiness—when next a sound stirred echo in that valley of the dead, that lay forgotten between two toes of the old volcano. It was the hail of McQuestion's six Kroo boys from the rocks above, as they sighted their chief climbing to meet them from the valley mouth. The night before, they had set out upon their leader's trail according to instruction, and had followed on infallibly as bloodhounds on the scent, for they were men born and bred in the elephant lands. The shrill trumpeting of El Robo echoing afar over the steppes had brought them on at a run, for with uncanny sagacity, they had read the danger in that far call.

McQuestion offered no explanation as the party made the tortuous ascent back along the mountainside, and his curt orders forbade all questions. He seemed to have aged ten years and he had the feeling he would never get a grip on his shattered nerves again. Some of the cold horror of that tableau in the fossil pits remained like a slow poison in his blood—a sort of culmination—and he knew then that he was through with Africa for all time.

Back on the Coast he never told anyone what he had found in the secret valley. A lifetime close to nature and the beasts had bred odd, mystical fancies in McQuestion, things which other men would have held in ridicule. To him the elephants had always stood as the kings and heirophants of the jungle domain. Their burial laws deserved man's reverence, he maintained. The dead monarchs would never be disturbed through him.

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# The BEST SONG of ALL

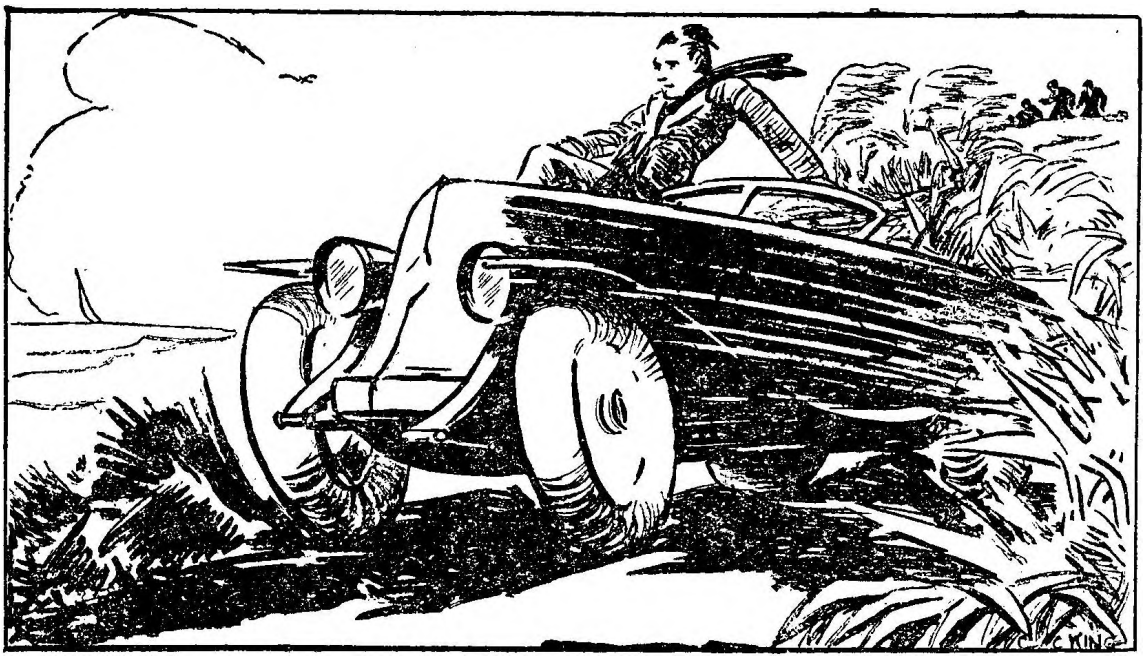
***By Hugh Thomason***

I HAVE sat by a Cossack campfire and heard the soldiers sing,
With the red light on their faces as they made the wild hills ring
To songs of headlong charges, till one almost seemed to hear
The beating of the horses' hoofs, and the clash of sword with spear.

I know the measured cadence of the dark canoe-men's song,
As, swaying to the paddle-stroke, they urged their boat along.
Heard gladsome voices that rejoice, and the fierce warlike call;
But the melodies of the sailorman, I love them most of all.

And what can cheer the longing hearts of wanderers o'er the foam
Like to that tender melody that tells of Home, sweet Home?
And who can match the kindly song when hand and voice combine
To conjure up in friendship's name the days of Auld Lang Syne?

And give to me a sailor's chant to the swing of the capstan-bars,
When the anchor breaks from its ocean bed, and the cable clanks and jars,
For it's up and away from foreign soil to rest on our home ground,
And every voice will join with joy in the song of the homeward bound.



# THE TRAIL OF JEOPARDY

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

*Author of "Captain No More," "Malay Gold," etc.*

PARISIAN JEWEL THIEVES SUDDENLY DISCOVER THAT AN AMERICAN REPORTER AND AN AMERICAN DETECTIVE ARE ON THEIR TRAIL TO ADD TO THE ALREADY SOMEWHAT COMPLEX LIFE OF A CROOK IN THE FRENCH CAPITAL

## I

THE *Gaulois* was only half a day from Havre, her voyage all but over, when Ogilvy noticed something wrong in packing his kit-bag for shore.

His passport had vanished.

Assured that it was gone from the side pocket of his bag, together with his letter of credit and his travelers' cheques, Ogilvy shut the cabin door, sat down, lighted his pipe, and reflected. Then he rang for the steward, and sent him for the purser. This was like Ogilvy—he had his own way of doing things.

The purser arrived, his whiskers freshly pomaded and brushed, and shook hands warmly. He liked Ogilvy, as did most of the officers aboard; this young American spoke good French, had won the Legion of Honor in the French air service, and was also a war correspondent—a combination absolutely unbeatable from the French point of view.

"Well, my friend?" said the purser, when he was seated.

"Not at all well," said Ogilvy. "My passport, letter of credit, and checks have been stolen within the past three hours. They were here this morning."

The purser stiffened, his eyes widened, and he uttered a tragic, "Oh! La, la!" Then he began to question. Ogilvy took it much more calmly than he did, in fact.

Ogilvy usually took things calmly. He was tall, dark, rather saturnine at times; not of the ballyhoo correspondent type but rather chary of his opinions, and was somewhat noted for being perpetually in hot water somewhere or somehow—and enjoying it.

"Take it easy, now," he observed. "First, it isn't the steward, because I happen to have known him in the service, and he's a fine chap. Rule him out."

"Your room-mate——"

"Is a Brooklyn Jew, a student at the Sorbonne, and a remarkably good sort," said John Ogilvy. "Rule him out."

"But, m'sieu! Whom do you suspect?"

"Not a soul," said Ogilvy cheerfully. "If you raise a rumpus over this, it means

a lot of fourth-rate publicity and nothing gained. If you keep quiet, we may get somewhere. There's nothing lost, exactly. Send a radio at once to Paris, Havre and Washington regarding the passport; that's up to the consulates, and I can get an emergency passport at Paris. Radio my bank regarding the letter of credit and checks. I've plenty of cash for the present."

The purser nodded, lighted a cigarette, and frowned.

"You suspect no one?" he said again.

"No." Ogilvy puffed at his pipe. "Somebody wanted the passport to help him get ashore at Havre. He took the checks and letter of credit to make it look like robbery. Therefore, it is someone who looks enough like me to get by on the passport. Now, if you'll observe, I'm very ordinary in appearance. I know a dozen men aboard here who could pass the passport window on my picture and never be stopped."

"Your consulate at Havre will have a man there," said the purser, "when we land. Our officials will be on watch. Whoever presents your passport will be arrested."

Ogilvy shook his head, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"No chance. Only a fool would try that, and it was no fool who pulled off this little stunt. He may alter the passport; he may not present it at Havre at all, but may use it later; he'll know, of course, that inside twenty-four hours that particular passport will mean arrest for the bearer unless it's altered. Where he may plan to use it, is in other ways."

The purser nodded to this. Passport bureaus and consulates would be on the lookout, but banks, post offices, the dozen other places where identification by means of a passport is necessary in France, would be easily taken in. Particularly by an American passport, for to American tourists all the rules are off.

"What do you want done, then?" asked the purser.

"Nothing. I can get ashore without a passport—have done it before, by means of this," and Ogilvy touched the ribbon of the Legion in his buttonhole. "You and the captain both know me, and so do one or two of the officials at Le Havre."

The two men were silent for a space. As Ogilvy said, without a clue to work on, any search was sure to be futile. The thief might not even look like Ogilvy; might be a woman, for that matter, intending the passport for use by a third party.

"Someone who knew you, perhaps?" asked the purser reflectively.

"I fancy not. I'm down in the passport as traveling for pleasure and business; he might not know I was a correspondent, might take me for a simple tourist. That's why——"

Ogilvy checked himself, but not soon enough. The other regarded him sharply.

"Ah! That's why you do suspect somebody, eh?"

"No. Suspicion needs some sure base." Ogilvy smiled, and his wide-mouthed, friendly grin was good to see. "It just popped into my head, that's all, and I don't intend naming any names."

"Then I shall merely send the radios?" The purser shrugged. "Give me the number of the passport and I'll attend to it."

Ogilvy complied.

Half an hour later, he sauntered into the smoking room, sought a corner table where two other men sat, and nodded.

"Exact to the minute, as usual!" one of them said, laughing. "You haven't seen Marmont?"

Ogilvy dropped into a chair and picked up the cards.

"He'll be along—there he is, now! Cut for deal."

The fourth approached, bowed smilingly, and took the vacant chair. He was easily the most distinguished of the four in appearance—one of the most distinguished men aboard, in fact. He was French-Hungarian, an exiled noble of Hungary domiciled in France; tall, dark, proudly handsome, he was instinct with courtesy and had a winning smile which made friends for him on all sides. It was generally understood he had been in the diplomatic service. He seemed little over thirty-five, of extremely powerful build, and was an excellent bridge player.

It was this man whom Ogilvy half suspected—without any real basis. Since Ogilvy very rarely named himself as a newspaperman, preferring the rôle of tourist, Marmont had no reason to guess the fact. Certainly the thief did not know it, for in France a journalist of any standing is not a man to be lightly played with. He can usually pull too many strings.

These four men had played together frequently in the past few days, having gravitated out of the mass as is the shipboard custom. One was an elderly manufacturer from Chicago—a good hand at the game, but otherwise with little personality. Not so Keene, however, the fourth of the quartette. A hard-bitten man of

fifty, Keene had been all over the world and had done everything, spoke half a dozen languages, and now very frankly made a large living in the racing game. He played polo and had a horse-raising outfit in India for the game, and was now on a leisurely return to the Far East after a year spent at home. Crude in some ways, he was in others astonishingly cultured, and Ogilvy had long since marked him down as that rarest of men—utterly dependable and a good sport.

A rubber finished, they ordered drinks while waiting for the second dinner-call, and settled up. The manufacturer departed in search of his family, and the other three at once settled into last-night intimacy. Cards were exchanged, and Ogilvy perceived that Marmont was a count—which did not prepossess him in the least.

"You are both going to Paris?" queried Marmont, in his fluent English.

"I have business there in three days," Keene nodded. "Then I may come back to Le Toquet and Deauville for a swing around the racing circuit—it's about the end of the season and I'd like to hit the Grand Prix at Deauville. No telling, though."

Marmont glanced at Ogilvy.

"And you to Paris?" he questioned.

"I'm not sure," said Ogilvy. "I may have to meet a man in Havre, and may drift up or down the coast, depending on business."

"Well," said Marmont warmly, "I have an old chalet down Villers way—not far from Deauville, you know—and shall be there for the rest of the summer. If either of you come that way I shall be honored to have you visit me; we usually have a gay time of it, and I can promise you an entertaining stay. Wire me at Villers—no other address is necessary—and I'll meet you at Deauville with the car. We might make a party of it for the Grand Prix, eh? Be sure, now! I'll look forward to it."

So hearty was his invitation, so sincere were his level, humorous eyes and his warm words that there was no doubting his friendliness. For an instant Ogilvy felt shame for his suspicions; then he steeled himself. He had a rather hard view of most people, did John Ogilvy, and inclined to a cynical criticism of too profuse friendship.

Marmont rose and swung lithely away to dress, promising to see them later. Ogilvy fingered his glass and glanced after him, then was surprised by a sharp word from Keene.

"Well?"

He started, and for a moment locked eyes with the other. In that pock-marked, aquiline countenance, with the thick lips and masterful eyes and strong keen nose, he read a strange comprehension. Keene was smiling at him—had somehow read his thoughts.

"You don't like him?"

"Yes and no," Ogilvy nodded. "Anyone would like him, but I seldom give way to likings."

"So I've noticed," Keene grinned. "He's a good scout, but up in the air. Said his wife had left him a year or two ago—probably had reason. Believe me, that bird is a deep one, a hell of a lot deeper than he looks on the surface! He talks a lot about himself, but says not a word. You don't talk, and say less. Newspaperman?"

Ogilvy nodded.

"Hm!" said Keene. "I'd set you down as a pilot, now—flyer, I mean. You're the type."

"That used to be my line," confessed Ogilvy. "Crashed and lost my nerve for it, somehow. Here's how!"

"How," said Keene, and finished his drink. "You and I—we get on, eh? How long you going to be in Havre?"

Ogilvy looked at him for a moment.

"No telling, as you said. I may be there a day or a week. I rather think I'll put straight over to Deauville, though."

"You damned bird-dog!" exclaimed Keene admiringly. "Oh, you don't fool me—you're on a trail. I know you! Tell you what I'll do. I'll be at loose ends for a fortnight if I stop over for the Grand Prix. None of these other races are worth a damn, but I'll bring back a line of hot stuff from Paris on the big one at Deauville. Be back Monday. If you feel like it, look in at the Hotel Fondue in Trouville—it's a little hole but comfortable, and cheap—on Monday night about seven, and we'll go out and do the show. If you don't feel like it, then don't. Ta-ta! See you later."

With this, Keene rose and was gone. Ogilvy glanced after him, smiling a little.

## II

THE boat docked early in the morning, and Ogilvy, who had expected some little trouble, found himself the first passenger to step ashore. The chief of the passport bureau was on hand, summoned by officials of the line, and when Ogilvy had thoroughly established his identity, he scrawled his name on a document and was through. With the slightly bored courtesy of the French official, the chief shook his hand, welcomed him to France, and bade him go.

"So much for wearing a red ribbon in my button-hole!" thought Ogilvy, and took his kit-bag in to the customs shed, where he had finished in five minutes.

Evading the eager porters, eager for the money of tourists who pay ten times the proper charges, Ogilvy turned aside from the waiting boat-train in the long shed, and sought one of the taxicabs outside. On all of these the tops were down, French fashion. Ogilvy selected one, took the driver aside, gave him a cigarette, and confided in him.

"Look you, *mon gars*—there is a man whom I would follow, you comprehend? Put up the top of your cab, then we can post ourselves down the street at the end of the sheds, where one turns for downtown. I think he will go to the Quai de Southampton, for the Trouville boat; but let us wait and see."

"Ah!" said the driver, and winked broadly. "A jealous husband, eh?"

"Not a bit of it," said Ogilvy, and returned the wink. "Shall we say—a rival?"

Thus put into an excellent humor the chauffeur raised the top of his cab, Ogilvy entered, and presently they drew away from the line of taxicabs and private vehicles. The landing quay was at some distance from the town proper, and after a moment the driver halted the car just around a sharp turn. Here Marmont would either bear off to the left, if bound for Trouville, or would go on downtown if heading for the town itself.

Presently taxies and victorias began to file past. Ogilvy watched them narrowly. He had no definite reason for his present action, and indeed was proceeding in a very vague fashion, content to follow his hunch and see what turned up. If Marmont had a chateau down the coast at Villers, he would be known in Havre, and Ogilvy wanted some information about the man. As he waited, he reflected on Keene's invitation. Today was Friday—well, why not? He liked Keene. If Monday found him in Deauville, he might keep that appointment.

"There's our man!" Ogilvy tapped on the window, the driver nodded, the car moved. It wheeled into line behind that of Marmont—no easy task, for there was now a solid stream of vehicles leaving the quay.

Marmont looked extremely pleased to be back in France, beaming on all around. As usual, he was impeccably dressed and groomed, and had a good deal of baggage heaped on and around his taxicab. His driver turned to the right and headed for the town. Passing the wide gardens of the Hotel de Ville, the first car halted before a little dram-shop in a dirty and obscure street. Marmont got out, took one of his suitcases, and entered the place. It was anything but a choice establishment, being a hang-out of chauffeurs.

Ogilvy's driver went on to the next corner, turned up the street, turned around and came back, and waited. Almost immediately Marmont's car passed—the count must have taken in the suitcase and then left at once. Now his taxi headed back to the square at the end of the yacht-basin, and turned down for the Quai de Southampton. At the shed devoted to the Trouville-Deauville ferry, he alighted with all his baggage. One of the little black steamers that plied across the Seine estuary was waiting, and Marmont hustled aboard.

Having discovered this much, Ogilvy paid off his own driver, took his bag, and settled himself over coffee and rolls in a corner of a nearby restaurant. He waited there, and saw the Trouville boat depart with Marmont perched in all his glory on the solitary first-class deck. Then he relaxed and began to reflect on the situation. Why had Marmont dumped that one suitcase at the anything-but-respectable dram-shop?

Ogilvy found it worth pondering. He knew what queer things might happen in this town. Le Havre is a survival of the days when packet rats afloat were the prime seamen of the world, and ashore were the veriest dregs of humanity. There is nothing cheerful about the dull gray city; it holds an aspect of neglect and hopeless dreariness and grime, while its Norman folk are noted for their incivility.

Along the byways of the town may be seen odd human flotsam. Battered fair-haired Scandinavians two by two, seaman's duffle-bags over shoulder, purplish

bruises and old scars marking faces and warped hands; negroes from Senegal or Virginia, dungarees oil-smeared, teeth flashing white with gay impudence and brotherhood of man; lagging wrecks drifting about the quays, brown Algerines, huge side-shouldered slouchers with dirty fez and a bundle of gaudy rugs and mangy furs, and sorrowful-eyed Hindus. The tiny, narrow streets are lined with boozing dens, the doorways know blowsy, beckoning women; here are money-changers and pallid, furtive-eyed men with faces of preying birds, and worse. This town is a center for many things—sea-trade, traffic with America and England, the coast resorts lying all around—and is on the line between Paris and London and New York. Havre in the west, like Marseilles in the south, has its finger on the very pulse of France.

"Why not?" Ogilvy laughed suddenly. "What's the use of a hunch if you don't follow it? Take a chance, you poor fish, take a chance!"

He paid for his breakfast, arranged to leave his bag here until the next boat for the twin ports across the bay, and set off uptown at a rapid, swinging pace.

Retracing the course followed by his taxi, he presently sighted the chauffeurs' hang-out. He went straight to it, and much to his satisfaction found it empty of clients. The woman behind the bar gave him a greeting as he entered, and Ogilvy, playing the Frenchman, made answer.

"Good morning, madame! A *café fine*, if you please, and then we'll relieve you of the suitcase and be on our way."

Mechanically drawing his coffee, the woman checked herself, gave him a sharp look, then called for "Jules!" From the rear appeared an unkempt, red-haired Norman, who regarded Ogilvy suspiciously.

"So!" he observed, with Norman abruptness. "Of what suitcase is it a question?"

Ogilvy smiled cheerfully at him.

"Sacred name of a dog! Were you not told to expect me?"

"No," growled the other. "Unless you are the maggot and have changed your skin since we last met!"

For an instant Ogilvy was stumped, despite his thrill at finding his main conjecture correct. The maggot! A nickname? No—suddenly he remembered his Parisian slang, and laughed heartily at his own denseness.

"Maggot?" he repeated, leaning over the bar and fingering his glass. "Not yet, my old one! There is nothing of the Chinaman about Georges Picard, I assure you! Here's to you, madame, with my compliments."

The Norman's scowl did not lighten as Ogilvy drank his coffee.

"Exactly," he said. "There is nothing of a maggot about you, my Georges Picard, and I never heard of you before. Certainly, the master did not mention you."

"How should he, when he has been in America?" said Ogilvy. Then he regarded the other seriously. "Listen, *mon gars!* I am in a hurry, for I have to catch the *rapide* for Paris and there is not too much time. Here's the master's card, if that will convince you. If it won't, then I shall go direct across the bay to the master and hand in a report on you that will make somebody's hair curl. So trot out the suitcase or take the consequences!"

Ogilvy tossed Count de Marmont's card down the bar with a flourish.

The Norman read it, and nodded heavily. Obviously this Georges Picard had been sent—did he not know the master, did he not have Marmont's card and know all about him and where he was? It was certainly all right.

"One moment," growled the Norman, and shuffled into the rear room.

Ogilvy lighted a cigarette, and not a trace of his inward excitement showed itself in his lean, large-boned features. Nothing venture, nothing win! He had plunged on a wild guess, and apparently had won. Marmont might have smuggled something past the customs—no matter. He was known as "the master," and therefore was clearly the head of a gang, and this gang comprised at least one Chinaman.

Thus ran suspicion. After all, the whole game might be an innocent one. Marmont might be leaving the suitcase for a Chinese servant to pick up and take to a friend. There were a dozen possible explanations, but all of them were discounted by the low character of this dram-shop. A gentleman of Marmont's appearance would certainly choose another rendezvous unless there were something shady going on. Ogilvy chuckled at thought of Keene—how that hard-bitten rascal would enjoy such a game as this!

Two men sauntered in, greeted the lady behind the bar, and lined up for drinks.

They were not chauffeurs, but workmen of a sort, as their baggy corduroys and red sashes indicated; from the fact that they were in no hurry and evidently not at work, Ogilvy's alert brain took sharp warning. He was rather relieved when the Norman appeared, carrying the same suitcase which Marmont had deposited here earlier.

As he set down the grip, he shoved Marmont's card back at Ogilvy.

"Sign it," he growled.

Was this a test? It was hard to say. Very likely the gang, if there were one, had some secret system of numbers or names. Ogilvy wagged his head with a knowing wink.

"Sign the honest name of Georges Picard?" he said, knowing that the others were drinking in every word. "Name of a black dog—I am no such fool! No, no, *il pleut!*"

And taking the card, he scrawled across it the nickname of "Le Minuit"—thieves' argot for "The Nigger"—a name which might easily be applied to him because of his dark compexion. The Norman glanced at it and nodded with an air of satisfaction. Once more, Ogilvy had scored a bull's-eye with his scraps of slang.

He shook hands with the Norman and his wife, while the others watched him curiously, then picked up the suitcase and departed.

He found the suitcase unexpectedly heavy and started for the Hotel de Ville to get a tram, then changed his intention. Beyond doubt, he would be followed—therefore he must go to the railroad station as though heading for Paris. So, instead of hopping the down-bound tram, he struck one bound for the station and climbed aboard.

Ogilvy knew perfectly well that he dared not take any chances at the present stage of the game; he was, as yet, absolutely in the dark on many heads, and needed information. So he inquired as to the Paris express, found it left in ten minutes, bought a ticket, passed through the gates to the platform—and then promptly doubled on his tracks. He emerged through the side entrance of the restaurant, found a taxicab ten feet away, and climbed in.

"American Express," he said, and then bent over in order to conceal himself until the taxi had left the station square.

Five minutes later he climbed out and paid the driver. Instead of entering the building before him, he turned away from the wide open space before the Bourse, crossed the bridge spanning the basin where ships were closely laid up, and then plunged through the waterfront section beyond. He came out on the Quai de Southampton, feeling certain that his tracks had been lost, and hurried on to the restaurant where he had left his bag.

The big blackboard at the wharf entrance across the street told him that the next ferry left in fifteen minutes. He ordered an aperitiff, drank it, then departed. Once aboard the boat he ensconced himself in the second-class cabin, out of sight from the quay above, and settled down to wait. He was tempted to open Marmont's suitcase, but refrained.

The boat was comfortably crowded when she worked her way out past the fishing craft and mole, until she left the harbor behind and headed for the green hills on the other side of the Seine estuary, on her forty-minute trip. From the depths appeared an old hag, clad in black, with the usual lace cap of Normandy. She was serving coffee, and Ogilvy ordered a cup, which she brought him after a time, with crescent rolls. As it was boiling hot, Ogilvy laid it aside for the moment.

He smoked for a little, ironically watching the cabin empty, for the craft was catching a heavy Atlantic swell, and was rolling badly, so that the rails were quickly lined with unhappy mortals paying their debt to Neptune. After a time Ogilvy sipped his coffee, and found it vile—so strong as to have an acrid taste. However, he put it down, left his two grips, and strolled out for a glance at a fishing lugger bound up for Rouen.

And as he stood there, he glimpsed a red-sashed man up forward on the barred-off third class portion of the deck.

Ogilvy turned and leaned over the rail, startled. He recognized the figure instantly. It was one of the pseudo-workmen he had seen in the dram-shop. Either he was being shadowed with astonishing skill, or this was a chance encounter—the man might be going to Deauville for any one of a score of reasons, perhaps to seek Marmont.

Almost on the heels of the thought, Ogilvy had his answer. This came in a sudden swirl of giddiness, gone at once—but here was enough to give him sharp alarm. Instinctively he knew he was less clever than he had deemed; he had been shadowed after all, and the bitter taste of that coffee——

Reacting at once to the least divergence from his normal state of perfect physical well-being, Ogilvy did not hesitated. He

knew he had been drugged; unless he acted swiftly, he was lost. So he rammed fingers down throat, and leaned far over the rail—and remained there a good five minutes. He was so placed, however, that from the corner of his eye he could keep watch on the cabin where his grips reposed.

When he had done the best he could for himself, Ogilvy staggered in, got his two bags, brought them out in the open, and sat on them. He was feeling as though he had been dragged through a knot-hole, his senses were all swimming, and his legs were weak; the drug must have been powerful to act so rapidly. With an effort he took stock of the situation. The little steamer was nearing the end of her trip.

As it was low tide, she could not enter the Trouville harbor, and was heading for the long pier a mile to the east, on the other side of the town. She turned slowly and drifted in under the high steel framework; lines were flung and made fast, the gangplank was presently in place, and the passengers began to file ashore, presenting their tickets as they left.

Ogilvy stayed where he was until the worst of the shoving throng was gone, then rose and forced himself to the effort. It was a tremendous one, for his head was reeling, his brain had nearly lost coherence, and he seemed to have gone to pieces physically. Only by summoning up every atom of will-power did he manage to get across the gangplank with his two bags.

There faced him the steep climb to the wharf above. He negotiated the narrow iron steps slowly, yet for all his condition he had kept track of the red-sashed workman. He saw that the man had waited, also, and was now following him with a negligent air. No question about it all now!

Somehow the man must be got rid of. Ogilvy groaned to himself, but faced the problem squarely. The man was waiting for him to collapse, and he certainly would collapse if he did not get to bed in a hurry. The drug must have gone through his whole system most viciously to leave him in such condition.

Now he was up on the wharf, a long file of people streaming ahead of him toward shore where carriages and taxicabs were waiting. He took a few steps, then staggered and set down the grips. Turning, he found the workman close behind him. Ogilvy, gray-faced, appealed to him.

"My friend, will you give me a lift? I'm very ill——"

"Of course, of course!" exclaimed the other heartily. "Give me the bag, m'sieu—now put your arm around my neck and lean on me—so! Lean well. My faith, I am no weakling!"

Ogilvy complied, and thus they slowly proceeded toward shore. The workman looked well pleased with himself—more so than he would have done had he known John Ogilvy's mind.

## III

OGILVY knew that he must win or lose everything at one blow, and faced the ordeal grimly enough, hanging on by sheer will-power.

Leaning heavily on the workman, staggering as he pulled himself along, he found the end of the pier in sight. Half a dozen taxi drivers were beckoning and shouting. He selected one, motioned, and the man sprang forward to take the bags. Ogilvy followed to his car, which was an open touring model, and turned to the workman.

"M'sieu, perhaps you'll accompany me?"

"With the greatest of pleasure!" replied the other, eagerly enough. Ogilvy motioned him in, seized the car door to steady himself, and looked at the driver.

"I am ill—I need air," he said. "Drive out a little way along the coast road, then back to town."

The driver assented, helped him in, and Ogilvy collapsed on the cushions. The workman at his side quite obviously considered all this a providential occurrence.

The car started up, gained the highway leading from town along the shore, turned into it, and everyone was happy; the chauffeur, for his extra fare, the workman, for the way Ogilvy was playing into his hands, and the American, for the impression of extreme exhaustion he had conveyed. He was badly off enough, but not nearly so badly as he appeared.

Within half a mile they reached a deserted spot with no chalet in sight, the long reaches of black rocks studding the

exposed shore to the left. Ogilvy, bracing himself, saw the workman gazing off across the sparkling waters toward the Havre headland, and loosed his blow. His fist took the man accurately at the angle of the heavy jaw, and the workman limply collapsed. Ogilvy tapped on the glass, the driver glanced around, and then put on his brakes.

"Mon Dieu m'sieu, what has happened!" he exclaimed, staring at the senseless figure.

"Listen to me," said Ogilvy curtly. "This man was one of a gang that tried to rob me, you comprehend? They misjudged their prey. Now if I turn him over to the police, you and I will both be questioned and caused trouble. So I propose that we leave him here beside the road and let it end there. Speak up—yes or no? If you refuse, go to the prefecture of police and turn him in."

Naturally, the driver was only too anxious to escape the red-tape and inquisitions of a police inquiry; moreover, his hesitation was dispelled by sight of a hundred-france note which Ogilvy was fingering. So, making sure no other car was in sight, he offered no further protest but opened a door, lifted out the body of the workman, made sure the man was no more than stunned, and set him beside the road. Then he leaped back to his seat, swung the car around, and headed back for Trouville at his best pace.

Ogilvy gazed out across the sands at the gaily colored tents and umbrellas on the beach near the casino, and with a last effort of will kept himself in hand. He was, now that the crisis had passed, gradually failing, and recurrent vertigo seized upon him. As the car approached the cathedral, he sighted by pure chance, the sign of a small hotel on a side street up the hill—the Hotel Fonduc. Swiftly, he tapped on the glass.

"Stop! I'll get out here."

The chauffeur obeyed, then protested. M'sieu was obviously ill—and the bags were——

Ogilvy shook his head, paid the promised fee, then stood beside his bags until the car had departed on toward the casino. The final spurt remained before him, and he managed it somehow—but when he reached the little hotel he was staggering, and stars were dancing before his eyes.

He did not argue over the price of a room, but made out the regulation police card and then followed his host, who bore the bags. He found himself taken to a large, neat corner room, and expressed himself as well pleased.

"I was very seasick crossing from Havre," he said, "and I must sleep—perhaps until tomorrow morning. Do not disturb me. I'll ring when I want anything."

"Very good, m'sieu—our good Trouville air will soon put you in shape!"

Alone, Ogilvy locked the door; then leaned against it, trembling, reeling. He jerked off hat and coat, tried to undress—and collapsed across the bed.

When he opened his eyes again darkness was falling; the day had gone. He sat up, and immediately fell back under an access of giddiness while pain darted through him. He did not doubt now that but for his prompt action he would have been dead; no ordinary knockout drops would have thus affected him. It was an alarming thought, but he wasted no time on it—he managed to undress, and then crawled into bed. He was asleep almost at once.

He wakened again, to find the sun up—morning had come and half gone. When he rose, he found himself better, but extremely shaky. He rang for his breakfast, bathed and shaved, and after a bite to eat, got out his pipe and reviewed the situation.

"This bird traced me to the station, then to the Trouville boat, and knew I had tricked them regarding the suitcase," he reflected. "Then what? He arranged with the old dame on the boat to fix my coffee, and did it with a heavy hand. He was taking no chances. Well, we've established the fact that Count Marmont is at the head of a cheerful bunch of cut-throats—and nothing else. Now for the grip."

He pulled out Marmont's grip and attacked it. The affair was a cheap one, poorly constructed—not at all the sort which a customs officer would search, especially when his palm was greased. Besides which, as Ogilvy knew, American tourists were not bothered by the customs people unless some under-tipped porter drew down the official notice.

Thus, finding the suitcase locked, Ogilvy attacked it and speedily wrenched out the flimsily riveted fastenings on either side.

He flung back the lid, then stared down at the contents, brows wrinkled in astonishment.

The suitcase was filled with soiled clothes.

Ogilvy broke out laughing. Shirts, pajamas, handkerchiefs, collars—his hand rumpled up the articles, and amusement seized on him. Here he had expended wits and strategy, had all but lost his life, over a suitcase filled with Count de Marmont's dirty linen awaiting the wash! No wonder it had been left at the dram-shop—probably it was to be taken to some particular *blanchisseuse*——

"But Chinamen don't do washing in France," reflected Ogilvy, and his frown returned.

He untied the strips of cloth holding the contents of the suitcase in place, and ruthlessly tumbled out the articles. His half-suspicion was startlingly verified. Something dropped to the floor—he was looking at the dark green folder of his own passport! And now the cloth-lined bottom of the suitcase—yet not the bottom, surely! Too shallow for that——

Five minutes later, John Ogilvy leaned back, relighted his pipe, and regarded the row of little boxes on the table before him. They had been exhumed from the false bottom of the suitcase, and he was filled with admiration for the ingenuity of Marmont—not as to the false bottom, but the affair as a whole.

Slight attention is paid by the customs to the tourists who arrive from America, and the chances were ten thousand to one against any customs searcher giving a grip filled with soiled things a second glance, even if he opened it at all. As for considering that such a bag could have a false bottom, that was out of the question. The French have no organized system of rewards and reports such as the American government puts into play on its returning tourists, and Marmont could carry the thing off with practically no danger whatever.

It paid him well, too, since the French levy a high duty on precious stones. Ogilvy whistled in astonishment as he eyed the contents of the little boxes—unset stones of all descriptions, but none of them negligible; diamonds in platinum settings, tiny watch-bracelets, and one necklace of blazing sapphires whose sheer beauty held him spellbound. He examined one or two of the articles, found where names had been engraved and later erased, and sat back to figure it out.

"Why would he jeopardize this batch of stuff for the sake of stealing a passport?" he cogitated. "Of course, a passport would be of prime value in the hands of a crook over here, and perhaps Marmont has particular need for such an article at the moment; or one of his outfit might need it. Hm! He's certainly the head of an organization."

As for the stones, these explained everything. They must undoubtedly be the loot of some American gang, stones too valuable to be easily disposed of at home. Marmont had taken them over, perhaps for a French syndicate, and after smuggling them into France could turn them over at good profit. There was the thing in a nutshell.

"How does it affect me?" thought Ogilvy. "I've got the loot, and there's going to be a large slice of hell raised over its disappearance. I don't want it particularly, but there's sure to be a large reward for it, and I want that reward. What's more—look at the front page story, exclusive with John Ogilvy! I'll bet the count has been dined and wined by half the would-be society in New York, too. What'll I do with the stuff?"

It was a poser. Ogilvy was not at all the sort to hand over conscientiously every lost umbrella he found to the police, but he had no desire to retain the jewels of other people. If he turned in these stones, the first thing he would be up against would be an inquiry as to how he got them, and he had no intention of explaining. He wanted to keep the whole thing tight until he could get the story on the wire. If he called in the police this would be impossible.

The thing to do, then, was to cable his New York paper, briefly describing the stones, let them take up the matter with the police, using their influence at home and in Paris to keep the story exclusive—and await developments, which should come within a day or so. To go over to Deauville and find the cable office meant the risk of being seen and recognized by Marmont's gang, who were undoubtedly moving heaven and earth to find him; but this risk must be run.

So much for the stones, but what about himself? He was in no shape to run down the story, as he realized when he began to dress. Once Marmont located him, recognized

him as the man who had relieved him of the loot, it would be war; sharp and deadly. Perhaps he had already been traced to this hotel.

Glancing around the room, Ogilvy went to the old-fashioned washstand in the corner, pulled out its bottom drawer, piled the little boxes in it, and shut it again. This must serve for the present. Then he dressed, alarmed by his own weakness and lack of energy, and after replacing the soiled clothes in Marmont's suitcase, took it and left the hotel.

In five minutes he reached the line of waiting carriages beside the cathedral, and hired one to take him to the station. He chucked in the suitcase, settled back on the cushions, and was soon rolling along the main street of Trouville, with the walled river-channel on his right. Crossing the bridge, the carriage took him to the side door of the station, and Ogilvy got out.

"Now," he said to the driver, "there is a noon train for Paris, eh? Good. You know the chalet of Count de Marmont, at Viller?"

The driver shrugged.

"One can always find, m'sieu."

"Here's a hundred francs. Drive there and deliver this suitcase at the chalet. Any time this afternoon will do."

The driver nodded, pocketed the money, and turned out of the big enclosure.

After five minutes, Ogilvy hired a taxicab and was taken to the cable office in Deauville, the more aristocratic of the twin resort towns. Here he sent off wires to announce his recovery of the passport, and filed a long cable in code to his own newspaper in New York.

These things took considerable time. When they were finished, noon had arrived. He left the office and made his way to the Potinière, the café across the street from the casino, where the so-called society of Deauville gathered each day. Ogilvy knew that in this assemblage of actresses, society loafers and pleasure-seekers, he was effectually concealed, so he made himself comfortable at a table beneath the trees, had a drink and a bite to eat, and presently paid his score and sauntered over to the casino. Finding that this would not open up for real business until late in the afternoon, he turned aside to hail a carriage—and things went black.

When he recovered, two men were reviving him and a small crowd had collected. Ogilvy, furious with himself for fainting, realizing that he had miscalculated his strength, was helped into a carriage, and perforce gave the driver the address of his hotel. He had left a trail now which would be impossible to cover, he knew, but there was no help for it.

Twenty minutes later, a touch of fever burning at his temples, he entered the Hotel Fonduc and went to his room. He locked the door, undressed, and crawled into bed after dosing himself copiously with whisky and quinine. In two minutes he was fast asleep. He wakened in mid-afternoon, found himself bathed in a profuse sweat, turned over and went to sleep again.

At seven that evening he wakened, sat up, and realized that he was extremely hungry. He rose, felt nearly himself, and began to dress. Then he found an envelope that had been shoved under the door, and seized upon it. The reply from New York was to the point:

*Got the story. Arranging with Paris prefecture. Congratulations.*

Ogilvy grinned, stretched, and threw on his clothes.

"Congratulations, eh?" he reflected. "That means it's big stuff and I'll hear more later. Now for dinner and a plan of campaign!"

He need not have worried over the plan of campaign. It was already headed straight for him.

## IV

WITHIN half an hour Ogilvy assured himself that the effects of the poison had been thoroughly worked off. He was by no means himself, but another twenty-four hours would see this rectified.

He strolled over to the Trouville casino, far less pretentious than its Deauville sister and catering to the cheaper class of tripper, the bourgeois Parisian, and then along the cafe-lined square until he came to a *brasserie*. As it was just the dinner hour, the tables in front were partly occupied, but the corner table at the end of the terrace was empty, and Ogilvy made his way to it.

Fresh from unconventional America, he was anew amused by the stiff dressiness of the French summer resorts, and was watching the people around when a man approached and bowed in the courteous fashion of the country.

"Is m'sieu occupying the entire table?" he asked. "Or may I have his permission to take the opposite chair?"

"By all means," said Ogilvy.

The other seated himself. Waiter and bus appeared, the table was laid, the orders were given. Ogilvy lighted a cigarette, which the Frenchman eyed with the usual compassion of his race for those who spoiled their gustatory organs with smoke before a meal.

He was a tall, immaculately attired gentleman, in white flannels, the highest of high collars, and white spats. In his button-hole were the ribbons of several decorations. His air was severe and lofty; his face grave and dignified. Ogilvy set him down as possibly a lawyer, or even a magistrate.

The two fell into conversation over their meal. M. Bacqueville de Morant proved to be a lawyer of the court of appeals in Paris, and Ogilvy congratulated himself on being a good guesser. Further, M. Bacqueville had a chalet down the coast, but was in Trouville to give his aid in a local court. His car had broken down—an ill to which French cars are heir—in the course of the afternoon, and he was forced to wait until after dinner to return home.

Cards were exchanged. Upon perceiving the miniature Croix on Ogilvy's card, M. Bacqueville thawed perceptibly; he became friendly, even ardent, insisted on touching glasses, and spoke of his warm feelings toward all Americans. He was obviously a man of great culture, highly educated, and mentioned his collection of relics. All Frenchmen are collectors, and M. Bacqueville, it appeared, gathered historic relics; he had recently acquired Marie Antoinette's lace nightcap, and spoke of it with pride.

The coffee and liqueurs appeared, and being somewhat loosened by his bottle of 1906 Vouvray, M. Bacqueville proposed that Ogilvy accompany him to his chalet for the week-end.

"It is only two or three miles down the coast, toward Blonville," he said eagerly. "My car is repaired and waiting; we can be there in ten minutes! It would give me great pleasure to present you to Madame, and she would be charmed to have the honor of your acquaintance! You may return here very easily, whenever you are ready. If you would care to visit the Deauville casino, I have a card to the baccarat rooms——"

Ogilvy scarcely listened to all this, for he instantly perceived the timeliness of this invitation to him personally. By Monday he would be certain to hear from the Paris police, and Keene would also be along on Monday; he rather fancied Keene would make an excellent partner in this affair, and would jump at the chance to get in on it. So, on all counts, he might very well let things rest until Monday, and himself remain out of sight.

"I should be delighted," he responded, "but I shall have to pack a few things to——"

"Good!" exclaimed M. Bacqueville cordially. "I'll get the car and come for you—at a hotel?"


"The Hotel Fondue."

It was arranged, and after receiving a bow and a handshake, Ogilvy strode off toward his hotel, whistling as he went.

Arrived there, he informed the proprietor that he would be absent until Monday, then ascended to his room. A glance showed him that the stones were intact in the drawer, and he first considered taking them with him, then rejected the impulse. Glancing around the room, he went to one of the windows, which faced the hillside behind. Opening this, he found a wide sill outside, and arranged the little boxes there. Screens being unknown in France, and windows opened only in case of necessity, the boxes were as safe as though in a vault.

"Even if I've been seen and traced here, even if they search the room," he reflected, "they'll never find the stuff here! So I'm off, to vanish until Monday."

Two minutes afterward, he left the hotel, bag in hand.

There was but one way Bacqueville could come, turning out of the main street, and when his white figure showed up in a car, Ogilvy was at the corner waiting. Bacqueville stopped, and Ogilvy got in. The car was a two-seater Renault, powerful enough to eat up the hilly roads of Normandy with ease. In two minutes they were thrumming toward the bridge and Deauville, and once out of traffic, Bacqueville opened her up and they went down the long straight stretch toward Blonville at fifty miles an hour.

Ogilvy was astonished at the man's driving. Something in the way he tooled the

car did not jibe with his grave dignity—it was more as Ogilvy himself would drive. He had slight time to wonder, however, for when the steep hill showed ahead, the pace slowed and Bacqueville waved his hand toward the left.

"Over there—a charming little place—the turn ahead——"

He made the turn, striking into a narrow little road at a speed that made Ogilvy gasp. For some minutes the car mounted steadily, winding among thick trees, shot over a final grade, and came into sight of a cluster of lights.

"There we are!" exclaimed Bacqueville. "And just under eleven minutes from Deauville, I think. Not so bad, all things considered. Ah, we have guests from Paris, it seems!"

The lights of several cars showed before a long, low building of some size. Off to the left, Ogilvy caught the dark sheen of a small lake. In between high gates they passed, a stone wall on either hand running into darkness, and on up to the house. Bacqueville tooted his horn.

For the first time, Ogilvy's suspicions leaped into life. No ordinary blast of the horn, but an irregular, rhythmic tooting—obviously a signal. On the instant, half a dozen other things occurred to him; notably, why should Bacqueville have remained to dine in Trouville, when any of these other cars might have brought him home—even a hired car?

Too late now; Bacqueville halted, leaving the motor running, and climbed out. A door opened, flooding a flight of steps with light. The long windows, uncurtained, showed glimpses of men and women, and a tinkle of music rippled out.

"Welcome, my friend!" exclaimed Bacqueville, coming around to Ogilvy's side of the car. "Here, let me take your bag."

Ogilvy looked up at the nearest window—he could have sworn that the figure, coming and going again, had been that of Count de Marmont! Then, on the steps, came a man, to whom Bacqueville turned with a word of greeting.

*A chinaman!*

Swift as light, Ogilvy's wakened brain leaped at the truth. Decoyed, trapped, snared like a foolish bird! What a silly ass he had been!

He acted by sheer instinct—it was a split second of time, a crisis on which everything hinged. Only instinct served now. He struck like a flash for Bacqueville's jaw, and as the Frenchman reeled back, flung himself under the steering wheel, threw in the clutch, threw off the brake, opened up the throttle. The powerful car whirled like a top and roared for the entrance.

From behind came a shot—answer enough to all doubts. The bullet went wide. Next instant Ogilvy was out in the winding road, thrumming along on second speed, shifting swiftly to third, then taking the dip beyond on full high.

Marmont was here, then—the whole gang was here, and he had been fetched along to be recognized, forced to give up the stones, probably murdered in the end! Fool that he had been, to think himself secure with such brains pitted against him! He crouched low, face set in a grim mask, and a snarling smile wrenched at his lips.

"Brains, eh?" he thought. "By George, if they want a fight they'll get it now!"

First it was a run, however. Over the crest, and from behind he caught the roar of an engine. He smiled again, threw in the gas, and took the narrow road like a madman. Drive? Let them try it with him! The night and the road ahead, his faculties all alert again, and untold horsepower at his fingers' ends!

Sickening swoop, wild lurching climb, wild curves—he covered the winding road at full speed, and only slowed for the descent into the highway. Then, for an instant, his mind paused. Which way? Instinct again—instead of turning to the right for Trouville, as he would be expected to do, as he had himself meant to do, he swung sharply to the left and swooped at the steep hill.

Part way up was an abrupt curve. As he neared this, he glanced backward and saw the headlights of a car swerve into the road from the same side road he had followed. Many cars were passing, and he did not bother to switch off his lights. As he had expected, the pursuing car turned in the opposite direction, toward Deauville and Trouville.

Ogilvy laughed, turned again, and changed gears to roar up the hill.

Now what? He knew subconsciously, and it came clearly to him as he reasoned it out. The entire gang was collected here at this chalet. Now that he had vanished, their whole effort would be, first, to find him, and second, to go through his room at the Hotel Fonduc. They were welcome to do that, he reflected. He himself was heading for Villers and Cabourg—and for Marmont's chalet. If the man really had one near Villers, it would be empty.

"They want action, do they?" and Og-

ilvy chuckled. "All right, let's have it!"

He settled down to his task. He was over the Blonville hill now, shooting down the long descent to the village beyond, whence the road crossed the sand flats to Villers like a ribbon unwound. Ogilvy had once toured through all this section, and now sharp memory of it swept back to him.

He slowed for the dangerous corner at the village, opened up again, and shot like an arrow for Villers. The speedometer quivered—thirty kilometers—forty—seventy—then eighty—a mad thing hurtled through the early night across the ribbon of macadam. The spurt ended when the straggling cottages of Villers swept up on either hand, and next moment Ogilvy was speeding along the esplanade and slowing for the hill and town beyond.

Fortunately, he knew exactly where to go here for information. Reaching the square of the town, he swung the car aside, left it, and turned to the café that served as headquarters and stop for the motorbus lines. Any inquiries elsewhere would be dangerous, but Marmont would never ask here.

In two minutes a blond Norman was pointing to a wall map and showing him exactly where the villa of Count de Marmont lay, three miles outside town.

In five minutes Ogilvy was tooling his borrowed car out and away. He intended to carry the fight into the enemy's country.

## V

THE Chalet de Souvenir, as Marmont's villa was termed, was situated on an unpaved hill road. Leaving his car drawn up against a hedge, lights out, Ogilvy approached the place and examined it carefully.

The environing fence was a high one, of iron, and the massive iron gates were securely locked. This evidence that no one was about the place was borne out by its general appearance. The house was dark, and was on the hillside above the road, a hundred feet back. Not a light showed anywhere.

"Hm! Getting over that fence will take some doing," thought Ogilvy. "And I'll need a light!"

Struck by an idea, he returned to the car and searched it carefully. To his delight he came upon an electric torch of the pistol-shaped variety which produced its own light when the handle was worked; further, upon a vacuum bottle filled wtih excellent coffee, of which he partook liberally. Thus provided without and within, he sought one extremity of the high iron fence, and found that it adjoined a low wall of stone. Climbing this wall easily enough, he gained the top of the fence and jumped.

Ogilvy made the circuit of the house, found it unlighted except for an attic window where a servant's room must be located, and set about entering. One servant, obviously, was here. An unlocked window swung open to his hand, and Ogilvy was in.

Now he dared not use his electric torch, because of the grinding whirr it made when being operated. With a shrug, he located an electric switch, turned it, found he was in a salon that opened into a library, and turned off the light. In the library, he closed the doors, switched on the lights, and set about exploration.

A glance showed that this was the room he sought. A desk was littered with papers. In the wall was set a large safe. The pictures and furnishings were rich, costly rugs covered the floor; lying on the desk, holding down a pile of papers, was a Luger pistol and a box of cartridges as though brought out for use and then left hurriedly. Ogilvy pocketed it, pocketed the box, then sat down at the desk and began to investigate the papers.

Ten minutes after, he switched out the lights, buttoned his bulging coat, and left the house as he had come. Leaving the grounds was another matter, but he made it at the expense of a ripped sleeve, and regained the car.

It was with a feeling of exultance that he turned on his car lights, started the motor, and began the delicate business of getting the car turned about on the narrow road without going into a ditch. What mattered now? Nothing! In his pockets were letters and papers, cables, telegrams, a complete cipher code. One glance at them had told they dealt with police matters and he had bundled up everything within reach. Those papers, bulging out his coat, meant that Marmont's whole gang lay in the hollow of his hand!

So great was his eagerness to be off that Ogilvy did not even don his light overcoat, but wrenched at the wheel and got the car half across the road. As he threw in the reverse gear, a sharp hail leaped out of the night at him. He backed, halted—was in the act of changing gears to go off like a shot, when another car without lights loomed up dead ahead, coming from the direction of Villers. As Ogilvy swung his car, his own lights picked up the other and showed it to be a small open Citroen bearing two men. It halted, and both of them leaped out, their car blocking the road.

In the very moment of victory, Ogilvy saw himself cornered. There was no time to smash the little Citroen aside—the two men were already springing for him.

He writhed out from under the seat, the gears in neutral, just as the man on the right leaped on the running-board with a sharp query. For reply, Ogilvy struck at him—the Luger was in his pocket. A hand caught at him and dragged him out the open doorway of the car.

He let himself go, with a savage blow to the face of the man below him, and both of them went rolling in the road. A kick in the side apprised Ogilvy that the other had come up, and now the man was on top on him. They struck and tore at him wildly, vehemently, a torrent of profanity emphasizing their blows; the three of them came half erect and then went down again, and rolled into the ditch.

Ogilvy struck his head against a stone, and for an instant was dazed. He dug one hand into his pocket, trying to get out the Luger, while both his assailants wrenched at him. Even in this moment, their manner of fighting struck him with contemptuous amusement.

"They're like a couple of old women and——"

As though in response to his unspoken thought, a pistol roared, but left him untouched. He had his own Luger now, but for an instant more could not use it. One of the two men had him by the coat and was jerking him aside with desperate wrenches.

Then, abruptly, Ogilvy flung himself backward. There was a ripping, rending tear, and he was free—half his coat was gone. He pressed trigger, then fired a second shot. Out into the road staggered one figure, and fell in the full glare of the headlights, and lay quiet. The other darted off into the darkness. Ogilvy fired after him, but without apparent result.

Panting, the American came to the prostrate figure and turned it over. The man was dead—it was the same workman who had poisoned him. He dragged the body to one side, then straightened up with an oath of dismay. The whole front of his coat had been ripped away; and with it had gone the precious papers, the price of triumph!

Ogilvy hesitated. He knew how far the sound of shots carry at night, and knew, too, how thoroughly these Norman roads were patroled by bicycle police; whoever was in the house would certainly be coming in another moment. None the less, Ogilvy dashed back to the ditch and made swift but vain search. The escaped man had doubtless carried off the fragments of

coat, dropping them as he ran. Search were futile now, delay perilous in the extreme. The whole pack would be on his trail within half an hour, for he had seen a telephone in the library.

He jumped into his car, threw in the low gear, and stepped on the gas. A wild crash, a lurch, and the Citroen was rammed out of the road and turned over in the ditch. The big Renault leaped into speed and fled for Villers like a wild thing.

As he drove Ogilvy came to swift decision. Return to Trouville, for the moment, was out of the question—would be only tempting fate. Now he must await Keene, and whomever might come from the Paris prefecture, for the game had grown beyond his single handling. The main thing was to wash out his tracks as completely as possible and lie hidden until Monday night; and to this end he had laid his plans with some care while on the road.

Accordingly, he flashed through Villers, avoiding the main street and taking the side street to the right, which brought him out on the coast highway below the village. Now he opened up the Renault once more, heading for Blonville. To his right were wide marshy flats, to his left were sand dune or open stretches with the shore directly beyond. He was a good halfway to Blonville when he found his chance—a moment when the road was empty of cars ahead and behind. He switched off his lights, slowed down until he found a gap in the dunes, and then put the car at it.

With a plunging leap, the Renault was out of the road, roared over the low four-foot sandhill, and took the shore beyond.

Ahead was a wide expanse of sands with the ripple of water in the starlight. Ogilvy tossed out his bag and topcoat, poised himself on the running-board, opened the hand-trottle wide, and jumped.

He fell heavily, rolled over, then sat up and watched. The car's black mass ploughed over the wet sands, struck the water with a high splash, seemed to go on interminably—and then halted far out. Ogilvy rose, found his coat, donned it, picked up his bag, and struck out along the curving line of shore, well satisfied. The tide was creeping in, most of the coast along here was quicksand, and he felt certain that by morning there would be nothing of the Renault in sight.

Ahead of him was scarcely a mile, and he could see the blaze of lights from the new Parisian hotel of Blonville. He plodded along until he neared this hotel, then struck back to the highway. He had no idea of applying at the fashionable tourist caravansary. Instead he came to the cross-roads of the tiny village, and just off to his right saw the place he had previously noted; an old-fashioned country tavern of brick.

The dining rooms of this little inn opened on the street and were ablaze with lights, while the rythmic hammering of an electric piano showed a dance was in progress. It was Saturday night, Ogilvy remembered. Inspecting the place, he avoided the noisy crowd and found a side entrance. This brought him into a wide courtyard, and he spoke to a woman who was at a doorway.

"Where can I find the proprietor? I have just arrived by motorbus, and want a room."

"I will call him, m'sieu."

She departed, and presently returned with a smiling young fellow who heard Ogilvy's request and then nodded.

"A room? But yes. M'sieu is an American, by his accent?"

"You're a good guesser," said Ogilvy in surprise. "Usually I can fool anyone but a Parisian."

"But I am a Parisian, m'sieu! You see, I married the daughter of the house, here, and in the summers this is my profession. At other times—I am an artist. Come, let us see what room you would like! After next week we shall be full up. The Grand Prix week——"

"It is for a few days only," said Ogilvy. "I am ill, and must have complete rest."

He followed his host up a flight of steps, and found himself fifteen minutes later in possession of a small but scrupulously clean chamber on the second floor. Ogilvy removed his light overcoat, and an exclamation broke from the proprietor at sight of his half-coated shape.

"Why—m'sieu has lost half his coat!" he exclaimed, and laughed. "Now, I have heard of a coat being lost, but never the front half of a coat!"

"Then you've learned something," and Ogilvy chuckled. "This afternoon in Caen, when I left the train to take the motor bus, I shut the compartment door without seeing that a corner of my coat was in it. Pouf! It happened. So I put on my overcoat and came along. Perhaps you can lend me a jacket of some sort, until I buy a new suit?"

"With pleasure." The proprietor did not inquire too closely into Ogilvy's none too probable story, but accepted it at face value. "The fit will not be good, but it will serve, I think."

"Can you get a letter into the post for me tonight?" asked Ogilvy. "I'll give it to you in half an hour. I'd like to have it registered if possible——"

"I can get it registered in the morning," said the other, with a wink. "No letters are accepted for registry on Sunday—but our postmaster here will arrange it for me."

This put the last link in the chain of Ogilvy's plan, for he knew with what extreme caution the French postal service will deliver no registered letter except to the party addressed. Accordingly, he sat down and wrote without reserve:

*My dear Keene:*

*This should reach you Monday on your arrival. Go to my room at the Fonduc, open the second window on the left, and you will find a number of small boxes on the window sill. Pocket them and bring them along to me at the White Horse Tavern in Blonville.*

*You will probably find a gentleman seeking some word of me at the Fonduc. Sound him out with great care. If he is from the Paris prefecture, bring him along. But do not open your head to another soul about me—deny that you know me! And if you haven't a pistol, get one.*

*Ogilvy.*

He addressed the envelope to Keene at the Fondue Hotel in Trouville, sealed the letter, put the return address as Jean Fouquieres at the White Horse, and sought the proprietor below.

When he returned to his room he glanced at his watch, and whistled with surprise. It was not yet ten o'clock. He went through what was left of his coat, and found just one thing remaining of his loot, besides the Luger, the extra cartridges of which were gone. This object was a flat notebook containing not more than a score of entries, some rather lengthy. Ogilvy found it absolutely unintelligible, being in a language which he could only conjecture to be Hungarian. He laid it aside, and with a sigh for what had been lost, turned in for much-needed sleep.

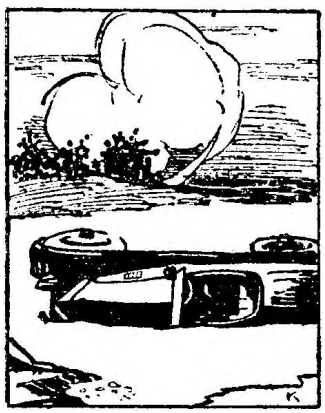
Ogilvy had by this time entirely forgotten his recent illness.

## VI

JOHN OGILVY spent Sunday in strict seclusion, not leaving the tavern. When he went down to the dining-room for breakfast, the genial host handed him a receipt for the registered letter, showing it had departed safely.

Ogilvy spent the afternoon in his room or in the courtyard of the inn—a cobbled, tree-shaded space. From his window he commanded a view of the cross-roads and the highway, where the usual miracle by which French tourists avoid bad smash-ups was of hourly occurrence. There was a constant flood of traffic, and from behind his curtains Ogilvy wondered amusedly how many of Marmont's gang had passed his shelter. That a furious search was being made for him he had no doubt.

He kept his ears open that day, but heard no mention of an auto having been found in the sands at low tide. As such a discovery would have thrown the village into a ferment he was reasonably certain that the car had sunk in the sand.



Monday he was up early, obtained a bathing suit, or what passed for such, from the proprietor, and spent an hour on the surfless sands, seeing nothing of the Renault and returning with a hearty appetite for breakfast. He retired to his room again for the morning, and on inquiring into train arrivals, figured that Keene should show up here late in the afternoon. He would reach Trouville from Paris about three; allowing two hours to get the registered letter, obey instructions and come along to Blonville, he should be here by five. All of which was entirely satisfactory.

At twelve-thirty Ogilvy left his room, having delayed to finish a letter to the Paris office of his newspaper, and descended the narrow stairs to the courtyard. A number of peasants were gathered about the wagons and sheds in the rear, engaged in some dispute. Ogilvy entered the hotel office and deposited his letter in the box for mail, returned to the courtyard, and headed for the dining-room. As he came to the door, he noticed a man sitting near it reading a newspaper, but paid him no attention. He entered the dining-room, which had another entrance on the street, and had been floridly decorated by the proprietor with scenes of classical deities in undress costume.

At the first glance, Ogilvy perceived that he was trapped. The man outside had risen and was standing by the door; inside, a number of men seated about the room had looked up sharply. One of them was Count de Marmont.

It was a stiff shock, but in the flash of a split second, Ogilvy chose his course. Escape was impossible and would mean a bullet. The important thing was that flat notebook, which reposed on his dresser. As though he had discerned nothing unusual, Ogilvy turned to the genial proprietor, who was standing behind a cigar counter and addresed him.

"I'll return this coat you lent me, immediately after luncheon, as I must get the first train to Paris. Will you have a car brought, to take me to the station? I believe it's some distance from here. I have no luggage, so that will save bother."

The proprietor was about to speak, then checked himself and looked past Ogilvy. The latter turned, to see Marmont approaching. He gave a start of assumed astonishment.

"My dear M. Ogilvy!" exclaimed Marmont, beaming, hand extended. "This is indeed a delight! I heard that you were here, so in passing through I stopped for luncheon, hoping to see you. Come, you must join me! What was this I heard you saying about Paris?"

Ogilvy shook hands gravely.

"I meant to get up to Paris tonight——"

"Impossible, my dear fellow! You must

come home with me; my car is outside. My chauffeur is there—Henri!" At the word, one of the seated men rose. "Go to M. Ogilvy's room and pack his things——"

"No use, my dear Marmont," said Ogilvy, meeting the man's eyes and smiling, so that the double meaning of his words might be apparent. "No use, I assure you—I have nothing to pack! Half naked I came into Blonville, and half naked I go—you see, my luggage went on to Paris, and Saturday night I lost even the little I had, in an accident. I've had to borrow a coat from our host, here. If you insist, of course I can't very well refuse."

"I do insist!" said Marmont at once. "Never mind, Henri. M. Ogilvy will accompany us home. Come, my friend—I have not yet begun my repast. A bottle of your best Burgundy, host! Now, then, let us have a chat."

Behind the surface cordiality Ogilvy plainly discerned the menace. Marmont was bland, smiling, impeccably groomed; but in the liquid depths of his dark eyes glowed a tiny flame that spoke louder than words.

As he sat down opposite Marmont, Ogilvy glanced around and took count. Four men besides Marmont in the room, and one at the courtyard door.

"You do me great honor, my dear Marmont!" he observed ironically.

"You are worthy of it," said the other gravely, dropping his light manner. They could talk without danger of being overheard. "I am sorry that I must interrupt your journey to Paris, my friend."

Ogilvy smiled. "We are proceeding on a friendly basis?"

"On an amicable basis." Marmont spoke English now. He regarded Ogilvy curiously. "You did not tell us, on the *Gaulois*, that you were a newspaper correspondent among other things."

"And that led to errors?"

"Regrettably, yes." Marmont shook his head. "Errors must be admitted frankly when they occur."

"Upon my word, I'm beginning to like you!" drawled Ogilvy. He perceived that Marmont now knew all about him, and that any subterfuge could be discarded.

"I return the compliment."

"Thank you. The mutual admiration society is now disbanded. To tell the truth, I am rather anxious to reach Paris as soon as possible. My passport was lost on the boat, but has fortunately been recovered, so nothing detains me."

"As to that, I must be permitted a difference of opinion," said Marmont, affably. "But you mentioned an accident the other night—you were not hurt, I trust?"

"No, but I lost all the valuables I had with me. Some of them I had just obtained."

Marmont gave him a sharp, keen look, so unmistakably tinged with astonishment that Ogilvy was promptly puzzled. Surely the man who escaped, the man who had half torn off his coat, would have reported what had happened?

"We are both gentlemen, Mr. Ogilvy," said the Hungarian slowly. "That is, in a certain acceptance of the term. For my part, I should accept your pledged word as beyond any equivocation. Perhaps, in what you have just said, you are joking?"

"Not at all." Ogilvy paused as the waiter hovered near, knowing that two out of three Frenchmen have a working knowledge of English, though they usually deny it. As to the papers he had looted, he promptly accepted their relinquishment as a necessary evil. He was in a very tight place, and had no choice.

"Saturday night," he resumed, "I had received some papers which might be very valuable, though I had no opportunity of perusing them. Two men attacked me. One of them tore away the whole front of my coat, and carried it off with him. With the coat went the pockets."

Marmont sipped his wine, but his dark eyes were piercing.

"Hm! That is singular, indeed," he returned slowly. "Now, I know that two men seem to have also met with an accident the other night. One of them was found, but the other seems to have been lost. Odd, how accidents could happen here in Normandy!"

Ogilvy's brows went up. What of the man who had escaped him, with the half of his coat?

"Lost? That is strange. Perhaps he found himself with valuables in his possession, and decamped?"

"No, he was not that kind," said Marmont, then added grimly, "And he knew better."

For a space the two devoted themselves to the excellent repast before them. Then Marmont opened fire.

"Odd, the amount of crime going on in Calvados at present!" he observed with an air of detachment. "In Havre, across the bay, I lost a suitcase—it was later returned, but with certain things missing. And only the other night my little chalet was en-

tered and pillaged of some valuable documents."

"You've called in the police?" asked Ogilvy blandly.

Marmont regarded him steadily, a glimmer of amusement growing in his eyes; then both men broke into a laugh.

"Come!" Marmont flung off all pretence. "You're a good enemy; I'd prefer not to have you as a bad enemy, Mr. Ogilvy! I want the stones and the papers. I think you quite comprehend what I am willing to pay for them—a journey to Paris, let us say?"

Ogilvy shook his head.

"Impossible. I left the stones in Trouville."

"Not in your room at the Hotel Fonduc, certainly."

"No. You see, I did not want to be connected with the affair, so I turned them over to a friend, who will, I believe, give them to the police. Probably he has already done so."

"A friend? Keene?"

"Eh? Keene?" Ogilvy concealed his alarm at this deadly shot. "I haven't seen Keene since landing, or heard from him. He's only a boat acquaintance. No, believe me, the stones are beyond recovery. You deserve it, Marmont. One who makes errors, must pay!"

Marmont lost his calm air for an instant. His mouth tightened into cruel lines, the affability of his eyes became a wickedly vicious flame of anger; then, with an effort, he was in control of himself again.

"So!" he observed. "What, then, of the papers?"

"I don't know," said Ogilvy frankly. "I've told you exactly what happened."

Marmont looked down at his wine glass for a long moment, and slowly a pallor crept into his face.

"So that's it!" he murmured, as though speaking to himself. "There were four shots heard—Raoul had fired one, you the others. One did for Raoul; the other two? They explain everything."

Marmont looked up, caught the eye of a man at another table, and beckoned. The man came over to them and leaned above their table. Marmont spoke softly, rapidly.

"Go, find Tsing Li, take his car. Look through the woods at the side fence of the chalet grounds. You'll find Foucher's body there. In his hand, or somewhere in the woods, will be a piece of a coat. Preserve it carefully. Look for any papers that may have been scattered. Make haste!"

The man nodded, gave Ogilvy one dark glance, and departed.

As for Ogilvy, he was a little startled at this evidence of the enemy's discernment. He could reason it out for himself as well—the lost Foucher must have got over the low wall adjoining Marmont's fence, with one bullet in him. He must have tried to get into the chalet grounds from the rear, but death's hand was the speedier.

"Good reasoning," said Ogilvy reflectively. "I believe you're right."

Marmont looked at him, with eyes that had become bloodshot.

"Yes. Here comes the coffee. Drink it and we'll be off."

"And shall I see the charming M. Bacqueville?"

"You'll be lucky if you ever see anyone again!" Marmont snarled, as the mask slipped. "Now that you're taken care of, we'll go into this thing from the ground up."

Ogilvy shrugged, and beckoned to the proprietor. He quite understood that this keen-witted Parisian had been astonished when he disclaimed having any baggage, and he resolved to take a chance on the man's acuteness of perception. Marmont watched him suspiciously, but Ogilvy only lighted a cigarette and smiled at the proprietor.

"There is nothing in my room except my light overcoat," he said. "Will you have the kindness to bring it down for me? Then I'll give you back your coat, and put it on instead. Let me have my bill also. I may return in a few days, but it is uncertain."

For an instant Ogilvy thought the ruse would work; then Marmont motioned to the proprietor.

"No, no! I cannot cause you such trouble. My chauffeur will get the coat—he is well acquainted with your hotel. What is the room?"

Ogilvy gave the number.

"Henri!" Marmont beckoned one of his men from another table, and sent for the coat. In the puzzled eyes of the proprietor, Ogilvy read the feeling that something was amiss, but this hope was smashed: he could say no more, do no

more, except leave a trail in case Keene came along. The notebook was lost.

"I'm off to Paris with Count de Marmont," he said, as he paid his bill. "In case any mail comes, hold it. I may return."

Marmont smiled thinly. A moment later the chauffeur appeared. The very fact that he did not bring Ogilvy's bag, showed that he had heard all the conversation and was managing the matter very quietly. He held the coat for Ogilvy, then turned to Marmont.

"Here, m'sieu, is your notebook. I believe you left it in the car this morning."

Marmont nodded, pocketed it, gave Ogilvy a significant glance, then took him by the arm with an air of friendliness and they turned to the door.

"Good player, eh?" he observed. "Well, our car's waiting—another Renault. I do not depend on one alone, be it cars or men."

This hint, and the accompanying pressure of the fingers, was significant. At the door one of the other men was at Ogilvy's elbow. Before them was standing a large closed car, and the chauffeur and a second man took the front seat. Marmont ushered in his guest most impressively, and they turned into the highway. Another car followed, with Marmont's other men.

Then, as they flashed out the long level stretch toward Villers, Marmont turned and faced the American, with an abrupt change of front.

"You're a clever rascal," he said, a sneer on his lips and in his eyes. "I've been trying you out a bit—having a little fun with you. So you really thought you could match your wits against mine? You fool! I've had every hole blocked, every alley searched, every contingency provided against. In proof—look at this."

He held out the letter which Ogilvy had sent to Keene at the Hotel Fonduc.

## VII

THIS was a terrific blow—about the hardest Ogilvy ever had received. From the instant he found himself ensnared he had built every hope upon Keene, and now the whole structure was tumbled over like a house of cards! The stark reality of the situation was frightful. Marmont had played him cleverly there in the hotel, not daring to push him too far lest he take a desperate chance—and he would have taken it had he known all was lost. For now he admitted to himself that all was lost.

"You have found the stones, then?" he asked.

"Yes, thanks to your kindness in sending us straight to them!" Marmont laughed, and the scornful contempt in his voice stung deeply. "There remained to get the papers and notebook, and since you seem

to have told the truth about them—we'll see! Did you really think we'd leave that hotel without searching your room? I'm afraid you're a bigger fool than I thought."

Ogilvy resisted the temptation to turn and strike that sneering face.

As things now stood Keene could not know where to meet him—would not even know Ogilvy expected to meet him. In a flash Ogilvy perceived with fatal clarity how he had absolutely cut himself off from every hope, every chance. Probably in the course of the morning Marmont had caught that registered letter. That he had secured it, whether by bribery or strategy, in the face of the stringent postal regulations was proof enough of his ability.

"When you set out to measure swords with me, Ogilvy, you picked the wrong man!" said Marmont, a hint of steel in his voice. "I picked the wrong man when I secured your passport, I admit; but I'm equal to coping with errors. You're not. You ran your head into a game that's far beyond you, and you know what to expect."

Ogilvy stared out at the flitting shores, and said nothing. Despite his impassive mien, the very sting of the jeers served to rouse him. He could now depend on no one, had only himself to count on. Was he such a fool, indeed, as he seemed to this man? The thought was like a spur to him, a burning goad stirring him to action.

Yet he sat in silence, his face a stony mask of defeat, while Marmont outlined his victory step by step, and gloated over it. The car headed into Villers, unhurried, passed through the sleepy little town, and turned out for Marmont's villa.

"Your letter would indicate," said Marmont suddenly, "that Keene is as yet unconnected with this affair. Eh?"

Ogilvy told him frankly of his half-understood rendezvous with Keene, and was relieved to see that Marmont accepted his explanation.

"Very fortunate for Mr. Keene," said the Hungarian dryly.

"What's your program, so far as I'm concerned?" demanded Ogilvy. The other regarded him for a moment, then made a slight gesture as of one who has no choice.

"Is it not obvious? You declared war. *Vae victis!*"

"You mean—murder?" said Ogilvy steadily. "You would not dare."

"My dear fellow, don't be childish!" Marmont laughed. "Dare? Nonsense. I am quite impervious to the law, rest assured on that head. You are too brutal in your choice of words; murder is one thing, removal is another thing. I prefer removal, always. First we must see about those papers. Once this delicate point is settled the rest can be determined. You have learned far too much to be permitted to go at liberty, as you can readily understand."

Ogilvy made no response, for on this point could be no argument. Marmont had, indeed, only one course. In self defense, he must shut the mouth of this American who had pried open his coffer of secrecy.

Ahead of them now showed the villa, its gates open. The Citroen had been pulled out of the ditch long since; indeed, it or a sister car now stood before the entrance of the villa, with three figures around it. One was a Chinaman. They were the two sent from Blonville, conjectured Ogilvy, and the servant of the house. She was a peasant woman, gnarled and stooped from labor in the fields. When the big Renault halted, she turned and scurried into the house. The two men came forward, and the man sent from Blonville made report.

"Well, we found Foucher just where you said, Master. Sacred name of a pipe! The whole back of his head was stove in."

"Eh?" Marmont, in the act of leaving the car, halted. Ogilvy heard the words with astounded incredulity. "The bullet had stove in his head?"

"Hardly. Something bigger than a bullet!" The other laughed. "He's dead enough. Not a bullet in him, either."

Marmont alighted and turned to Ogilvy.

"You smashed him, eh? I thought it was a bullet."

Ogilvy shrugged.

"Hard to say. I did all the smashing I could. Naturally there was no time to be very nice about it."

Marmont turned to the men.

"And the letters?" he asked.

"We found part of a coat near him," said Tsing Li, the Chinaman—a broad-faced, slant-eyed fellow who spoke very beautiful French. Obviously a man of education. "Letters and papers were strewn around. They have all been collected and put on your desk."

"Ah, good!" Marmont relaxed in very evident relief, and turned to Ogilvy with a smile. "Come along, my friend! You shall appear before the council and plead your own cause. Every justice shall be done you. Ready, gentlemen?"

Council? This was a new phase of the matter, and for the moment a puzzling one. Ogilvy left the car, and glanced around. Escape was impossible. The following car had come up and now six men, besides Marmont himself, were around him. Without wasting words on protest Ogilvy accompanied his captor up the steps and into the house, the others following. Marmont led him into the library. On the large flat-topped desk lay a pile of papers, with the box of Luger cartridges holding them down, and the fragments of Ogilvy's coat. Marmont stood for an instant surveying them, then turned.

"Very good. I think we need not waste time sorting them over. Apparently the pistol is still missing. You have it!"

"In my room at the Blonville hotel," said Ogilvy. "I did not anticipate your call, you see."

"Well, let it go," Marmont chuckled. "Henri! Come and make certain our friend is not armed. You may remove your coat, Mr. Ogilvy. Chairs, gentlemen, and close the doors."

Ogilvy flung off his light coat. One of the men advanced, frisked him, and retired with a nod of satisfaction. The others drew up chairs in a semi-circle. Marmont seated himself at the desk and opened a box of excellent cigars, which were passed around. Then the count took from Tsing Li a package, and opened it to disclose the little boxes of stones and jewelry, which he placed on the desk. Ogilvy lighted a cigar and waited.

Studying the faces around him, he found all of them strange to him. None of them were criminal; a party of business men gathered to discuss their affairs, one would have said. Among them was M. Bacqueville de Morant, solemn as ever, but he did not favor Ogilvy with any sign of recognition nor return his nod.

"Now, Mr. Ogilvy, let's get down to business," said Marmont, leaning forward in his chair. "You are in the presence of the council or governing body of a little society of which I am the head. As you speak French perfectly, we shall continue

in that language. You will pardon us if we attend to one or two slight matters of business before proceeding to your case. M. Bacqueville, you will now take charge of the consignment I brought from America. For the moment, leave them as evidence. Arrangements are made?"

"Fully," said the lawyer, for such Ogilvy judged him really to be. "If they answer the description previously sent, I am offered the sum of four million, three hundred thousand francs for the lot; one third cash, the balance within three months. They will go to the Riveria for disposal."

"Very well," said Marmont, with a nod. "An excellent bargain, in my opinion. Shall we approve the terms, gentlemen?"

A word of assent passed around the circle.

"Agreed, then. Now, as you know, our colleague Foucher was recently killed in the performance of his duty. He leaves a widow and two children in Caen. What is your wish?"

"I move," said one of the men, without emotion, "that we grant the widow Foucher the usual subsidy, and a further pension of ten thousand francs per annum, in view of the fact that Foucher recovered these stolen papers."

"Your pleasure, messieurs?" Marmont glanced around the circle and met a general nod. "Approved, then. With Foucher was killed Raoul Hougant, an employee of the Havre agency; he also leaves a widow. The usual compensation, I presume? Agreed, then. We now have to fill the place left vacant by Foucher's death. Suggestions?"

"I propose M. Lebrun of the Brussels agency," said one.

Other names were proposed, and there ensued a most animated discussion, waged with as much freedom as though no outsider were present—an ominous sign. Ogilvy might have thought himself the victim of some hoax, had it not been for the deadly gravity of those around, and the obvious sincerity of all that had previously taken place.

A criminal society organized on business lines, then? Incredible as it seemed, here was proof enough before him. Very well organized, too, he inferred, and headed by well-chosen men of ability. He was speedily given more evidence of this, for as soon as a ballot had been taken and a successor chosen to the defunct Foucher, Tsing Li spoke up blandly.

"As I understand it, our esteemed M. de Marmont obtained an American passport, neglecting to estimate the danger involved, and thereby nearly wrecked the important enterprise on which he was engaged. Before moving for a vote of censure, I should like to inquire why he thus imperiled a large thing for the sake of a small thing?"

"Because," said Marmont, "I received an urgent radio from M. de Nesle, who sits yonder, stating that the Paris agency had immediate need of such a passport."

"That is true," spoke up one of the others, thus appealed to. "It is pressingly needed in the affair of the Cellini urn, and I am the one to blame for demanding a passport if such a thing were possible."

"I am satisfied," said Tsing Li. "My apologies, M. de Marmont."

The count waved his hand grandly, yet he had looked undeniably startled. Ogilvy listened to all this with mingled emotions. Tempted to laugh, he none the less realized the deadly gravity of it all.

"We now come to the case of M. Ogilvy, here before us," said Marmont. "He is charged, first, with the murder of M. Foucher and the man Raoul Hougant. Do you deny it, m'sieu?"

"No," said Ogilvy calmly.

"You have, perhaps, some defense?"

Ogilvy smiled.

"If you seek a pretext to murder me, why defend myself? The two men attacked me as I was leaving here, pulled me out of my car, fired on me. That is all."

To the utter astonishment of Ogilvy, Tsing Li spoke up.

"M. Ogilvy claims self-defense. From the scene of the struggle and other evidence, he speaks the truth. Therefore I move that the charge of murder be dismissed."

There was a murmur of assent. Marmont glanced around.

"Agreed? Then, M. Ogilvy, I take pleasure in informing you that the charge is dismissed by unanimous consent of the council."

Ogilvy was speechless, incredulous. Yet in Marmont's benign gaze he read dark things.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said, with faint irony. One or two of the men smiled, and in this smile Ogilvy perceived a frightful menace.

## VIII

JOHN OGILVY saw plainly enough that he was being played with, and that there was something more to come. Since being shown his letter to Keene he had been at high tension, every nerve keyed up, every sense on the alert to seize some straw of advantage; all in vain. Now he sat smoking, outwardly imperturbable, inwardly at desperate extremity, every faculty centered on Marmont. He gave himself up for lost, and his one resolve was to drag down this man with him if he reached the end of things.

Therein lay his one and only possible vantage-point. He was an American, these other men were all Europeans, with the exception of Tsing Li. They enjoyed a Latin sense of the dramatic, of the theatrical. If they condemned him to death, they could only conceive him as going to that death with dramatic dignity; knowing himself surrounded, outnumbered, lost beyond hope, he must accept his fate. But John Ogilvy had no intention of doing anything of the sort.

"It is human nature," said Marmont suavely, "to desire the inaccessible, to seek what is unattainable, from a superficial viewpoint. That is why, for example, a bad man usually loves a good woman. That is why I fastened my desires upon certain things, and attained them despite obstacles. That is why our friend Ogilvy was tempted to take over single-handed a task at which all the police of Europe had failed ignominiously."

He paused, selected a fresh cigar, lighted it, and resumed.

"M. Ogilvy, gentlemen, is a newspaper correspondent. When he found himself injured, he set out to regain what he had lost. He regained it. Not content with this, he gained possession of those stones yonder. He then laid information with the Paris police against us, and this is the first charge against him."

M. Bacqueville spoke up gravely.

"If we war against society, we cannot blame that society for arming itself against us. He did his duty as he saw it. I move the charge be dismissed."

There was a murmur of assent.

"Approved," went on Marmont, and gave Ogilvy his winning but dangerous smile. "M. Ogilvy then opened a campaign against us, came here, looted my correspondence——"

"You forget," put in Ogilvy suddenly, "that this was after you tried to entrap me by means of M. Bacqueville yonder."

There was an exchange of glances, and despite his situation Ogilvy smiled to see how seriously these men took each other and the farce they were playing.

"To the vote," said Marmont. "All in favor of dismissing the charge, aye!"

The charge was dismissed by a majority of two votes, one being that of Marmont. Ogilvy's ironic smile greeted the verdict.

"The final charge," said Marmont placidly, "is that M. Ogilvy has attained to a fund of information about our society which imperils us all."

As Marmont paused, Ogilvy perceived that the farce was ended, the crisis at hand.

"This," went on the Hungarian, "is in my opinion a most dangerous situation. We cannot silence this man without keeping him imprisoned and thus causing a search to be made. We are of course unable to turn him loose with such information in his possession. M. Tsing, what is your opinion in the matter?"

"I think," said Tsing Li, staring unblinkingly at the American, "that the body of M. Ogilvy should be found tomorrow morning on the sands of Deauville. It will help to advertise the resort, and I happen to know that the proprietor of the casino is very hard up for press-agent material just now."

No one smiled at this speech except Ogilvy himself.

"And you, M. Bacqueville?" asked Marmont.

"I fully agree with M. Tsing."

"Have you," and Marmont turned to the American, "anything to suggest in this matter? Is there any guarantee you can give as to your silence?"

Ogilvy knocked the ash from his cigar.

"None," he said.

"Then I put the motion of M. Tsing to the vote. Is there any dissenting voice?" Marmont glanced around the circle and met none. "The motion is approved."

"And how," demanded Ogilvy, with sarcasm, "do you propose to carry it out? By putting cyanide in my coffee, or by staking me out on the sands to drown with the tide?"

"Neither," said Marmont, and chuckled.

"You will be put in a certain room. After dinner tonight the room will be flooded with a certain gas; when your body is found, it will be seen clearly that you died by drowning. We can even manage to flood the lungs with water by a simple device invented by M. de Nesle yonder, who is a physician."

"Then at least," observed Ogilvy, "I shall have a good dinner?"

"Of the best," said Marmont. "I regret that it must be solitary, but I draw your particular attention to the Tokay that will be served."

"I shall endeavor to appreciate it," said Ogilvy.

He caught a nod exchanged between two of the men, and felt satisfied that he was playing the part they had expected. Already had come into his mind the desperate scheme that would let him go down fighting, instead of like a rat in a trap; but the time was not yet. He would not attempt it until the very last moment—surely somewhere he would find a straw!

He found none.

Marmont and two of the other men escorted him from the room and up two low flights of stairs to a mansard room under the roof. Marmont pointed to a bell-pull and told him to ring if he required anything; then closed the door. It shut when a subdued click that told of a spring lock.

Alone, Ogilvy threw off his mask of self-control and darted to the window. It was small, overlooked the winding road and tree-clad slopes, and three heavy transverse bars crossed outside the glass—which was thick and blown over wire. Only a hammer could smash that glass. Nor did the window open.

Satisfied that he was powerless so far as the window was concerned, Ogilvy looked around the room. Here was nothing that could serve him as a weapon. An electric light was in a solid wall-socket; an iron table, bolted to the floor, held magazines and newspapers; an iron cot, likewise bolted down, invited to repose. There was nothing else in the room—absolutely nothing.

For half an hour Ogilvy worked desperately at bed and table; then, panting and bathed in sweat, he desisted and flung himself on the cot. It was useless. He had only his bare hands with which to fight against the doom that was upon him.

The little room was stifling hot, situated as it was under the roof and without ventilation. As he lay, Ogilvy examined the walls and ceiling; he struck them with his fist, then relaxed again in despair. They were solid, as though plastered against solid boards. In each corner of the ceiling he discerned a small hole from which protruded the edge of a rubber tube, sharply discolored.

This discovery proved that Marmont's threats were not futile.

Ogilvy realized the fact calmly. At first it had seemed ludicrous, unreal, even as the farcical trial by the council appeared unnatural; but this had now simplified into cold fact. Regarding the matter from a criminal standpoint, indeed, Ogilvy could see that it was the essence of simplicity. His body would be found on the Deauville sands, and that would be the end of the matter.

The prospect of being gassed like a rat in a trap, however, made no appeal. The more Ogilvy thought about it, the less appeal it made.

Struggle as he might, he could evoke no hope of escape. Even the prospect of going down fighting was a forlorn chance. The heat in the room sapped his mental and physical vigor; it became intolerable, until it was as though he were enclosed in an oven. The lack of air was insufferable. Remembering the bell-pull, he jerked it, then waited.

After an interval he heard a sound and lifted his head. The door did not open; but a small square in its upper panel slid away, and he saw the face of the old woman servant.

"Air!" exclaimed Ogilvy, panting. "Bring me a drink—beer—and leave the door open or I'll suffocate here!"

"I will tell the Master," was the reply, and the panel was closed again.

Another interminable wait. Presently the square in the door slid open again; through this opening, about six inches square, the old woman pushed two bottles of beer and a glass, Ogilvy taking them from her.

"The master says the door must remain shut, but this little door can be open," she said, and departed down the stairs, which led directly from the door.

Ogilvy's first thought was to get his arm through the hole and see what he could effect, but the result was futile. Marmont knew what he was doing in letting the panel remain open. Giving it up, Ogilvy opened a bottle of beer, and experienced enough relief from the slight ventilation to make himself comfortable in comparison with his former state. He could do nothing except wait the ap-

pointed time, and then make his try for Marmont.

Time passed. It was after four o'clock when Ogilvy suddenly sat bolt upright, then leaped from the cot, went to the iron table, and mounted on it. Directly above this, set in the ceiling, was the single electric bulb. Putting his hand up, Ogilvy tried to unscrew it, then remembered it was of French make and gave it a twist. The bulb came away in his hand, and he took it back to the cot, a sudden thrill of savage triumph coursing through his veins.

The bulb was of the ordinary mazda type. Carefully wrapping it in the folds of a blanket from the cot, Ogilvy placed it against the wall and struck it a sharp blow with his fist. The report of the exploding bulb, despite the muffling effect of the blanket, was sharp, but he did not think it would reach the ears of those on the lowest floor of the villa.

Swiftly unwrapping the remains of the bulb and breaking off the fragments of glass adhering to the brass base, he dumped all these shards behind the bed and inspected his prize. There remained the base, and from this projected the long round-tipped glass column that had held the outspread filament; placing this under his heel, Ogilvy pressed with care until the tip broke. The column was now transformed into a spike; the electric bulb had become a weapon. Fragile, true, yet far less fragile than human life.

As he contemplated his work, then put it under the pillow of the cot, Ogilvy suddenly straightened up, listening. On the wall beside him had come a sharp tap, not loud but distinct. It came again and again, with pauses. Someone, then, was in an adjoining room or chamber—no doubt a similar death-cell to this one—and had heard the report of the bursting bulb! And as he listened, Ogilvy suddenly recognized what those taps were saying, over and over, in Morse.

"OG! OG! OG!"

He rapped sharply with his knuckles, a blaze of excitement firing him, and tapped out a question. The response came at once, and left him dismayed, aghast, stupefied.

"K-e-e-n-e."

So they had Keene after all, then—despite all their fine talk! Dejection seized upon Ogilvy, then alarm at hearing voices and steps on the stairs. He rapped sharply, swiftly, and Keene took warning. The tapping ceased.

Marmont came to the door, and with him, Tsing Li.

## IX

IF OGILVY were disconcerted and aghast at finding Keene also in this trap, he was more put out by the inopportune coming of Marmont and Tsing Li. Given a little time, he would have been able to exchange stories with Keene, at least; and the very possession of his fragile weapon, good only for one blow, had heartened him enormously.

On the other hand, here Marmont had come to him, when he had been pondering how he would get the man to his prison-room. Well, why not take the plunge now? There was nothing to be gained except a fighting end, and that was well worth the effort. Keene was no doubt prisoned and perhaps slated for murder as well.

So, when Marmont looked in through the opening, Ogilvy, sitting on the cot, looked up and nodded calmly.

"Thanks for the beer," he observed, "but I can't recommend your ventilation system."

"It will serve," said Marmont. "I came to ask whether you know a gentleman connected with the Paris prefecture, by the name of Lanvier."

"Never heard of him," said Ogilvy promptly. "Hold on, though—wasn't he the chap who ferreted out that pearl mystery last spring?"

"The same." Marmont regarded him with grave eyes. "He arrived in Trouville last night and then disappeared. It occurred to me that you might be responsible for his arrival. If you can throw any light on it, I'll pay you well—in hours of life. Until midnight, let us say."

"Generous, aren't you?" Ogilvie smiled. "However, the atmosphere of this room is extremely impressive, my dear Marmont. I had already made up my mind to strike a bargain with you, if possible. As for this Lanvier, I believe he came to Trouville as a result of the information I sent Paris—those jewels, you know. He is no doubt waiting there to see me."

"He'll see you tomorrow morning," said Marmont, an ugly note in his voice. "What sort of a bargain did you have in mind?"

"Nothing to discuss for the whole house to hear," said Ogilvy. "If I offered you something big—let us say, as big as those jewels downstairs—would you consider setting me at liberty? I might add that this affair would act in your hands as a perpetual check on me in the future, an assurance of my silence."

Marmont studied him a moment.

"Hm! I might propose it to the council," he said. "What is the affair of which you speak?"

Ogilvy grinned at him and fumbled for a cigarette.

"Think I'm going to shout it out for all the world? Not much. I'll tell you privately what it is; then, if you find it's worth paying for, go ahead with your blessed council!

This hint of mystery brought into the dark liquid eyes of Marmont a mixture of suspicion and interest.

"Hm!" he returned slowly, staring at the lanky figure of Ogilvy. "Just what is in your mind, my friend?"

"Life," said Ogilvy simply, and with a terrible earnestness that was very convincing. "Those four pipes in the ceiling, Marmont, present an argument which grows stronger with each half hour of reflection."

"So I would imagine," said the other. "You must let M. Tsing into this dread secret of yours, or I refuse to consider it. We of the council do not have secrets from each other very often. Yes or no?"

Ogilvy shrugged. To himself he reflected that this decision meant the speedy death of Tsing Li, in a most disagreeable fashion; but there was no help for it. Perhaps Marmont suspected his real purpose and would not trust himself alone in the room with Ogilvy.

"Bah! I can't afford to be stubborn," replied the American. "Come in, and leave the door open, if you will. It's devilish hot in this room."

Marmont turned to the yellow man. The panel in the door clicked shut. A moment later, the door opened and Marmont entered. As Ogilvy had foreseen, his very request that the door be left open reached in the minds of the two men so that when Tsing Li came in, he swung the door shut —as Ogilvy wanted it.

"Have you a match?" Ogilvy stood up. In his sleeve, the spike up his arm, lay the fragment of the bulb. He held his unlighted cigarette and turned to the Chinaman, who remained beside the door.

"I think so," said Tsing Li, and felt in his pocket.

As he did so, Ogilvy seized the bulb-base, and thrust—a motion lightning-swift.

Nor did he stay to see the effect of that lunge; the feel of it was enough. He whirled like a cat and flung himself bodily upon Marmont. No chance for blows here, no time for them—he could only grapple the man, bear him back on the cot with his weight, so that the two fell headlong across it and crashed against the wall.

Marmont, already striving to get at a pistol, was too slow. Ogilvy's hands got him by the wrist, and as they twisted, Ogilvy's knee drove into him. With this, Marmont wrenched his hands up, let go the pistol half-drawn, and began to fight.

And he could fight after his own fashion. The Hungarian was a bundle of muscle and knew how to use it. He wrenched clear of Ogilvy's grip and smashed in short-arm jolts that hurt; the two men rolled from the cot and fell to the floor. As they did so Ogilvy had one horrible glimpse of Tsing Li standing against the door, both hands clutching at his throat where showed the brass base of the electric bulb, blood streaming over his chest, death in his face, knees sagging as he stood. A moment afterward he must have fallen, for Ogilvy heard the sound of it, but was too busy to look.

Marmont, with a furious burst of energy, came clear and was on his feet. With a leap he was across the room, reaching for his pistol as he did so, but he had to throw off the safety catch—and this lost him the play. Ogilvy was on him like a wildcat, struck him hard under the wrist on the inside—a blow that will knock any pistol clear—and the weapon whirled across the room. Then a spat-spat of fists, heavy pounding blows, merciless, unguarded, the two men slugging with every ounce of strength.

Neither of them could stand such furious expenditure for long. Human flesh and muscle could not stand it. Twice Marmont opened his mouth, drew back his head to utter a shout; each time Ogilvy smashed him square in the teeth. His face was a white-and-red mask. Abruptly he got in a straight left to the chin and Ogilvy was hurled backward. In this instant Marmont got out one hoarse, panting shout; then Ogilvy had him again, head under chin, arms around, throttling him and almost breaking his back.

Somehow Marmont got out of that; went limp, tripped his opponent, let himself fall heavily to the floor. Striking, he wrenched about like a steel spring, writhed clear. Ogilvy let him go, leaped aside, stood waiting, poised, for him to rise. Marmont, watching him, came to one knee, gathered himself, timed his spring to escape the coming blow—leaped!

And as he leaped from the door came the burst of a pistol-shot, thunderous in the muffled room.

Tsing Li lay there on one elbow, in his hand the fallen pistol. Death was rattling in his throat. With the supreme effort he had caught up the pistol and fired point-blank at Ogilvy—and Marmont had leaped between, unseeing. The yellow face sank down, blank in death. Ogilvy, panting, saw Marmont spin around once, then fall across the cot and lie there motionless.

And as Ogilvy strove to realize what had happened, the door quietly opened and Keene came into the room, his eyes striking around.

"Congratulations," he said.

Ogilvy stared at him, astounded, incredulous. Keene's flannels were natty, his attire was fresh; his air was entirely composed, as—though he had slight concern with what was going on here. It was unreal, this attitude. Ogilvy panted out an oath.

"You—are you crazy?"

Keene smiled. "I couldn't be sure of what was going on, you see, until it sounded like a real fight. Then it was hard to get the door open; these French spring locks are the devil!"

"Eh?" Ogilvy's eyes widened. "Thought you were next door——"

"I was," said Keene. "I've been there since two this morning—only place in the house I could hide. I owe you a good deal for putting Marmont out. Hope you haven't killed him. He was the one we expected most trouble with."

"We?" repeated Ogilvy. "Look here, who——"

"Take it easy," said Keene with maddening calm. "You see, I was out in back on Saturday night when you broke into the place, but was not sure that it was you until too late to take a hand. The chap who grabbed your coat came along, and I soaked him. You were off in that car before I could hail you. Well, I got the best of the letters you looted, and they showed me everything. So I sent a wire to Paris, some of the boys there came—ah!"

He cocked his head to one side, listening. From somewhere below came a shot, then another shot, followed by a wild cry. Then silence. Keene nodded.

"That'll be Lanvier and his men. The place should have been surrounded half an hour ago, but I gave them a bit extra time to make sure—no two clocks are the same, in France. Is our friend there dead? I trust not."

Keene moved suddenly, darted to the cot, turned over the figure of Marmont, whose coat was reddened with spreading blood. Keene felt the injury, then laughed, and took a set of jingling handcuffs from his pocket. He locked them about the wrists of the senseless Marmont.

"There!" Keene straightened up. "Scrape across the ribs, nothing bad. He'll go back all right to stand trial."

"See here, who the devil are you!" cried Ogilvy, half angrily.

Keene flipped open his coat. "Police department, New York. Your report on those jewels showed I had the right man—was never quite sure until then. I hadn't expected such quick work, you see."

"Gosh!" Ogilvy relaxed, seated himself on the table, swung one leg, and stared at Keene. Then he came to life. "Look here, old man, you fooled us all, no doubt of that! Now get me a coat and a car, will you? I have to rush into town—just time to make it——"

"Eh?" Keene's brows went up. "Make what?"

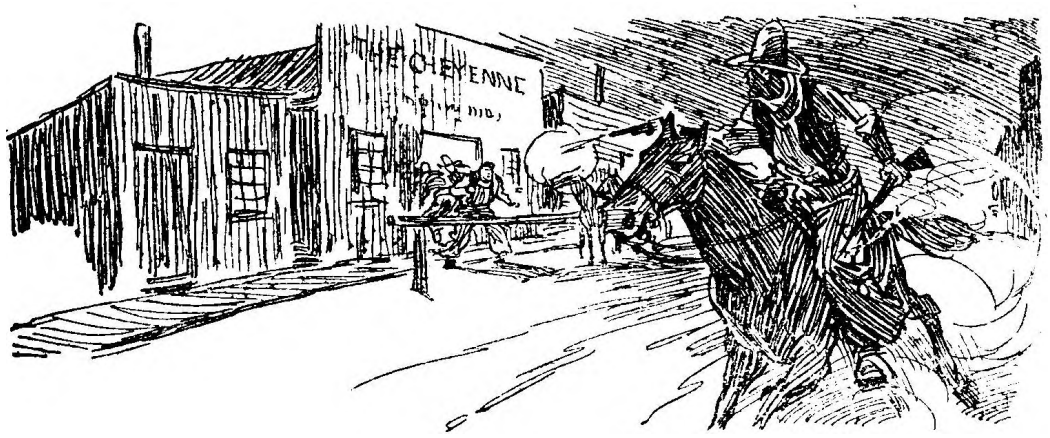
"The story and the morning New York edition," said Ogilvy, and grinned. "Gosh, what a story! Let's go."

"Agreed," said Keene. "Yes, I rather think you have a pretty good story here. What's the idea of this room? Prison cell?"

Ogilvy glanced around, looked at the pipes in the corner of the ceiling, and shivered a little.

"No," he said gravely. "Summer resort. Ready? Let's go."

So they did.




# CORSON OF THE JC

*The Story of the Fight for a Lost Ranch*

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

*Author of "Bar 20 Rides Again," "Cottonwood Gulch," etc.*

Part II

## Chapter VII

### THE GODS SNICKER

JIM WATSON, having given his two punchers a few minutes' start, went up to the hotel desk.

"Tyson, I'm goin' for a short walk. If old John Corson comes in while I'm away, tell him that I'll be right back. I'll want to borrow pen an' ink after he gets here, an' take 'em up to my room with me."

"All right," replied the clerk, his nervousness increasing. "You goin' to leave this safe entirely unguarded?"

"I'm glad it's you that's doin' the worryin' instead of me," laughed the ranchman. "It won't be unguarded very long. It's light in here, now; an' that ain't no good. There'll be a couple of my men hangin' around outside in the dark in a few minutes, an' they're the toughest pair in my outfit. I've been savin' 'em for this."

He hastened from the building and went to the last saloon up the street, the one farthest from the Cheyenne. Here he found and spoke to two of his Texans and saw them start on a swift, awkward run for the hotel. Both of them were wanted for a crime back in Texas, a crime which their employer knew all about, and he could count on their loyalty.

Nearly twenty minutes behind them came Watson, and he nodded to the two shadowy figures standing with their backs against the wall of the hotel, and who grunted low replies. Passing into the office he took pen and ink bottle and went up to his room on the floor above. There he busied himself for a few moments in the dark, drew the curtains and then lighted the lamp. Moving the wash stand out into the middle of the room to serve as a table, he put the pen and ink in place of the wash basin and slid the latter against the wall. Having everything in readiness for the important business of the night, he turned down the lamp and went to the lower floor, where he called the two grim Texans into the hotel and waved them to be seated. They chose strategic positions in the office and settled down to wait and to watch.

Tyson sighed with relief. These two gunmen looked much more capable than Slim and Red, and now his uneasiness vanished. He moved aside as Watson pushed past him behind the counter and stooped to pick up the valise from a low shelf.

"All right, Tyson," said the ranchman in a low voice, opening the satchel. "Slip those packets in here. I'll take care of 'em now."

"You do all the handlin' of 'em yourself," replied Tyson, bending over and hurriedly working at the combination.

Watson grunted impatiently, and then

took the packets from the small pigeonholes and placed them in the satchel, calling off the amounts in a low voice as he showed the heavy, black numbers to the clerk. When the last packet had been put away he closed the valise, snapped the catches, and stood up.

"How much do you make it?" he whispered.

"Eighty thousan', even," answered Tyson, more nervous now than ever.

"Right: eighty thousan', even," repeated Watson mechanically.

"Thank Gawd!" sighed the clerk. "That's a load off my mind. Take it upstairs, an' take it there fast."

Watson chuckled and went across the office, up the stairs and into his room. He closed and locked the door and carefully examined the shades at each window. Then he dumped the contents of the satchel on the bed, stripped off the misleading stamped slips and ruffled the piles. He fussed with them for a few moments, turned down the lamp until its light threatened to die out, and again fussed with the piles of currency. When he locked the door behind him and started down the stairs he was arranging his gun belt and his upper clothing.

On his person, packed into temporary pockets sewed inside his vest, was the purchase money for the ranch, a very large sum, and it made him considerably fatter from his armpits to his waist than anyone ever had seen him. This was not as noticeable as it might have been because his coat was large and ample, and hung loosely from his square and chunky shoulders. He was leaning against the desk talking idly to Tyson when a horse was heard nearing the front of the building. The hoofs ceased their regular beats, leather squeaked suddenly, and a moment later old John Corson strode through the door, peering about the well lighted room from under thick and bushy eyebrows.

"Howdy, John," said Watson affably as he straightened up.

"Howdy, Jim," replied Corson. He nodded to the clerk and then grudgingly included the two tough looking Texans. Turning back to Watson he spoke again. "Been waitin' long?"

"No-o," answered the Bar W owner. "I've been in town most of the day 'tendin' to other things. Found out I could make town, after I sent you word, an' didn't think it necessary to let you know. Everythin's all ready, if you are. Reckon we better go up to my room, where it ain't so public?"

"Reckon we better," grunted Corson, smiling grimly. It might have been his imagination, but when he passed through the Mexican part of town he thought he had sensed furtive movements and heard whispering. He had made up his mind then and there to ride wide of that quarter when he started back to the ranch, and he was almost sorry he had not accepted his son's offer to ride with him. He still had time to get in touch with Bob, but pride and a growing contempt for danger made

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# CORSON OF THE JC

## CLARENCE E. MULFORD

**What has happened before.**

In "Corson of the JC" Mr. Mulford again takes us adventuring in the Western country he knows so well, but this time introduces an entirely new lot of people. We are sure that they will win to popularity with you as quickly as did any of the old friends.

Bob Corson's father, John Corson, decides to sell his JC ranch to Watson of the Bar W, the purchase terms agreed on being $30,000 cash and $50,000 in notes.

A few hours before his father starts for Willow Springs to consummate the sale Bob goes there himself and meets his friends Nueces and Shorty of the Box M ranch. While playing pool with them in the Cheyenne saloon Bob meets Señor Chavez, a polished, imperturbable Mexican who says he is on his way south to his ranch in Mexico.

Watson comes into the saloon with four of his punchers and insults Señor Chavez. Corson takes the quarrel on his own shoulders and gunplay between all hands is narrowly averted by the intervention of Steve the barkeep, and Watson takes his men away.

For some reason Watson has drawn from the bank $80,000 in cash, though old John Corson had agreed to accept $30,000 in cash and the balance of the purchase price of $80,000 in notes. Also Watson leaves some money within reach of the dissolute stableman Higgins, knowing that this will insure Higgins getting drunk and being absent from his stable this night.

Bob Corson spends the evening playing poker with his friends in the Cheyenne. With them during the entire evening, as an interested onlooker at the play, is Señor Chavez. The game is suddenly broken up by news of the most tragic sort being brought to young Bob.

him put the thought from his mind.

"Where's the witnesses?" he asked, glancing around the room again.

"They'll be on hand when we're ready for 'em," answered Watson in low tones. "Thought it would be just as well if they don't see all that money. We'll call 'em when they're needed."

John Corson nodded and looked toward the stairs. Watson took the hint and led the way up them and into his room. The door closed and locked, they seated themselves and took hold of the business which had brought them together.

Downstairs Tyson was making idle marks on a blotter, and occasionally glanced at the two grim and silent Texans. These men were standing, now, with their backs against the wall. They seemed to be listening, and Tyson held his breath to aid his ears, but heard nothing. He exhaled gustily and straightened his back.

"Yore boss shore is careless with his money," he remarked, feeling that the sound of a voice would be very welcome.

"You reckon so?" grunted the taller Texan, who, in truth, was short enough. His hand now balanced a single action Colt .44-40, a weapon handling even a greater powder charge than its famous brother, the .45.

The second Texan sneered, his yellow teeth showing.

The words and actions were eloquent enough to apprise the clerk that his remark had been ill chosen. He should have mentioned that he really was thinking of the afternoon, when Slim and Red, two local flatheads, had been riding herd on a sizeable fortune. He was about to explain this, but the attitude and facial expression of the two watchdogs took the edge from his purpose. He felt, however, that it would be well to make some placating remark, just by way of showing that his attitude was not critical, and had been entirely impersonal.

"You reckon El Toro is in town?" he asked carelessly.

"Hope so," said the first Texan. "Shut up yore fool mouth."

The second Texan grinned again.

"There's twenty-five hundred on El Toro's head, *dead* or alive," he said, and licked his lips. Then the grin faded. "Shut up."

The big, fly specked clock ticked monotonously, and for the first time Tyson recognized an unevenness in its beat. It accented every other tick. This limp was very plain now, and it annoyed the clerk. He wanted to throw something at it. Then there came the faint sound of a grating lock, a faint click of a bolt thrown back, and quick steps sounded in the upper hall.

"All right, boys; come on up."

The second Texan faced about and walked to the stairs. On the third step he stopped and turned, the big Colt gleaming dully in his hand. It had, Tyson now noticed, ivory handles.

"C'mon," he grunted.

His friend turned and hastened to the stairs, passed up out of sight, and was then slowly followed by the other.

"Safe *enough!* Safe *enough!*" ticked the clock solemnly, and Tyson's head thoughtfully nodded in time to the accented beating. He was mechanically nodding when the two Texans came down again, their guns sheathed, their interest dead. They glanced curiously at him and passed out silently, like dangerous threats, and were gone. "Safe *enough!* Safe *enough!*" ticked the clock, and Tyson swore at it petulantly.

Voices sounded upstairs and steps came along the hall. John Corson, his hand now frankly resting on the handle of his gun, stepped into sight, ten inches at a time, his feet showing first. Closely behind him followed Watson, the new owner of the JC ranch. Corson was grim with dangerous responsibility, but Watson was smiling and mechanically rubbed his hands.

"Got to celebrate a little," said the latter, and while he smiled his voice was tense. He looked at the clerk and waved him toward the barroom. "Come on, Tyson; I'm buyin' the best in the house." As they followed him he stepped aside, let Corson take the lead, and moved his hand swiftly toward that of the clerk. Then he hastened to the bar and gave his order.

Tyson opened his hand, squinted at the numeral on a corner of the bill, and sucked in his breath swiftly. His face beamed and he was ready to celebrate as long as he could see or speak. Jim Watson was a mighty fine man.

Corson paid for the second round, taking cigars on both, said a few conventional words and then stepped into the night, out of the side door. Watson yawned,

stretched, and chuckled. He held out a folded paper.

"You might as well put this in the safe, Tyson," he said. "I'm right tuckered out, an' I'm turnin' in. I've walked more today than I have in years; an' been under quite some strain. Don't let anybody disturb me before time for breakfast. Good night."

"Good night, an' *thank* you, Mr. Watson," replied the clerk. "Nobody'll bother you till the bell rings."

"You better look out for El Toro," laughed the ranchman, and climbed the stairs.

Outside in the night the partial darkness covered hasty movements. John Corson, vaulting into the saddle, raced down the street instead of up it, swung wide to the west and in the direction of the short-cut trail. He pounded along this for nearly a mile and then veered from it and rode rapidly toward the regular trail and the wagon road. In either event he had to ride through the canyon, but the short-cut trail was too narrow and led through too many close thickets which pressed in on both sides until their branches and stems rubbed a rider's legs. The road was the wiser choice, even although it was longer.

Back in the town he had just quitted there was no general riding, but the whispers reached a higher level. Suddenly there sounded quick hoofbeats in the vicinity of the stable. They swept southwestwardly around the town, and then straightened out along the short-cut trail. Here their tempo increased with no one but the rider to hear them. This trail led to an old and abandoned prospect hole and came within a few hundred yards of the canyon entrance. A newer, fainter path connected the two, and was sometimes used by a man in a hurry.

This racing horse skimmed through the star-bright night like a passing shadow and covered the five miles at a speed which easily would overcome the more sedate pace of John Corson's poorer horse over the longer road. The canyon reached, its rider raced through it to the point where the JC trail turned off and left the wagon road to strike northwestwardly for the ranch-house. He followed the latter route until he came to where it pitched down into a twisted arroyo about half a mile from the main road. Here he dismounted, tied the horse to a bush in a side ravine and then slipped down to the trail and hid behind a boulder in the bottom, from where he distinctly could make out the arroyo's rim against the starry sky.

John Corson rode on at a lope, passed through the canyon and left the Cactus road. He gave no particular thought to danger, since for nearly two decades he had ridden over this route in all kinds of weather and at all hours of the day and night. In the first part of his ride along the Cactus road he had pulled up frequently to look behind him and to listen, but as the town fell steadily to the rear he dismissed its threat from his mind; and after he cautiously had passed through the canyon, its threat the high water mark of potential danger, he felt a little ashamed of his timidity and swung into the JC trail with no further thought of peril. He now was on what had been his old range, familiar ground, and in less than a dozen miles more he would be at the ranch-house.

The hotel clerk's open perturbation concerning El Toro had been founded on nothing more substantial than imagination. The outlaw's fame was established and was, in many minds, a bogey. This master rustler had confined his operations to one line of endeavor, and to a territory rather well to the south of the local ranges. Willow Springs and the surrounding territory were a little too far from the border for the successful running off of local herds, and there was no need to take unnecessary risks while a more convenient hunting ground sufficed. This was the only reason why the Mexican desperado had not bothered the local ranches; but the local ranches were not outside his system of espionage.

The matter of the sale of the JC had been talked about for weeks before the sale took place. Price and terms were well known to almost every man in the surrounding country. When the date had been set for the signing of the papers it was quickly known in town, and Watson's appearance at the bank had been expected.

To raid the Willow Springs ranches and drive off a clumsy and cumbersome herd was one thing; to strike a quick blow for a few packets of currency and make a run for it with nothing to hold back the robbers and cut down their speed, was quite another. As the negotiations for the sale took form and substance El Toro's interest had quickened, had changed from passive to active, and he had made his plans.

The arroyo through which the JC trail led was only a great, open ditch with sloping sides. It is obvious that any ditch has two ends, and two ends had the arroyo;

and they were less than a quarter of a mile apart, measuring them from the points where the trail dipped into and left the ravine.

The arroyo was crooked, nearly as crooked as the men who counted on taking advantage of it. When the lone horseman from town had hidden his mount and slipped back to the trail, and slid his Colt over the convenient boulder he was far from being blessed with the solitude he thought was his. He hardly had settled down before four Mexicans, hidden farther up in the ravine, began to worry about the non-appearance of John Corson. It was possible that he might be suspicious of the dried watercourse, and avoid it. Then they had heard the sounds of a running horse east of the ravine. The sounds stopped and did not start again. Here was something to investigate, and, leaving their horses where they were picketed, the four started cautiously along the trail on foot toward the southeast end of the arroyo, spread out and slipping along as silently as possible from boulder to boulder, sagebrush to sagebrush. If John Corson were hiding out he would learn the quality of the men he sought to avoid.

Then hoofbeats sounded faintly down the trail in the direction of the canyon, and grew steadily plainer and louder. The

horse was coming at a lope, lazily rocking along on its regular traveling gait. The lone watcher behind the boulder tightened his grip on the Colt and flattened himself against his breastwork as a thick blotch against the star-riddled sky loomed up before his eyes where the trail pitched down on an angling course into the ravine. Lying on the very bottom of the arroyo and not ten feet from the trail, the lone watcher could see well enough. He had the rider between him and the sky. While one might count ten slowly he waited, his eyes straining to sight along the barrel of his weapon as it swung with the progress of the rider. There sounded a loud roar, magnified by the ravine. A vicious bayonet of flame flashed and died, and echoes rumbled and ceased.

There came the sounds of a startled grunt, a fall, and the swift clatter of a panicky horse heading at top speed for its stable and safety. The killer scurried from his place of concealment, still gripping a ready gun, and bent over the sprawled and indistinct figure huddled on the dark earth of the trail. There was no need for a second shot. His hands moved swiftly and deftly and in a moment he picked up his gun, laughed nervously, and leaped to his feet, now hotly eager to get to his horse and to town. As he passed the boulder he laughed again, his voice high pitched with nervous strain and exultation; and then his sky was filled with flashes of light, his ears with a tremendous roar, and he fell interminably through a dark and horrible void.

Vague shapes moved swiftly around him, with the lithe grace of predatory felines, their hands needing no aid of match or torch even in the black darkness along the ground. They did not know the identity of the man they so quickly searched, and they did not care to know it if the knowledge meant the striking of a match. They did not care whether he lived or died, no more than he had cared about the fate of the rider. To strike a light might be dangerous, especially after the sound of that shot; and they were accustomed to working in the dark, the greatest natural boon given to their kind. This poor fool had stepped between them and the man they had meant to rob, and they treated him without sympathy or consideration. Speed of action, the shielding dark, the accomplishment of their purpose, and the safety of swift flight to the ready relays in a short string of hamlets were their only concern.

In a few moments they had stripped their victim's pockets of everything they contained of any possible value and then melted into the darkness from whence they had come; and a few minutes later there sounded the quick clatter of hoofs down the ravine and then the rolling, drumming tattoo of racing horses on the harder ground back from the arroyo's rim, as the compact group of hurrying riders plunged into the sheltering blankets of dark and distance in the south.

The assassin groaned, stirred, raised himself to a sitting position and tried to orient himself both in time and in space. His mind was a chaos of aching and fantastic thoughts, slowly clearing. The stalwart strength and thickness of his Stetson had softened the blow and saved his skull from being fractured. The pain was almost an anodyne, tending to make him apathetic, and against this he fought, instinct telling him that he was in great danger.

First to stand out in his returning consciousness was the impelling need for flight, and while he considered it there slowly came the reasons for it. For days he had been planning this murder and robbery, and it had been well grained in his mind. He picked up the gun his hand chanced to be resting on, staggered to his feet and blundered, panic-stricken, to his horse, not knowing how much time he had lost, how much time he had remaining to gain safety and to cover his tracks.

Even now he did not know just what had happened to him, could not understand how a dead man could run after him and knock him down; and the thought made him fear that Corson was not dead, that he would appear against him with damnable accusations. Yet he *knew* that the fool was dead! No man can survive a heart shot. What was the matter with him, with his brain? He had the spoils of his crime, and to make assurance doubly sure, he holstered the Colt and plunged his hands into his pockets.

They were empty! He rocked on his heels from the impact of this discovery, and he started back on a shambling, weak kneed run to search the ground at the trail; and then panic gripped him again. How much time had passed while he lay unconscious? He had no way of knowing, for time is meaningless when its markers have been lost. Corson's horse would be nearly certain to run to the ranch, and, if seen there, would start a hard riding outfit to look for its employer. He did not dare to return, he did not dare to go to town, he did not dare to stay where he was; there might be safety in flight, but to flee would be to call attention to himself and start a hot and vengeful pursuit. Noses would be counted after this night's work, and his nose must be present to keep the tally complete.

He shook his head, and slowly the truth burned through his brain: he, himself, had been robbed in turn! They had let him kill Corson and rob the body, and then had fallen on him and taken the spoils of his crime! The pulsing of his blood was like heavy hammer strokes on his head, and again he had to fight the deadening effects of the steady, throbbing pain. He must get away from here before the JC outfit came in search of the missing rider of that saddled horse.

He turned and ran to his restless mount, jerked loose the knot with one fierce pull, climbed awkwardly into the saddle, and found the whistling wind like a balm to his aching head, while the jars of the riding increased the pain. To reduce the jar he stood in the stirrups with bent knees, cushioning the shocks; and then found that his legs were too weak to hold the position for long. Alternately sitting and standing he raced toward the black canyon and through it, swung from the road to and on the old short-cut trail, and pounded on into the dark.

Slowly the full import of this night of misfortune came to him and set him afire with rage, which his helplessness in no way tempered. Spurring and cursing he hurled the horse forward in a mad race against time, while name after name burned in his suspicious mind in throbbing and flaming letters of hate and fury. He had figured every step correctly, every detail to beautiful perfection. Nowhere had he made a mistake that he could name; yet by some trick of hell he had lost everything he had played for, and committed a murder in vain. His spurs ripped savagely into the already bleeding skin of the horse, and he almost went out of his mind from the intensity of his fury.

## Chapter VIII

### WHAT THE DAWN SHOWED

FIVE men played poker as wordlessly as possible in the Cheyenne, Big Jim of the JC having been frozen out early, and he now was hunched up near the table straining his sleepy eyes in a vain greediness. It was a three-cornered duel between the Box M, the Bar W and the JC, and some time since had changed from the chatty and bantering game usual with these men. It was table stakes, played cannily; and to go broke was to get out.

Both of the Bar W men were justifying their employer's remark of the early evening, and had weathered runs of bad luck which ordinarily would have sent them to join the circle of watchers; but tonight, fortified as they were, they had ridden out the local financial squalls and were still going strong. The audience which had gathered around the table in the early play had grown slowly and by midnight was of considerable size, and even the Mexicans had forsaken their beloved games of monte to watch this struggle. Foremost in their ranks was Señor Chavez, keen and appreciative observer of every play.

Big Jim grew steadily sleepier as he watched the game, finally said his good

nights, made some remark about having been out all the night before, and rode off for the JC with hardly anyone realizing that he had left. The game went on and all thought of reckoning of time had been lost. Hand followed hand in grim silence, broken only by grunted words; and the audience had unobtrusively shrunk until now no one but the players, the napping bartender and Señor Chavez were in the room.

Nueces gathered in the cards, bunched them, shuffled them and pushed them out for the cut. He was picking them up when a sudden clatter of hoofs, a hoarse shout, sounded from the street. He held the deck

while he turned his head and stared with his companions at the closed door, closed to keep out the chill of those late dark hours. The door swung open and slammed back against the wall as a tense faced JC rider exploded his verbal bomb.

"Bob!" shouted Big Jim, sleepy no longer. "Yore dad! Shot an' killed on the trail in the first arroyo!"

The room rang to shouted inquiries, brisk and sudden movements. Over the noise Big Jim's voice roared, not to be denied.

"My hoss shied an' like to thrun me, snortin' at somethin' on the ground. I could just make out somethin' that looked like a man, an' up on the top of the ravine, down near the other end, a cayuse started to rear an' plunge in the brush. Yore old man's, I reckon, tangled up by the bridle in the bushes. I struck a match, an' then I seen it all. I'll go back with you an' hustle right on to the ranch for the boys."

"You shore he was—dead?" asked Bob, calmly, holding himself in check.

"Yes; had been, too, for some time, I reckon."

The sounds of the crashing and scraping chairs and the heavy tread of stamping feet on the board floor now had ceased, to be followed by the sounds of milling hoofs outside. Corson had stopped in the doorway, remembering that his own horse was in the livery barn, and that time was too precious at that tardy moment to go after it.

"My cayuse is in the stable!" he shouted above the turmoil. "Who'll lend me his?"

"Take mine!" yelled Slim, thus cheating himself out of all the excitement which a horse would give him. "Take mine, an' hunt down the murderin' coyote!"

"Permeet me to go weeth you, Señor Corson," said Chavez, his face black with anger. This looked like bungling to him, and he hated bunglers. "I am ride on again today, an' eet may be eet ees on my r-road. I then get an early start, an' maybe geeve you help."

"Shore," replied Corson, as he whirled toward the door. "Come on."

Dust swirled in through the open door to the sound of the hoofs, and then there came a more purposeful clatter which died out down the street. The few stragglers abroad at this late hour hastened to clear the way and then stood back and looked into the noisy night as the dust clouds settled down around them. A shouted phrase changed their indignant growling into hot curiosity, and the stragglers ran for the lighted doorway of the Cheyenne. Learning the news they discussed it loudly on the street as they returned. Here and there querulous voices cursed them sleepily from darkened windows, and then pitched high in inquiry as the news was told.

Hotel clerk Tyson, sleeping restlessly, awakened, became curious, stuck his head out of a window to ask for the news, and then hurriedly dressed himself. He stumbled up the darkened stairs and felt his way along the upper hall, stopping before Watson's door to knock loudly upon it.

"What's matter?" demanded a sleepy voice, somewhat peevishly.

"John Corson's been murdered! Shot down on the JC trail! I *told* you it was dangerous havin' all that money!"

"I'll be right down, an' we'll lend 'em a hand," called Watson. He stumbled about in the dark, lighted the lamp, and was soon on his way downstairs, calling for the clerk; but the clerk was somewhere on the street, his hungry ears set to catch what words they could. Watson soon located him and pushed forward hurriedly to join a little group around a corner, a group excitedly discussing the crime.

"—eighty thousan' dollars!" said the clerk's voice in awe. "Saw it myself, had my hands on it, an' even counted the printed slips an' added 'em up. It was El Toro, shore as hell!"

"Bad news, boys," said Watson. "I wanted to give old John a check, but he was mistrustful. That's entirely too much

money to carry around in the dark in this part of the country; or in any other part, far's that goes."

"There's too damn' many Mexicans in this man's town," growled the harness-maker. "We oughta clean 'em out. Every mother's son of 'em is hand an' glove with that damn' cowthief! He knows everythin' that's goin' on up here, an' he allus will know it unless we clean house."

Through the paling night rode the racing group, knee to knee in quiet loyalty, the Mexican Chavez crowding the rear. Knee to knee on the straining horses, as though by this closeness to emphasize the quality of the friendship riding compactly at the flanks of the leader; and the thundering of the hammering hoofs masked throaty curses here and there, to be lost behind on the whistling wind. Wordless, otherwise, they rode on while behind them dawn lightened the eastern sky and slowly extinguished the stars. The echoless clattering of their horses' shoes suddenly changed and thundered back upon them in one sustained roar as the rock walls of the gorge hurled the noise from side to side; and then as swiftly it died out again on the wide expanse of plain. The canyon behind them, there came a swift swerving from the Cactus road, and the highway was abandoned for the narrower trail leading to the JC ranch.

Let us note a significant peculiarity in

the riding of this group, since in a way it serves to measure what sort of men they were. There had been no instructions given, but at irregular intervals, where the roadside permitted it, the group had swerved as the leader swerved, to leave the road or trail for short distances. Behind them, all the way to town, were little patches of road unmarked by their passing, a series of high spots purposely left to aid the art of tracking; little pilot marks for the trailing down of a murderer.

The bunched group reached the end of the little arroyo where the trail slanted down, and slid to a stop at one shouted word, each man anticipating the command and knowing the reason for it. What telltale tracks there were had already been messed, perhaps, by Big Jim's riding in the dark, and must not be further messed.

Corson dismounted, handed the reins to a companion, and went down the slope on foot, keeping to the edge of the trail. It was daylight now, and every detail stood out plainly. The huddled figure still lay down in the ravine as Big Jim had left it; there was now no sign of John Corson's horse, which evidently had broken from the entangling brush and was on its way to the ranch. There were many tracks in the ravine, itself; footprints, mostly, and of a surprising number. Here was a puzzle which would take time and patience in its solving, and there was the young man who would begrudge neither.

First he gave his attention to his father, finishing by searching the rifled pockets and then placed the broad hat on the upturned face. The pockets yielded nothing of value, and so thoroughly had they been emptied that they suggested a casual robbery, a robbery where the gains had far exceeded the highest hopes of the murderer. Not a coin was left, and the battered old silver watch was gone. It was hardly possible that any man, knowing of the vast sum of money, would have bothered to take trifles. Either he had found the trifles first and then come upon the treasure, or he had taken them to mislead and to be cataloged in the class of casual thieves. The latter seemed to be the true explanation, since it had been too generally known that old John Corson would have the treasure with him.

Bob arose to his feet and looked slowly around him, his attention mostly on the far side of the trail. Toe and knee prints in the thin layer of dust and sand at the side of the body showed where a man had knelt. The footprints came and went across the trail, to be lost on the harder earth beyond; and then the young man grunted, ran back a few yards, leaped across the trail, and hastened to a spot not ten paces from the body, where a wealth of prints showed faintly on the clayey earth.

For a few minutes he studied them, and found that he had three leads to follow. He chose the plainest and largest, and traced the tracks of four men back over their own first trail. It led him down the arroyo to where four horses had been tied to the brush. The horse tracks went up the bank over the course they had followed in going down it, and from the top

of the arroyo they made a straight line into the south.

Bob returned to the starting point and followed the very faint trail of one man to a boulder close by, dislodged pebbles and their darker nests showing him the way. He read this riddle almost at a glance: here a man had knelt, a man who had come down the little hill behind him; and from this boulder he had gone to the body, made the toe and knee prints, and then, arising, had struck straight east, where the jumbled prints of himself and four others already had been found. He had fallen here, and then gone on alone, as occasional scratchy tracks showed; and Corson followed them, and soon found them doubling back, and then going on again. Corson was now going up a little side ravine, and soon came to the point where this man had regained his horse, mounted, and ridden back the way he had come. This, then, was the murderer. The tracks of the other four did not lead to the body. They led up the ravine, turned aside to join that of the maker of the single trail, struggled with him, knocked him down, and went back over their own course, to get to their horses and to ride away.

Why had these four ignored the body and its treasure? Because it no longer had borne the treasure, because it already had been robbed. This much was plain. They had taken what they had come to get, but they had taken it from the murderer, and gone on their way again; they had taken it from the maker of that single trail and not from the body of John Corson. For the moment they could be dismissed, since the apprehension of the murderer was the first task.

"The four, they e-steal, from the keeler," said Señor Chavez with a grim satisfaction. "Eet ees too bad they deed not keel heem."

Corson nodded, turned and looked at the expectant and waiting group; and then he listened, looking into the northwest. Sounds of running horses came from that direction. They should be made by the JC riders, hastening along the trail to see why the horse had come in with empty saddle. He was right, for a few minutes later the ravine was filled with pounding hoofs, and the JC outfit whirled into sight around the bend. It drew up and slowed quickly, riding the rest of the distance at a walk. The foreman, a grizzled old-time cowman, pushed into the lead, riding off the trail and motioning for his men to do the same.

"Sorry, boy, right sorry," he said, his level gaze on the son of his dead employer.

"Shot down by a damn' skunk from behind that boulder," said Bob, and the word skunk automatically started a chain of thought which swiftly blossomed with promise. The young man stiffened. In his mind one sentence stood out plainly. "Skunks have been known to bite—fatally."

Could it have been Watson, burning to recover the cash and the notes? The fantastic thought would not depart; instead, other thoughts darted into Corson's oversuspicious mind like the flight of vultures to a kill, birds which magically appeared from nowhere, unerringly sped. He shook himself and sought an impartial viewpoint. To yield to the importunities of personal dislike was the way of the weak man, and too often led to nothing, too often wasted precious time and aged the scent. This problem was one to be solved by a fair and dispassionate weighing of facts, and personal prejudices had no right of entry. He was annoyed by the persistence of the idea, and tried to put it from him. He turned to the quiet and deferential outfit, sitting massed behind its outraged foreman.

"Better send a man on to break the news, an' take him home, boys," he slowly said. "Thank God he's still got a home, an' time enough to be buried from it."

The grizzled old foreman thought of the highly perfumed atmosphere of the ranchhouse, its costly and ornate nonsense. He put his hat back on his silvery head and spat with over-deliberate care and accuracy.

"Might be more fitten, seems to me, to take him inter the bunkhouse, Bob," he suggested.

"Yes, might be; but you take him to Mrs. Corson," ordered Bob grimly. He stepped forward to lend a hand, and in a few moments a serious and silent group rode slowly homeward, their advance courier stirring up the dust far ahead. A

gentle movement, almost apologetic, sent hats back on to the heads they belonged to, and the first group stirred restlessly, each man's mind on the beckoning tracks of that single horse; each man's mind filled with grim and deadly thoughts, and each blindly searching for the name of the murderer. Perhaps it had no significance, but each man's hand rested on the rope coiled at the pommel of his saddle.

"Found tracks of four horses, down below," said Bob, glancing down the arroyo. "They came down the bank, an' went up it again. Them four riders did not go near the body; but they shore jumped the man that did. Seein' we're after the murderer, first, we can let them other cayuse tracks alone. They'll only lead us onto beaten trails, an' into Mexican country, an' get lost."

"Mebbe yore old man got in a shot, Bob," suggested Red hopefully.

"No; all five chambers of his gun were full, an' it ain't been fired." He then stated a fact that they all knew. "He carried the hammer on an empty chamber."

"I told a certain party that the Great Divide ran right plumb through the middle of his damn' ranch," growled Nueces in a low voice. "Here's hopin' we visit them Texans! There won't be no damn' bungstarter around to mess things, if we do."

"It's shore onreasonable for a growed up man to think so much about a measley little belt buckle," cogitated Shorty sadly and aloud as the horses moved restlessly, bumping their riders against one another.

"What say, Shorty?" asked Red Purdue, recoiling from the collision.

"I said a man can be too damn' careful of his hands," growled Shorty. He urged his horse with the others to follow a sudden forward movement. "Great jumpin' mavericks! Get outa my way; can't you see I'm goin' some place?"

"Yeah; yo're damn' right yo're goin' some place!" retorted Red; "an' if you bump into me again like that, I'll tell you it's name!"

Corson had swung into his saddle and was riding across the trail to follow the tracks of that single horseman, his friends pressing close behind him. Over the broken plain it led them, on ground so hard that not a distinguishing characteristic was revealed; and then it bore steadily southward, and joined the wagon road at the canyon's western end. The leader raised his hand and checked his companions. In the soft dust, which lay like a thin coverlet over the harder soil, the tracks showed plainly. He dismounted and bent over them, studying intently; and as he looked up he passed a hand over a countenance bespeaking a vast and unbelieving surprise. It was not possible; yet there it lay.

"My own roan!" he muttered, looking about incredulously into the set faces above him. "My own roan! Can't be possible! Boys, get down an' memorize these prints. I'm shore goin' loco!"

"I don't know the tracks of yore roan," said Shorty, slowly rising from the prints and stepping back; "but if I see *them* tracks again I'll shore recognize 'em. If he borrowed yore cayuse he was a right clever gent, an' we mebbe have got a reg'lar job on our otherwise idle hands."

Others took their turn, studied the prints, and fell back, slowly mounting again.

"But he took a big chance, ridin' a cayuse that didn't belong to him," said Nueces slowly. "*Every*body knows that roan."

"It was dark last night," said Corson, climbing into the saddle.

Señor Chavez pushed up close to him, and held out his hand.

"Shall I say *adios*, Señor Corson?" he asked. "Eef I can be of help I weel stay. I do not know the people een thees country; but I weel stay eef you weesh. Otherwise I weel ride on my way. Eet ees as you say."

"Thanks, Señor," replied Bob. "I don't see how you can help us none. You might follow those tracks, the tracks of the four riders, as long as they go yore way. If you find out anythin' about 'em that's worth knowin', leave word for me in the first town you pass through."

"I weel do that weeth pleasur-re," replied Chavez. "I am sorry for your trouble, Señor Corson; an' I am glad I have met you; an' all you other boys. I hope you have luck, an' also that I weel see you soon again. *Adios, adios!*"

He shook hands all around and backed off the trail, to wait politely until they left him. After Corson had raised a hand in parting salutation and led his friends along the road toward town, Señor Chavez leaned over and took one long look at the tracks which Corson claimed to have been made by his own roan; and then, frowning, wheeled and rode on his way.

At the eastern end of the chasm Corson and his friends found the tracks in one of the little spaces they had kept unmarked

for just that purpose, but at the next place they were not to be seen.

Corson led the way back again, and turned in the saddle.

"Likely he turned off to that old trail leadin' to the abandoned prospect hole. It's a right fair short-cut for a horseman, an' not traveled much. He could count on not meetin' anybody on it after dark; an' shore as hell that's the way he rode out. If he went back to town that's the trail he took."

The old trail bore out the reasoning, and now they pressed on swiftly, the tracks plain enough on the narrow path. They hammered into town, crossed the main street, and pulled up in a smother of dust before the livery barn. No one was there to greet them, and they surged into the building and stopped at the third stall from the end.

One glance at the JC roan was sufficient for these men, the signs of hard riding being apparent to all. Still, they had something to prove, to make sure of, and as Corson led the animal forth to make its hoofprints anew, the bloody flanks drew curses from every throat. There, in that saddle, had sat the murderer of old John Corson, fleeing in guilty panic from the scene of his crime, rowelling his guilt to be read in the coagulating blood of a horse which needed no such brutal treatment to give its best speed.

The prints were made and closely scrutinized by every man in the group, in case they would have to convince some stubborn jury; and the verdict was unanimous: they were the same as those found at the far end of the canyon; the same as those followed over the old short-cut trail.

Bob led the horse back again, and stopped to look at the Bar W roan in the next stable. Again his suspicions flamed high: as Nueces had said, the man who had ridden the JC horse had taken a chance of the animal being recognized; but, once out of town, one roan would look much like another, especially if moving swiftly through the semi-darkness of a starbright night. Watson had ridden his own roan to town: would he be likely to borrow a horse which might easily be mistaken for his own, to borrow it to commit a murder? Hardly; and yet, if this similarity caused suspicion to point to him, the tracks, incontrovertible, would exonerate him.

Corson hunted about the premises, eager to find the worthless stableman; and hunted in vain. Then he led the group back to the main street, where Red and Shorty turned into the first saloon to begin their hunt for the stableman Higgins. And in the first saloon they found him, so drunk he could not talk with any degree of sanity. They kicked him gently to indicate their strong disapproval, and turned to face the grinning man behind the bar.

"Alvarez," spoke up Shorty, hitching up his belt, and thrusting his face across the counter, "we're leavin' that louse in yore care. Keep him right here till we come for him. You savvy my drift? *Keep him right here,* till either us or the damn' fool sheriff comes for him. If you don't, all the saints won't save you."

Alvarez grinned even more widely as he glanced at the helpless thing that was a man.

"*Si, Señor,*" he cheerfully agreed. "Eet weel be a so easy theeng to do."

"How long has he been here?" demanded Red ominously. "Tell the truth, now!"

"I e-spik no theeng but the tr-ruth," replied Alvarez somewhat indignantly. "He ees her-re fr-rom befor-re the dar-rk, last night."

"An' you keep him here," said Shorty, "unless you want to get all tangled up in the murder of old John Corson."

"*Señor Juan!* He ees mur-rder? *Madre de Dios!*" exclaimed the Mexican, hurriedly crossing himself. "May he be weeth God." He glanced at the oblivious Mr. Higgins, and a look of disgust came to his face. "He weel be her-re, the *sote!*" Again he crossed himself. "But for why was he mur-rder, the Señor Juan?"

"Because he had a little bunch of money in his pants," said Shorty. "Thirty thousan' dollars, to be exact."

"*Eighty* thousan' dollars," quickly corrected Red.

"There you go, blattin' ag'in," retorted Shorty. "He had *thirty* thousan', that Watson paid him for the ranch."

"I said *eighty* thousan', an' that's what I mean!" rejoined Red in his most positive manner. "I know, because I rode herd on it all afternoon. Me an' Slim both set right in front of that hotel safe, an' watched it. That there blattin' you mentions was yore own echo, Siwash."

"Echo!" muttered Shorty. "Hell, it ain't near as much an echo as it is a stink! Come on: let's find Bob!"

## CHAPTER IX

### A PLEASANT TETE-A-TETE

JIM WATSON did not eat his breakfast in the hotel that morning, for breakfast time found him on the street, going from one excited group to another, and he had reached Tomaz's lunchroom when he heard voices across the street, and three men moved into sight along the side of the harness-maker's shop. He stopped and waited for them, gravely regarding their leader.

"Heard the news a little while ago, Corson," he said. "It's too bad. I'm right sorry."

"So I reckon," growled Bob ungraciously. "Findin' you so easy saves us a hunt. Want to ask you some questions, Watson."

"All right; let's eat while we talk," he suggested and turned toward the lunchroom, waving his hand politely. "It's right lucky yo're such a good tracker. What did you find out there?"

"Found a-plenty," grunted Corson, letting Watson enter first.

The orders were given and the hungry men settled back to wait, their eyes on the Bar W owner.

"Eet ees too bad about the Señor Juan," said the proprietor, turning from his activities long enough to look sympathetically at Bob.

"Damn' outrage," growled Watson. "There was a time when a man was safe on the trails 'round here."

"Ah, but eef you leeved down een Mexico," replied the proprietor, shaking his head significantly.

"If I did I'd soon make things hot for El Toro!" snapped the ranchman. "Damn' thievin', murderin' coyote!"

"But he r-robs onlee the reech!" quickly replied the proprietor. "He ees a gr-reat man, ees El Toro; a gr-reat man. My cousin Luis, he saw heem once. He ees a gr-reat man."

"He's a low, dirty thief!" snapped Watson, in tones throbbing with sincerity. The veins on his forehead stood out and his red-brown countenance paled slightly. "He's such a great man that I'm addin', here an' now, five hundred dollars to the reward on his murderin' head! That makes it three thousan', even; an' mebbe we can call that a measure of his greatness: he's now worth three thousan' dead!"

He took hold of himself and turned slowly to face Bob Corson.

"What was it you wanted to ask me, Corson?"

"First, as a mere formality, I want to know if the JC was sold to you last night?"

"It was. The bill of sale is in the hotel safe."

"How did you pay: cash, or check?"

"Cash, as yore father asked."

"Who witnessed the signatures?"

"The only two men who happened to be handy: George Bludsoe an' Jack Burns."

"How did you come to mistake my roan for yours?" demanded Corson in a low voice, leaning slightly forward and poised for swift and deadly action. The little room was very quiet now, except for the sputtering of hot grease in the frying pan. Tense faces gave notice that their owners were ready for any eventuality.

Watson looked steadily into the questioner's eyes, a slight pucker on his forehead suggesting puzzlement.

"I don't remember ever mistakin' them two hosses, Corson," he replied. "Not while I was sober, anyhow. Is yore roan missin'?"

"No! it's not missin'," retorted Corson, trying to read the eyes of the man before him. "It was ridden purty hard, last night, an' all cut up with spurs."

Watson smiled, and shook his head.

"Well, I didn't ride it, although I'd like to, Corson. I'm sorry that animal don't go with the ranch: but mebbe it does?"

"Whoever killed my dad and took 'most everythin' he had on him," said Corson, slowly, again peering into the tired eyes of the ranchman. "They took even—*those notes!* Don't you make a quick move, Watson!"

Watson shook his head in slight bewilderment.

"Reckon I'm a little out of step. What notes did they take?"

The front door opened and closed, and Shorty and Red stopped just inside the room, instantly warned by the tension in the atmosphere.

"*What* notes!" sneered Corson, his eyes glinting. "Why, what notes do you think?

What notes but those you gave him to secure the balance of the purchase price for the JC? *What* notes? *Huh!*"

"Well, I don't know; but I do know that you ain't talkin' about no notes given to secure any of the purchase price for the ranch. There warn't no notes. I paid him spot cash, every cent down on the table. It come to an even eighty thousan' dollars."

*"What?"* shouted Corson. *"What?"*

"Just that. I can prove it. Yore dad wanted all the cash he could get; an' I found I could get it all for him, an' save a hell of a lot of compound interest. After I talked it over with Pritchard I was convinced that it was wise to save that interest; an' I did save it."

Corson was looking at him in amazement, thrown off his mental balance; then he took a short step forward, bending slightly at the waist.

"I don't believe it, Watson!" he snapped.

"Suit yoreself," snapped Watson hotly. "Hell of a lot *I* care what you believe!" He sneered. "Just to show you what a damn' fool yo're makin' of yoreself, suppose you ask the bank, an' the hotel clerk? Tyson counted it when he put it in the hotel safe, an' when he took it out again after yore dad came in. Either yore dad had it, or it is in that safe right now, or I hid it. If I hid it, it'll likely be in the hotel, seein' as how I went to bed right after yore dad left, an' didn't get up till Tyson woke me just before daylight to tell me about him bein' killed. Whoever killed him didn't get no notes; but they did get a hell of a lot of money. They got just eighty thousan', U. S."

*"Santa Maria!"* ejaculated the proprietor, his eyes bulging. "Eighty thousan' pesos! Holy Father have mercy!"

"Shore," said Red's voice, somewhat proudly. "Didn't me an' Slim set an' watch it half a day? Tyson near choked when he added it up; an' he was near scared stiff worryin' about El Toro droppin' in on us."

"You mean to tell me that you paid the whole price in *cash?*" demanded Corson almost breathlessly.

"Yes; why shouldn't I when I found I could get it?" asked Watson. "You figger ten per cent. compound interest on five notes for ten thousan' dollars each, runnin' from one to five years. That'll tell you why. Ask Pritchard, up at the bank. He said I would be a fool to give notes an' pay that kind of interest."

"Lemme see yore spurs," demanded Corson, bending swiftly.

Watson wonderingly complied, and regarded his own spurs with grave curiosity.

"Look here, Corson," he objected. "What's all this nonsense? What have my spurs got to do with it? I heard he was *shot!*"

"Don't you get smart!" snapped Corson, standing erect again, and obviously disappointed for some reason which he kept to himself. The spurs were guiltless of blood, and their dirty and dusty condition gave no reason to believe that they ever had been cleaned, not to mention recently.

"I'm lookin' for the man that murdered my dad," he growled, his face savage; "an' I'll look at every damned pair of spurs in town if I feel like it. There's not a thing to connect you with the murder, not a thing that I've found; but I'm suspicious of every man in this town that wasn't in the Cheyenne with me last night, an' yo're shore up in the front rank. An' lemme tell you *this*, Watson: if I find the man that did it, he'll never be hung!"

"Don't blame you, Corson; but you better not take the law in yore own hands," warned Watson, shaking his head.

"Then who should take it?" snapped Corson. "When do you aim to take possession of the JC?"

"I figgered on the first of the month," slowly answered Watson. "But I ain't in no hurry, Corson, under the circumstances. Be time enough when you say so. If there's anythin' I can do for Mrs. Corson, call on me."

"Reckon about the only thing that'll interest Mrs. Corson is a one-way railroad ticket east. Where's George Bludsoe an' Jack Burns? I want to see 'em before you do."

"Out on the ranch, I reckon," answered Watson. "I was figgerin' on ridin' out there purty soon; but if it'll make you feel any better I'll stay in town till you go out an' get back. What's more, I'll stay in the company of any man you name. You seem to think it's a right pleasant thing to be suspected of murder. If you was about ten years older I might hold you to account, Corson. As long as you've got me up in the front rank of suspects, I'll do what I can to get out of it. You want to see Pritchard, Tyson, an' the stableman. An' let me tell you that I'm stayin' right here in town where everybody can see every move I make until you *do* see 'em, an' see 'em all."

"My idea, exactly," retorted Corson.

"An' as far as you holdin' me responsible for what I've said an' done, I don't give a high whoop in hell how soon you start on that job. Is that right plain?"

"You'll see things different after you've had a night's sleep, an' got hold of yoreself. Hell, I'd do the same, myself!" He turned to the counter in sudden impatience. "For God's sake, Tomaz! Ain't you cooked my breakfast yet?"

"*Si, Señor, si,*" complacently replied the proprietor, and slid a hot platter before his complaining patron. Other platters made welcome sounds and there quickly arose a masticatory symphony.

Breakfast over, Corson and his friends pushed back from the counter, impatient to be on their way to interview the Texans; that is, all but Nueces. He slid his cup down toward the cheerful proprietor, waved his hand impatiently, and then looked at his friends.

"You boys make tracks for the Bar W," he told them. "Jim an' me are goin' to be one an' inseparate, united we stand, divided we fall; ain't we, Jim?"

"Don't be so damned familiar!" snapped Watson. "My name's Watson, with a *mister* in front!"

"An' that's right where yo're goin' to be, mister-in-front," said Nueces, bowing slightly. He did not particularly suspect Watson of the murder. That entered into his mind only to a small degree, but it provided him with a weak spot in Watson's armor; and he disliked the ranchman so heartily that he welcomed any opportunity to drive his barbs under the man's skin. "Right where yo're goin' to be: in front, mister. Time shore is goin' to drag with me an' you, Jim. I wish these boys would hurry up an' get started, an' rustle right back. What you say about me an' you settin' right here till they do come back? Or mebbe you'd rather ride out to the scene of the murder an' see what it looks like in *daylight?*"

Shorty, the last in the line of departing punchers, paused in the door and looked back, grinning at his cheerful friend, and at the thought of the unpleasant time Watson was going to have in that person's company. Shorty took advantage of the opportunity to sink a barb of his own, just by the way of lending aid and moral support to the long legged puncher at the counter.

"Take him out there, Nueces; it'll mebbe refresh his mem'ry," he suggested. "It's a bad time to forget anythin'. I'll leave you to yore sorrers, Nueces; an' mebbe bring you back a scalp, if them Texans get all riled up. You got any choice?"

"Allus make it a rule to collect my own," grunted Nueces as the door closed. He had kept his eyes on his sullen companion while he spoke and now he grinned sardonically.

"Feel like ridin' out an' lookin' at the blood on the trail?" he asked, challengingly.

Watson stirred his coffee while he let it cool, and paid no attention to his garrulous and trouble-hunting companion. He was not ignorant of this puncher's peculiar nature and misleading characteristics. He knew that Nueces was one of those persons who carelessly mix humor and death; that he would joke grimly with an enemy and kill him while he laughed, if he believed himself to be justified. Careless observers called Nueces erratic and a man of whims; but the knowing knew that his eccentricities were cunningly directed, and that his whims usually were the budding flowers of roots which ran deep.

"You got a white sight, Jim?" asked the puncher. "I never got away from the factory sights, myself; but I'm willin' to admit that there are ones, for night shootin'."

Watson was now looking out of the window, lost in deep contemplation of matters apparently far from the present surroundings, and he gave no sign that he had heard his companion speak.

"How the hell you Bar W fellers can see so good after dark is past *my* understandin'," remarked Nueces after a comfortable pause, and in no way abashed by the other's silence. He took his own coffee cup from the proprietor and meticulously put in one and one-quarter level teaspoonfuls of sugar. Anyone could see that he regarded this as a grave and important matter.

"Plumb center heart shot, that one was," he enthused, and then thoughtfully considered this phenomenon. "Of course, there was lots of starlight, lookin' up thataway outa the dark arroyo." He stroked his chin with his left hand and after a moment shook his head gently in frank and candid admiration. "Yes, sir: you fellers

shore have got the gift of seein' in the dark."

Watson sampled his coffee, found it to be the right temperature, and sipped it placidly, apparently oblivious to the presence of his talkative companion; but he was alert and angry as a prodded rattlesnake.

"Eighty thousan' dollars," mused Nueces in a low and awed voice. "Thirty from eighty leaves fifty. Feller would have to work a couple of lifetimes, punchin' cattle, to make that much money. Say, Jim would you advise me to buy that there ho-tel before Corson comes back, an' search it? Or should I take a shovel, an' ride along that there short-cut trail, watchin' for fresh turned earth? Hum! Come to think of it, I reckon I better not. If I ever found fifty thousan' dollars the shock shore would kill me; an' my heirs, bein' relatives, don't deserve no such good luck. Ain't you allus found relatives a no-account lot, Jim?"

Watson turned a murderous face to the cheerful and deadly puncher. His eyes were mere slits, blazing with fury; his lips, trembling with rage; but the governor of his earthly destiny sat alert in his brain and ceaselessly counseled caution. He did not say a word, and he did not have to.

Nueces studied him for a moment, groomed his front teeth with his tongue, and smiled idiotically.

"Time shore does pass slow as hell, don't it?" he drawled insolently.

Watson knew that to stay on the defensive would be to go Berserk, and to commit suicide. Murderous rage burned in him like a slow coal, and to fan it into flame was to die. He got hold of himself, and just in time. A forced smile crept over his face, and he looked calmly at his torturer, knowing that the man had nothing on which to base suspicion.

"Yes," he said; "it does. Out in this dry an' dusty country time usually does pass sorta slow, especially in a high wind. You shore can babble, Nueces, like the little brook, forever an' forever, an' not say nothin' at all. If you feel like ridin' out to the scene of the murder, I'm with you. I wouldn't mind takin' a look at it, seein' it's the main topic of conversation." He slowly scratched his head and smiled again; and this time the smile was not forced. He knew that he had mastered his rage and was becoming his cool and competent self again. "I'd sorta like to see just how El Toro works."

"You don't have to go way out there to see that," said Nueces. "How come yo're figgerin' it was him as done it?"

"Who else? He's been on everybody's tongue for months. Why don't I have to go out there to see how he works? What you mean?"

"Because he come to town, took Corson's roan, an' then come back here ag'in after the murder," replied Nueces with great sarcasm. "If he ain't polished up his spurs, they'll be right caked with blood. I'm figgerin' he stayed at the ho-tel over night, an' was waked up early this mornin'. How you figgerin'?"

Watson chuckled and leaned back, teetering on the high stool.

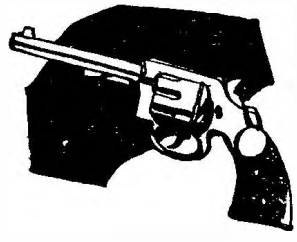
"What'd I just say about a wind storm? You made a mistake, Nueces, among a lot of others. Time ain't passin' slow at all, for *me*. What you say we go up an' play a game of pool? There's *another* damn' fool, up in the Cheyenne, behind the bar."

"I'm agreein' with you on that," admitted Nueces. "I betcha you got one bright an' extry clean chamber in yore gun, Jim," he said, pointedly. "Betcha five dollars you have."

Watson curiously slid a hand into a pocket, drew it out full of money, put five silver dollars on the counter, and replaced the rest. He gingerly drew his Colt by thumb and forefinger and placed it beside the bet.

"Put up, or shut up," he grunted.

Nueces was studying him even more intently now, his thoughts racing over several trails. Was Watson bluffing? It might cost him five dollars to find out, but the knowledge would be cheap at the price. He covered the bet and picked up



the gun. Carefully removing the five cartridges, he first squinted into the empty chamber, which a careful man always left empty for the hammer to rest on. One by one he examined them, and found all five foul with burned powder. The barrel was the same. He remembered the shooting match of the day before, when Watson had lost a dollar to the storekeeper. He looked idly at the cartridges and they told him nothing, since they all looked alike, and equally dirty.

"You don't think much of yore gun," he remarked, reloading the weapon.

"Plumb forgot to clean it," admitted Watson, a little apologetically. "Thinkin'

too much about buyin' that ranch, I reckon." He was smiling.

"Reckon so," admitted Nueces. "Old Eagle Eye beat you yesterday, didn't he?"

"One shot out of five," answered Watson.

"You get him shootin' after dark, some night, an' you'll win his store," said the puncher. "Night shootin' is a gift that everybody ain't got like *you* have." He placed the Colt on the counter and pushed it from him with criminal carelessness; but the hammer was on half cock, with the one empty chamber ready to move under it.

Watson very gingerly picked up the weapon by the same thumb and forefinger, noticed that the hammer was not down, and slowly turned away from his companion. Pointing the gun toward the rear wall, he moved the cylinder one-sixth of the way around and let down the hammer. Then he dropped it into its holster.

"Well, this is one bet you won," said Nueces in a drawl. "Nobody can't say you didn't get *some* money honest."

Watson smiled, pocketed his own part of the bet and pushed the remaining five dollars from him.

"Take yore money, Nueces. I don't never want nobody to accuse me of takin' money from an infant. An' I've heard it said that the good die young; you better rustle right out an' get yoreself some bad habits. Yore friends, if you've got any, would miss you; an' somethin' tells me that you ain't goin' to be with us very long."

"Well, I could get me a job, mebbe, punchin' for the Bar W," countered the lanky puncher; "that is, I could if I could see better in the dark. Howsomever, I aim to be here after the lynchin' of the rotten skunk that murdered old John Corson, if he don't get shot first. An' it don't make no damn' difference how *rabid* that skunk is, neither, Watson," he finished, remembering part of the conversation he had heard in the Cheyenne only the day before. "Now I'll make you another bet, an' you don't need to worry about what folks say about it. I'll bet you another five dollars I can walk up the street while yo're walkin' down it, an' put five slugs into you before you hit the ground. You see, it's daylight, *now*, an' you won't have no edge on me."

"That sounds good comin' from a man who just fixed a gun so it wouldn't fire when the trigger was pulled the first time," retorted Watson.

"I done that to keep from havin' to kill you, Watson," said Nueces, flushing; and there was conviction in his voice. "It would give me time to take it away from you, an' I wouldn't have to shoot you down. As long as you make a point of it, my last offer stands. You want to risk five dollars, an' yore hide?"

Watson laughed, and turned to the proprietor.

"Tomaz, bring my friend another cup of coffee. Coffee," he explained to Nueces as he faced around again, "is a great thing to sober up a man. I don't make them kind of bets; but I've got two men out on the ranch that do; only they've got enough confidence in themselves to run the figgers up to five hundred dollars."

"The first time I get that much money I'll let you hold the stakes," retorted Nueces pleasantly. "Them fellers ain't got enough sportin' blood in 'em to shoot it out for the excitement of it, have they? What do they look like, Jim?"

"One's a little, banty legged feller, with a couple of gold teeth in the front of his mouth," answered Watson, describing George Bludsoe. "The other feller is his pardner," he added, referring to Jack Burns. "They're both right good men."

Nueces became thoughtful, and when he spoke his drawl was dry and ironic.

"Watson, I read a story book once, when I was a kid. It was about pirates. One thing in it I never forgot. It was about the only true thing in it, I reckon, an' mebbe that's why it stuck in my mem'ry. It said that dead men tell no tales. Did you ever read that book, Jim?"

"No; it ain't necessary that I ever read it," replied Watson, smiling coldly. "You figgerin' that yore story tellin' days are near over?"

"I'll be settin' 'round the fire tellin' stories long after yo're six feet under, if the coyotes don't clean yore bones," retorted Nueces. Again he groomed his teeth with his tongue. "I was thinkin' more about George Bludsoe an' his pardner."

Watson turned the thrust and gave no indication that he knew what his companion was driving at.

"I shore don't blame you for thinkin' about them two," he retorted. "If I stood in yore boots I'd be thinkin' about 'em, too. They're great hands for goin' gunnin'."

"Yeah, mebbe; but I'm figgerin' they're worth more to Boh Corson alive than dead. It ain't a good idea to go 'round killin' valuable witnesses."

And so passed the time until Bob Corson and his friends returned from the Bar W ranch, and neither Nueces nor Watson found that the time had dragged.

## CHAPTER X

### "GUILTY AS JUDAS"

WHEN Corson and his companions got back to Willow Springs after their fruitless visit to the Bar W they rode to the stable and again looked for tracks. The hard packed floor, here and there covered with straw litter, told them nothing; and neither could they find any boot marks outside it that helped them. They worked their way to the main street, looked into the saloon where the stableman Higgins still snored, saw that he was being watched all right by the bartender, and went on again. At the bank, just now opening its doors, they sullenly listened to what the cashier told them, and knew that he spoke the truth. Watson's eighty thousand dollar check was added evidence.

Scouting around the hotel before the townsfolk had a chance to mill about it and spoil whatever tracks were to be seen, they found nothing. The clerk's answers and the information he volunteered bore out the words of the bank cashier. A visit to the room Watson had used was barren of results. They searched and scouted, tracked and made inquiries in vain from one end of the street to the other; and then they reluctantly made their way to the little lunchroom, where Nueces and his prisoner still engaged in verbal skirmishes.

They closed the door behind them, Shorty leaning against it while Corson stepped clear of it and stopped to look appraisingly at the ranchman. For perhaps ten seconds he stood thus, his eyes boring into Watson's, and then he spoke.

"Just got back from yore ranch, Watson. None of them Texans said anything that helped us. Bludsoe an' Burns claimed they only wrote their names on one piece of paper, which both you an' dad told 'em was the bill of sale.

"The cashier at the bank, an' the hotel clerk both bear you out. I found nothin' in the arroyo, or between here an' there that indicated that you had any hand in the murder. I ain't apologizin' to you for suspectin' you, because that was only nat'ral; but any time you want to leave town, the way's open."

"That's right kind of you," sneered Watson, slowly arising. He looked angrily at Corson's friends, and then directly at the young man.

"I didn't stay here because you wanted me to, but because I reckoned that I owed it to myself to let you pull yore fangs. As far as apologies are concerned, I don't want none from you, Corson; I don't want no hypocritical patchin' up. You've had a lot to say, the last couple of days, an' what you said goes as it lays. When it comes my turn I won't do so much talkin'. You can read that any way you want to. But before I go I'll tell you this: seein' as how you've shot off yore mouth so much, I'm takin' back my offer about you usin' the JC. You can get off it on the last day of the month; an' you can stay off it. I'm takin' possessin' on the first, an' givin' you public notice of that, here an' now."

He moved toward the door, waved Shorty aside, and raised the latch.

"There's quite a heap of insults to be paid for. Yore friend Nueces, here, wants to keep his gun loose. If Bludsoe an' Burns hear about his smart Aleck remarks concernin' them they'll be shootin' as shore as hell."

He opened the door and stepped across the threshold.

"I'm sorry yore dad was killed; but I'm a lot sorrier that is wasn't *you* that rode home with that money. Good-by, an' go to hell, the lot of you!"

The door slammed with a force which sent ancient and undisturbed dust puffing out from unexpected places; and with the slam Corson moved swiftly sidewise in line with the one small, front window, his gaze centered on the boots of the angry ranchman, watching every step until the man had crossed the street and became lost to sight behind a building on the far side.

Shorty and Nueces had started toward the door, both eager to speed the departing man with close placed bullets at his heels; but Corson flung out his arm and checked them in their strides.

"Stay here!" he snapped, tensely. "He's makin' somethin' I aim to use, out there in the dust."

In another minute he opened the door and hastened into the street, bent low over the fresh tracks indisputably belonging to Watson. He studied them intently, pass-

ing from one to another, and when he finally arose to his full height he was shaking his head in sullen regret. There was no similarity, except in the spacing, of these prints with the ones he had seen and memorized in the arroyo; they were entirely different in width, length and impression, the rounded outer heel telling positively of a bowlegged maker, while those in the arroyo fairly shouted that their maker had been knock-kneed.

Nueces and Shorty had followed their young friend, both studying the plain, fresh prints; and they both arose, shook their heads, and swore under their breath.

The three friends exchanged meaning looks and then walked back to the little restaurant, where Big Jim and Red Perdue leaned lazily against the wall.

"Not a thing to pin it onto anybody that we suspect," grunted Corson as he stopped near the step. "Red, you might as well go out to the ranch. Tell Watson anythin' he wants to know, for he knows it already, far's you can tell him. Are you with us, or with him, in this thing?"

"I'm workin' for Watson; but I'm shore ag'in the man that killed yore dad," answered Red somewhat indignantly. "If you can prove it was Watson, I'll help you hang him. In a thing of this kind I ain't above listenin' all I can; an' if I hear anythin' that you oughta know, then I'll make shore that you do know it. Just the same, Bob, you better let Watson rest: yo're wastin' time with him. Find El Toro an' you'll find a trail that'll lead you to somethin' worth while."

"I got my own ideas about El Toro," retorted Corson. "He had no hand in the killin', an' I reckon it mebbe surprised him. If he had anythin' at all to do with last night's business, it was what took place *after* dad was shot. The man that shot him is the coyote that I'm interested in, right now." He pushed his Stetson back and frankly scratched his head. "Whoever he was, he shore was a trail-hidin' genius; but I'll get him, sooner or later." He turned to the others. "Let's go up to the Cheyenne an' have a war talk. See you later, Red."

They soon mounted and rode slowly up the street, pausing to reply to the expressions of the men they met, men who found their old-time respect for John Corson slowly returning, and who always had liked him and his son.

Dismounting before the Cheyenne, they trooped in, pushing through the mixed crowd before the bar, all of whom murmured their regrets and sympathy. Corson leaned over the counter and spoke to the man behind it.

"Want to borrow yore room, Steve, to make a war talk," he said.

"Go right ahead, Bob. Learn anythin' that calls for a rope?"

"No; not a damn' thing," growled Bob, slowly shaking his head.

"Warn't no signs of *hydrophoby skunks*, was there?" persisted Steve in a low voice.

"Not a thing to show that he wasn't in that hotel room all night," answered Corson, stepping toward the little room which Steve called home. He opened the door and stood aside to let his companions enter first, and then followed Big Jim.

Steve looked at the closing door and then at the staring crowd. He picked up the bung-starter, placed it in full view on the counter, and made a significant gesture, conveying the idea that anyone whose curiosity impelled him to play eavesdropper would nurse a broken head.

Once inside the little room it did not take Nueces very long to learn all that had been found out, or, rather, all that had not been found out. Corson spoke frankly, finished, and gently shook his head.

"I reckon that lets Watson out of it," he grudgingly admitted. "I'm not backin' suspicions, or dislike, in a thing like this. What I'm backin' is evidence. I believed that Watson was the most interested, that he wanted to get the notes, destroy them, an' in that way get the ranch for nothin'. Of course, if he did it, he would have taken the money, too. But if dad had left the cash in town, or hid it, those notes were still worth more than their face value to Watson because of the interest. If dad had the money on him, as well as the notes, then Watson would make a real clean-up.

"We found out at the bank that Watson drew out eighty thousan' dollars instead of thirty thousan'. That was proved beyond doubt. At the hotel we found that the sum was eighty thousan'. Out on the Bar W, Bludsoe an' Burns both said they didn't witness no notes, but just the bill of sale. We tried to get them to say what the purchase price was, but they admitted that they didn't know anythin' about that. All they knowed was that they signed a bill of

sale, which was about all they would know. That rings true. Now, it's foolish to persist in suspectin' Watson when everythin' we've learned shows otherwise; when the tracks themselves, show otherwise. Whoever killed dad went from this town to do it, an' came back here. That's all I know."

He faced Nueces. "How did you an' Watson pass the time?"

Nueces stretched, and answered, telling his conversation with the ranchman, his facial expressions and gestures adding much to the recital. His auditors listened in growing amazement and at the end of the recital Bob was leaning forward, his hands on his knees, and they were closed so tightly that the knuckles stood out in livid lumps.

"An' he took all that!" he exclaimed. "He took all that from you like a sick cow?" His voice was pitching high.

"Swallered it like it was sugar coated," said Nueces, his eyes narrowed, his face grim and eager. He was watching Corson's expression, hoping fiercely, yet saying nothing. Whatever the reaction was, it must be unguided, undirected.

"My God!" cried Corson, leaping to his feet and pacing swiftly to and fro. "No innocent man would have taken that, Nueces! No innocent man would have set there an' let you insult him like that No innocent man would have *dared* to let such talk go on!"

"But what could he have done ag'in Nueces?" demanded Big Jim, at last stirred into saying something. "He knowed Nueces would kill him before he touched his gun. Hell, you don't expect a man to commit suicide, do you?"

"An innocent man would have had no choice!" retorted Corson. "Even if he considered that, he would have told Nueces to leave his gun on the counter, an' go out in the street for a lickin'. If it had been you bein' accused, you know damn' well that them hamlike fists of yourn would have filled that lunchroom. You'd have wrecked the place, but you would 'a' stopped Nueces' mouth from makin' a noose to fit around yore neck!"

"Ex-actly," grunted Nueces, smiling grimly.

"Why did Watson name Bludsoe an' Burns as the two men of them five Texans that would bet money on themselves in a pistol fight?" demanded Corson exictedly. "You know that *all* them Texans are gunfighters. You know that there's one of 'em that's a better gunfighter than either Bludsoe or Burns; Tom Powers. You know that neither Bludsoe nor Burns have any business standin' up ag'in *this* long legged streak of lightnin'. Why did Watson name them two in what might easily be the beginnin' of somethin' that would end in powder smoke? Because they signed as witnesses, *that's* why!"

"What's that got to do with it?" growled Big Jim, better with his hands and gun than he was with his head. "He had to call Nueces' talk, didn't he?"

"He did; but if he only wanted to call that talk he would have named the best man he's got, Tom Powers; an' not Bludsoe an' Burns! Why did he name them two?"

"What the hell are you askin' *me* for?" indignantly demanded Big Jim.

"Because, shore as hell, Bludsoe an' Burns signed as witnesses on some notes, an' Watson's uneasy about what they may say, one of these days. That's why he named two instead of one, an' that's why they are the ones he picked. He knows that Nueces can take 'em, one at a time, an' kill 'em both; an' I'm prophesyin' that Nueces will be given the chance to take 'em both on, to save his face an' make good his words."

He whirled to face the lanky gunman, and shook his fist under the long and predatory nose.

"That's a job you don't get, Nueces; you've made yore play to help me out, an' when them two Texans get all ribbed up to call yore hand, *I'm* takin' yore place. Don't you forget that! The Corsons fight their own battles."

"W-e-l-l," drawled Nueces, an affectionate grin changing the expression on his face, "I made my talk with my eyes open, an' I meant what I said. You can put up the money, if you've got it; but I'm sorta lookin' forward to burnin' a little powder. I hate the looks of gold teeth, an' the first chance I get I'm shore goin' to say so, right out loud. Then I'll knock 'em out. After that there ain't no tellin' what might happen. Bludsoe will fight like a wildcat. He's a right willin' hombre, but his partner ain't quite so willin'. That's a good thing, too: it would be a shame to kill 'em both, when you might need one of 'em, some day, to explain things. Comin' right down to cases, we *ought* to keep 'em both alive. I can win that bet any time. You see, if Watson wants 'em to get killed, we oughta want to keep 'em alive. Reckon that's reasonable."

"You, me, I," sneered Shorty in strong disgust. "You shore think a hell of a lot

of yoreself, Nueces. Judgin' from yore talk there ain't nobody present but *you, me,* an' *I!* Gettin' so swelled up you can't see no more? There's *two* of 'em—Bludsoe *an'* Burns—ain't there? They're pardners, ain't they? Well, there's two of us, an' we're pardners. What about *me?"*

"Shorty, I allus have a hard time seein' you, even when you stand up," replied Nueces; "but when yo're settin' down you sorta fade right out of sight. Besides, if you go an' get tangled up in any Colt wrastlin' match, you'll shore as hell kill yore man; an', like I told Watson, dead men don't tell no tales. I ain't aimin' to kill nobody that'll mebbe be useful. All I figger on doin' is to put a home-made, blunt-nosed, soft-lead slug through George Bludsoe's right arm; an' the same through Jackie Burns' left arm, him bein' left handed. If I do that every so often I can keep 'em both alive, but harmless. You don't savvy the fine points of this here affair."

Corson stifled the laughter that threatened to rupture him, and leveled an accusing finger at the open mouthed Shorty.

"You don't use yore head like me an' Nueces," he choked.

"Hell, no!" admitted Shorty. "I ain't no damn' goat!"

Big Jim's loud and totally unexpected guffaw made his companions start, and they all regarded him with strong disfavor.

*"Haw! Haw! Haw!"* roared Big Jim. *"Now* I know what Nueces' face reminds me of! *Haw! Haw! Haw!* Put some chin whiskers on it, an' give him a goat odor, an' he shore couldn't pass no ram in the matin' season without fightin' for his life! *Haw! Haw! Haw!"*

Shorty leaped from the chair after one intent look at Nueces' face, left the floor and clicked his heels together three times before he came down again.

"I allus reckoned you was dumb, Jim!" he shouted. "Why, you ain't nowhere near as dumb as you look!"

Nueces was scowling at the big man, but there was a twinkle in his eye.

"Hell, he couldn't be *that* dumb, an' live," he grunted, and then turned to Corson. "Well, Bob; *now* what you think?"

"What do I think?" demanded Corson fiercely. "Why, I think that Jim Watson murdered my old dad—*that's* what I think! An' you boys will be doin' me a favor if you don't mention that to anybody. Savvy that? Not to *no*body! Watson reckons he's cleared hisself, an' I'm admittin' he's got a purty good right to reckon so; an', likewise, I'm admittin' that I'm goin' to let him keep on thinkin' so."

"Keno!" said Nueces quickly and proudly. "He's guilty as Judas."

"Right!" snapped Shorty, a grim smile crinkling the skin of his face. "Now I'll recover my spirits: I was hopin' all along, that Watson done it."

"I'll help you recover yore spirits, Shorty," said Nueces, lazily arising. "You left 'em with mine, out behind the bar. Let's go get 'em."

"What you talkin' about?" asked Big Jim dubiously.

"We are talkin' about—*what* are we talkin' about, Nueces?" asked Shorty as he started toward the door with suspicious alacrity.

"Why, the last subject under palaver," answered Nueces, falling in behind his friend, "was home-made sage-hen aigs. Put some chin whiskers on *that*, Jimmy; an' see what it reminds you of."

They leaned against the bar and had their spirits, answering questions and asking them; and then Shorty moved along and nudged Corson in the ribs.

"I told Alvarez to keep an eye on Higgins till we told him not to," he whispered.

"Go up an' tell him to keep Higgins there until after dark, an' charge the likker up to me," replied Corson. "After dark he is to put the sot outside his back door, an' not pay any attention to him after that. Tell him to forget everythin' he knows about Higgins, an' us."

Shorty nodded and wandered out to his horse as Corson beckoned to Big Jim, who moved along the bar and stopped against his friend's side.

"You borrow a cayuse after dark, Jim," Corson told him. "When it gets real dark, lead it around behind Alvarez's saloon. You'll find Higgins there, very drunk. Tie him on the cayuse an' take him out to the JC ranch. I want to be with him when he sobers up an' gets so he can talk. You savvy?"

"Shore; but suppose he don't want to go?"

"What the hell has that got to do with it?" snapped Corson.

"Nothin'; not nothin' a-tall," replied Big Jim hastily. "I'll get him."

"That's right," said Corson, nodding. "Tell the boys to keep him in the bunkhouse, to keep him tight. By that I don't mean drunk. I got some hard ridin' ahead of me, an' the tracks of them four cayuses are gettin' older all the time. There's one good thing, though: there ain't been no wind since they was made."

"You ridin' after them fellers alone?" asked Big Jim, shaking his head to keep awake.

"Yes," answered Corson, his own eyes heavy. "You want to borrow that cayuse from a good friend, Jim; an' tell him to keep quiet about it. If them four fellers keep off the Cactus road there'll be tracks that mebbe will lead me to somethin'; if they didn't, then I'll not be gone long. If they've left a trail I'll let this section settle down a little, an' mebbe get careless, while I go off an' stir up another part of the country."

Big Jim rubbed his eyes and yawned prodigiously. "I'm goin' up to the harness shop, find me a bundle of hides, an' go to sleep till time to get that cayuse. There ain't no hides on earth that stink enough to keep me awake, the way I feel."

Shorty came back from Alvarez's saloon and joined them, made a whispered report and hung by his elbows from the bar. He gaped and blinked, yawning twice while Corson gave final instructions to Big Jim, who slowly turned from the counter and slouched away, eager to get to the bundle of hides and make up some lost sleep.

Corson talked with Shorty for a few minutes and found, now that the need for action had lulled and the excitement died down, that he was painfully sleepy. He had a room up the street, and he longed for its bed; but there still remained something to be done, and sleep would have to wait.

"What you goin' to do now, Bob?" asked Shorty, glancing enviously toward the rear of the room, where snores were sounding.

Corson told him briefly, his eyes fixed on something on the other side of the pool table. This something was Nueces, sound asleep in a chair, his pool cue lying between his released hands and resting against a shoulder.

"You better foller Nueces' lead, Shorty," he suggested.

Shorty grinned, yawned, and turned listlessly away. He stopped and turned back again.

"You leavin' Big Jim to kidnap that Higgins all by hisself?"

"Shore; why not?"

"Yo're shore you don't want me an' Nueces to ride with you?"

"No; why should I?"

"How do *I* know? What you askin' me so damn' many questions for?" growled Shorty. He stretched until his joints cracked and then waddled sleepily away. He turned his head and looked over his shoulder.

"I can best Nueces playin' pool; an' I can beat him sleepin'," he chuckled, and in another few moments his snores paid his long and lanky friend the sincere flattery of imitation.

## Chapter XI

### In the Stilly Night

Corson, on the trail of the four cayuses, reached the place where the tracks of four horses joined the Cactus road, found that they did not cross it, and followed the road for a dozen miles without finding any sign to show that the tracks had left it. This was a well used highway running a little east of south and following along the western side of the range of hills which lay west of Willow Springs. It led to Cactus, through it, and then branched several times, each branch hard packed and leading to scattered settlements.

Corson knew that to follow the road any farther, or any of its branches, would yield nothing but time and labor lost. He had caught himself falling asleep in the saddle and knew that even if he had a plain trail to follow he was too sleepy to trust himself to keep to it.

A determined man can fight hunger for a surprising length of time; he can successfully battle thirst for a much shorter time; but sleep he cannot fight when once its crushing weight begins to beat him down. There was nothing for him to do but to go to the ranch and let sleep have its way; and this he did, although he never could remember reaching the JC. His friends took him, sound asleep, from the saddle, and placed him in a bunk; and he knew nothing until late the following morning.

BACK in Willow Springs darkness hovered tentatively, and then dropped down over the town like a swiftly falling blanket. Big Jim, awakened by the harness-maker, groped blunderingly to the corral of a friend, saddled that friend's extra horse, mounted his own, and rode slowly toward the rear of Alvarez's saloon.

Certain sounds and activities in the darkness out back of the saloon sent his hand to his holster and made him draw up sharply; but he knew the grunting, quarreling voices, and was quickly reassured.

"Who're you?" came a low challenge.

"Big Jim, you damn' fool!"

"Oh," came a replying grunt, weighted with disappointment. "You got that cayuse?"

"Shore; you got Higgins?"

"The damn' fool wants to know if we've got Higgins," said the voice.

"You reckon I'm deaf? *I* heard him. What you doin' with that rope end?"

"Here it is; but I'm tellin' you that if you tie him up like that you'll shore kill him."

"An' I'm tellin' you that yore gran'-mother stole sheep. *Hey*, Jim! What the hell you doin' with that hoss? Admirin' him? Lead him up here!"

"Hell, the bigger they are the less brains they have," said the other voice. From this remark one gathered that it was Shorty speaking.

"That so?" snapped the second man. "Hey, *Jim! Will* you bring up that hoss?"

The clatter of hoofs on the street stopped the mysterious activities behind the saloon, and three right hands dropped to walnut; but the hoofs rolled on without stopping, and work was forthwith resumed.

"The idea," said Nueces' voice, "is to make this coyote walk every step of the way. He's so full of likker that he'll mebbe stay drunk for a couple months," he sarcastically explained. "Bob wants him sober by mornin', an' sober he'll be. This here rope will keep him from saggin' an' droppin', an' mebbe gettin' lost; but it'll let him walk. If he don't walk, then he can drag. I'm bettin' he walks." A series of grunts followed, and then came a profane question. "What the hell ever made you pick out a new rope? It's too stiff to tie good knots. Here, grab hold of this, an' *pull*, you runt! *Pull*, I tell you!" There came a snort. "The bigger they are the less brains they got! *H-e-l-l!*"

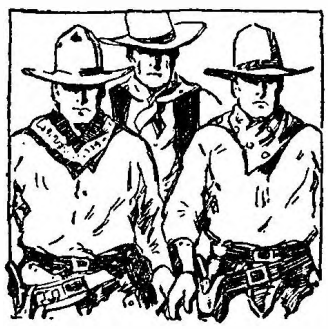
Other hoofbeats became audible, coming from the direction of the trail from Watson's ranch, and the two punchers hurried to finish their job.

"Here, Jim," ordered Nueces. "We've put him in the saddle, an' tied him there, in case you have to make a run for it. If you ain't follered, stop an' wait for us. If we don't come up, an' you ain't bothered by anybody, take him outa the saddle, tie him to the stirrup leather, an' make him hoof it every foot of the way to the JC. Get a-goin', now, roundabout for that short-cut trail, an' stick to it. Me an' Shorty will foller as soon as we can. Them fellers ridin' in now, may be Watson's Texans. *Get a-goin'!*"

Big Jim and his prisoner faded into the dark, the sounds of their walking horses lost in the noise made by the incoming riders. Shorty and Nueces slipped along the side of the saloon, hugging the wall, and saw Tom Powers and his Texans burst into and out of the straggling patch of lamplight before the open door. They whirled up the street in a compact mass and stopped in front of the Cheyenne, where they dismounted and went inside.

"If they wasn't lookin' for trouble they'd never pick out the Cheyenne," muttered Nueces, moving restlessly.

"They're shore lookin' for somethin'," admitted Shorty, knowing what was in his friend's mind, and wondering how to lead his thoughts from warlike deeds and into other channels.



"Betcha one of them coyotes is a-lookin' for me," grunted Nueces, pushing away from the wall. "Hell, *I* ain't never very hard to find."

"You keep yore shirt on, you flathead," growled Shorty. "They're more likely lookin' for—lookin' for—*Higgins*, by Gawd!" He gave silent thanks for this inspiration. "*That's* it, Nueces! Watson's tryin' to get him out on his ranch, where he can make him keep his flabby mouth shut!" Under his breath he muttered, "Brains? *Huh!*"

"Mebbe so; mebbe so," grunted Nueces uncertainly. "Might be a good thing if I sorta wandered up there to the Cheyenne, an' asked some questions. What you think, huh?"

"*I'll* tell you what I think, you damn'

fool!" retorted Shorty. "I think yore play is to shoot it out with Bludsoe right in that there street, in broad daylight, with everybody lookin' on. The publicker, the better. Show him up an' don't give him no chance to bellyache, or his friends to bellyache. *That's* what I think! Now you get after Big Jim an' see that he gets Higgins to the JC bunkhouse. If you think half as much of Bob Corson as you let on, you'll do that an' not nothin' else."

"Why, you howlegged little wart!" snorted Nueces indignantly. "You know right well how I feel about Corson! *Ah-h-h!*" he said, trying to peer into his companion's face, but baffled by the dark and the wide hat brim. "Yo're right handy tellin' *me* what to do: what *you* aimin' to do?"

"I'm aimin' to lay low, you tumblebug; an' see what I can learn."

"You ain't figgerin' to lay low in some saloon while they're in it, are you? You ain't aimin' to lay low by hollerin' out loud, right in front of 'em, are you? I've seen you lay low before this."

"My Gawd! I ain't *that* dumb!"

"Well, mebbe not; but yo're cussed close to it."

"You get after Big Jim an' Higgins!" ordered Shorty peremptorily. "I'll overtake you before you get halfway to the JC, if you make that drunk walk it off."

"All right," growled Nueces reluctantly; "but I would like to find out what they're doin' down to the Cheyenne."

He knew that his companion was right in what he had said about shooting it out with Bludsoe; but he hated to let Bludsoe swagger around and make erroneous statements.

"You get on that short-cut trail," ordered Shorty. "I'll be after you, purty soon."

Nueces took his growls toward the rear of the building and past it to where his horse stood. Then he mounted and swung toward the short-cut trail, his eyes on the distant Cheyenne as long as its lights could be seen. A rise shut him off from the sight of it and he pushed forward at a lope, every now and then calling Big Jim's name in case that person had heard him coming and had left the trail to let him ride past.

"Big ham head!" chuckled Shorty. "Watson's too wise to take any interest in Higgins if he committed that murder. He knows Higgins was right in that saloon, drunk as two owls, that whole night. I know what them Texans are lookin' for, but they won't find Nueces *now*. Lots of things can happen at night that can't happen in daylight with people watchin'; an' when Nueces shoots it out with any of that bunch it shore is goin' to be daylight; an' I'm goin' to be settin' somewhere close by with a rifle acrost my knee." He chuckled. "*Brains!* Huh!"

There was movement in front of the Cheyenne as men passed from its lighted door, across the light patch to the tie rail, and mounting, rode down the street. They stopped at every saloon and store, and kept coming steadily from point to point, in every case taking the trouble to mount and ride the varying distances. At last they drew up before Alvarez's building, dropped the reins down over their horses' heads, and surged noisily through the open door, their swift, threatening glances sweeping the room.

George Bludsoe ripped out a curse of disappointment and let his hand fall from the holster. Although Tom Powers was foreman and the leader of this group of men, he seemed to have delegated the lead to his pugnacious, gold-toothed puncher. Bludsoe advanced to the bar, scowling at the Mexican behind it.

"You seen that Nueces coyote?" he truculently demanded. The expression on his face, the tone of his voice, and every movement of his body showed his open contempt for all things Mexican, and stirred instant and smoldering resentment in the heart of the man he faced.

Alvarez took no sides in the affairs of men not of his own race, and he might have answered truthfully; but now he looked unflinchingly into the sullen angry face before him and lied calmly, and with the practised expertness which gave the ring of truth.

"No; I have not seen heem theese evenin'."

"You shore?" demanded Bludsoe, scowling deeper.

"But why should I see heem? He does not come een her-re."

"Good thing for him he didn't come in here tonight, an' stay here!" retorted Bludsoe. "Seems to me he got outa town right *pronto*."

"He's harder to ketch than a *four* laigged coyote," laughed one of the group.

The foreman now resumed his leadership and waved the others to the bar.

"Well, we can drownd our sorrer, anyhow," he said. "Set out the best you got, Alvarez, an' *pronto!*"

Alvarez turned slowly and with stiff

shouldered dignity toward the back bar, took a bottle from a shelf under it, placed it exactly on the inner edge of the counter, and then slid five glasses toward his customers; but each glass stopped before it had covered half the distance. The thirsty group leaned forward and reached, which provided Alvarez with a degree of satisfaction not revealed by his placid and unreadable face. Had his face been readable he might have died then and there.

"He run out on you, George," said a man at the far end of the line-up. "Made a lot of big war talk, an' then hit the trail like a scared jackrabbit. Here's that you ketch him!"

"Aw, he's like the rest of them Box M coyotes," said another in strong disgust. "Only way to git one of them hole-hunters is to go out to their ranch an' smoke 'em out."

Seemingly several things happened at the same time. There came three quick reports from the street, the frantic hoof-hammering of a small stampede, and the whisky glass in the upraised hand of the last speaker disappeared in the air, while slivers of glass and drops of whisky obeyed the laws of momentum and gravity.

The Texans surged to the door with more courage than good sense, seeing they all were in a strong light. The first man who reached the threshold felt his hat tug strongly at his head coincident with the *spang* of a splinter and a flash and roar from the street. He ducked, turned, made a terse remark; and the two lamps in the room flew apart and darkness fell. The sounds of the racing horses were dying out behind the building, but there now sprang into hearing the swift gallop of a horse not far away. This was Shorty's horse, and Shorty was on it, returning from a personally conducted stampede. Several jutting streaks of sparky flame announced to him that his movements were full of interest; but this was no news to him, and he overcame the temptation to spot himself for a lucky shot.

New lamps were brought and lighted, and they revealed a room deserted by all but the calm faced proprietor. He procured a broom and slowly, methodically began to sweep up the broken glass, thankful that he did not have a raging fire to fight.

A head raised outside a window and George Bludsoe peered over the sill, his gun lying across it.

"I thought you said he hadn't been in here tonight!" he accused in a snarl.

Alvarez glanced at him, and then at a sombrero lying near the door. He unhurriedly swept the hat through a pool of kerosene and out into the street, and then replied without emotion.

"I spik tr-rue, Señor Bludsoe: he haf not been een her-re thees evenin'. That was not heem. Eet was not hees shootin', onless," he cogitated a moment, and nodded, "onless he shoot to mees."

"Hey, George!" called a peevish voice from the darkness across the street. "*Now* see what you went an' done! How we goin' to git home?"

The words of Mr. Bludsoe were beyond repetition, and he forgot his half formed resolution to shoot Alvarez, forgot it entirely in his conversation with this unseen friend.

Out on the short-cut trail Big Jim pulled the horses to a stand, and listened. He was a comfortable distance from town, but he thought he heard the faint sound of gun shots. Riding from the trail until he believed himself to be safe from the observation of any pursuers, he stopped again, and waited. In due time he was rewarded by hearing the hoofbeats of a single horse, rapidly growing louder; and then he heard his name called in a well known but somewhat vexed voice, and he answered.

Nueces was waiting for him on the trail, but Nueces was twisted in his saddle until he faced the rear. He, too, had heard the sound of firing.

"What you swearin' about?" curiously asked Big Jim.

"That sawed off, bowlaigged, triple spavined friend of mine!" snapped Nueces, still facing backward. "He's got the head of a coyote, an' the nature of a hawg!"

"Shore; but what did he do now?"

"How the hell do *I* know?" snapped Nueces, facing about with a jerk. "He got rid of me first, didn't he?"

Big Jim pondered this nugget of thought for a moment, and then changed the subject.

"You goin' to make this pore devil hoof it all the way to the JC?"

"Yes, I am; an' I wish it was twice as far!" snapped Nueces. He swung to the ground and got busy with various and com-

plicated knots. Then he hauled the sodden wreck from the saddle and leaned it against the horse. In a few moments he was back in the saddle again. "Come on!" he growled.

An hour passed and then Nueces raised his hand and checked his horse. Far back on the trail something sounded suspiciously like singing. It grew steadily louder and the words became recognizable.

*"Oh, Beulah land, sweet Beulah land,*
*As on the high-est mount I stand,*
*An' look away, across the sea,*
*Where man-sions ar-re pre-pared for me——"*

"Would you listen to *that?*" demanded Nueces disgustedly. "Runty hypocrite! *I'll* prepare somethin' for him, one of these days; an' it shore won't be no mansion! You'd figger he was comin' from Sunday School!" Nueces raised his voice. "Hey, *S-h-o-r-t-y!*"

"W-h-a-t?"

"What was that shootin'?"

"What shootin'?"

"*That* shootin'!"

"Shootin'?"

"Yes, *shootin'!*"

"Mebbe it was guns."

"*Good hell!* Who was doin' it?"

"What?"

"Who—was—doin'—it?"

"Mebbe it was them Texans." And again Shorty relapsed into song:

*"Oh, Beulah Land, sweet Beulah Land,*
*As on the high-est mount I stand,*
*An' look a-way, across the sea,*
*Where man-sions ar-re pre-pared for me——"*

"Too bad he don't know more of it," said Big Jim. "Sounds right nice in the dark."

"Great mavericks! Yes! He oughta sing it in a cellar, with the doors shut!" Nueces raised his voice again. "What was them Texans shootin' at?"

"W-h-a-t?"

"What — was — them — Texans — shootin'—at?"

"*You*, they reckoned; *me*, I guess. Anyhow, they didn't hit nothin' but a couple of lamps."

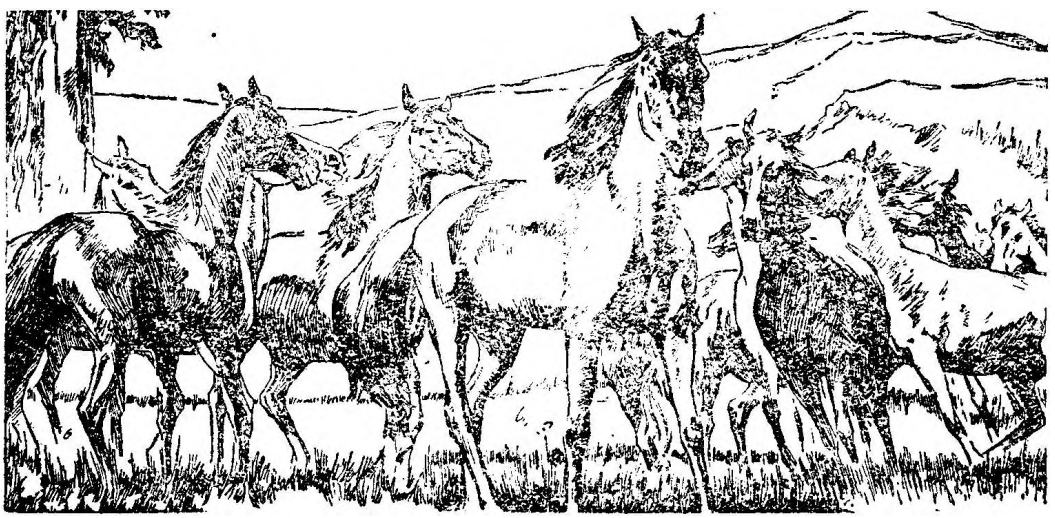
"What started it?"

"There was a couple of shots. Their cayuses stampeded, right from in front of Alvarez's. They split up, couple miles from town, an' I sorta lost track of 'em; so I reckon Higgins can hoof it all the way now, without bein' bothered by a lot of polecats." He chuckled. "You should 'a' seen that sombrero leave that head. Reckon it wasn't on very tight." He laughed contentedly. "Oh, well; that's what a feller gets when he goes gunnin'."

"Who was they gunnin' for?" asked Nueces, feeling that he knew the answer.

"Feller called Nueces," laughed Shorty. "Brains? *Huh!*"

(*To be continued in the next issue*)



# THE FIGHTING FACE

By THOMAS BOYD

*Author of "Beyond the Battle," "The Sound Sleeper," etc.*

IT WASN'T THE GERMANS IN THE WIRE-BARRICADED TRENCHES UP AHEAD THAT EDWARDS WAS AFRAID OF, NOR YET THE RATTLING, CHATTERING MACHINE-GUNS NOR THE THRASHING, CRASHING SHELLS—IT WAS THE FEAR OF "LOOKING AFRAID." AND IT WAS AN ASTOUNDING DISCOVERY THAT HE MADE IN THAT LAST MOMENT OF THE FEARFUL CHARGE

THAT thunder, though it was not close, shook Edwards more than it shook the ground. His was one of the nine hundred odd figures which lay stretched out between the damp earth and a blanket. Tired after the long forced march of the day, forty kilometres into the Champaign country toward the front, many of them now slept in spite of the penetrating air of the fall night against which their blankets gave scant protection.

Lying with his eyes screwed shut and his body rigid, he recoiled each time the shell from one of the long guns broke furiously open; recoiled though the explosion was more than a mile away, then waited wretchedly in the following stillness in fear that someone nearby would notice his lack of control and mention it loud and scornfully.

But no voice rose out of the night to upbraid him. From the nine hundred odd comprising the depleted battalion came nothing but stillness, which in itself was rather terrifying to Edwards as he tried to roll up in a ball under the thin blanket. To think himself the only one awake, the only person conscious of that menacing rumbling about a mile to the north, that ominously rolling roar which seemed to advance and recede, advance and recede so that at one time he felt the danger going farther away and at another felt it come crushingly and irresistibly forward.

And that treacherous rumbling was only the mildest foretaste of what he expected with the coming of morning. For Edwards, as well as every member of the battalion, knew that sometime during the night the outfit would move even closer to the front so as to be ready to attack before dawn. And then—he dared not try to imagine what would happen, how he would behave. That sullen roll of fire caught his mind and held it, made it impossible for him to imagine any further.

Lying there, waiting rigidly under his thin blanket for he knew not what, Edwards was as close to the actual scene of fighting as he had ever been. He had been with the battalion only a couple of days, having joined them at Chalons sur Marne from a replacement division which had lately arrived in France from Hoboken. Back in the States the war had been all talk, drill, fatigue and Y. M. C. A. entertainment. At Brest it had been mud, sickness, strange soldiers, weary and poor old women and children. Deeper into the country it had been, wherever he stopped, wooden cantonments, old houses abandoned in disrepair, military police, soldiers lurching out of small cafes, and a general air of restlessness. Farther on it had been splintered trees, shattered villages and acre upon acre of untilled fields. From Hoboken on each step had been a

little more sobering, and at last when Edwards, along with many others, was ordered to a combat division there were painful doubts in his mind as to what the goal of all his months of training would do to him, whether in the face of the enemy he would go forward or backward or be unable to move at all.

His arrival and welcome into his new outfit had not given him any assurance with regard to his future actions. For the battalion to which he had been assigned had gone through two notable offensives and furthermore had battled the enemy for a perpetual nightmare of a month over the possession of a strip of wood not far from Chateau Thierry. Edwards knew that so far as reason went he should be thankful to have been put among experienced and capable men. He knew that he was safer with these men than he would have been with men of scant training and no tried capacity under fire.

He knew all that, and yet it was of no help to him. Quite the contrary, it was a hindrance. From the first moment he had handed his papers to the top sergeant to whose company he had been assigned he had felt his position as a newcomer, a novice in war. The top sergeant had looked at him with shrewd, cold eyes, no doubt thinking, "Good God, here's a recruit from a training camp, prob'ly had on a uniform about three months in his life. What a hell of a lookin' soldier!" And the men in the ranks, remembering how the old-timers had treated them when they had first enlisted, made use of this remembrance either in tall talk or else in gazing superiorly at and beyond the person of Edwards.

Left out of the general conversation on the night before he nevertheless had been forced to listen to a group of the soldiers boasting to one another, evidently for his benefit. "Oh, I don' know. It ain't so bad up at the front if they don't throw that liquid fire on you," one of them had said. And another: "Boy, when that Squarehead held his bayonet at my throat I sure thought I was a goner, an' I would of been too if I hadn't happened to think of my trench knife an' jerked my head to one side while I lep' up an' buried it in his damn' hide." "I was leanin' pretty heavy on the barrage when we went over at St. Mihiel," another had said, "an' one of them Big Bertha's lit near me an' knocked me halfway up a tree. I sure don't like them big shells."

So they had talked, those vainglorious veterans of a few months, cited in army orders and known as "shock troops." And every word they had uttered while they lay in their billets the night before taking the long hike which had brought them up to the front had drawn them farther away from the inexperienced Edwards.

On the wearying march Edwards had kept up with the rest, and when they came near to the front and were deployed on the sodden field he had dropped down, letting his pack slide to the ground and following it without resistance. It had been thought then that they would go up to the front that evening, but orders had come for the men to halt and stand by, the inference being that they would finish the trip to the actual front some time before daybreak and attack the first moment of the morning.

So there Edwards was, with men who would form a line which would wither but never break, who knew how to take cover in the best way possible to shield themselves from the ripping shell casing and the showers of shrapnel, who knew how to maneuvre around a machine gun nest whose fire held up the advance—in short he was in the safest place he could be and still be at the front.

But from this he got no cheer, got nothing that would soothe his cringing nerves when those shells streaked over in the darkness and roared out like sullen, angry bulls. For he realized that he had no notion of how he would act when confronted with the job of pushing steadily upon the enemy who were bitterly on the lookout to kill him. If he ran it would be as mortifying as death, and maybe would result in death since it was not uncommon for an officer to shoot a man who becomes so demoralized as to run away.

Worst of all, though, was his fear that he would betray himself before these other men, these veterans. In that case he would be better off if he were wounded, no matter how badly, he decided. For to come back through the attack only to be known as a coward was not worth striving for. Just the opposite it was to be guarded against, watched zealously so that it would not happen. Much better to expose himself to the German fire purposely.

Thus thinking he continued to wince as the shells poured over into the front line trenches, now held by the French, a mile or so up the shell torn road which ran its course unseen through the darkness. He lay on his side with his Springfield rifle close to his hand, using his combat pack as a pillow and keeping his box gas

mask fastened to his chest. When the call to assemble was given he would be one of the first to answer. Yes, damn it, he was ready any time, because it was impossible to sleep.

He was still awake, hours later, when the platoon commanders were routed out and in turn began to rouse the enlisted men. Though they were a mile and more distant from the Germans they talked softly, having learned the habit while in closer contact with the enemy.

"All right, you birds. Come out of it now," Edwards heard the subdued voice of his platoon sergeant chirping. And then darker blots against the darkness were apparent, vague, almost indistinguishable outlines of humping figures as the men stooped over the ground, fumbling for their equipment—their gas masks, steel helmets and rifles.

And there was mumbling:

"Lord, I'm soaked clear through. Must of been layin' in a puddle of water. Wettest damned country I ever seen," followed by the sound of a hand slapping irritably against a soaked breeches' leg.

"Naw, I don't want that condiment can. I'll salvage me another one when we come out and start back to a rest camp."

"Rest camp? Be the first one we ever seen then, won't it, buddy?"

And from the sergeant: "Pipe down, you birds. Hey! Put that light out, you squint-eyed German spy!"

And from all around in the heavy darkness:

"Fall in, you men."

"Fall in!"

"Fall in!"

Then there was grumbling as packs were shouldered, bandoleers slung and rifles hoisted up.

"Why the hell couldn't they let us sleep a little longer?"

"Sure is a lousy time to start on a march."

"Keep offa my heels, ya big bum."

"Aw, save your wind."

Edwards, from the right place in his squad, listened and heard not a word about the dangers which these men were preparing to march on. As for himself he could think of little except those slippery hazards. His face felt all screwed up and painfully stiff inside the strap which led around his chin from one side of his steel helmet to the other.

Then they were plodding off in a column of twos through the black night, keeping on the outer edges of the wet road which had been ripped up by the frequent shelling of the past week. Stumbling along in

the darkness toward a wet ditch beyond which anything might be waiting, tramping on the heels of one another, sometimes being so close together that the man in rear bumped into the back of the man in front of him, sometimes making ragged gaps so that members of the column often felt as if they had lost their way and were wandering guideless toward the German lines, they pushed along, heavily weighted down by the bandoliers of rifle ammunition, hand grenades, rifle grenades, automatic rifles, entrenching tools and Springfields.

From time to time Edwards heard the inevitable news being passed from behind him, "Pass the word that the machine gun company can't keep up," and being a new man he worried, thinking that the machine gun company would be unable to make the march with their heavy tripods and thus force the infantry to go into action without their protection.

Meanwhile the Germans continued to drop their dark, exploding curtain of shells about the front line ahead. And as the battalion went farther Edwards could see the flash of the powder as it ripped open the steel shell cases and sent them flying in great jagged strips through the air. How brilliantly red they were! How suddenly they flamed on the black horizon, then shook the earth till it was like a swelling sea.

"Squareheads sure are spendin' a lot of money for shells tonight," said the voice of a man behind him.

"Maybe they're fixin' to retreat and don't want to carry all that ammunition along back with 'em," suggested someone hopefully.

For a second Edwards took heart at this novel explanation of the continued bombardment, then realized the craziness of it. No, far more likely was it that they were showing how strongly they would hold out against the attack in the morning. He had no doubt that the enemy knew of the attack. German spies, he had heard, were everywhere inside the Allied lines and had

many secret means of spiriting information through to their officers.

Maybe the Germans themselves were planning for an attack in the morning, Edwards thought. What would it be like, he wondered, for both troops to meet in the middle of the disputed ground! Would they fight it out with bayonets?

He heard a voice in front of him, "Reckon they got their Prussian Guards up there in the trenches again?"

And another voice, "Prob'ly. Seems like we go wherever the Prussian Guards go. Save a lot of this damned marchin' around if they'd put us both out in some field and let us fight it out together."

"You tell 'em, big boy."

The double column veered over to the side of the road to let a mounted orderly gallop past toward the head of the column. Splashing mud and kicking gravel the horse floundered on, heedless of the cries from the ranks of, "Hey, you big bum!" "Ya lousebound stiff, splashin' mud on me like that!" "Git offa that plug an' I'll beat ya to a pulp."

Edwards wiped a blob of mud from his left cheek and said nothing. His concern was from something much deeper than the reckless riding of an orderly. He had already taken for granted that the Prussian Guards, the best troops of the Central Powers, were holding the line against which the battalion was to attack, and he visioned them as great, broad shouldered six footers and unerring marksmen. No, he was almost indifferent to the amount of mud the hooves of the orderly's horse kicked up at him.

The shells were much nearer now, and the crimson splotches where they burst were very close to blinding. He began to wonder flinchingly if the firing a little farther on would not be so thick that the battalion could go no deeper, but would be forced to turn back.

A whining noise came from the black sky ahead. It grew louder and more insistent. Keen and terrible, it seemed bound directly for Edwards. In that second there raced through his mind the remembrance of what a wounded soldier had said: 'I heard it comin' and I could tell it had my name on it. And it had.' Edwards waited, thinking the same thing. He could not move a step, seemed powerless, fascinated by the approaching sound.

There was a dull sound, a roar and then the earth appeared to open up in front of him and a little to the right, shooting out flaming brimstone. Slap! He felt something strike his breast and thought, "Well, I guess I'm done for." But his body remained stiff and set, though he expected every moment to sag to the ground.

"Close up, close up!" came irritable voices from behind him. "Do you want us to get lost?"

He tried his legs. They moved as always. Gradually as he marched on he got sufficient control of himself to feel his chest. His hesitating fingers touched the cloth of his coat. It was only a chunk of mud which had been thrown out by the bursting shell.

He stumbled hurriedly ahead, his outthrust hand feeling for the back of the man ahead of him. Again there was that streak of whining in the air, ending in a thunderous clap which shook the whole line. The palm of his hand jammed against the combat pack worn by the man in front of him, stopping him short. Another shell, of more ponderous size, came over, and in the searing light of its explosion he saw a man sink limply up ahead. There were cries of "Stretcher bearer! Stretcher bearer! There's a man hit!" He tried to pass on the urgent call but the muscles in his throat were so knotted that he couldn't speak.

Edwards wondered which of the men it was who had been struck. But nobody spoke any word that would inform him. The whole line was doggedly silent. As he moved on he saw two barely distinguishable figures along the roadside, one stooping over the other. The former was talking soothingly, "Now soldier, you're all right. Pretty soft for you. Tomorrow by this time you'll be layin' between white sheets in a hospital—Je's, he's dead."

Edwards shuddered with the knowledge that he had seen his first dead man and hurried past. The column jogged along quietly, the men breathing heavily but doing very little talking. Edwards was no longer speculating about what he would do. He realized that after a few more rods he would be at the trenches, in the front line, if some missile from a German gun did not stop him before he reached the trench.

Suddenly the line clogged up, halting. Edwards bumped against the man in front of him so hard

his mess kit rattled. He stepped back, waiting uneasily. From up ahead came the voice of the lieutenant muttering softly, "All right, men, no talking now. We're goin' into the trenches." Edwards stood motionless, staring into the darkness. Immediately to his left little figures could be made out as they trotted to the road and hurried off in the direction from which the battalion had come. Edwards could hear their equipment jangling, and once, in the light of a bursting shell, he saw one of the men. It was a Frenchman, small and wiry, with a great black mustache half as big as his wizened face, and bent nearly over under the weight of his pack. The French were coming out, the battalion was moving in. Soon they would be in the trench alone, it then devolving only upon themselves whether an advance or a retreat should be made in that sector.

Meanwhile they had to stand there, grouped closely in the road and making a solid target for a German artilleryman who at any moment might drop a seventy-seven or a one hundred and fifty-five millimeter piece of steel casing into the middle of them.

At last the time came for Edwards' squad to move. He followed the corporal a few steps up the road and felt blindly ahead as he stumbled into the trench which wound along to the left. Now he was at least safe from the shells, he thought, as he touched the high side of the trench and blundered along after the corporal. He was almost ready to relax, to take one free breath when he was stiffened up again by the sound of an angry voice below him.

"Keep offa my laigs, ya big hayshaker!"

Then he realized that he had been walking on members of the battalion who had already got into the trench, made their relief and were settled down to wait for the hour when they were scheduled to attack.

After that he walked more carefully, but he was not accustomed to picking his way through a slippery ditch in darkness, and so he left behind him a string of irate muttering from men whose peace he had disturbed.

Finally the corporal halted. He began talking with a voice which Edwards recognized as the lieutenant's. "All right, lieutenant. They're all here, sir. Say, what time do you think we'll jump off?"

Edwards listened sharply for the answer to this last question, but he could not make out what the lieutenant said. Then he heard a sergeant cautioning in a low voice, "No talking from now on. And if you men take off your equipment be sure you put it where you can get your hand right on it. The Boche may have his patrols out and we don't want him to know we've relieved the French."

Edwards pushed up against the wet, crumbling side of the trench, partly to steady himself, and looked out into the blackness. At that moment there might be squads of Germans prowling in the dark, listening for any information they could get from the trench. They might be ready with trench knife and grenade to come swooping down and try to take some prisoners before the attack. Edwards' hands gripped his rifle tightly at this thought.

Time dragged on. Edwards' heart flopped over as an illuminating rocket was shot up from no man's land and spread a metallic glow over the dank earth. Barbed wire. It would be hell crawling through barbed wire in front of the German trenches in the morning. He had a very vivid picture of himself jerking himself free of the grasping strands and coming out directly before a great red faced German who held his rifle pointed at Edwards' temple.

The picture worked on him powerfully, and though it was night he shielded his face with his forearm, quite involuntarily, as if in fear that some of the men of his squad would see the expression thereon. For something certainly had happened to his face. It felt stiff and chalky and the muscles were uncontrollable. His mouth gaped and sagged and his eyes felt as if they were bulging. It was no use for him to tighten the strap which circled his chin from his steel helmet, though he tried it. His chin remained wobbly just the same.

Not having shared their experiences, he was utterly alien to these men of the battalion who lined the trench. What they would do would be of no advantage to him, leaving his own problem untouched. They might go over the top as gallantly as any body of men had ever done, but that would be of no satisfaction to Edwards. Meanwhile there was no one to talk to, nobody from whom he could reassure himself or to whom he could unburden his doubts. That his fear and worry would be given away to these men made him even more fearful.

The darkness before him which he had watched for so long began to change. The night had been clear and now the stodgy black was turning into a soft blue. It

was as if azure cobwebs were floating thickly from the heavens, as if it had begun to snow flakes of the deepest, softest blue. Then darkness again, and after a few moments more of night there appeared a patch of gray over to the right. Dawn was on its way. Things would soon be starting.

It was light enough for Edwards to see a little beyond the barbed wire which defended his trench when the order came for the men to stand by. And simultaneously there arose from a kilometre or less to the rear the earth-trembling shock of a battery of artillery beginning to fire. And then shells were streaming majestically overhead, their destination inside the German lines already marked out. Way, tremendously high up the shells vaulted and then swooped down upon the enemy, roaring angrily.

Then other batteries opened up along the line, and Edwards heard the impetuous barking of the seventy-fives, the cold, deadly thunder of the six inch rifles, all of them battering away with great regularity as the sky to the east began to streak with the coming of dawn.

Edwards looked at the dawn and his throat clogged up. The muscles of his face were working spasmodically, making it seem ghastly. The worst of it was that he was aware of it. And as soon as it lightened a little bit others would notice the emotion scrolled so weirdly on his face. It would be more than he could stand. He thought with complete sincerity that it would be better to die than to live and be seen as he was then looking, with that horrible grimace making his features writhe.

The shells poured over through the thinning sky. From down the trench the word was passed to fix bayonets, followed by a clicking as the steel came out of the sheaths and the bayonets were secured on the ends of the rifles. Edwards' hand wobbled as he fitted in his own bayonet. While he was fumbling with it he heard another order being forwarded, a more desperate order, more desperately passed on. "Over we go. Up an' at 'em. Let's go! Straight ahead and keep your alignment. All right there, first wave!"

The men of the first wave lifted their rifles to the top of the trench, grasped the parapet and, digging their knees in the ground, clambered over. One by one the men went through the holes in the barbed wire. They halted on the other side and formed a line, commencing the advance.

Edwards, in the second wave, could scarcely contain himself. One look from another man and he felt that he would be done for. Without waiting for the order for the second wave to start off he climbed

over the trench. "Hey, come back here," called the corporal of his squad. Edwards did not go back. It did not matter what the corporal told him to do. He had one thought and that was to get into the first wave, even ahead of the first wave so that there would be no danger of anyone seeing the expression that contorted his face.

The ground over which he walked was soggy and strewn with refuse which had been left there by a number of armies in fighting for its possession. Rotten boots, rusted helmets, pieces of cloth and tin cans lay here and there. Even bones. As the second wave formed beyond the barbed wire Edwards caught up with the first wave. The sky grew lighter and he pressed ahead.

But he was still unable to see the German trenches. They were separated from the trench which Edwards had left by about seven hundred yards. Edwards was two thirds of the way there before he could make out the low, gray impasse of barbed wire which was tangled and criss-crossed among the gray posts. And when he saw the wire he did not think of it so much as an obstruction which would hold him up and give the enemy a chance to shoot him; he rather thought of it as an impediment to his escaping the eyes of the men in the first wave. He had to be first to the barbed wire and first on the other side of it so that the other men would not see him.

Meanwhile the vicious shriek of the seventy-fives ruled the skies. Four waves were out on the field, their rifles at high port and their bayonets thrust diagonally upward from their necks and shoulders. Behind them were the machine gunners. Behind them were the batteries of artillery, blazing away from their camouflaged emplacements.

Ahead it could be seen in the morning light that the German trenches with their four rows of barbed wire lay at the base of a slope which was capped by a wood.

The wood was still dark and enshadowed so that it seemed to be more than usually mysterious. Along the slope and in the wood the shells from the artillery were striking, raising puffs of smoke which were beginning to show clearly.

Edwards, with one idea in his mind, reached the barbed wire and began to penetrate it. The barbs caught and tore his breeches and puttees, but he jerked himself free and continued. Halfway through the barbed wire a violent rattling sounded from his left, and while he was still wondering what it was he felt the bullets of a machine gun making the wire sing and snap as they crashed into it. He went on, stepping high and carefully through a break in the entanglement where a shell had ploughed its way, opening up a path.

And suddenly he was standing alone above the German first line trench. He looked down and saw the humped shoulders of a dead man in a gray blouse, the head lolling. Except for that and for a prone, motionless body in the bottom of the ditch the first line was deserted. He jumped down into it, paused a moment and clambered up the other side.

The artillery continued, successfully keeping the enemy under cover. But there were enough in machine gun emplacements to make a belt of fire which swept the slope and sent bullets ricocheting over the ground among the attacking waves. A few whippet tanks had slowly squirmed into the field and were bearing down on the barbed wire entanglement for the purpose of crushing it to afford the men a freer advance. Overhead a scout plane with indistinguishable markings was flying slowly, not so high but that the whirring of the motor could be heard.

The noise was continuous and terrific. Rifles and machine guns rattled out their fire from all directions; the gears of the tanks ground dully; overhead the motor of the scout plane buzzed and the shells loudly left the guns, throbbed through the air and burst. Then the enemy artillery began, making a crisscross overhead, the explosives landing on the debated field where they threw up great white clouds and thinned out the lines of olive drab.

But Edwards, crossing the trench, went forward. And as soon as he proceeded up the slope he heard the bullets, which had been passing by his legs, rise and go over his head in a steady stream. For the moment he had protection except from the riflemen. He went on, conscious of the fact that with each step he was getting out of his place of safety. But he couldn't stand still, and he couldn't go backward.

He couldn't stand still because he wanted to keep ahead of the first wave, and for the same reason could not return to his own squad. There was nothing to do but go forward. Cradling his rifle he moved ahead, feeling the bulge of two hand grenades in his pockets.

Above him in the edge of the wood and a little to the left was a machine gun nest whose fire was trained on the places in the barbed wire entanglement through which the second wave was then passing. The first wave, or what remained of it, had got through, had formed again on the other side and was advancing, trying to protect itself by hip fire directed at the wood.

Edwards pushed on. He got within about a hundred yards of the edge of the wood when he was discovered and was forced to drop under the rifle fire. A small rise before him on the slope protected him, the bullets either striking the ground far in front of him or flying high over his head. Lying flat, he crawled up close to the hillock. From there he could see into the fringe of trees. Men in green uniforms and strangely shaped helmets were moving about, firing, carrying ammunition. Edwards stretched forward, lengthening out his arms and settling the butt of his rifle against his shoulder. He had a good target, but the muscles of his face were jerking so uncontrollably that he could not line up his sights. He pushed back and then lay still. Turning his head a little to the right he could see the first wave advancing resolutely up the slope, could see men fall, sprawling out, spinning, dropping weakly, turning suddenly and with hands clapped to their wounds hurrying back.

The sight of the advancing first wave, with the second wave coming up behind it, made him restless. No, he couldn't stay there. Deciding on this he began to crawl out to the left. It was a cold day but his neck was wet with sweat. As he crept along the sweat splashed down and fell on his gas mask. It was a hard physical strain, this crawling. From fatigue, or from the closeness of rifle bullets, he was forced to pause, and then his head went down flat upon the ground and he tasted the dirt in his mouth.

But he crawled on, in a kind of arc, his objective almost unconsciously being the machine gun nest at the edge of the wood. This machine gun nest was placed in a cu-

rious position. For the slope was higher to the left of it, making a small ridge between Edwards and the German gunners. And to his left there seemed to be no action at all. His battalion must have been at the extreme left of the attack, where the end of the German sector terminated.

Edwards dragged himself up the slope, holding his rifle in front of him. Inch by inch of the hundred yards he pushed along, and was at last so close to the edge of the wood that he could make out the lines running through the bark on the trees. The clatter of the machine guns in their emplacement, from which they were reaping the lines of his battalion, was so loud and distinct that he knew he could not be more than five or ten yards away from the weapons themselves.

But he could not see them on account of the ridge. There he lay, irresolute. Nobody was shooting directly at him. He could not see his own men coming up the slope. But he had an overpowering urge to see how they were moving along, how many were left of them. His face still twitched, his jaw sagged heavily, sort of rolled against his chin strap, though he was no longer in a panic.

He turned on his side. The hand grenades in his pocket felt uncomfortable. Hand grenades! They gave him an idea. Motionless, he listened to the close rat-tat-tat-rat-tat-tat of the machine guns, pondering it. Yes, it could be done.

He lay on his belly again and reached cautiously for the grenades. They were blue, nothing but a thin egg-shaped piece of tin surrounding a very capable bit of explosive, enough to tear a man's head off. He held one in his left hand, tightly gripped, and pulled out the pin. Quickly he picked up the other in his right hand and jerked out the pin with his teeth. Then he stood up.

In a little hollow about fifteen feet from him two Maxim machine guns poked their noses out from a busy mass of German gunners, all hastily loading or firing into the advancing waves of doughboys. Edwards' right arm went back and shot forward. The hand grenade struck the unsuspecting back of the gunner at the nearer machine. It bounced, and before it landed again it had disappeared in a tremendous cloud of black, biting smoke. The explosion was sharp. Edwards tossed in the other grenade.

The blot of smoke grew greater, spreading out. Edwards stood with his rifle pointed into the midst of it, ready to shoot at anything that moved.

Released from the pressure of the two machine guns' firing the two waves, which had blended into one, leaped ahead. Men cursed a little and held their bayonets searchingly out in front of them. When they came to the machine gun nest which had been cleaned out a few of them paused and peered through the smoke.

"Who throwed them bombs, is what I'd like to know," one of the men said. And in a moment the speaker was standing over Edwards. "Here's the guy." Then bent down and touched him. "Je's I guess he got knocked off."

Edwards turned over, covering his white, twitching face with his elbow.

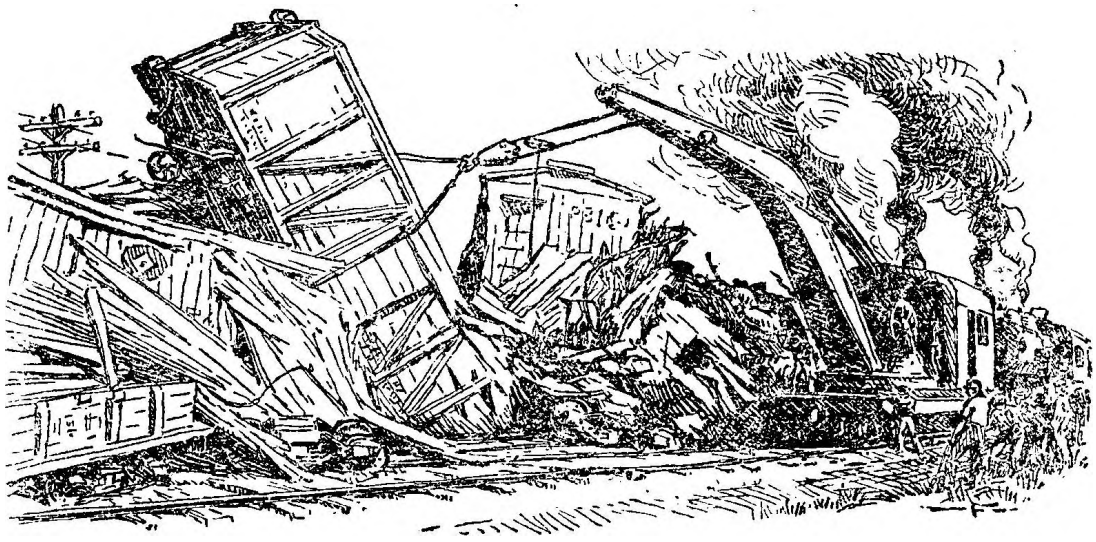
"'Smatter, buddy? Git it in the face?" Edwards felt his arm drawn solicitously from where he had placed it. He thought, "Now I'll be discovered," and looked up.

Edwards gulped. The face of the old timer bending over him was just as screwed up, just as white, just as grotesque as his own.

## A MYSTERY MINE

IN THE famous old La Cucaracha (Cockroach) mine, near Yago, in the state of Nayarit on the Pacific coast of Mexico, recently rediscovered after a century and a quarter, miners have found felt hats and blankets left by the Spanish friars who once owned the rich veins of gold.

The padre mine owners were driven out of Mexico in 1812 and never permitted to return. Although the Cockroach mine was well known, its location remained a mystery until recently an American mining engineer found it by accident. Legend tells that the retreating Spaniards buried many bars of pure gold and silver and this tradition adds zest to the work of the miners. —L. R.



# THE ROUGHNECK

By FRANCIS LYNDE

*Author of "The Currency Expert," etc.*

BUCK HARROD DIDN'T COME TO THE GREEN BUTTE RAILROAD SHOPS JUST TO GET A JOB. BUT HE GOT ONE, MADE GOOD AT IT IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE, AND THEN MADE IT CLEAR JUST WHY HE DID COME TO GREEN BUTTE

SINCE the drafting room in the Green Butte railroad shops was merely an extension of the shop office, I could hardly help overhearing what went on when men came in applying for work. Grimsby, our division master mechanic, was rather hardboiled with job seekers, probably because the Western shops catch a good many "floaters": tramps calling themselves mechanics and afterward turning out to be anything but. Just the same, I thought the boss was a little more hardboiled than common the day "Buck" Harrod blew in and asked for a job.

"Let me see your hands!" was the first thing I heard; and when I gave a glance over my shoulder I saw a solidly built young fellow, with square shoulders and a still squarer jaw, showing the palms of his hands to Grimsby. "Huh! Look to me more like a prize fighter's hands than a machinist's," the boss went on gruffly. "Where are you from?"

The young fellow named a railroad in Ohio, and Grimsby snorted again.

"Put it far enough away, didn't you? Did you quit, or get fired?"

To my astonishment the job hunter said shortly: "I was fired."

"What for?"

"For punching a man's head in the shop," was the calm reply.

"Oho! A scrapper, are you? Well, you look it. We don't need any box-fighters here."

A biff like that was usually enough to make the hungriest job chaser take the count, but this one didn't.

"Some day you might, at that," he said mildly. Then: "I know my job. If I can't prove it, it won't cost you anything to give me my time."

As I knew Grimsby, this was no way at all to get on his soft side, if he had one; but for once in a blue moon it seemed to work.

"Ha! Think you can make good, do you?" he barked. "All right; come along and we'll see what your bluff amounts to." And he got up and took the new man into the shop.

That was all for the moment; but, later in the day, when I had occasion to go into the back shop, I saw that Harrod had been put on one of the pit gangs. He was taking down the front end of an engine to grind in the dry-pipe joints, and the way he went at the job told me that he was at least no "floater." You can tell, if you've ever handled tools yourself, as I had before I worked my way out of the shop and

into the drafting room.

That evening at quitting time I chanced to catch up with Harrod as we were crossing the tracks to the town side of things and spoke to him.

"Been in town long?" I asked.

"No," he answered. "I came in this morning."

"Got a good place to stay?"

He named a pretty tough joint on a side street, adding: "Flagman on the train sent me there. I can't say much for his notion of a place to eat and sleep."

"No," I agreed; then: "Mother Gifford—she runs a boarding house for a bunch of us—has a spare room. Like to go around with me and look at it?"

He said he would, and the result was that he became one of us, after a fashion; I say after a fashion because he didn't mix and mingle to amount to anything; got in all the overtime he could, and when there wasn't any, he spent the evenings in his room, smoking and reading detective stories. He wasn't surly, or anything of that sort; just kept himself to himself, as you might say.

After a bit we got chummy enough so that I'd drop into his room now and then of an evening to smoke a bedtime pipe with him, and at such times he gave me the notion that there was more to him than appeared on the surface; I mean that when he came to us he wasn't just the ordinary mechanic out of work falling into the first shop he came to for a job; that he had some bigger reason than that for picking Green Butte as a stopping place.

One evening when we were chinning in his room I was brash enough to ask him how he come to pick on Green Butte and our railroad dump for a hangout, and he bluffed me fair and square.

"Maybe you'll find out some day, Jimmie," he said, with a grin that wasn't altogether good natured. "I had my reasons."

I knew it was no good to ask him what the reasons were. If he wanted to, he'd tell me, when he got ready, but not a minute before. Drifting into talk about other things, he asked me, casually, if I knew anything about the opening of a new bank in Green Butte, and I said I knew the town talk; that some rich relation of Mr. Homer's, our division superintendent, was backing it, and that I'd heard the rich man's son was to be put in as manager. Also, that there was a rumor that the new bank would get the railroad pay-roll account, through Mr. Homer, of course.

"Do you happen to know where this rich banker is from?" he asked.

I said I didn't know where he was from but that I'd heard that his name was Hiram Stearns, that he was a stockholder in our railroad, and that he was president of a bank somewhere in the East. I added that he'd brought a party of friends with him to Green Butte, and he was showing the party a good time at the expense of the railroad company—this on the strength of his being a stockholder. Then I asked Buck, jokingly, if he were going to help the new bank out by opening a savings account with it.

"Not so you could notice it; not if it's a Hiram Stearns bank," he denied, adding, half humorously, that he never had liked the name 'Stearns.'

That was all that was said, and it didn't occur to me at the time to wonder why Harrod, a newcomer himself, should be interested enough to ask questions about the new bank.

As for his own state and standing as a valuable addition to the shop force, that was already well assured. It had developed immediately that he was that rare find, nowadays; a man who knew his trade in every part of it. Burkman, our foreman, soon discovered this, and he shifted Harrod all over the lot, shoving him in anywhere, on lathe, planer or the floor, wherever there was a rush job to be done, and never finding himself disappointed with the result.

This is about the way things had shaped up on the day when we had our near tragedy. The Green Butte back-shop, as everybody knows who has seen it, is a modern, steel framed building, high in the center, and with machine-tool bays on either side. In the afternoon of the day in question I had gone into the shop to explain a blue-print to a man whose lathe was next to the bench where Buck was fitting a set of crank-pin brasses.

At the moment, the yard engine was backing the "dead" 1026, laid up for a re-truing of her driving wheels, into the shop. The two repair tracks, down one of which the dead engine was being pushed to its place over a working pit, ran through the center of the main building and were spanned by an electric traveling crane carried on rails high up under the main roof trusses, its "bridge" extending across and serving both tracks.

To be ready to lift the 1026 off her drivers—the modern way to free the wheels—the crane man at his controllers in

his hanging cab under the bridge was bringing his big lifting machine along its rails from the far end of the shop; and at the same time shifting the transverse hoisting head, with its tackle and two steel yokes from which dangled the massive chain-cable lifting slings, from Track One to Track Two, upon which latter the 1026 was coming in.

In the space between the two tracks stood a young man and a girl, sightseers from the Stearns party, as I took it, watching the advance of the big dead locomotive, and they had their backs turned to the upcoming crane with its swinging menace. Neither of the two was conscious of the danger surging up behind them; and it was apparent that the crane man did not see them. The catastrophe threatening was perfectly obvious. The swinging chain slings would presently knock one or both of the sightseers down, and most likely leave them stunned and helpless directly in the path, if not fairly under the wheels, of the backing 1026.

I suppose half a dozen of us in the machine bay saw what was about to happen but Buck Harrod was the only one with presence of mind enough to get action. With a shout of warning he dropped his tools and ran. And, as he ran, we saw the young man of the pair give a startled glance over his shoulder at the approaching menace, and then, seemingly with no thought at all for the girl whose danger was precisely the same as his own, leap aside and dodge.

When Buck reached the girl there was not time for anything but strong-arm work. Without missing a stride, he grabbed her up in his arms, cleared an obstructing pile of blocking in a high jump that would have done credit to a champion hurdler at a track meet, and set her down in safety at the precise instant the nearest of the surging slings whipped over the spot where she had been standing.

That was that, and what followed was all dumb show for us, the shop noises making it impossible to hear what was said but the pantomime was readable. The girl's outburst of gratitude which seemed to be mingled with a whole lot of astonishment, was not that of a stranger to a stranger. It was plainly evident that she had known Buck aforetime and elsewhere. Then we saw him hold out his work grimed hands, and he seemed to be excusing himself for having had to put those hands on her to the messing up of her pretty dress. And I could imagine she was saying that she had other dresses, but only one life.

At that, the dudish looking young man came up, very palpably blazing with wrath, now that the danger was over; wrath directed at the crane man, but unloaded upon Buck; perhaps switched over to Buck when the black finger marks on the girl's dress were taken into account. I could easily fancy he was flaring out at Buck and saying, "What kind of a chump are you, pawing a lady all over and spoiling her dress?" or words to that effect. Anyway, his gestures fitted the guess.

Buck came back to his bench presently and went on with the brass fitting as if nothing had happened. But his eyes were hot and he was scowling like the villain in a play. I went on into the office without saying anything to him, and there I found the lately imperiled pair. The office was otherwise unoccupied, and the young man was trying to remove some of the smudges from the girl's frock with his handkerchief, and, of course, was only making them worse. Neither of them paid any attention to me as I went to my place in the drafting alcove.

"How do you suppose Buck Harrod ever happened to turn up here?" the young man was saying irritably. "I thought he'd skipped out to South America, or Mexico, or some other foreign country."

I fancied there was a bit of an edge in the young woman's voice when she replied, "I don't know why he shouldn't be here, if he wants to." Then she added: "It's fortunate for me that he happened to be just where he was a few minutes ago. If he hadn't been there, I shouldn't be here now. And another thing, Hal: you ought to be ashamed of the way you spoke to him, after he had just saved me from getting hurt. Anyway, I was ashamed for you."

"Pshaw!" was the frowning rejoinder; "His skin's thick enough. He's nothing but a mechanic—if he isn't something much worse. I'll bet they don't know his record here. If they did, they'd fire him, too, quick."

"That's ungenerous, Harry, and you know it is!" the girl flamed out. "He proved that he was at home in bed the night your father's bank was broken into. You know that as well as I do!"

"I know that his boarding-house lady testified that she saw him come in and go to his room, and that she would have known if he had gone out again. That is all that cleared him. Everybody in Mid-

dletown knows that he unlocked the bank vault once without having to cut through the door, and though it couldn't be proved on him, everybody in Middletown accepts the plain inference that he did it again. You've always been too soft hearted about that roughneck, Lois—just because you happened to go to school with him when you were a kiddie. He isn't in your class at all."

"You mean because he works with his hands?"

"I mean because he is a roughneck mechanic, and one with a cloud hanging over him, at that. He couldn't stay in Middletown after the bank burglary, and I shall try to see to it that he doesn't stay in Green Butte."

Whew! That brought blood, if nothing else had. I didn't need to turn around and look; I could perfectly well imagine how that pretty girl's brown eyes were scorching things when she said, "If you do that, Harry Stearns, I'll never speak to you again as long as I live! I don't care if you *are* my cousin!"

They left the office a minute or so after this, and what I had seen, and, later, overheard, was mighty interesting. So Buck had been accused of robbing a bank, had he? And he had got off on a Scotch verdict of "not proven guilty," which meant that the jury had thought he was guilty only the legal evidence was lacking. It was in the hope that I might make him loosen up a bit that I strolled into his room that evening for a smoke and took occasion to say something about the crane-and-girl episode of the afternoon, praising him for his swift get-away when the rest of us were too nearly paralyzed to move.

"Umph!" he grunted; "I came mighty near being that way myself. Didn't know Lois Hardwick was within a thousand miles of Green Butte until I looked up and saw her standing there in the way of the crane."

"You knew her before?" I threw out.

"You said it! We used to go to school together; that is, until after her father got rich in real estate and sent her away to a fashionable college."

"Then you know the man who was with her, too?"

"I'll say I do!"

For a few minutes we smoked in silence, and that seemed as if it were going to be the end of it. But presently Buck began again.

"You can call me a damned nut if you want to, Jimmie, but I've been in love with Lois ever since I can remember. Of course, I know I'm out of it—have never been in it by the width of a gnat's eyelash. If she were willing to marry a workingman, her people wouldn't let her. They've forgotten that one of her grandfathers was a carpenter and the other a farm hand. Besides, I'm black-listed."

"How is that?" I asked, wishing to hear his side of it.

"It's a short horse, soon curried. I was a machinist in the railroad shop in the home town, and one morning a queer thing happened. The cashier of Hiram Stearns's bank, an old man, had had a stroke of paralysis in the night and was dying. For years it had been his job to open the bank vault for the day's business, and nobody else knew the combination. Stearns had it written on a slip of paper, but he'd lost the slip. Just before nine o'clock that morning he came tearing down to the shop to have a machinist rushed up to the bank to cut the vault open. With the news of the cashier's stroke in the morning paper, some fool had started a rumor that the bank was in trouble: that there'd been a defalcation. The town was wild."

"I see," I said. "That meant a run on the bank."

"Sure; especially if there was any delay about opening the doors. When Stearns sneaked me in at the side door he couldn't talk straight, he was so crazy scared. I expected to have to drill into the lock and force it, and had brought tools for it. But when I saw that the lock was an old-fashioned make, I told Stearns I thought I could open it by listening to the click of the tumblers."

"And you did it?"

"Yes; I was just fool enough to do it. And for my pay, Stearns went to my boss afterward and told him I was a dangerous man to have around; that he'd better just quietly get rid of me. I got that straight, from the boss's stenographer. The Old Man was decent enough to refuse to fire me; but three weeks later the Stearns bank was burglarized by somebody who either knew the combination, or had opened the vault in the same way that I had. Stearns had me arrested on suspicion and I had to stand trial. Stearns and his cousin, Lois's

father, cut a big figure in the town—they own a good deal of it—and I was nothing but a roughneck workingman who knew too much about opening safes. I had a packed jury, but it had to acquit me for lack of evidence."

"I see," I said. "And then you lit out and came west?"

"Not right away. My boss, the master mechanic—he was about the only friend I had left—took me back into the shop after the trial; but it wasn't long before the fellow at the bench next to mine got funny one day and called me 'Buck the Burglar.' I beat him up for it, and then, of course, I had to clear out."

"How did Miss Lois figure in all this?" I asked.

"She didn't figure at all. She was away during the trial. But I guess they filled her up properly after she came back and made her believe that I was a crook. Anyway, just before I left I heard she was going to marry Hal Stearns."

"Don't you believe it," I laughed; "either that, or the other thing—that she thinks you're a crook."

"Humph! What do you know about it?" he shoved in suspiciously.

I wasn't going to tell him what I had overheard in the office a few minutes after the near tragedy, so I said, "Call it a guess but I'd bet on it, just the same. She doesn't look like a girl who could be fooled, either way around."

He shook his head gloomily. "I shouldn't wonder if that's what she's out here for now—to marry young Stearns, now that he's the manager of the new bank. He isn't good enough for her, Jimmie. He's a money spoiled pup; gambles, got into all sorts of trouble in college, and all that. If Lois hadn't been with him this afternoon when he jumped on me—But no matter about that."

I grinned as I got up to go to my room. "What did he say to you, Buck?"

"He had the nerve to rip out at me for putting my dirty hands on Lois and spoiling her dress; wanted to know why I hadn't grabbed the crane chains instead of pawing her all over."

I laughed. "I don't wonder that you wanted to push his face in," I said; and with that I left him.

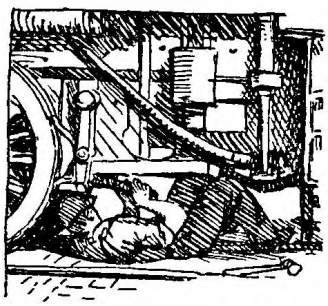
During the week that followed this little heart-to-heart talk with Buck a number of things happened. The first of them was a call upon Mr. Grimsby by young Stearns's father, a pursy, big waisted man who would have made an excellent model for the cartoonists picturing the bloated capitalist. I couldn't hear all that was said, but I got enough of it to make me warm under the collar. The caller was telling the boss the story of Buck's arrest and trial, and when he got up to go, I heard the wind-up of it.

"I just thought you'd like to know, Mr. Grimsby. A man who can open safes by ear is a rather dangerous fellow to have around, you know."

"Thanks," said the boss, and that's all he did say. But for some time after Buck's accuser had gone, he sat back in his chair, chewing his dead cigar and scowling, and I knew he was trying to make up his mind whether to fire Buck, or to let things rock along. And I was a lot relieved when quitting time came and he had not sent me to call Buck on the carpet. With the relief came the thought that I'd like to have some excuse to punch young Stearns's head. He had done the tale-bearer act, just as he had threatened to.

Naturally, I didn't tell Buck anything about this dirty little episode. So long as the boss didn't fire him, there was no need of my butting in.

It was on the second day after this that we put on a small night shift to catch up on some extra repairs, giving such of the men as cared for it a chance to get in some overtime. Buck was one of a dozen or more who took to coming back after supper, and one night I accompanied him from Mrs. Gifford's, meaning to get in a quiet evening hour or so figuring some data for the boss.



From the night when Buck had unloaded his particular grief on me, neither of us had broached the subject again; but now he opened the door of his own accord.

"Jimmie, it's hell for me to have Lois here in the same town with me, and yet be obliged to dodge and keep out of her way," he began abruptly. "I thought I'd got a grip on myself when I heard that she and Hal Stearns were engaged; but I guess I'm just as big a fool as ever I was."

"Huh!" said I. "If I were in your place, and felt that way about it, I'd butt in, or break a leg trying to."

"No you wouldn't," he snapped. "Sup-

pose I had a chance—and I don't know that I ever had—look what it would be asking of her. You've seen her. Can you imagine her marrying a common mechanic, cooking for two in a five-room shack and living on a machinist's wages?"

"I can very well imagine her marrying the man she loves, no matter what his job might be. She wouldn't marry the job: she'd marry the *man*."

"But that isn't all," he went on. "Her people, the whole new-rich tribe of them, including the Stearns cousins, hate me. Despise me, I guess is the better word. I think they've been sort of scared of me ever since Lois and I were children together; afraid it might eventually come to something more than chumminess. I shouldn't wonder if that was the main reason why Cousin Hiram tried to run me off the map in that bank-burglary business."

I could have told him that Cousin Hiram was again trying to run him off the map, but I didn't. Instead, I spoke of the junketing party the elder Stearns had brought with him from the East, and what it was costing the railroad company to chase it all over the landscape in a special train.

"Where is the party now?" he asked.

"It went up to the Copper Consolidated mines on the Lame Horse branch this morning," I replied, adding: "again in Mr. Homer's private car, stocked with everything the market affords. Nothing like being a stockholder in a railroad company when it comes to working the rabbit's foot for the luxuries."

We had reached the shops, and when I entered the office, Buck went on to check in for the night shift. For an hour or so I worked over the data, figuring in the quiet office, with only the subdued noises of the machinery in the adjoining shop, and the jangle and crash of cars in the yard as the night crew made up the midnight freights, to break the silence. It was only when I went into the shop to get some figures from the foreman's office that I remembered we were short of bosses. Mr. Grimsby had gone to the west end to attend a new-time-card meeting, and Burkman, the shop foreman, was captaining the regular wrecking crew in the picking up of a derailed engine at the eastern end of the division, substituting for Marston, the wrecking boss, who was sick.

When I re-entered the office the telephone was ringing fiercely and I answered it. Betterton, the superintendent's chief clerk, was on the wire, and he was evidently excited, not to say badly rattled.

"That you Jimmie?" he barked. "Has Burkman got back yet?"

"No," I told him.

"And Grimsby's still at the time meeting?"

"Sure thing."

"So is Mr. Homer, and there's the devil to pay! Number Eleven is scattered all over the scenery at Lame Horse Junction, worst wreck we've had in years. They're making up a wreck train of sorts in the yards, and I've got the callers out hustling for a crew. It's got to have a boss. Are you big enough to handle it?"

"Not on your life!" I denied hastily.

"Well, who is? We've got to have somebody."

In a flash I remembered that Buck was for a second time in trouble and was needing a bit of spotlight stuff that would kill the poison of Banker Stearns's story. On the impulse of the moment I said, "Buck Harrod's your man. He's here now, working in the night shift."

"Harrod? I don't know him, but I'll take your word for it. Tell him he has the authority and to hop to it. The despatcher is clearing for the wreck train and there won't be anything in the way. Jump to it, Jimmie! Tell Harrod to grab every man he can get hold of. It's up to us—with the bosses all out of reach!"

I jumped, first upon Buck. He took hold, quite as if it were all in the day's work, turned the night shift out to a man, and sent me to the roundhouse to get what help was to be had there. In less time than it takes to tell it, the train was made up and we were on our way to the scene of the disaster forty miles west, with a picked-up crew of shopmen, yardmen, roundhouse helpers—a little of everything. I sat with Buck on a coil of rope in one of the box-cars.

"Ever had any experience in snakin' 'em out, Buck?" I asked.

"A little; but not enough to hurt. Who let me in for this job?"

"I did," I confessed.

"What for?"

I didn't tell him the real reason; that for a second time Banker Stearns was reaching for his scalp, and that if he made a good job of picking up this wreck it might turn the scale in his favor. Instead I said, laughing, "Oh, just to see what you're made of, I guess."

"All right," he grinned; "if that's it, I'll show you."

He did it, and to the queen's taste, at

that. When we reached the Junction, we found that Betterton hadn't stretched things a particle. Something had gone wrong with the split switch at the junction and about two-thirds of a long freight train was piled up all over the main line and the first hundred yards of the branch. We had only the secondary equipment; Burkman had the big crane picking up the derailed engine at the other end of the division. But Buck certainly showed that he knew how to make the best of poor tools.

The light crane was pushed up into position, and the picked-up crew was soon working under Buck's snapped-out orders like a bunch of well drilled army engineers. In a couple of hours he had the main line clear and was ready to begin on the buried branch track. It was while the trainmen were backing and filling to get the crane into a better position and anchoring it that Buck came to a squat on his heels beside me at the fire we had built on the upper side of the main track.

"Did you tell me the junketer's special had gone somewhere up the branch?" he asked. And when I nodded; "It's on its way back now," and he pointed to the headlight of a train that was appearing and disappearing on the sharp grades of Lame Horse Mountain.

"Huh," said I, "they'll have a good long wait before they can get out on the main line."

"They are probably all abed and asleep long before this time," he offered.

But, as it turned out, he was wrong. When the one-car special had pulled down as near to the obstructions as it could get, half a dozen or more of the junketers piled out of it to come and look on; among them, Banker Stearns and his son and Miss Lois.

The work of snatching and snaking the wrecked cars out of the way was again going on full tilt, and I could see that Buck was fiercely resenting the invasion of the sightseers. Spectators at such a job have a way of getting underfoot, to the hindering of the rush and not seldom to their own peril. Any moment a hitch may break and let a strained tackle or cable snap back like a murderous whip, and it is all a foreman can do to look out for his own men and keep them out of danger.

Buck stood it in silence as long as he could, but finally he had to go to the intruders and tell them to keep back out of the way. They didn't take his warning kindly; at least Mr. Banker Stearns didn't. I wasn't near enough to hear what was said; but when Buck came down into the raffle to show his men how to make the next hitch, his face was red and his eyes were blazing, and I knew then that Stearns had said something to humiliate him; something to belittle him before the others.

And that wasn't all. Buck's warning seemed to have little or no effect. The private-car people kept shifting about and getting in the way and making themselves a nuisance generally; and I could imagine what Marston, our regular wrecking boss, would have said and done if he had been in Buck's place. I'll bet the air would have been blue around that bit of chaos for a few minutes, anyway. But Buck was only a shop man, and he couldn't very well cuss them out.

It so happened that some of them were edging in again when the crew was making the most dangerous hitch of the lot. A box-car was bedded in the mass of wreckage in such a manner that it served as a key to lock in three others. Buck called Harvey, the crane engineer, down to look at it, and Harvey said the crane would pull it if the tackle would hold. Accordingly, a hitch was made on the box-car, and when the crane began to wind, Buck shouted a warning to all and sundry to stand clear, and everybody got out of the way—all but three members of the private-car party.

Buck bellowed again, and two of the three came back and joined the others at the bonfire. But the third man, young Stearns, paid no attention to the repeated warning. I suppose he thought he was safe enough where he was. He was standing between the rails of the main track, and what he didn't know was that the pulling cable, if it should break, would recoil like a giant whiplash. Anyway, he merely gave Buck a scowling look, calmly took a cigarette from his pocket case, tapped it on his thumbnail and struck a match to light it.

It was at this moment that the box-car began to move, and we could all see that the strain on the tackle was terrific. The wrecking crew, with Buck holding the men back out of possible danger, had eyes for nothing but the straining crane tackle and its extension, a big, three-inch hemp hawser, a new rope that began to sweat the castor oil in drippings and grow rigid as

an iron bar under the tremendous pull. We all knew that the hawser would break, if anything did; that the wire-rope fall of the crane would stand any strain the winding-drum could put upon it.

Fortunately for Stearns, a hemp hawser always gives a momentary warning when it is about to pull in two; a few fibres part first and stand out as if they were electrified. Stearns didn't see the warning; perhaps he wouldn't have known what it meant if he had seen it. He was holding the lighted match to his cigarette when Buck gave a roar like that of a mad bull and leaped for him; leaped, caught him around the waist and flung him, as if he had been a bag of feathers, to the safe side of the main track embankment. At the flinging instant the big rope parted, the free end came back in a hurtling, scythe-like sweep, and Buck went down as if he had been hit with an ax.

I guess we all thought we were picking up a dead man when we gathered Buck out of the ditch into which the flying cable-end had knocked him, and there was plenty of excitement after we had carried him up the slope to put him down beside the fire. It so happened that there was a doctor in the private-car party, and while he was trying to find out whether Buck was dead or alive, one of the sightseers, a tall, thin faced man that I took to be her father, was holding Miss Lois, apparently to keep her from rushing in to kneel beside the doctor. Just as she broke away, Buck sat up and pushed the doctor aside.

"I'm all right," he said in a sort of thin voice. "Just knocked the breath out of me for a minute."

"You are very far from all right," the doctor snapped back. "You have two ribs broken that I know of. Lie down and let me see what else you've got."

"Can't do it now—not till my job's done. Thanks, just the same. Here, Jimmie—give me a hand up, will you?" And after we'd pulled him to his feet, he staggered off down the slope and began to tell his men how to make another hitch on that key box-car. But I could see that he was doing it pretty much on sheer nerve. Every now and then I'd see him take a handful of waste from his overalls pocket and wipe the sweat from his face, though it wasn't a hot night, by any means.

Between times, I had an eye on the bunch of private-car people. Young Stearns, looking a bit the worse for wear for the fling into the ditch that had saved his life, was talking to Miss Lois, or rather, she was talking to him, and I was just curious enough, or unprincipled enough, to listen in.

"After what you've done and what he's done, you ought to go down on your knees to Dave Harrod!" the girl was saying, and though she spoke quietly, anybody could see that she was fighting hard for self control.

The man she was talking to hung his head. "I don't know what you mean," he said.

"Oh, yes, you do!" came back like a shot from a gun. "You told your father that Dave was working for the railroad company in Green Butte, and he went to Mr. Grimsby and tried to get Dave discharged!"

'How do you know all this?"

"Don't be an ostrich! You told me yourself you were going to do it; and when your father told mine what he had done, I knew you'd carried out your cowardly threat. You've been talking against Dave and sneering at him ever since I can remember, and you call yourself a gentleman! You are not even a good sport, Harry. You're sneering at him now, when he has just saved your life and got himself all smashed up doing it. I'd like to know what you've got against him to make you act so much like a cad."

At this the cad struck back. "You're in love with that brute, Lois, and that's enough. I'm not going to let him stay in the same town with me—not if I can help it!"

I saw her pretty lip curl and her eyes flash. "Oh," she said, very softly, "you are making another threat, are you?" And then, as sweetly as if she were not angry enough to bite a nail in two: "I think you will change your mind about that, cousin mine: I shall *make* you change it." Then she turned her back upon him and came over to where I was standing by the fire.

Before I knew she was going to speak to me, she said, "You are a friend of Dave's, aren't you?"

I said I was, and she went on quickly: "Doctor Lambert tells me he is badly hurt. Isn't there some way he can be made to stop working and take care of himself?"

I was about to say that I didn't know of any way to make a bulldog let go of the bull's nose until either he or the bull was knocked for a goal; but just then a better answer came along in the approach of a train from the west. Excusing myself abruptly, I ran down to where the train was coming to a stand on the cleared main

line. It was a company special, made up of a single Pullman and a diner, and it was carrying a bunch of the east-end officials who had been attending the time meeting. When it stopped opposite the wreck I was glad to see Mr. Homer and Mr. Grimsby drop from the step of the Pullman.

Of course, they'd had a wire report of the wreck, and I told them what they hadn't heard; about the broken tackle that had come near killing Buck, who was pinch-hitting as wrecking boss. Mr. Grimsby looked at the huge pile of debris that had been snaked off the main-line track and said to Mr. Homer: "Damned good work, I'll say—for the little time he's had; wouldn't you?" Then he went with me down to the branch track, where Buck was leaning against a tipped-up gondola bossing the gang, and took over the job himself, telling Buck he was to go to Green Butte on the official train and get himself looked after in the railroad hospital.

I helped Buck up the embankment, but he balked like a mule when I tried to put him on the train. "No," he objected stubbornly, "I don't want to mess up a Pullman in these clothes. I'll hang on and go back with the wreck-wagons." I didn't insist too much. He wasn't either dead or dying; and I had a hunch that there was something waiting for him up by the bonfire that might do him a heap more good than a hospital would, just then.

I boosted him up the hill and eased him down by the fire where he could sit with his back to a tree and look on while Mr. Grimsby finished the snaking job. Right off the bat, Miss Lois came over and sat down on the ground beside him. At that, I suppose I should have pulled my freight and faded out of hearing; I did sheer off a bit and turn my back. But again I was just curious enough, and unprincipled enough, to listen in.

The first thing she said was, "David, dear, haven't you any sense at all? Won't you let Doctor Lambert find out how badly you are hurt?"

I heard Buck mutter: "You mustn't worry about me; I'm all right."

"But I am worried," she insisted. Then: "You shouldn't have risked your life the way you did, David."

"I guess I had to, didn't I?" he gritted. "I couldn't stand by and see you made a widow before you were married, could I?"

"A widow? I'm not going to marry Hal Stearns, David."

"They told me—before I left Middletown—you were."

"The Middletown 'they' tell a good many things that are not so. When I marry, David, I shall marry a *man*. Don't you know me well enough to be sure of that?"

I didn't catch Buck's reply; in fact, in the next few minutes there was a good bit that I didn't catch because their voices had suddenly dropped to a murmur. When they became audible again, Buck was saying, in a voice that was like that of a man just coming to the surface of the pond after a deep dive, "Do you really mean it, Lois—that I am the man? I—you've got me going, little girl! I thought it was all on my side, I've always thought so." Then: "I wonder if you realize what you're going up against—what your people will say—what it will mean to marry a man who works with his hands for wages?"

"You're not always going to work only with your hands, David, dear; though I shouldn't care if you did. I can work, too; I belong to my own generation, and I don't want to be a useless ornament. Each of my two grandmothers kept house for the man she loved, and I can do the same. And as for my people——"

There was an abrupt pause, and I skewed my head around to see what made it. The person responsible was the tall, thin faced man whom I had spotted as Miss Lois's father. He was standing over the two sitting by the tree and saying, in a voice that sounded exactly like a circular saw going through a dry board, "When you are quite through entertaining your workman friend, Lois, I think we'd better go back to the car. It's getting very late."

It was then that Miss Lois, who certainly did belong to her own generation, rose to the occasion.

"But I am not through, Dad," she said quite coolly, as she got upon her feet to face the music. "I have just now asked Mr. Harrod—" she put the emphasis an inch thick on the "Mister"—"to marry me, and he says he will. That being the case, I have some new responsibilities, the first of which is to see that my husband-to-be

gets proper care for the hurts he got a little while ago keeping Cousin Hal from being killed." Then to me: "Jimmie,—" I haven't the remotest idea how she had learned my name— "Jimmie, please run and see if Mr. Homer can find room for David and me in his car, so we can reach Green Butte and the hospital without any more delay."

Of course, I ran for it, and so didn't hear what Father Hardwick had to say to his up-to-date daughter; but it was no doubt good and plenty. I caught Mr. Homer just as he was getting orders over the Junction wire for his special to go on east, and he held things up until Miss Lois and the private-car party doctor came along with Buck and put him aboard. I went in with them and helped get Buck into a made-down berth, and then, as the engine bell was ringing for the start, I made a break to get off. But Miss Lois held me for just a second.

"You're a dear, Jimmie," she said, putting her arms around my neck and kissing me as if I'd been her long lost brother. Then: "It won't be much of a wedding party, but you'll be in it. Run along now, and don't get hurt jumping off."

It was a new kind of a Buck that looked up at me from the hospital bed the next day when I made my duty call. He was all swathed and strapped up with bandages to hold the broken ribs in place, but his good right hand had a grip like a vise when it closed around mine.

For a while I couldn't get him to talk about anything but the wonderful girl who had picked him out of a worldful of men. I found she had just been to see him, so that accounted for the way he looked and talked. But after he'd used all the words in the dictionary raving over his heavenly luck, I got in a question or so that I wanted to ask.

"Did you know she was coming to Green Butte when you lit down out here, Buck?" I asked.

"No; but I knew Hal Stearns was. That was why I came."

"That's only half of it," I suggested.

"You're right; it is. From two or three things that I learned before I left Middletown, I was pretty sure he was the one who had robbed his father's bank. In the first place, there was only a couple of thousand dollars taken, when there was a chance to take a good deal more. Then a fellow who knew Hal pretty well from having gambled a good bit with him told me that Hal owed gambling debts to just about that figure and was likely to have a lot of trouble made for him if he didn't pay up. Get the idea?"

"Perfectly," I said.

"Well, that wasn't all. This same fellow that I'm talking about showed me a bit of paper with some numbers on it; said it was stuck between two five-dollar bills he'd won off of Stearns the night before. The numbers looked familiar, and pretty soon I remembered; they were the combination figures of the lock on the bank vault. You may remember I told you that Hiram Stearns had these numbers written on a slip, and that he couldn't find it—for the good reason that Hal had already found it and stolen it.

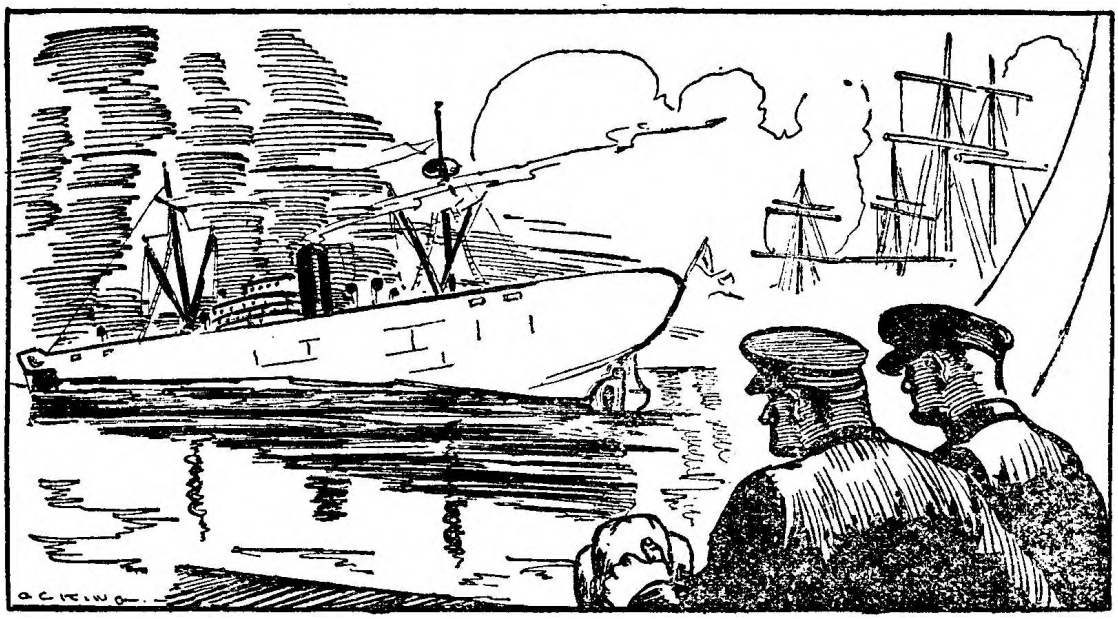
"When I got hold of that slip I knew then what I was going to do. It was town talk that Hiram Stearns was going to open a bank out here and put his son in as manager; and it was also town talk that Hal was going to marry Lois. I made up my mind right there and then that I'd come out here and shadow Hal until I caught him redhanded in some crookedness that I knew his gambling craze would get him into, and show him up. I couldn't bear the thought of Lois throwing herself away on a damned crook. That's why I came to Green Butte. Do you blame me, Jimmie?"

"Not an atom. But how about it now? Are you going to let the crook go because you've got the girl?"

He grinned and rocked his head on the pillow.

"It's all jake, now, Jimmie," he said. "I've told Lois the facts, and have given her the fatal slip of paper with the figures on it; also the name of the fellow who gave it to me. She'll do the rest, never you fear. There won't be any scandal, because it's all in the family; but there'll be a new manager for the new bank, just the same. Now then, if you haven't anything better to do, you may congratulate me. If you don't say I'm the luckiest dog that ever barked——"

I said it, with variations, and when I left him to go back to my job at the shops I was thinking that he was even luckier than he knew. For the girls who know enough to choose between a man and a white collar in these days are scarcer than hen's teeth, and he'd got one of them.



# DEEP SEA SILVER

By MILLARD C. WARD

WHEN TWO YOUNG AMERICANS FOUND THEMSELVES BROKE AND ON THE BEACH IN A SOUTH AMERICAN PORT, THEY DIDN'T AT ALL REALIZE WHAT THE METHOD THEY TOOK TO REACH HOME WAS GOING TO NET THEM

THE little South American town of Perador, sprawling on the shore of the Pacific within a few degrees of the equator, gasped beneath a merciless sun. There had been no rain for weeks. There would be no rain for months. Nothing escaped the heat, not the sea; nor the white walled houses of the town, nor the arid, brown and gray inland slope, nor even the distant mountains.

A little distance away from the town on the shore of the open harbor which was formed for the most part by a projecting ridge of land at the mouth of a shallow, fast running river, a lighter with one side stove in lay stranded above the tide. She had been a heavily built craft, blunt at bow and stern, and as she lay canted over toward the water her undamaged side cast a wide shadow upon the sand beneath.

In this shady spot which caught each faint suggestion of breeze from the ocean, two men were sitting, their backs against the warped planks of the lighter and their knees drawn up before them. Both wore loose, white clothing and the wide straw hats of the country and both puffed in a listless way at brown paper cigarettes. With their lean, hard bodies and deeply tanned faces, they might have passed at a few paces for natives, but if you had come closer you would have seen that the eyes of one were blue and those of the other gray and you would have heard them talking in English.

"I'm tellin' yuh, Duke," the blue eyed man was saying in a dispassionate voice, "we ain't goin' to git nothing more out of the consul. I seen him again this mornin' and either he can't help us or he won't. Says he'll send us home in the first American ship that puts into Perador, but he knows as well as we do that there may not be one in the next year."

"You asked him about passage in that Limejuicer out there, didn't you, Bill?" enquired his companion, gazing resentfully toward the middle of the harbor where the long, flush decked freighter *Martaban* with the red ensign of the English merchant marine drooping from her stern, lay quietly at anchor.

"Yes, sure I did," replied Bill wearily. "He said he'd try fer it and he did, but the captain wouldn't take us fer love or money. No reason, jest meanness. Him bound fer N'Yawk, too."

"I tell you, it's too bad," exclaimed the other in sudden exasperation. "Because you broke your leg and I picked up the only case of yellow fever in the country, we gets stuck into hospital in a hole like this and the company forgets all about us. Our ship will never hit this place again. I'm out of luck for a chief mate's berth and so are you for a second assistant's. Oh, that's a fine outfit we worked for, all right."

"Uh-huh," nodded Bill. "We've been on the beach more than six months, you with master's papers and me with first assistant's, an' we ain't got ten bucks between us. Hell, Duke, you're beginnin' to look like a native."

"Duke," who had been christened Horace Chenoweth, dug his heels viciously into the loose sand before him without replying. The yellowness of his eyeballs had scarcely faded out and his hair was still thin and short from the ravages of the fever, but in spite of this he was a handsome man. His forehead was high, eyes well spaced, nose straight and thin of nostril, while in the deep bronze of his face his teeth were very white and even. Nervous, impatient, abrupt of speech, there was still an indefinable something about him that seemed to take decency and honor rather irritably as a matter of course.

William Johnson was steadier and more formidable looking. His red hair, broken nose and hard blue eyes were the marks of a fighting man, and his speech at times suggested the wilds of Hoboken, N. J.; but he fought clean and hard and swore, somewhat incongruously, like a gentleman. Though not particularly friendly with Chenoweth in the days aboard ship, he had become his full partner through the long months in the hospital and later on the beach.

For a time the two men watched with eyes narrowed against the glare while the anchored freighter lazily took on cargo from lighters made fast alongside. At the number two hatch they could see what appeared to be small bales wrapped in burlap being hoisted up from a lighter in which several men in military uniform were standing guard. Despite the smallness of the bales, the steamer's winches handled them with great difficulty and the slinging of each load required an unusual length of time.

"What d'yuh reckon they're loadin' out there, Duke?" enquired Bill with mild interest. "They're takin' time enough about it."

"I heard," said Chenoweth bitterly, "that that ship was to carry a million and a half dollars' worth of bar silver to New York and I suppose that's it. See those guards out there. They must be afraid somebody will sneak off with one of those sixty pound chunks in his inside pocket."

The lighters carrying the silver had put out from the only pier in Perador Harbor, a long weatherbeaten affair resting on wooden piles in comparatively shallow water and supporting a spur of narrow gauge railway line. Along the sides and at the seaward end of this pier the two men on the beach could see other light colored uniforms stationed at regular intervals. Two whole squads of soldiers were drawn up on the beach close by.

"Hell!" exclaimed Bill disgustedly "They are careful, ain't they?"

Chenoweth laughed dryly. "They've probably got the whole army on guard there. Oh, well. We weren't figuring on getting any silver. The sun's going down a bit. Come on, let's get back to town and see if there's any mail for us at the consulate. Not that it matters."

The two men scrambled to their feet and plodded away through the blazing sunshine, side by side, with only their shaven faces and matter of sixteen pesos to distinguish them from the worldwide brotherhood of beachcombers.

When they reached the outskirts of the town, a region of scattered, one story shanties, they headed diagonally away from the beach toward the wide, dusty main street. Few people were stirring. An occasional dirty, incurious Indian passed them on some unimportant errand and along the shore of the harbor the faded uniforms continued to guard the pier, otherwise Perador appeared to be still enjoying siesta.

Situated near the center of town, facing the barren, sun-swept plaza, the American Consulate was not an imposing building. Though boasting two whitewashed stories, it did not look more comfortable than a large packing box. This, together with the stifling heat, may have accounted for the unsympathetic nature of the consul, a thin, dyspeptic man from Dubuque, Iowa.

When the two seamen arrived and enquired for letters, he produced a single white envelope, peered at it nearsightedly, and handed it over to Bill Johnson with such a marked lack of cordiality that his visitors glanced covertly at each other and retired to the shade of the bandstand in the deserted plaza outside.

There, Chenoweth seated himself on the low rail, swung his leg and hummed rather dismally. From the corner of his eye he could see that Bill's letter consisted of several folders of notepaper covered with round, feminine handwriting. Watching the face of the man who read, he felt some pity and some envy. He himself had no family.

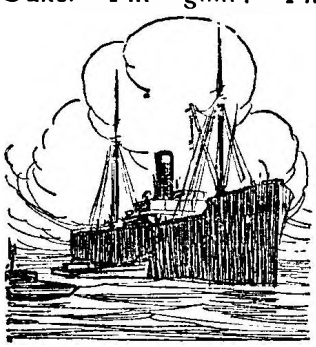
Presently he noticed that Bill had finished reading and was merely staring at the page before him, lips set and eyes far away.

"What's the matter, Bill?" he asked casually. "Anything wrong at home?"

The engineer roused himself. "Only what you might expect. I hadn't been saving very long and my wife just mentions that the bank roll's about shot. She ain't the kind to whine. Says she can take the kid and go back to her mother for a while, but I know that her mother ain't got any more than enough fer herself. And me laying around the beach like a pig!" His eyes blazed in sudden anger. "Damn it! It's got to stop."

Chenoweth nodded sympathetically. "Been going on much too long now. If that Limey skipper would only listen to reason——"

Bill reached out with a jerk movement and caught him by the shoulder. "Listen, Duke. I'm goin'. I'm done foolin' around. I'm goin' to stow away in that ship and I'm goin' to do it tonight. My family don't suffer while I've got both arms and legs. You can figure on that."



Chenoweth stared at him speculatively for a moment, then smiled. "Engage a suite for me, too, William. I'm in on this."

Bill rose and took a turn across the floor. "Good for you, Duke, he said. "It'll be easier if there's two of us."

Coming to a halt again, he surveyed the houses surrounding the square with an expression of profound distaste. "What a dump this is! Quaint! Romantic! Hell!"

"Uh hum," agreed Chenoweth. "It's all of the last. But let's be getting back to the room. We'll need to make some plans if we're going to do this thing without any hitches."

Five minutes later a mangy dog strayed into the empty wooden bandstand, lay down in the shadow and began earnestly to search for fleas. Nothing else moved in all the magnificent plaza of Perador.

For a space of several hours the same drowsy lethargy possessed the town. The afternoon sun moved very slowly down the sky and the last vestige of breeze died away, leaving the parched grass of the plaza covered with fine, white dust.

THEN, of a sudden, the sun seemed to sink faster, the rugged mountains in the west being silhouetted starkly against a bright golden background. The shadow of the bandstand in the plaza stretched further and further along the ground, increasing to huge proportions. Already the shutters of a few of the houses were being thrown open and a faint stir seemed to run through the streets. The clear, sweet notes of a bugle rose on the warm air and presently a column of soldiers swung through the square, bound from the harbor toward their barracks on the other side of the town. Their arms gleamed in the slanting rays of the sun and the approach of evening seemed to have put new life into their step and bearing.

Soon the bells of an old Spanish church at the end of the plaza began to ring with a mellow sadness in their voices. Four great vultures, disturbed by the sound, rose from the belfry and flapped heavily away, black and sharp against the sunset sky. A tall, bearded man in white came out of a large house near the church and leisurely crossed the square, the smoke from his cigar floating behind him, almost motionless on the limpid air. Doors and windows opened on all sides and the plaza began to take on an air of modest festivity. A military band marched out, took possession of the wooden pavilion and crashed into the overture from William Tell.

The sun rested momentarily upon the peak of one of the highest mountains, slipped down and vanished, leaving behind a wide expanse of incredibly thin, clear orange. A cool breeze wandered across the plaza, whispering about coral islands a thousand miles away, and a very bright star winked into being just above the tower of the Spanish church.

Presently the band stopped playing, fussily put away their instruments and marched off again in precise formation. Lights began to appear in the windows of the low, white houses, the single star above the church multiplied amazingly, the last fire died out of the western sky and velvety

darkness took possession of the town.

After a long time the lights went out again just as they had appeared, one here, one there, and then many at the same time. Voices and laughter ceased. The great field of stars overhead shifted and brightened and the stillness of the deserted streets became absolute.

Down on the shore of the harbor, a little distance away from the town, the hull of the wrecked lighter showed dark against the white sand beneath it and the lap-lap of the incoming tide, now no more than a dozen paces away, was audible all over the beach.

Soon an Indian dugout carrying two men appeared out of the darkness off shore and crunched softly upon the shingle just abreast of the lighter. The men dropped their paddles, scrambled ashore and hauled their clumsy craft well up out of the water behind them.

This done, they turned and gazed intently seaward for perhaps a minute without speaking. The hull of the British freighter was now no more than an irregular blur on the starlit water, but her white anchor lights at flagstaff and forestay and the bright cluster at the gangway glowed strongly through the darkness. All lights in the quarters amidships and aft had been extinguished and the only human being in evidence was the night watchman who was patroling the deck near the head of the gangway.

"See that, Bill," grumbled one of the men on the beach. "I was afraid we'd be too early. That watchman's still full of life."

"Ah," agreed the other calmly. "So he is, but don't worry, Duke. It ain't midnight hardly yet. Another hour, maybe less, and he'll begin to get sleepy. Give him time, kid, give him time."

The first speaker sat down abruptly on the gunwale of the dugout, fumbled in his pocket and produced a cigarette case.

"Butt, Bill?"

"Sure. Where they at? Oh! Thanks."

Two matches scratched simultaneously, the tiny yellow flares illuminating momentarily the cupped hands and intent faces of the stranded seamen, Chenoweth and Johnson.

After hours of preparation, they were now ready to attempt the actual boarding of the *Martaban*. Two heavy bags, a jumble of rope and a long pole were stowed in the bottom of the dugout. The craft itself they had found unmoored at the foot of the railway pier and appropriated without question. The white ducks and straw hats of the afternoon had been discarded for dark suits and caps, which were not too warm for the breezy midnight and, besides, were less conspicuous in the darkness. Both men were purposely barefooted.

For some minutes the glowing ends of their cigarettes paled and brightened in silence, then Chenoweth laughed softly. "Just had my hand on our luggage, Bill," he murmured. "I'll bet something pretty this is the first time stowaways ever started aboard a ship carrying pigskin handbags."

"Well," said the more literal engineer, "we had 'em laying around and we needed something to pack our grub and water bottles in, didn't we?"

"We did," acknowledged Chenoweth. "Awkward stuff, water. You can ærate vegetables and make meat extracts and condense milk but nobody has ever doped out a way to condense water. That's hard on explorers and stowaways. However, water doesn't cost anything."

"No," grumbled Bill, "and while I don't like to throw peanuts at my own parade, I'm thinkin' we'll need all the water we can carry and then some down in that stuffy hold. You sure the men bunk aft in that ship, Duke?"

"Of course," came the dry retort. "By the time I've watched a ship as long as I've watched this one, I've noticed things like that. I know, too, for instance, that she's due to sail in the morning and that all the cargo that's going into the forward holds is aboard. The forward booms are down, but I'm pretty sure they haven't battened the hatches. If they haven't, that's the place for us, as I said this afternoon." He flipped the butt of his cigarette in a fiery arc toward the water. "So far everything's all right."

The engineer had fixed his eyes again upon the lights of the *Martaban* and a moment later he sprang to his feet.

"Quick, Duke. Your glasses. The watchman's gone. See if you can see where he went to."

Chenoweth's binoculars had been sent ashore with the rest of his effects from the other ship, and, having them already at hand, he leveled them hastily across the water.

After a minute he lowered them with a satisfied exclamation. "Good! He's up on the fo'castle head looking at the anchor chain with a flashlight. He won't be back there for an hour, anyhow. So let's be on our way. He'll never see us from amid-

ships even if he doesn't get sleepy."

They shoved the dugout into the water, splashed through the shallows alongside and scrambled aboard once more. Besides the *Martaban* no other vessel of any size was in port at the time, so they were able to head directly toward the forward anchor light.

For some minutes there was no conversation in the dugout, both Chenoweth and Johnson saving their breath for paddling, but when the short pull was over and the high bow of the freighter reared out of the darkness almost above them, they held water sharply and conferred in whispers.

"Sure that watchman's gone aft?" enquired the engineer anxiously. "I lost him when he left the bow."

"Not aft," corrected Shenoweth. "He's sitting by the galley door amidships. I saw his head. The whole forward house will be between us, but we can't afford any noise. No time to lose, either."

A few gentle strokes urged the dugout forward until the *Martaban's* starboard anchor chain, leading stiffly up from the water, was in easy reach.

Then, while Chenoweth, who had been kneeling in the bow, held the little craft steady, Bill crawled forward and crouched at his back. In his hands he carried a coil of light line with a bowline rove in one end. This he looped over his companion's shoulder.

"All set, Duke," he murmured coolly. "Jerk the line when you're ready. Luck, kid."

Chenoweth drew the dugout forward and, steadying himself against the anchor chain, stood cautiously erect. Then, holding fast with both hands, he stepped suddenly out onto the top of a massive link just above the water, his bare feet holding it securely. From that point he climbed upward hand over hand as easily as a fireman uses a scaling ladder. The anchor chain, having several thousand tons of steel already straining against it, did not even tremble beneath his weight.

The *Martaban*, however, was by no means heavily laden and Chenoweth scaled a good twenty feet before the hawshole brought him to a stop. Well out of reach above him he could make out the slender white bars of the deck rail at the point where it joined the solid plates about the bow. So, with his legs locked about the heavy anchor chain, he hauled up from the dugout an apparatus which he and Bill had designed especially to meet this situation. It consisted simply of a light but very strong rope ladder terminating in a large iron hook the back of which was securely lashed to the end of a ten foot pole. By raising the pole to its full length above his head, he was able to slip the hook at the end of the ladder over the lowest rail. This made the rest of the ascent to the deck a very simple matter.

When he had crawled noiselessly through the rail, he made certain that the watchman was nowhere about the forward deck, then turned back. Below him on the water he could just make out the dim outline of the dugout with Bill's crouching figure in the bow, still close against the anchor chain. Without loss of a moment he coiled in the light line which he had left trailing from his shoulder and dropped the end fairly upon his partner's head. Then while Chenoweth hauled the heavy bags up to the deck, Bill in his turn swarmed up the anchor chain. A moment later the two adventurers stood together inside the rail, their baggage safe at their feet.

Without speaking, Chenoweth stooped, disengaged the hook of the ladder from its place, knotted to it the end of their hitherto indispensable line, and lowered the whole thing gently into the water. Then he dropped the line after it and left it, like the dugout which had already disappeared into the blackness astern, to the disposal of the fast running tide.

Still without a word, their bare feet making not the slightest noise on the steel deck, the two men crept aft along the coaming of the number one hatch. At the after end they turned inboard and followed the coaming again until they reached a point in line with the shadowy foremast. Here Chenoweth who was in the lead found as he had hoped the middle hatch cover not yet in place. Just inside the coaming were the first rungs of the narrow steel ladder leading down into the hold.

"All right, Bill," he whispered. "Come on and watch your step."

Hoisting a leg into the opening, he took his bag in his left hand and vanished silently into the hold. Bill followed in the same way, both descending very cautiously

until they came to the level of the first 'tween deck. Here Chenoweth stepped clear of the ladder and set down his burden on the steel plates.

"This is no place for us, Bill," he said in a low voice. "Come on back."

"Right," gasped the engineer. "I ain't used to goin' down that kind of ladder with only one hand and I been thinkin' I'd fall off any minute. Say, ain't it dark?"

"What did you expect?" enquired his companion. "Broadway and Forty-second Street? We don't want to use the flashlight unless we have to."

"For the love of Mike, git it out, though." Bill's anguished voice came from a spot several feet away. "I jest caught my foot on something. Don't know what, but I think I broke three toes."

Chenoweth grinned unfeelingly in the inky blackness, but knelt, unfastened his bag and produced a long, three celled flashlight. Its pale circle of light revealed the bewildered engineer standing with one foot against a very low iron coaming that surrounded a three foot scuttle in the deck, wide open and revealing nothing but space for a considerable distance below.

Both men gasped. "Damn, boy," exclaimed Chenoweth with more lightness than he felt, "it's a good thing you were walking easy. A man that lifted his feet right would have broken his neck then at the very least."

"Never mind how I was walkin'," retorted Bill shortly. "You keep that light burnin' till I git away from here."

A few minutes later they found a spot to their liking in the extreme wing of the 'tween deck, well hidden among low tiers of clean boxes and barrels. Here they stowed their bags in a corner and dropped down on the dry dunnage to rest.

"First thing I'm going to do," muttered Chenoweth, "is put on a few shoes. I don't want any rats lunching off my toes while I'm asleep."

The handbags yielded two pairs of the necessary footwear and the stowaways were soon shod again. They had scarcely tied the laces and turned out the flashlight when footsteps sounded on the main deck above them, going forward past the hatch.

"That watchman making a round again," whispered Bill in amazement. "Must be an officer sure. No sailor would ever keep such a tight anchor watch."

"On account of the silver, perhaps," suggested Chenoweth. "A good thing for us now we're aboard. They'll never think of looking for stowaways after this."

"Ah," agreed the engineer thoughtfully. "We fooled 'em all right. If we'd had a few cutthroats to back us up, we could have taken the ship, silver and all, and put to sea with it."

"Out of date, I'm afraid," yawned Chenoweth. "Silver must be in the strong room in number two hold. Only takes fifty tons or so to make a million and a half dollars' worth." The reaction from hours of nervous activity was already setting in and he yawned again, widely. "I'm plenty tired, Bill. Come on, let's crawl in behind here and turn in. Nobody will be coming down this way again and if they do they won't see us."

"Right," said Bill approvingly.

Five minutes later a lean rat, wandering disconsolately through the 'tween deck, heard no sound except light, measured breathing and a distant scurrying of his own brethren.

After a long time in which the darkness remained impenetrable, two dim gray discs of light began to take form on the littered steel plates beneath the ends of the long ventilators from the main deck. The same gray light seeped downward through the opening in the hatch, bringing the spindly steel ladder into faint visibility and introducing different degrees of intensity into the blackness of the hold.

Gradually the light increased, the patch beneath one ventilator which chanced to be trimmed toward the east in particular growing very round and bright. The anchor chain began grumbling to the jackstaff about the turn of the tide and presently from the deck amidships came the shrill note of the mate's whistle. Scattering footsteps sounded about the forward hatch and the heavy covers jarred into place, cutting off more than half of the newborn light below. At the same time the steam winches on the after deck opened up with a series of bangs and wheezes that sent vibrations through the whole length of the ship and a lighter, just out from shore, bumped ponderously into the side.

The cumulative effect of this was sufficient to rouse both stowaways. Bill Johnson, who had been sleeping with a protruding nail head beneath one shoulder,

groaned, flinched from his uneasy couch and sat up. Chenoweth opened a rebellious eye but did not move, whereupon Bill reached over and shook him.

"You awake, Duke?"

"Of course not," came the vindictive answer. "What d'you think?"

"Oh, well," said Bill considerately, "in that case I won't disturb you."

Chenoweth laughed, sat up and began feeling himself over solicitously. "I'm corrugated," he observed, "from stem to stern."

"Me, too," nodded Bill. "But it's morning now. Break out a bottle of water, Duke, and let's get started right."

One handbag, the stronger of the two, had been given over to the rôle of scuttle butt and was entirely filled with tall glass bottles, each containing about a quart of water. There were eighteen of them in all, wadded newspapers being forced into the spaces between them to prevent inconvenient rattling. With this supply the stowaways expected no real suffering from thirst during the ten or eleven days which would be required for the voyage to New York.

The other bag contained their food, hard tack in quantity and a fair supply of tinned meat and vegetables, together with Chenoweth's sextant, which was too valuable to abandon, and two pairs of duck trousers. Their only other resources were their professional licenses and the few copper coins that remained of their combined money.

When they had finished their simple preparations and eaten a discreet breakfast of hardtack and watery tomatoes, the two men lay back again upon the piled up dunnage and listened idly to the varied sounds of activity on the deck above. The hold was already becoming uncomfortably warm, so before the first hour was up, they discarded their coats and changed back to duck trousers.

"Only thing we couldn't tell beforehand," grumbled Bill, "was whether we'd be entirely melted down here. It's beginnin' to look as if we might."

"It'll be hot," agreed Chenoweth, "but we'll have the ventilators, and then, too, if it gets too bad we have only to stick it until we're past the canal. After that we can give ourselves up and no matter how mad the Old Man is, he can't do anything but take us on to New York. We're American citizens, you know."

"Ah," replied the engineer sagely, "but we'll do best right where we're at. This captain told the consul in Perador he didn't want nothing to do with us and, after all, it's his ship."

"You saw him, didn't you?" queried Chenoweth. "What sort of bird is he, anyway?"

"Why," said Bill emphatically, "he's a mean bird. No Englishman, I'd say. More like a naturalized something. Short, thick set, light hair, pig eyes and loud voice. Bad medicine for you and me."

At this point the roar of the winches on the after deck decreased to an intermittent clatter and very soon stopped altogether. Another lighter bumped hollowly against the side and the mate's whistle screamed from the forward deck. There followed the sudden chugging of the windlass on the fo'castle head and the faint clank of the anchor chain as it poured slowly down into the deep locker in the forepeak.

"There comes our ladder in," remarked Bill with deep satisfaction. "It won't be long now."

Soon the bellowing of the *Martaban's* whistle penetrated hoarsely into the 'tween deck and when the uproar died away the clatter of the windlass had ceased. A strong puff of wind shot down the ventilators, the circles of light beneath them changed in intensity and in the deep silence that followed, the two stowaways strained every sense for the first suggestion of open sea.

Several minutes later the deck beneath them lifted with an indescribably sweet and easy motion and fell back again as softly. The circles of dusty light shifted upon the plates and the men grinned at each other delightedly.

"Good-by, Perador," chanted Bill Johnson. "Before two weeks is out I'll be seein' me wife again and me son fer the first time. I hope the kid don't look like me, at that."

Chenoweth sneered in a friendly way and the two sat for a long time in silence, leaning against a crated piano and watching the rhythmic play of the light from the ventilators across the litter at their feet.

The first three days at sea passed uneventfully, the stowaways having ample opportunity to practice the art of doing nothing which they had mastered on the beach at Perador. They slept as much as they could, ate and drank carefully and argued quietly but interminably upon every subject under the sun. The weather continued fine, the motion of the ship being barely perceptible in the hold and the breeze from the ventilators light and fitful.

Upon awaking on the morning of the

fourth day, however, they found the 'tween deck noticeably cooler, a strong current of air pouring from the ventilators and the ship rolling moderately. For a time they lay quiet, listening to the footsteps and voices of the watch on deck making everything secure forward. Then came a harsh, scraping sound, a shower of dirt and rust fell from the ventilator shafts and the breeze ceased abruptly.

"Trimming ventilators," said Bill in a low voice. "Must be coming on to blow."

Before Chenoweth had time to answer, an iron door slammed so close at hand that both men stiffened instinctively and lay quiet. The sound of voices followed, coming forward along the 'tween deck, and a few seconds later two sailors appeared, carrying flashlights and some heavy lines.

"Sye, Jock," one called to the other in clipped Cockney accents as they passed, "where did the bloody myte say them blinkin' pipes was hat that we was to put the bleedin' lashin's hon?"

"I' the bottom o' number one," came the sour reply. "Look out fer yersel' as ye go."

Some minutes passed, then the sailors reappeared on the 'tween deck, the lines no longer with them.

"'Tis weel enough, thot," grumbled the man called Jock. "An' bein' oot o' sight o' the mate, I'm fer a smoke."

"Ay," agreed the Cockney. "It's little time we gets to smoke otherwise."

The seamen turned off their flashlights and sat down on a box so close to the stowaways' retreat that the scratching of their matches was plainly audible there. Scarcely daring to breathe, Chenoweth and Johnson still listened with interest to the sailors' conversation.

"Hi don't know what's got into that devil o' a mate," the Cockney was muttering. "Work, work, work all the time. An' grub not fit fer a nigger. An' since we left the larst port, worse an' worse."

"I think, meself," put in Jock's voice, "they're tryin' to haze us into jumpin' the ship withoot oor pay when we make New York."

"It bleedin' well won't do fer me," snapped the Cockney. "Lose fower months' pay? Ho, yus. I think not. But if this ruddy ship was goin' down t'morrow, I'd turn no hand t' save 'er, so long has Hi didn't 'ave t' go with 'er."

"Noo," growled Jock, "nor me. The auld mon is worse than the mate. But the ither mates is deeferent. They like things no better then we. I hear the second tellin' the third, meself."

"Ay," replied the other seaman, "an' Joe, the fireman, 'e says the chief's worser'n any. Ah, they's plenty that don't arf like the way this ship is run."

"Ah, weel," said Jock sullenly. "Coom on oop for breakfast. Marmalade an' rotten potatoes. If we wait longer we'll hear froom the deevil o' a mate."

The flashlights gleamed again and the seamen tramped away aft. A minute or two later the iron door to the fiddley clanged violently.

The stowaways relaxed.

"Oh, hell," said Bill cheerfully. "Did yuh hear that? We got better grub than the crew and we don't have to do no work. But we better not let that Old Man catch us if he treats his own gang that way."

"It's funny, though," muttered Chenoweth, "that he should do so. If it was my ship and the strong room was full of silver I'd treat the men mighty well so they would stick by me in any emergency. It would ruin a skipper to lose a cargo like this."

"Not likely to lose it on this run," said Bill calmly. "Maybe that feller was right and they're tryin' to haze the men into jumpin' ship. They pick up some fellers from hospital, doctor the articles and put the back wages into their pockets."

"Maybe," agreed Chenoweth absently. "Maybe. But it looks like poor judgment to me."

The threatened storm failed to materialize into anything more serious than a fresh breeze, and early the next morning the *Martaban* entered the Panama Canal. The cessation of the ship's easy rolling and the warm smell of vegetation creeping down the ventilators told the stowaways of the approach to land, and they distinctly heard the pilot's launch come scraping alongside. For the next eight hours the hold was even hotter than usual and the gongs of the electric locomotives at the locks, the roar of a train speeding past and all the other interesting sounds that penetrated into the 'tween deck made it very difficult for them to remain good tempered in their dark and sweltering prison.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, however, the breeze freshened again, clearing the air of the hold, while the deck rose sluggishly upon the first of the long swells from the Caribbean. The temperature of the 'tween deck dropped twenty degrees in an hour and by the time darkness fell the stowaways were comfortable once more.

"Well," said Bill more cheerfully than he had spoken all day, "that's that. It's straight ahead now. Let's see. This old tub made the twelve hundred miles to the canal in four days. Three hundred a day, twelve point five knots. You know I believe she 's got turbines. She don't ever vibrate and that time's too fast for most reciprocating engines. I learned all about turbines on shore but I've never had the luck to ship with 'em."

"I've been in ships that had 'em," remarked Chenoweth. "If you have one engineer out of the four that understands 'em, you're all right. Otherwise it's ticklish. By the way, Bill, where do you figure on finding a job in New York?"

"Bunch of places I can try," replied Bill somewhat doubtfully. "I'll take anything for a trip, third assistant, deck engineer, even oiler. Got to have something right away. How about you?"

"Same fix," said Chenoweth briefly. "Maybe the old outfit will give us back our jobs, but I don't count on 'em for anything. Look how they treated us so far."

"That's so," nodded the engineer. "Oh, well. We'll doubtless end somewhere. We always have, by Gosh!"

Not long after this both men crawled into their inconspicuous sleeping quarters and dozed off, all things taken into consideration, quite contentedly.

Just after four o'clock the following morning when the 'tween deck beneath the ventilators was still untouched by light, something exploded against the bow of the *Martaban*. She lurched in a sickening up and down manner like a street car when the air brake is applied too suddenly and then, her engines being stopped very promptly, lay to, rolling gently on the starlit sea.

In the 'tween deck the stowaways scrambled dazedly to their feet, the rending of steel plates sounding in their ears and water already rushing into the hold beneath them.

"Duke! Hey, Duke! Where ya at?" Bill cried out. "Get the flashlight. We hit something then and we better git out of this."

"All right, all right," Chenoweth grumbled irritably. "I'm getting it. Nothing's going to happen in a minute, is it?"

A few seconds later the flashlight gleamed from his hand, showing crates and bales toppled from their former positions and the old way out of their hiding place entirely blocked.

"All right," snapped Chenoweth again. "We'll just climb over. Come on."

Leaping to the top of the nearest packing case, he found a way to the open part of the 'tween deck with the aid of the flashlight, and a moment later was leaning over

the open hatch, playing it into the hold below. Some yards behind him, Bill Johnson was still scrambling blindly and without complaint over the treacherous cargo.

Chenoweth's first thought as he looked into the hold was that the damage seemed remarkably small in proportion to the amount of water that had leaked in. In fact, as far as he could tell in the dim light, the real force of the explosion had expended itself on the forepeak, for all the plates of the hold itself looked solid. Still, where was the tremendous leak? The rays of the flashlight shifted to the bilges and he started back with an amazed exclamation.

"Bill! I say, Bill! The hold's not leaking. Somebody has opened all the seacocks."

From the darkness behind him came a sudden creak and scrape of wood, a startled exclamation and then a dull thump. Swinging the light around, he found Bill lying across a square packing case against which a huge, burlap covered bale had fallen, his leg jammed securely between the two. Chenoweth sprang forward, caught the edge of the bale in both hands and strained upward. It did not stir.

"What the devil is this?" he gasped. "Lead? Hurt much, Bill? Anything broken?"

"No," gritted the engineer. "Don't think so. Go ahead up on deck and get in a boat. I'll be with yuh before anything happens."

"Aw, go to hell," snapped Chenoweth. "I'm not as dumb as I look. Where's something to pry with?"

He searched the 'tween deck hurriedly,

found a piece of board, snapped it with his first effort and threw the pieces away angrily. All the while Bill struggled grimly, teeth set and face beaded with perspiration, but without success.

Then in a far corner Chenoweth stumbled over a six foot length of two by four scantling and brought it back on the run. The lower hold, he noticed in passing, was almost half full of water. At Bill's side he laid the flashlight down on deck and slipped the end of the scantling between the case and bale. Bill lay breathing heavily while he secured a firm hold and braced his body. Then as Chenoweth threw every ounce of his strength into a single heave, the engineer wrenched his leg free.

Without pausing for words, Chenoweth caught up the flashlight and started aft, Bill limping beside him at a lively rate. The upper 'tween deck extended from bow to stern unbroken by bulkheads and the stowaways intended to reach the main deck by means of the ladder through the fireroom fiddley.

As they passed, Chenoweth flashed his light into the depths of hold number two. It, like number one, was rapidly filling from the bilges, several crates and boxes floating uneasily upon the surface of the black water.

Bill whistled. "Say, they are tryin' to sink this ship, ain't they? Can't be any leak back here. I wonder what's the game."

"Don't know," replied Chenoweth shortly. "The silver's still there, all right."

With a gesture he turned the light on the long, narrow strong room just aft of the hatch. Through the bars of the door the even piles of bar silver were plainly visible, undisturbed and vaguely sinister beneath the rough, burlap coverings.

"Damn!" breathed Bill. "A million and a half! Oh, my eye!"

"Come on," said Chenoweth. "That water's rising."

The path to the fiddley was wide open and a minute later they were out on the deck amidships beneath the stars. A profound silence enveloped the ship, broken only by the gentle slap of dangling life boat falls against the side and the distant chugging of a power boat in the darkness off to starboard. Even this grew each moment fainter and farther away.

On board the *Martaban*, settling rapidly by the head, electric lights still gleamed everywhere, but not a living object was in sight. She must have been abandoned within a very few minutes of the explosion.

Realizing this, Chenoweth swore excitedly. "Barratry sure as hell!" Then he caught his companion's elbow in a sudden, hard grasp. "Get down in the engine room and close those sea cocks, Bill. You can find 'em. I'm going forward to make sure of something. She won't sink on you. Go ahead."

He emphasized his words with a little shove and Bill limped hurriedly aft along the alleyway. As he reached the engine room door and started below, Chenoweth called after him sharply.

"Oh, Bill! Put out the fires, too, and when you're done, stop the dynamo so all these lights will go out. Never mind why. I'll tell you later."

Then as the engineer waved an acknowledging hand and vanished, Chenoweth ran forward along the port side of the deck. When he reached the fore peak hatch between the hawspipes in the bow, he knocked loose the covers and swung down the ladder inside until his head was several feet below the deck. Then, and only then, he turned on his flashlight. Beneath him black water surged back and forth through a ragged hole in the starboard bow, but the after bulkhead and the outer hull aft of the bulkhead were not even dented. The hole itself, he thought, was too high in the bow to have been made by a floating object and might have been altogether above the waterline before the ship began to settle.

Wrinkling his forehead in a puzzled way, he clung to the narrow ladder, steadying his flashlight upon the water below. Two—three—four minutes he watched intently, but if at the end of that time the water had risen, it was so little as to be imperceptible.

"Good old Bill!" A warm glow of friendliness spread through Chenoweth's body, and, turning off the flashlight, he clambered back to the deck. There all was dark, houses—engine room and range and running lights. Not a betraying gleam anywhere.

"Bill again," he muttered. "There's a real man."

When he reached the house amidships he found the engineer leaning calmly against the rail, smoking a cigarette.

"Any water in the fireroom?" he demanded eagerly.

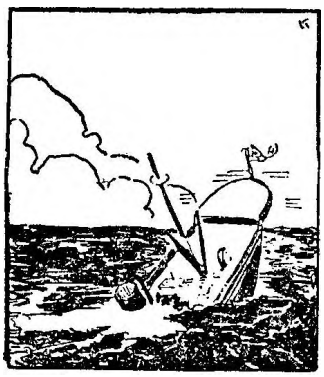
"Some," came the terse reply. "Not enough to hurt. Ain't sinkin' no more, is she?"

"No," said Chenoweth cordially. "She's riding easy. You're a good man, Bill."

Bill threw his cigarette away and spat over the rail. "I didn't do nothing but obey your orders, Duke. Now you might tell me what you make of it all."

Chenoweth leaned against the rail beside him and relaxed a bit. "Why," he said slowly, "I don't savvy all of it by any means. But what I did savvy was that those fellows were sinking this ship on purpose and just on general principles I wanted 'em to think they had. That's why I told you to pull the lights. From a small boat, pitching a good bit, they look back and see light aboard a sinking ship. All right. They look back again and see no lights. What do they think?"

"Gone down, of course," replied Bill.



"That was a good stunt, Duke. I'd never have thought of it and we'd have had 'em back on board to finish the job."

"As it is," went on Chenoweth, "they're clean gone. It won't be light for an hour yet and by that time they'll be out of sight. What are we going to do? Well, before deciding that we'd like to know what they were trying to do, wouldn't we? Let's use the old bean. First thing you think of is insurance. Did they try to sink her for insurance? Not likely. She's not an old ship and her cargo has a fixed value. Loaded under government supervision and we know ourselves that it's not been fooled with since. Wouldn't make anything if they did collect the insurance. It's deeper than that, Bill."

The engineer lighted another cigarette. "I guess they hazed the crew," he suggested, "so when a chance came to quit the ship they wouldn't stop to ask questions. Second and third mates, too. Looks like only the Old Man, chief mate and chief engineer were on to the dirt. Happened in the chief mate's watch, you notice."

"Sure," agreed Chenoweth. "Whatever it was it was well planned." He rose suddenly to his feet. "Come on up to the chart room and let's see if we can find out where we are. That might help."

The engineer followed him up the ladder to the pilothouse and waited there patiently while Chenoweth searched the adjoining chart room. Spread out on the table he found a regulation U. S. Hydrographic Office chart of the Caribbean, a pencil track following the usual route from Colon to the Windward Passage between Cuba and Haiti carefully laid out upon it. A glance told him that a rough fix on that line a hundred and fifty miles from Colon would place the ship in upward of a mile of water with no land anywhere near.

An officer's scratch work book was lying open beside the chart, and, still mystified, Chenoweth turned his attention to it. The flyleaf was inscribed, "C. Jansen. Chief Officer, S. S. *Martaban*. This interested him at once. Beginning in the middle, he hurriedly ran through the book until he came to a page headed, "Perador toward Panama Canal." Here his attention deepened but there was nothing in the next few pages to arouse suspicion. A neat person, this chief mate, and no bad navigator.

Then the last page, the ink on it hardly more than dry. "Panama Canal toward New York." Here the work was far less clear. An azimuth had been worked up at the head of the page and a good deal of space was occupied by confused compass, magnetic and true courses.

"Don't savvy this," muttered Chenoweth. "Doing tricks."

He ran his flashlight on down the page. The last entry was a star sight worked backward, that is, instead of working from an observed altitude to the ship's longitude, the navigator had worked from a given position back to the proper altitude for the star.

Chenoweth frowned, picked up a pair of dividers and found on the chart the position used. It was directly on the penciled line, a hundred and fifty miles from Colon.

"H'm," he said aloud. "Right where we ought to be. Why all that trouble for an approximate altitude?" He stood still for a full minute, tapping his teeth with the point of the dividers and staring at the chart. "Looks like he wanted a star sight in his work book that he didn't actually take. Now, why?" Then he straightened up with a jerk. "To show that the ship sank in a position where it didn't actually sink. Could that be it?"

In three strides he rejoined Bill Johnson in the pilothouse.

"Got an idea, Bill," he announced briefly. "Help me look for a dipsey lead."

Presently finding one in a locker on the monkey bridge, they carried it below to the main deck and laid it down by the starboard rail.

"Now," said Chenoweth as he carefully recoiled the line, "according to the position marked on the chart up there and also, no doubt, in the log book which they carried away, there's about twelve hundred fathoms of water here, so we're probably wasting time. However, here she goes."

He swung the heavy lead to the top rail and balanced it there.

"Catch hold, Bill. Right. Now, when I give the word, heave her over. I'll tend the line. Steady. Let her go!"

The lead struck the water with a quick, hollow plunge and the coils of line snapped after it at dazzling speed for—less than five seconds.

Feeling the line go suddenly slack in his hands, Chenoweth exclaimed in triumph. "There you are. Now I'm wise. Help pull her in, Bill. Here with the flashlight. Sixteen fathoms, sand bottom. Oh, what a fox that skipper is!"

Then as the engineer still looked blank, he went on eagerly, "It's clear enough now. The Old Man took a departure from the canal four o'clock yesterday but he never steered the course he entered in the log book. The chief mate got a trick azimuth and juggled the compass deviation so the second and third mates thought they were steering the usual course when really they were seventeen or eighteen degrees to the west of it.

"That brought the ship into shallow water, which is plain enough on the chart, early this morning and there they exploded some kind of a bomb against the bow, fixed it for the chief engineer to open the sea cocks and off they went in the boats. They could pass off the explosion as an old German mine drifted over from Europe. You've heard those stories yourself and it's not impossible. They didn't care, of course, whether the bomb sank the ship or not when all they had to do was abandon her with the sea cocks open. In fact, I guess they didn't want to take any chances on blowing themselves up so they made it rather small.

"With that power life boat they can get back into the place where they ought to be in a few hours and nobody be any the wiser, not even their own men. Then they'll be picked up by some steamer and report the loss of the *Martaban* in a spot which the log will show to be a mile and a half deep. The course from the canal will be recorded properly, nobody can check the deviation of a compass that's at the bottom of the sea, and then, too, there's the mate's star sight. I must say, that's an artistic touch. He took the position where the ship ought to be and from it worked back in his scratch book to the proper altitude for the star. Then, I suppose, he put that altitude down in his regular work book as if he'd just observed it on the bridge and worked it up in the usual way. Then when they abandoned ship he carried his work book along with him, giving a perfect check on the fake compass course.

"Now, then, the ship is sunk, as the owners think, in a mile and a half of water and naturally gone for good. The insurance is paid, everybody cusses the Germans a while and the incident blows over.

"What could be simpler after that than for the skipper and his gang to get an old tub with a steam winch, a deep sea diver and go to the place where the ship really is, only ninety feet below the surface, and recover all the silver for themselves? It's easy to dispose of and no one would ever think of it coming from the *Martaban* which is supposed to be sunk so deep."

As Chenoweth finished, Bill whistled aloud. "Say, Duke, I bet you're right. And he didn't wait around to see her go down because he couldn't be entirely sure that the topmasts wouldn't be left sticking out of the water, which would have looked funny to the officers and men who weren't in on the dirt. Lordy, how it all fits together."

Chenoweth nodded. "It wasn't such a dumb scheme. How could they foresee a couple of seagoing stowaways after the close watch they kept? They've had tough luck, all right, even if they are crooks."

Bill took a turn across the deck and his companion was surprised to find how plainly he could see him at a distance.

"I say, Bill," he called. "Daylight coming. Let's get some breakfast. I'm hungry and dry as dust."

During the brief meal of marmalade and bread from the pantry and nut brown Bass Ale from the ice box, they laid plans hurriedly.

"What," demanded Bill, "are we goin' to do with this ship now we got 'er? Wait

for somebody to give us a tow?"

Chenoweth's eyes narrowed belligerently. "And get hooked out of our undershirts? No, sir, we want to finish this ourselves. How many hands you got, Bill? Two? And how many brains? Not many? The hell you say! If I come down below and help you get up steam again, can you keep her wheel turning while I steer her back to Panama?"

Bill stared, then gave the table a resounding slap. "Duke, you beat the bugs. She's an oil burner and got turbines. Can I make her go a hundred and fifty miles all by myself? Sure. Hell, yes! Of course I can. But I'd never have been damn' fool enough to think of it. Go on up on the bridge and lay your course. I can make steam without you. You'd only get under my feet down there, the speed I'm goin' to travel."

The two separated on the deck outside, Bill heading for the engine room and Chenoweth swinging up the ladder to the bridge. Although the sun had not yet arisen, the eastern sky was glowing clear orange and the air full of an indescribable sweet coolness.

The beauty of the tropic morning, after five days of confinement, brought Chenoweth to a full halt upon the wing of the bridge. As he looked, a narrow sector of molten light broke the horizon before him, and, throwing both fists high above his head, he shook them in an intense, nameless passion. Then, turning short around, he hurried into the chart room and bent again over the table. The penciled track on the chart was very plain in the full daylight and as he studied the depths of water in the vicinity, his eye fell upon a tiny cross, very faintly drawn a short distance, perhaps thirty actual miles, to the west of the line. The depth at that point was sixteen fathoms and the bottom white sand.

"Damn! The spot itself! The crossroads at midnight. Dig here." Chenoweth laughed excitedly. "Saves me some work. I'll just lay a course from that cross to the breakwater at Colon. Where's the bearing that fellow took yesterday?"

He picked up a book of azimuth tables and riffled through the leaves. "Here's the true bearing. Let's see now. What variation? Come here, chart."

A minute later he entered the wheelhouse, found a piece of chalk and marked on the slate in round, bold characters "S 8 W."

"There," he said. "That'll be close enough."

The speaking tube to the engine room was close at his elbow and now he blew into it lustily.

There was no reply at first, then came a raucous shout.

"Wattinell ya want?"

"Just wanted to say I'm ready when you are, Chief," replied Chenoweth placatingly. "Give us a toot when we can start."

"No time fer rag chewin'," came the irascible retort. "Gimme five minutes by the clock. Then use the telegraph and ye'll git action. Don't bother me no more."

Chenoweth grinned broadly and walked to the binnacle. "Ship heading west. Swing her to port. Bill's the goat on this detail."

He found a high stool adrift in the chart room and placed it on the grating beside the wheel. From the same source he collected a full water bottle and some cold toast.

"That'll hold me for a while. I'd like to have a bottle of Bass but it doesn't harmonize with an empty stomach and I've an idea mine'll be plenty empty. Wonder how much speed Bill can get out of her."

Then he glanced at the clock, drew a long breath and slammed the handle of the engine room telegraph over to "FULL AHEAD."

An answering jingle came from below, and, stepping to the grating, he spun the wheel hard over. The steering engine was working perfectly, and presently under his imploring eyes the black lubber line inside the compass began to swing gently southward. In a few seconds he eased the wheel —'midships—port a bit—steady!

Miserably trimmed, far down by the head and her propellor half out of the water, the *Martaban* was yet moving, plodding southward through a flashing glory of ocean, ten thousand tons of steel conned by two men only, a quiet helmsman and a desperate, sweating engineer.

TOWARD the middle of the following afternoon a white seagull, dipping and soaring on the hot, gusty breeze above Limon Bay, made out a dark spot on the rim of the sea to northward. The bay had been unusually barren of appetizing refuse that day, so the big fellow hung aloft, watching the spot as it drew nearer and increased in size, with more than ordinary interest. He even saw fit to call the attention of a grayish, speckled gull who dived beneath him to the phenomenon.

"A-a-a-k!" he screamed. "Aak! Aak! Here comes a big ship in. Slow old tub but the cook might have some slops."

Accordingly the whole battalion of gulls, gathering like magic from all parts of the harbor, put to sea, wheeling and crying discordantly. When they reached the stranger, however, their cries became shrill with disappointment.

"A-a-k! No slop! Not even a chunk o' bread. Look at that hole in 'er bow. And no slop! Oh, hell! What ship is that, anyhow? *Martaban,* Liverpool. Limejuicer. Ought to be afternoon tea. What's a matter, no slop? Aak! Aak! A-a-k!"

Still protesting violently, the gulls followed the big ship's laborious progress all the way back to the breakwater. Puzzled by her deserted decks, they hung over her anxiously, watching with keen, beady eyes.

Once inside the harbor, she swung to starboard out of the channel, straightened out and steadied on her course. The faint jangle of the engine room telegraph floated up through the open skylight and the ponderous thrashing of her half exposed propellor slowed, changed to a half hearted flopping and ceased.

At the same time a single, white clad figure came out of the pilot house, half tumbled down the ladders to the main deck and ran forward to the windlass. When the ship had lost headway he threw his weight against the port compressor. The huge anchor beneath, already half submerged, vanished into the water and a cloud of stinging, reddish dust hung over the bow as the rusty chain roared out through the hawsepipes. A few seconds later the clamor died away and the man walked stiffly aft.

On the deck amidships he met another man, dirty, hollow eyed and wringing with sweat, who had just come up from the engine room. If they spoke upon meeting, their words were too low to reach the keen ears of the hovering gulls. All they saw was a quick handshake, a weary grin and then the two men disappearing into the saloon together.

The return of the *Martaban* to port had already roused the interest of others besides the seagulls. Three men, two sketchily dressed and the other in full uniform, who had been recently put ashore with other castaways from a southbound United Fruit liner, had stood on a pier in Cristobal and watched her unimpressive arrival with considerable emotion.

One of them, a short, blond, pig-eyed man, had turned to the others with an angry face. "It iss her. I don't know vy. I don't stop to ask vy. Ve haff already lied to de consul. You do vat you like. I start right avay for de jungle."

As he turned and half ran through the empty warehouse, the other two with hard, twisted smiles, ranged alongside, and a little later all three unobtrusively crossed the line into the Republic of Panama.

The affair, when the details became known, was something of a three day sensation in the Canal Zone. The log book and statement of the vanished captain of the *Martaban,* when compared with the evidence left on board, completely established Chenoweth's theory. The punishment of the culprits, however, in view of their complete and indefinite absence, was limited to the cancellation of their certificates and some rather burning remarks from the English Consul.

The Admiralty Court which considered the case awarded, after much deliberation, salvage to the extent of twenty-five per cent. of the total value of ship and cargo to the salvers, Horace Chenoweth and William Johnson, and concluded by complimenting them upon the courage, resourcefulness and determination shown by them in bringing the damaged vessel to port.

Some ten days after this two lean, remarkably sunburned first class passengers were leaning over the rail of an immaculate liner from Colon, watching the tall red buoys of the Ambrose Channel slipping past below them. Dusk had already fallen and a bitter wind was blowing in from the Atlantic, but the men seemed hardly aware of that.

One of them threw a half burned cigarette over the rail and spat after it. "Well, Duke," he said gruffly. "It won't be long now."

"No," replied the other, staring hard at the twinkling lights ahead. "I'll be catching a train in a couple of hours."

During the brief silence that followed, the faint clanking of a bell buoy off to starboard sounded unspeakably desolate. Both men shifted uncomfortably.

"It's funny, Bill," burst out Chenoweth. "We're getting home. We're well. And we've got more money than either of us will ever spend, and yet somehow I feel as if the best of something was over. I don't understand it at all."

Bill shook his head mutely, turned the collar of his heavy, ill fitting overcoat up around his ears and fixed his eyes steadfastly upon the rapidly brightening lights of New York.


# THE MASTER TRAPPER

By JOHN J. ROWLANDS

TO OWL MCKINNON, STERN, GRUFF MAN OF THE NORTHWOODS, THE BLACK FOX VIXEN REPRESENTED A START TOWARD ALL GOALS OF AMBITION—AND LOVE. WHEN WHAT SEEMED PROOF OF A FRIEND'S TREACHERY WAS MADE PLAIN TO HIM, BLACK, MURDEROUS HATE SETTLED AND FESTERED IN HIS HEART

MEN who murder nearly always strike swiftly in high, ungoverned passion, maddened by hate or overwhelmed by fear, driven by an overpowering impulse, unmindful of the consequences. But Owl McKinnon planned his killing with cool deliberation, working with infinite pains to make sure his man would not escape.

It was an old hate that filled Owl with the lust to kill, a bitterness that had seasoned like wine in a vat for three years, growing more potent as time passed. And like the hidden fire in wine his passion brooded darkly, deep within him.

The big man's square face with the large round eyes and small beaklike nose from which he took his nickname, showed none of the black murder in his heart. He looked pleased, certainly eager, as he knelt on the cabin floor, working with the skill of long familiarity on a huge steel bear trap. Now and then he glanced up at the candle flickering on the edge of the rough table, and his big eyes, flecked with specks of gold, slowly closed and opened as an owl blinks in brilliant sunshine.

Anywhere but in the Lake Superior country where he had first seen the light of day, and from which he had gone no further than the little lake shore settlement some fifty miles to the south, Owl might have been called stupid. He was to all appearances a big, dull witted man, slow and almost awkward in his gait; a man who walked with bent head and furrowed brow. He would have been as much out of place in a great city as a moose; but in the woods, far from the rush and turmoil of civilization, he was at home, a master of his kind. Woodcraft was his religion, almost an instinct. He boasted he could think as the wild animals think and there was substance for his talk, for he could choose a place to set a trap with uncanny knowledge of the haunts and habits of his quarry.

"When I goes to set a fox trap," he would say, "I thinks to myself, I thinks, where would I be huntin' if I was a fox? Maybe it's a place where there's lots of wood mice or maybe where the partridges is thick. So I thinks like the fox would think and my luck is mostly good."

Owl was a patient man, as patient as the lynx that lies in wait for hours or a day for its prey. He had waited three years for a chance to kill Bob Martin. It would have been easy to make his way stealthily through the fifteen miles of dark forest that lay between the McKinnon brothers' cabin and the shack of his enemy,

but that was not Owl's method. It would make trouble for him, and then there was Tod, his brother. He would not stand for killing, for any violence.

"Leave him be," Tod would say on the rare occasions when Owl recalled his grievance against Martin and mumbled threats. "If he stole your fox—and you can't swear he done it—then he'll get what's comin' to him some way or other. But it ain't you as has the right to do the punishin'. Leave him be, Owl, leave him be!"

Like most men who dwell in the hush of limitless space the McKinnon brothers were not talkative. When they spoke they had something to say—and having said it as briefly as possible, they were silent. Often they went for hours without a word between them, working with a well founded understanding of each other and their daily tasks.

Owl seldom made reply to what Tod had to say about Bob Martin. He was older than Tod and had been accustomed to make their decisions since their father died when they were mere boys; yet he valued Tod's opinions and seldom quarreled with him. Quick to resent, obstinate, and slow to forgive and forget, Owl would sacrifice much to avoid words with his younger brother. In contrast, Tod was smaller in stature; a lithe man, quick in mind and body, whose ready smile and kindly blue eyes made him a favorite with their far flung neighbors. There was nothing in the brothers' appearance to indicate the close blood tie, and few were aware of the great bond of affection between them. Tod respected the older man and loved him. He took singular pride in all Owl did, and boasted he was the best trapper north of Superior. Few would dispute it.

A natural diffidence, the reluctance of his kind to display emotion, and perhaps fear of his brother's quick smile and good natured teasing kept Owl from revealing the true depth of his hate for Bob Martin. He had suspected the rival trapper from the first and being convinced, he would not forget or forgive. As time passed the matter was seldom mentioned, but Owl brooded over it constantly.

In the evening when, after the day's work was done, he and Tod sat and smoked, most of the time in silence, Owl brooded. Every night he retraced the whole affair from the day when he found the fox, a tiny black ball of fur, in a den. He had brought it to the cabin and with great difficulty reared it until at last the vixen had reached the jet splendor of full maturity.

It was soon after he found the fox that Dianne Marchand—Dianne of the flashing smile and eyes like winter stars—came into Owl's life. He met her in the settlement, and finally he had asked her in his clumsy way to marry him. Dianne, however, had little faith in trapping as a means of livelihood and she had promised Owl that if he came to the settlement and found work which would make bread and butter certain in all seasons, she might consent. And Owl naturally thought then of his most valued possession, the jet black vixen. He would start a fox ranch. There was money in fox raising, and there was a place just beyond the limits of the settlement which offered such an opportunity. But the fox was stolen when he had all but completed his plans for moving down to the settlement. The keystone of his structure gone, the building of all his hopes and dreams crashed, leaving him broken, dismayed and filled with hate.

IT NEVER occurred to Owl that he might do something else. There was the sawmill, and the pulp company, but thoughts of such work never entered his head. He had planned a fox ranch and then the fox was stolen. Dreams of riches and happiness gone, the future loomed dull and hopeless. He could not afford to buy a vixen, nor had he hope of finding another, for female black foxes are rare in the Superior country. Males can be purchased easily and much more cheaply.

The fox was gone! No Dianne, no ranch, no happiness. Then Owl would laboriously count the profits of the ranch that might have been. One year, two years three years—so many foxes, so much money. He saw the place as he had planned it; kennels and high wire fences, a cabin in the background, and always Dianne in the home. In time he came to think of all this as actual loss. Bob Martin had stolen, not one black vixen, but many foxes. He had robbed him of his riches and of happiness—Dianne. The bitterness of his thoughts at such times tainted his blood, and his hate for the rival trapper grew day by day. The lust to kill became a fixed determination in comparison with which all other things were of secondary importance.

Once when they were talking about the disappearance of the fox a strange light crept into Tod's blue eyes.

"Well, that fox of yours is gone; gone more'n three year, and I reckon that's about all there is to say about it, Owl," he said quietly. "You'll get over that ranchin' fever. Anyway, raisin' foxes don't pay so much. And Dianne, she ain't the girl for you. Too flittin'. Now if you and me stick together trappin' we'll make a sight more money and there won't be no women to spend it for us."

But nothing Tod ever said purged Owl's mind of secret plans for revenge and he waited, patiently working out every detail leaving nothing to chance. And now the time had come to act! Tod had gone in the canoe to the settlement for supplies for the coming winter. Usually they went together, for there was much portaging and the trip was hard for one man; but this autumn the trapping signs were particularly good. It was decided Owl should remain at home to prepare for the season's work.

Owl accepted the opportunity to remain at home with an eagerness he found hard to conceal. Even Tod noticed the sudden brightening of his brother's big eyes, and laughed. "Good signs always did perk you up," he told Owl. "Trappin's going to be fine this year or I don't know a thing."

A mirthless grin spread across Owl's heavy face as he walked down to watch his brother send the little birchbark canoe out into the river with steady, short strokes of the paddle.

"Reckon it'll be a week 'fore I get back," Tod shouted across the water. "If the freezeup comes, better come down river and lend a hand with the load."

"All right," Owl shouted, and turned back to the cabin, his head bent in deep thought.

## II

OWL planned from the first to trap Bob Martin. The scheme offered every prospect of success without danger of arousing suspicion of foul play. It had happened before and it could happen again. It is not uncommon in the fur country for men to walk into traps. Every man knows where his own trap lies concealed, but is blind in respect to the traps of others. To walk into a small trap results in nothing more than a bruised foot, but when a man moving in the wilderness alone stumbles into a bear trap it is a serious thing. If he has his spring clamps with him he can easily release himself, though he may have a broken leg. And if he has no clamps and the owner of the trap fails to make his usual rounds, he lies there until the cold mercifully brings an end to his suffering. Sometimes the great gray timber wolves come to pick his bones.

A trip north to Dan Smith's shack would give sufficient excuse for not making the round of his traps for a few days. Everything would look just as though Bob had got into the trap by accident. The men might say it was careless to make a set on an old trail, yet it had been done many times, for bear like to follow beaten paths.

The big man went on working over the trap, a sinister rust reddened thing with thick double springs and jaws studded with steel fangs to make certain its victims could not escape. Once in a while when he moved the trap the log chain rattled, and the dog, sleeping by the stove, lifted his head quickly and cocked his ragged ears, trembling. He had never forgotten that sound after an encounter with a trapped bear in the days of incautious and daring puppyhood.

Owl worked late into the night and the rasping of his file on the murderous steel teeth broke the ponderous hush that crept in from the dark forest like a fog. Finally the job was done; he turned it over for minute inspection, and oiled the springs, a thing he never would have done for a bear. But there was no need of hiding the man scent now! Then he clamped down the springs, set the pan, and used a chunk of stove wood to test it. The wood dropped on the pan, the great jaws flashed, and the steel fangs sank into the hard birch with a crunching thud. The sound filled Owl's soul with satisfaction. He chuckled.

"Good enough! Fast on the jump," he muttered aloud. "He can't never get out once them jaws strike—no more chance than a rabbit in a fox trap."

Then Owl went to the door to scan the heavens, and the chill October air rushed in and set the blue smoke of his pipe eddying to the rafters. The stars were diamond bright, and the man knew by the feel of the air there was no fear of snow, the only thing that would balk his scheme. There had been a flurry a week before and there

were still signs of it on the ground, but not enough had fallen to make snowshoes necessary. The thought of snow kept Owl anxious. If the white mantle settled down on the forest his plan might fail, for there was slight chance of trapping a man on snowshoes.

"No sir," he told himself confidently, "it ain't goin' to storm tonight; not tonight, no sir."

The man turned and went to his bunk, removing only his mocassins. Sleep came to him swiftly, and his heavy snoring was evidence enough that it was a peaceful slumber, unbroken by fears or thoughts of the deed he had planned so long.

To Owl McKinnon there was a distinction between killing and murder. The latter was a vague sort of crime that sheriffs talked about; men went to jail for murder; sometimes they were hanged. But killing was different. You killed a man for a wrong. Not murder, that, just rightful killing. And Owl felt no compunction about killing Bob Martin. It was justice. Bob stole his fox and he would have to pay for it. The method might have been a knife or a gun; but trapping was the safe way; not much danger, and more suffering to boot. It was the natural way for a master trapper.

A less stolid man might have tossed in his sleep, muttering, perhaps, but Owl slept soundly, rolled in his blankets, a mountain of flesh and bone and muscle, rising, falling with his heavy breathing.

He arose long before the coming of dawn, and sat for a moment on the edge of the bunk and pushed sleep away, running calloused hands through his matted black hair and rubbing his eyes with his great gnarled fists. He yawned cavernously, stretched, and started a fire.

Unknown to Tod, Owl had followed Bob Martin's trap line for weeks, watching the man from a distance, marking down each trap, noting the days of his rounds. And Owl saw with a sense of satisfaction that Martin covered his line with clockwork regularity. Mondays he went north along Otter Creek, crossing over to Leaning Birch Lake. And on Tuesdays and Wednesdays he went west into the muskeg country. The grease spotted calendar hanging behind the stove told him it was Thursday. Today he would come eastward over the bald ridges, down through the black willow thickets and out on the tip of Long Point on Gull Lake, where he had set fox traps. Owl was pleased it was foxes and not bears Bob was trapping. Bear traps meant taking clamps along, but they were not needed for the lighter traps. Everything seemed right. On the trip out to the point Bob used an ancient portage and there it was the mantrap would be set.

When Owl left the cabin he chained the dog to a leg of his bunk. "No dog on this trip," he chuckled, when the mongrel whined in protest at being left behind.

Then he picked up the bear trap and with a knife in his belt, went out into the heavy darkness that precedes dawn. A cold wind rushed through the forest, kicking up the dead leaves that lay in the thin, dry snow. Overhead it soughed in the pines, and the gaunt, bare branches of the hardwoods swayed until they clashed with a sound like the clattering combat of antlered monarchs.

Owl moved with long strides, traveling due west with the instinct of an animal. He had learned to see better in the darkness than most men, and he could feel a trail with his feet, or walk straight through a black spruce swamp where the trees are all alike, when other men would be lost Owl had never owned a compass, and would not have known how to use one. His sense of direction was instinctive, as much a heritage of birth as were his eyes the eyes of his trapper father and his nose the nose of his mother.

The big man crossed Burnt River in an old birch canoe, standing erect, paddling leisurely and silently. Once on the opposite shore he struck straight west again, mounting the rising spruce covered land at a steady, unlabored gait. Now and then he stopped as a moose pauses, to listen, looking to the right and to the left and behind, as motionless for the moment as the trees around him.

Owl followed the top of the ridge northwest for a mile, then dropped down into the valley of the Musky River until he came to the banks of the stream. There he left his chosen course for a few minutes to look at one of his fox traps. It was sprung and the culprit, a snowshoe rabbit, was held fast in the steel jaws. The man grinned, glancing at the stiffened body of the little animal and then at the bear trap which he had dropped at his feet. He chuckled.

He set the trap again and moved on, following the stream until after traveling an hour he came out on the shore of Gull Lake. The faint light of the autumn dawn revealed a wide sheet of cold gray water stretching into the north until it was lost

in the blue haze that lay low over the surface. Owl was standing at the southern end of the lake and his eyes first scanned the west shore from which, some three miles away, Long Point thrust itself eastward into the water like a great black finger.

The hard white beach offered easy traveling, but the big man turned again into the tangle of underbrush and set out for the point, walking parallel with the shoreline.

Owl moved with greater caution as he proceeded, stopping now and then to listen. Once he paused to silence the clanking of the log chain dangling from the trap on his shoulder. As the light in the east grew stronger the air became strangely mild. Owl looked at the sky and the dull grayness he saw in the northwest stirred a new fear in his breast.

Snow! No mistaking that creeping pallor; the deathlike stillness, and sudden warming of the air. Snow from the northwest. Bad sign.

The man hurried on, glancing up at the heavens now and then as he plunged through the thick underbrush. He paid no heed to the stinging lash of the slender branches that seemed to be reaching out to hold him back, whipping at his head until thin red welts marked his face and lines of blood oozed from the scratches.

The northwest sky was banked with snow! No time to waste!

When he came near the point, Owl turned inland and soon he struck the old trail that Bob Martin used. At once he broke into a trot, a peculiar, tireless gait that carried him swiftly away from the lake until he entered a dense growth of black willows. There, where the tangle of slender dark trunks was thickest, he prepared to set the trap.

The air had steadily grown warmer and while Owl knelt in the trail, digging a cavity for the trap with the blade of his sheath knife, a soft rain began falling. It purred in the dead leaves in the thicket, and when the moisture gathered on the twigs and fell in heavy drops, a dismal liquid tapping filled the air.

Good! Not snow, but rain. Owl grinned.

Finally the trap was in place, and he dug a little trench in which to hide the chain, and he looped the end about a sturdy birch close to the trail and secured it with a heavy padlock.

He tucked soft moss under the pan to make sure no earth could get beneath it, and then the clamps were applied. Slowly the powerful springs compressed under the twisting wing-screw. He dexterously set the trigger with a twig and gently released the clamps. The jaws spread wide, a hungry mouth with bared steel teeth. The trap was set!

When Owl completed his task there was nothing to indicate the trail had been disturbed. The trap was close beside an old pine log lying across the trail and anyone stepping over the obstruction, no matter from which direction he approached, was certain to put a foot into the waiting jaws. Now it was covered with earth; even the dead grass had been replaced. The chain was hidden in its trench and a clever shield of leaves covered its loop about the tree. Never had he worked so carefully; all the skill of his craft was called into play to make it a perfect set. So far as the eye could detect not so much as a blade of grass had been moved. It was a masterpiece. A wolverene, cunning beyond understanding, would not have known it was there, and Owl was proud.

No more chance than a rabbit in a fox trap!

## III

OWL made his way homeward like one in a trance. He could think only of Bob Martin in the bear trap. Now and then he chuckled to himself.

"No sir, he'll never get outa that trap; no sir, not him."

He pictured his enemy caught by the foot, lying in the trail. It would turn cold again, no doubt of that, and Bob Martin would get what was coming to him as any man should who steals a fox. Bob Martin in a bear trap, and a good one too!

By the time Owl reached the river, the air had grown cooler, and the fine rain ceased to fall. A dark frown crept over the big man's face and again his round eyes lifted to the sky. He swore when snow, fine, flinty particles, began ticking monotonously in the dead leaves. But the flurry was a brief one, for the temperature dropped swiftly until the air was crystal clear, and still. The forest was as silent as death.

So absorbed was Owl with his thoughts that it was not until he prepared to start for Dan Smith's cabin that he realized how swift had been the change in the weather. A glance at the river where a thin veneer of ice showed in the dead-water close to the shore brought home the truth.

Instantly he thought of the trap under the rain-soaked earth. It would freeze. It might not spring! Five miles of rough country lay between the cabin and the black willow thicket where the trap was set, but Owl did not hesitate a moment. Thrusting a chunk of bread into his coat, he hurried out. Again he crossed the river, paddling quickly now, and mounting the slope beyond, broke into a trot, never slackening his pace until he neared the trap. Then he crept toward the spot where it lay with the stealth of an animal, making no sound.

When at last he came to the place he could not tell whether Bob Martin had passed. The frozen trail showed no signs. It was as he feared; the rain had filtered through the loose earth and now the trap was solidly frozen in. He examined the trail carefully for a distance on each side of the set, but still he was in doubt. Perhaps the man was out on the point. He might be on his way!

Panicstricken by the thought that he might lose his chance for revenge, Owl dropped to his knees and with his knife held in both fists, he picked in feverish haste at the frozen earth. And as he worked he lifted his eyes every few seconds, anxiously peering along the trail.

Seconds seemed hours. The point of the knife snapped off under the frantic thrusts of his big hands and he worked harder with the blunt end, glancing up more frequently, trembling under the strain of suspense. Bit by bit, in small hard flakes, the earth came away under the blows of the knife. Crouched over the trap, his big owl-eyes now almost constantly on the trail, he worked with desperate haste.

*Thud! Thud! Thud!*

The shining blade flashed up and down and the frozen chips flew wide.

*Thud! Thud! Thud!*

The great arms rose and fell.

THUD! It was a different sound, a crunching sound, a metallic rasping. Then a groan.

It happened in the twinkling of an eye. The knife had pierced the frozen crust and touched the pan. In a flash, even when Owl glanced along the trail, the heavy spiked jaws of the trap closed upon his thick wrists with a viselike grip. Panicstricken, pain driven, the big man struggled madly, like the animals he was wont to trap. But every movement increased the agony, for the cruel fangs settled deeper in the flesh. Finally he was forced to his knees before the trap again, crouching as he had when he set it a few hours before.

His first clear thought was of the clamps. They hung at his belt. They would free him! But not until he attempted instinctively to move his hands did he realize how desperate was his plight. The muscles, the bones, were clamped immovable; he could not bend a finger! He thought of the key to the chain padlock. It was in his pocket. No use.

Perhaps if he could get a foot on each spring and throw his weight upon them he might break the cruel grip. He tried it, working patiently until, squatting balanced upon the steel bands, he jerked downward. Hopeless! The jaws were locked, and he fell to the ground.

The cold sweat of overpowering fear bathed Owl's great body, a terror that contracted his heart and made his breath come faster. Once he had seen a human skeleton held by a foot in a trap. He was trapped by the hands!

But hope came again. There was Bob Martin; he would be along soon. Bob always stuck close to his traplines. He'd get out then, all right.

But what if Bob did not come?

Owl waited, haunted by the fear he might not be found. The pain from his wrists flowed up his arms, coursing through his big frame, and his big shoulders drooped. He knelt, whitefaced, before the steel thing that held him, a fantastic, tense figure in an attitude of humble supplication.

Owl had never known much of religion, but now a simple prayer his overworked mother had found time to teach her brood, came back through the years, and he mumbled it in low tones. Somehow it gave him no comfort. He had always felt prayer was like spitting on a fish-hook; it didn't add much to a fellow's chances of getting what he wanted.

It had grown steadily colder and now the creeping shadows told the man that night was near. He waited, listening intently, watching the trail in both directions, until the light failed.

Bob Martin was not coming!

Instead of striking terror to his heart, the thought now filled Owl with savage, unreasoning rage. Bob Martin was to blame for it all! He hadn't thought of it in that light before.

Never for a moment did his slow brain reveal the irony of his plight. Bob Martin was to blame. If he hadn't stolen the fox Owl would not have sought revenge and this never would have happened. And now when he needed help, when life was in the balance, Bob Martin did not come. Owl burst into a torrent of blasphemy against the man he hated. For the moment he forgot the pain, the fear of death, and he swore vengeance in a voice that set the air vibrating.

When darkness settled down upon the cold and silent forest new fears assailed the trapped man. Terror of freezing to death clutched at his heart. In the last faint light he looked down upon his great hands clamped in the trap and they were bloodless, as white as tallow. He groaned, sickened by the thoughts that crowded upon him.

The cold was creeping into his body now, striking deep like thin, sharp blades that burned. He longed for the warmth of a fire. If he could only have a fire he could stand the rest. There were matches in his pocket, but they might as well have been ten miles away. No hope of using them. He tried, twisting his body on the ground, pulling at the collar of his mackinaw with his teeth, hoping to empty his pocket. But all his efforts were fruitless and exhausting.

After a while he managed to raise the trap and hang it on a broken limb of a birch tree, waist high from the ground. The effort cost him terrible pain, for it meant lifting the forty-pound trap by his crushed hands. But standing was a relief and he jumped and kicked his feet against the tree to restore warmth to his body, until the sluggish blood began moving through him.

All through the long night Owl stood in dogged patience, moving now and then to shake off the drowsiness of exhaustion and the cold. His body was stiff, and finally he could no longer feel pain in his wounded hands. To sleep would mean death. He knew that well enough and he kept awake with characteristic obstinacy.

"Goin' to stick it out till mornin'," he mumbled. "Stick it out till mornin'."

Once a rabbit came to the edge of the thicket, and bounded away in fear when he moved, and the clog-chain rattled.

When time had passed beyond calculation, Owl saw the white birch before him gradually disentangle itself from the black meshes of the night. Slowly the trees further away came out of the darkness until in the faint gray light the thicket rising from the edges of the trail loomed like a wall with a jagged top.

The growing light of day revealed the man still standing, arms outstretched to the trap hanging on the tree, a grotesque statue with outline softened by the silvery sheen of dawn. He looked less like an owl now; his face had lost some of its squareness. The cheeks were hollow and pale. Deep lines of pain lay about the wide, heavy mouth. The great eyes were dull brown wells from which no light came.

"Stick it out—stick—it—out," Owl mumbled in a husky whisper. "I'll stick her out till——"

Strange the day was so long coming. The man lifted his head with an effort and looked at the sky, and his eyes closed and opened again very slowly. He moved and the clog chain clanked, but he did not hear. The day had stopped coming. Instead, it was growing darker! Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, then with the swiftness of a stalking lynx, a creeping black mist moved through the forest. It was coming nearer, a soft wall of vapor, which made him feel as if he was about to be suffocated.

As Owl watched he suddenly knew, as if someone had whispered in his ear, that the cloud of darkness about to envelop him and the forest was not before his eyes but in his head. For hours his strength had been pouring from a tiny wound in his wrist where one of the spikes he had so carefully sharpened had struck.

True to his type the big man fought signs of weakness. The black mist crept nearer. Something told him he would not be able to stand much longer, yet even as he summoned all his remaining strength to lift the trap from the limb on which he had hung it, Owl's numbed brain rebelled against the strange stupor seeping through him. The trap fell at his feet with a metallic clanking and as his dull gaze followed it, his thick knees bent.

"*S-t-i-c-k*—her out. Stick——out!"

Darkness was close upon him now. It was soft and its nearness seemed to warm the air. He swayed toward it. Now the fathomless depths were filled with leaping flames of gold and crimson fire. Above the sky was purple, and a thousand bells were ringing—perhaps the bells in the settlement church—perhaps the bells in Moose Bird Rapids. He staggered again, clutched weakly at a sapling and slowly sank to the foot of the tree to which he was chained. The ground was warm, strangely warm for frozen earth. Owl stretched himself upon it. He was weary. Now he would take some rest. Darkness crept over him, an impenetrable fog, heavy and sweet. The forest was blotted out. He sighed and moved a little and the clog chain clanked. Owl closed his eyes and for a moment a ghost of a smile disturbed the taut muscles of his face.

"No more chance—rabbit——fox trap."

## IV

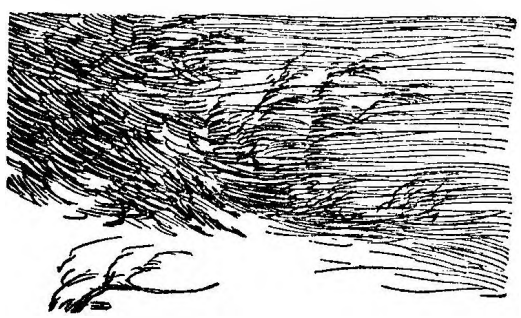
IT WAS warm, mighty warm for fall. Owl stirred wearily as a sleeping man moves in seeking a more comfortable position, and opened his eyes. He blinked several times and tried to raise his head, but it was too heavy to lift. He looked about and realized he was not on frozen ground, but in a cabin, and the darkness had passed away. Then something in a corner moved, lifted to its feet and came toward him. Bob Martin!

Owl was silent while he stared up at the grizzled man who stood by his bunk. Bob Martin's eyes were a friendly blue and about his lips was a sign of tenderness not often found in men who wrest their living from nature.

"How ye feelin' Owl?" he asked in kindly tones.

Owl scowled, ignored the question, and asked in surly tones, "How long I been here?"

"This'll make the fourth day," Martin



told him. "Right badly used up, you was, Owl, but I figure you can make out now. You got plenty of life in ye yet."

Owl frowned again and was silent.

"Lucky I found you when I did," the other went on. "It come on to storm by noon that day, and there's nigh two feet of snow laid down now. Came across ye when I was going down to the point to look at my fox traps. You made quite a pack, but I got you here at last."

Still Owl was silent. He did not thank the other for saving his life, and Martin turned away to put more wood in the stove. Here was a situation Owl had never dreamed of. Instead of catching Bob Martin he had fallen into his own trap and was being nursed by the man he had planned to kill. He recalled his scattered thoughts with difficulty, and as he marshalled them for review in his fevered brain the old flame of hatred for Bob Martin came surging back. Owl's lips twisted and his face hardened as if he had swallowed a bitter draught. He watched the man working over the stove and the flecks of gold again showed in the owl eyes blinking in the lamp light. The black vixen—Dianne—Bob Martin! Owl's eyes were cold and bright now; he trembled and a cold sweat bathed his body when Martin again turned toward the bunk. Had he the strength he would have leaped at the other. Instead he lay still and murderous thoughts reeled through his brain.

"Yes, sir," Martin went on. "I thought I ought to let Tod know about you, but being as you was so played out I couldn't leave long enough to make the trip. Ought to be able to make it tomorrow if you be feelin' better."

Owl's thoughts turned swiftly to his brother for the first time since he had watched Tod paddle down the river. Somehow he felt a strange sense of guilt, a dread of facing Tod again. What would he think when he failed to meet him on the portage; what would he think when he got back to the cabin and found the traps still hanging in the shed and the dog chained and hungry? Would he suspect? Would he?

As if in answer to his thoughts the door was flung open and Tod, white and breathing hard, strode in without stopping to kick off his snowshoes. For a moment he stared at Bob Martin, and Owl saw relief in his face. Then when his eyes went to Owl lying in the bunk, Tod, wiping the frozen vapor from his eye-brows, spoke quickly with an anxious note in his voice.

"What's wrong?"

Before Owl could gather his thoughts Martin answered.

"Got into his trap down the trail to the point," he explained. "Bad fix he was in, but I found him the next day when I was going out to look at my fox traps. He'll be all right now, Tod."

Confused and at a loss to know what to say, Owl knew he must speak.

"Rank careless, I was," he muttered nervously while Tod studied his face anxiously. "Trap was frozen in and I begun to dig it out with my knife. She sprung afore I knew it."

He was silent again and Tod said nothing for several seconds. Then looking at Owl, he asked:

"What was you settin' over on the point trail for?"

Owl thought he detected a note of suspicion in Tod's voice, which added to the difficulty of summoning a plausible answer. "Saw bear signs," he growled, trying to avoid meeting his brother's gaze. "Thought I'd take a chance and see what come of it."

TOD, making no reply, began pacing the floor nervously, and the soft padding of his mocassins was the only sound that broke the hush. He looked worried and his chin was on his chest. Suddenly he jerked his head up, tight lipped and grave, and looked from Owl to Martin as if searching their faces for the answer to some question.

"Reckon I better tell you about it, Owl," he blurted out, hoarsely. "I done you wrong and I don't exactly know how to say it." He looked at Bob Martin as if seeking encouragement. "'Way back when you got thinkin' about Dianne and talking about marrying her I lost my head. Ever since our daddy died I sorta looked to stick with you. Never thought of anybody else. Then you got thinkin' about Dianne and I saw I was going to lose you. Jealous, I guess I was, but I didn't see it that way then. I was feelin' more than thinking, and I made up my mind you wasn't goin' to marry her." Owl lifted himself to his elbow and stared in amazement at his brother, but he said nothing and Tod went on.

"I came over here and talked to Bob about it; said I figured you and Dianne weren't suited, that she was flittin'like and giddy, and I told him I was going to let your black vixen out of the pen, knowing you wouldn't have no chance then to start that ranch."

A hoarse cry escaped Owl's lips and he dropped back on the bunk, staring hard at a wall log. "Always figured you was one man that would play square with me, Tod," he said in a low voice. "Can't see how you done it." There was no anger in his words, only sadness, the bitterness of an unbelievable disappointment. He was stunned, and his round eyes were half closed and lustreless.

Tod nodded wearily and wiped beads of sweat from his brow. "I'm telling you, Owl, I done you wrong. Bob warned me ag'in buttin' in, but I told him as how Dianne was no girl for you. I should have listened to him. I even let you blame him for stealin' the fox, but I never thought you was takin' it so to heart. All that was bad enough, but when I went down to the settlement this time I met Dianne and I seen right away how I broke up your life. She's true blue." His voice trembled but grew stronger, and he looked into his brother's eyes; "and she loves you still, and wants you, Owl. I can't never give you back the black vixen, but I'm goin' to take you down to Dianne and I ain't going to leave 'till you and she is married. Maybe I kin trap enough pelts this winter to buy you a vixen and a male to start that ranch; and maybe, Owl, you won't be thinkin' too hard of me."

Owl's face was transformed and the light came back to his eyes, now wide and strangely happy. "By God! I knew you was square," he shouted. "I knew you wasn't no low-lifer!"

He wanted to take Tod's hand, to say more, but it was not the McKinnon way.

Bob Martin got up from his box and, kicking open the door of the stove, threw in a stick of wood, spat energetically into the flames, and turned to look at the brothers.

Owl, suddenly very grave, raised himself again and met Bob Martin's eyes. Except for the rush of the fire in the stove and the fingering of a cold wind in the logs of the cabin, there was no sound. Owl spoke, "I can't let it stand that way," he said. "I done wrong, too, Bob. I always thought it was you that took the vixen. I got to thinkin' about it night and day; sorta crazy, I was. Always thinkin' about gettin' even. It got worse lately." He hesitated a moment, his eyes turned away, then came back to the trapper's face and his voice fell to almost a whisper. "That trap I got caught in was set for you, Bob."

Dumb amazement showed in Owl's face when he finished. He had confessed his

plan to kill, and Bob Martin was smiling. It was a kindly, understanding smile, and Owl was puzzled. Bob nodded.

"Sorta figured you was holding a grudge again' me," he said quietly, "'cause you never came around this way any more. So I kept my eyes peeled. When I found you in the trap it wasn't hard to see what you was up to. I knew a first class trapper like you would never oil a trap —for bear."

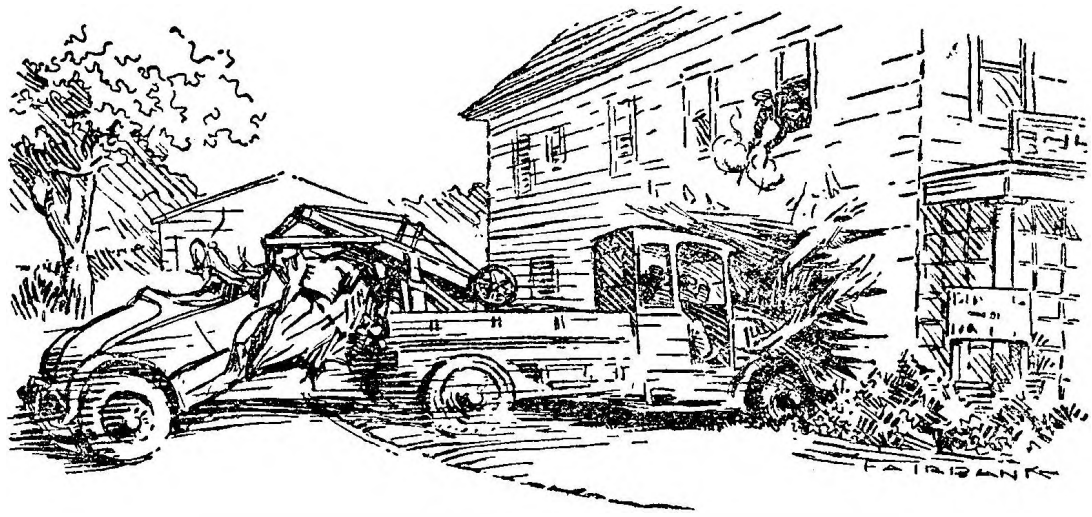
The three men were silent. Owl lay back. He wanted to say something, but no words came to his dry lips. Tod sat staring at a knot in a hewn log of the floor. Bob Martin sat down again, a peculiar expression on his face, and when he lifted the stove cover to poke the fire the momentary flare of golden light revealed a twinkle in his eye.

"There ain't any hard feelin's from me, Owl," he continued finally. "Can't say as I blame you. But now you forget it. Ye paid high with them hands of your'n. I reckon you thought I'd be mad. Maybe I ought to be, but I ain't. I'm older than you boys; older in time and older in understandin' of the ways of men and their women folks. I don't guess Tod ever thought I knew why he wanted to get rid of your fox. But I did. Your mother used to say Tod loved you more'n he did his daddy. Be that as it may, I knew how he was feelin'; he was crazy jealous — afraid of losin' you, Owl, and there ain't no use argain' with a man when he's that way. So I just let him turn that fox loose."

He chuckled hugely to himself and puffed at his pipe for a few moments in silence.

Owl and Tod exchanged puzzled glances.

"Y-e-s," he drawled, "I just let him go on and turn that vixen out in the snow. But I set out to track her, and I ain't such a bad tracker, either. She's been in a pen out back of the shack here ever since just waiting for you boys to get that much business straightened out between you. Reckon there's nothing to hinder you goin' ahead now."



# DRIVIN' THROUGH

By KERRY RALSTON

*Author of "Whistle Speed," etc.*

THE STORY OF A NIGHT THAT WAS TO TURN NUMBER SEVEN, PRIDE OF MILLER'S GARAGE FLEET, FROM A NEW TRUCK TO A BATTLE-SCARRED VETERAN—BUT WAS WORTH THE PRICE

HIGH above Box Number 1, down by the dusky levee, a red-lamp blinked and burned like a maddened fire-fly. There was a paddle of flat feet as a patrolman scurried to his telephone. On Broadway other lamps were flashing; on Market Street and Union; from slum to haughty *faubourg* the city was ablaze!

Police Headquarters had settled into the silence of super activity, broken only by staccato orders spat in reeking rubber horns, and the new Chief, O'Rourke, had his big cork city map before him on the glass-topped desk, busily decorating it with multi-colored tacks. Every box was indicated there, every joint and crooked hang-out, every street and murky alley. Since his advent to leadership of the force he had played this game just seven times, but it had him fascinated. He called it "Catch Column."

In character it was a little like checkers, but more like chess. Then, too, it had something in common with dominoes—the simplest form of dominoes, wherein one stands them adjacently in a long row and gently taps the first. Each fallen domino means a bluecoat in the dust. But most of all it seemed to him to resemble certain brands of solitaire—the brands in which one never beats Old Sol.

Choosing pin-headed chessmen displayed in Chief O'Rourke a certain grim humor. For instance, two large ones of mourning color opposite each other represented the Grand and Rialto Theatres on the White Way, west. He had not yet received from the bruised and beaten managers of those amusement palaces a complete report of financial casualty, but roughly figuring the capacities and admission prices obtaining there the total must have been at least $10,000. And if $10,000 lost in a simultaneous onslaught of banditry is not just cause for mourning then there is something radically phenomenal about Theatrical Row.

Next there was a yellow pin, symbolic of the yellow sport touring car in which the gang had made their getaway. At the corner of White Way and Park Avenue stood a bloody red pin where the yellow car ran down and critically injured a pedestrian. With lightning fingers O'Rourke manipulated blue polled pins hither and yon as his blue-coated detachments flashed him news from outlying boxes. Night-riders piled into fast cars and screeched off down the quiet streets, and red lamps burned anew. A silly game it may have seemed, but more than once that map had given him a clew to the next move and enabled him to have his men in readiness.

Suddenly a new element entered with a tingle of bell. Brows beetling in ferocious

thought, he jabbed the yellow pin into a lonely road near Southwest Park and started another black one back over the streets previously traversed. They were doubling on their trail! Abandoning the yellow and conspicuous car, they had commandeered another one of more subdued color, and a speedster, and were speeding back through the city unmolested. And worst of all, the owner of this stolen speedster did not know his own license number, having left his certificate at home, and by the time he reported it Coburn would have retired to the safety of the country. Again Old Sol had won.

"The devil," remarked O'Rourke in stoical disgust.

With an irate sweep of arm he cleared his shining desk, rescuing one letter of ornate bold head depicting a bright red wrecker truck disposing of a battered junk. He had received numerous such letters from the J. V. Charleston Garage, purporting to furnish superior wrecking service and bidding for exclusive police contracts. O'Rourke scowled thoughtfully.

"Concerning that letter there," began Assistant Chief McCarthy. "Of course the Board will go by your recommendation to a certain extent. They've given the police work to Miller for a long time, but I understand they are beginning to favor Charleston. He has a bigger fleet, quicker service, and better storage facilities. You've seen his red trucks——"

"What's wrong with Miller?" snapped O'Rourke. "We don't pick police garages by the color of their cars, or lack of it. What's paint?"

"Save the surface," quoted McCarthy, "and you save——"

"You've been reading the popular magazines," fumed the chief. "So help me, God, I'll demote any man in this district that I catch reading the popular magazines! Call Miller and tell him to get that yellow machine. Never mind—I'll do it myself."

His hand went to the phone—the ugly, squat police instrument with the short barrel and clumsy base.

McCarthy smiled easily. It meant a nice little rake-off if he turned the contract over to Charleston, and he knew that eventually he would succeed. He regretted that he had not been permitted to call Miller. He might, by chance, have slipped him an incorrect address, or by other means delayed his service and added to the multitude of things already annoying the chief. Sooner or later, however, Charleston would get that contract, just the same. He was willing to wait.

IN THE big, gloomy back shop, Old Man Miller, of the Miller Garage & Wrecking Company, was putting the finishing coat of green enamel on his newest and biggest truck, destined to be called Number Seven of a long line of battle scarred veterans. Each year he contrived to build one new truck, and he strove to make each bigger and better than its predecessor.

The swish of ugly rumor at Headquarters had not passed Miller unnoted. As far as the police work went there was no profit in it directly speaking, but it afforded advertising that in round figures amounted to thousands. He knew well enough that Charleston wanted it, and that powerful members of the department and the Board backed the newcomer and his pretty fleet of bright red wreckers. To combat those influences he watched his own machines with hawklike zeal, lest some bad slip or breakdown make the matter worse. It was one of his reasons for hurrying the paint job on Seven, squatting over the lacquer can far into the heated night. Then, too, he was breaking in a new night man, and one could not exercise too much care with new men on wrecking work.

A last touch to the gleaming, rakish hood, and he trekked back to the office through canyons of looming hulks; wrecks that his men had brought in from the highways. Some were recent; others awaited their year and a day when he could dispose of them for storage charges. A unique chapter in criminal history, many of them furnished, whose owners languished now in prisons here and there, and many in their graves.

"A big stick-up half an hour ago at the Grand and Rialto," his night-man informed him as he pushed open the office door and propped it. "Police think it was Coburn. Who is Coburn?"

Miller laughed dryly. A man had to be indeed new and green not to have read reams on Paddy Coburn. He set down the paint can and dropped into a chair.

"Well, he's a sort of right-hand man to the mayor," he mused sarcastically. "Whenever the mayor needs advice he calls up Paddy. Otherwise he's titular head of a gang called the Rats. Nice boys, most of them. Their emblem is a Colt automatic with a hole in the end and seven cartridges hidden in the handle. Their favorite song is "Dead Men Tell No Tales." Their fav-

orite occupation is robbing interstate shipments, bootlegging on a grand scale, holding up mail trains, snitching payrolls, and what have you? Paddy himself is the Big Stick in this burg. He's King Coburn in this town. Politician, committeman, general all around good fellow, ex-soldier, easy spender. Why even the Police Board *conciliates* with him! Yes, sir! Not a week ago Colonel Phillips himself went out to see Coburn at his own hangout—Lowrie Inn, in the country—to beg him kindly not to shoot no coppers! That's who Coburn is. You know Scarface Al if you come from Chicago. Well, he's our local Scarface. Anything else?"

"Smith took Number One and went after the yellow car they used. They stole the shift handle."

"Umpf," snorted Miller. "That same car's been hooked three times and the cops haven't learned yet that it's got an electric shift and don't need no handle. Cops are dumb, Colton, naturally dumb. You can't blame Coburn for putting it over on them. Why I've given O'Rourke enough hot tips myself to fill his flea-trap hold-over three times an' what does he do? Sits back at his desk an' sticks a map full of holes. He ain't got a driver in the whole central district that can buck traffic like my boy, Filer, and Filer's blind in one eye. There ain't a mechanic in the whole works that knows a housing from a timing gear.

"Understand, I'm not knocking, an' I don't mind 'em leaning on a garage for the mechanical end, but that's no reason for 'em to walk all over me. First it's this an' then that. When something goes wrong it's 'Call Miller.' When they get a crinkly motor with a doctored block, it's 'Call Miller.' There's one trick Charleston ain't got, and what's more he'll not get it, either—my blue vitrol process for bringing out a motor number that's been filed or hammered."

Throughout this diatribe against the force Jimmie Colton sat silently in his battered chair while the blue and white smoke from both ends of his cigarette curled up about his pale tousled hair. His coloring otherwise was odd; the swarthy skin and almost ebon eyes. He claimed the gas had bleached his hair—gas—overseas—A. E. F. He spoke of it that way—in dashes, coming to Miller only a week before from the Disabled Veterans' Hospital which had pronounced him cured of shock, unless—dash—he had a relapse. To compensate for this slight vagueness of reference the Rehabilitation Committee had arranged to pay half his salary from Government funds, Miller to pay the remainder for one year. At the end of that period Colton was supposed to be able to sink or swim unaided.

Miller had no objections to this pecuniary arrangement. In fact, after watching Colton at work for a few days he was tempted to 'phone the Committee for another man like Colton. Barring one man, Colton was the most thoroughly efficient mechanic he had ever seen. Positively, he could work in the dark! Army routine had taught him a system that was a sight for sore eyes. He seemed never to waste a motion. He worked with eyes half closed, laying parts behind him in neat rows. And with never a slip or falter he picked them up again as they came, each in proper place. Speed—he was lightning on repairs! And he came at half price, too! What more could an employer desire?

He had not intended to put Colton on the long, grueling night shift, but a certain Oxygen McCorkle had left a week before with the avowed intention of blowing in a goodly part of his life savings on a royal honeymoon, and Miller doubted whether McCorkle would ever come through it alive.

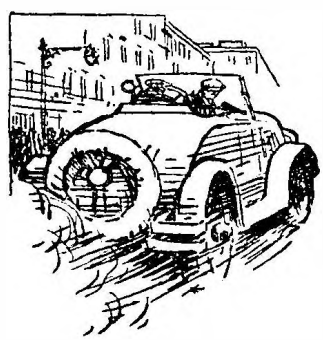
"Did I ever tell you about McCorkle?" he began. "Umpf——"

The phone buzzed angrily.

As Miller listened to the harsh voice on the wire his eyes narrowed to mere slits. Colton, listening, caught only parts of the conversation from the other end, but Miller's tones were clear enough.

"I wouldn't send any man out to Lowrie Inn at night, McCarthy, you know darn' well. What's your hurry on that car? Let me talk to O'Rourke. What's that—gone home, eh? I think I understand." And Miller's lip curled significantly as he covered the transmitter with his greasy palm.

"That's my friend McCarthy, the assistant chief. He knows danged well my only heavy truck is clear down at the south end after that yellow car, and now he wants a hurry-up hoist job on a stripped speedster at Lowrie Inn—Coburn's hangout. The gang probably doubled back in that speedster—



that's the way they always work it. To drag that junk in from out there would be like signing a death warrant—this time of night."

Without a moment's hesitation Colton uncurled his legs, put on his cap and spoke foolish words. Not until long afterward, however, did Miller realize how utterly foolhardy they were.

"Tell me how to get there," said Colton calmly, evenly, "and give me a gun and I'll bring it in here."

Three gold teeth decorate the lower segment of Miller's stern, square jaw, and his half opened, astounded mouth displayed them every one.

"You'll bring it—*you!* You're crazy!"

Colton merely shrugged. Whether the gesture was denial or affirmation he did not state, nor did Miller bother to inquire.

"Besides," he cried desperately, "I haven't got a truck that will handle it. Number One's good for another hour; it's a long trip to Southwest. And God, man, they'd fill you full of lead! They've done it more than once before—that is, not you, but other people. I couldn't order any man——"

Gazing sorrowfully at his cigarette, Colton flung it at the extinct stove.

"I've been looking over the new truck. It's ten after one now, and not much traffic. Dust's all settled, and it wouldn't hurt the paint to drive her."

"Seven!" breathed the big garage man. "Test out Seven!"

Had Colton made a deliberate and lifelong study of his employer's chief weakness he could have probed it no more unerringly than he had done. Miller's pride in his big wrecking machines was the ruling passion of his mechanical life. Every great throbbing beast of them carried forth upon its every journey a choice and palpitating section of Miller's own heart, done up in green and gold and steel and brass.

"Do you think you could? Do you think you could make it?"

Again Colton shrugged.

Miller frowned thoughtfully as his eagerness subsided. He had made a few lifelong studies himself, and one of them was shrugs. Now with McCorkle, for instance, a shrug was aimed purely to conserve wind, dispense with conversation and promote the goodfellowship of silence. With Heinie Gottelshatz, his Teutonic machinist, a shrug implied disgust and annoyance. Possibly a molecule of iron had slipped its microscopic moorings, or a ten thousandth of an inch strayed away like Mary's lamb. But Colton's shrug was different. In it he seemed to sense some trace of fatalism, an attitude of despair, seemingly saying, "What's the difference if I don't?"

"See here," he began bluntly, "I can't let you go out there. What would your sweetheart be saying if I got you killed.

A shrug.

"Or your mother?" tacked Miller anew.

"Your friend McCarthy is still on the phone, I believe," suggested Colton, ignoring the question. "Get me a gun while I go bring out the—Number Seven." And his bobbing back disappeared into the blue night.

McCarthy had become impatient and hung up. With a rattle of hook Miller got an operator, gave a terse number, and called for the chief's office.

"This is Miller," he stated jerkily. "One of my men is leaving to get that machine from Lowrie Inn in about five minutes. I want a couple of motorcycle riders to meet him as he comes in if there's any trouble, is that clear? You haven't pulled the wool over my eyes, McCarthy. Any fool could see your little game. I'm making a full report of this in writing to the Board and to O'Rourke. Yes, and it'll go to the press, too. If anything happens to this boy of mine I'm gonna make this town stink so that even the skunks will have to move across the river. What's that? No, I didn't call you a skunk. Do you want me to?"

He leered into the horn as McCarthy's answer came thickly back.

"Well, never mind that. Have those riders there in exactly half an hour from now, and order them to wait until my truck gets in. If it don't get in they'll have to go out after it, country or no country." And he cut off with a crisp click of hook just as Colton brought Seven out into the front lot under the Mazda bulb.

THE hot night had hatched a brood of fuzzy clouds, gathering slowly to hover directly up above. To Miller they smelled a bit like rain, since he had the faculty of smelling rain through gasoline and grease.

"Cal has a pretty good Smith Police Positive, but this is his night off and he's taken it with him," Miller remarked after an examination of the right hand desk drawer. "Ever handle a Lüger?"

He had got out his own gun, fondling its graceful taper.

"Oh, yes," replied Colton in a matter of fact way. "I've got—eight of them."

"Eight—eight *Lugers!*"

"I collected them—overseas. Sort of a hobby with me—collecting them."

"Godamighty!"

Things were beginning to dawn on Miller with great rapidity. At first he had questioned Colton's eagerness—not only questioned it, but doubted his mental stability. But he was beginning to understand. The man wanted to fight! He was literally bubbling over with the desire to see action as doubtless he had seen action more than once before. Inactivity had begun to sour within him; he wanted to cast off a few bonds. Ease, civilization and the Disabled Veterans' Hospital had cramped his style. No wonder! He was expecting to fight! In fact, he wouldn't have wanted to go otherwise!

A bubble of pride burst in Old Man Miller's throat.

"Boy, I'm goin' with you! Alice would kill me, but I'm goin', I tell you! You an' me an' Seven against the whole dern' pack!"

Colton raised his eyebrows only slightly. Also, he was observed to smile with a certain touch of grimness. But he made way and let Miller climb to the wheel.

"I'll drive out," the latter declared. "May teach you a few tricks about her. Then you can bring her in—providing we get through."

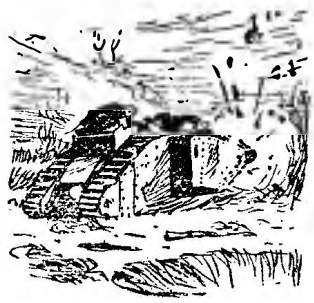
Miller was not an old man, although one of the pioneers of automobile repairing. He could remember the first ungainly machines with doors in the back and the stem wind on the side—days of clincher tires and carbide lamps and cylinders as big as buckets. Those days were gone, yet when he climbed to the wheel of Seven twenty years were as a snake's skin and he was back again behind the high wheel of his first plug-ugly truck.

"Not that I can't see you've drove a lot of cars, my boy," he said at the first corner, thinking that perhaps Colton may have been offended by his offer to teach an old dog new tricks. "But every machine has its little peculiarities. What branch of the service were you in, by the way? Engineer?"

"Tank Corps," said Colton briefly.

"Caterpillars, eh? Work on the dual clutch system. Man that can handle them ought to drive anything on wheels. Guess they take most of the fun out of war though, don't they?" he added thoughtfully, very thoughtfully.

"They're no pleasure car," admitted the other reminiscently. "Get pretty smoky inside. That's how I got mine. Taking belts to a machine gun nest in a shell hole when my ignition went bad—or the mag, I never did find out. Barely running on two and pumping oil and smoke. About that time the boches laid down a gas barrage. Even now the smell of smoke makes me dizzy — oil smoke. Guess they told you I'm not quite right yet. I've got to fight it off every once in a while or it'll get me down. What road's this we're on?"



"Claydown, this one. We turn off on North and South d'reckly. Several ways we could go out, but this is the best. We'll come in a shorter way. You'll soon learn 'em."

Wordless then, he turned to piloting Number Seven along the white macadam. Leaning forward to the warming dash he could hear the gentle swish of intake, and crooning putter of exhaust; the tick of bobbing push-rods and the whang of rocker springs, and the sounds that said the truck was right. And for a half an hour he drove.

Ahead a row of four lights gleamed through the gathering storm. Relinquishing the wheel with one hand, Miller pointed.

"That's the Inn. We're on dangerous ground, or will be when we turn off the main road. Paddy usually abandons his wrecks just the other side in a little culvert alongside that big elm tree you can see from here. It may be we can pick it up without a word. There ought to be a deputy there, but it don't make so much difference in the country as we've got the license and block numbers. Don't ever touch a machine in the city unless the owner or a copper is there."

"Do you mean to tell me he leaves them there—right at his own front door?" gasped the new man in amazement. "And they can't get the goods on him!"

Miller chuckled.

"Sure; nothing different. Who's to prove they stole it? What jury would convict Paddy, anyway? Every man of it'd be dead in six months. I know them boys, I tell you. I even do repair work for 'em. An' watch 'em every minute. At that they pay their bills better than some

honest men I know, probably because their money comes in fast. But don't ever let anybody tell you there's any honor among thieves. Once upon a time there might have been, but them days have gone forever."

He swung into the side road, lighting the hoist lamps.

"Out West," he resumed, "you used to get an even break and the quickest man to draw was last to die. They use thirty-eights around here, an' shoot from ambush. It used to be 'Your money or your life'; now it's 'Your life, and then your money.' There ain't no romance in the Rats, boy."

Slowing to a five mile pace over the knobby cinder road, he kicked open the cut-out.

"They've got men posted all around here tonight, no doubt. No use trying to sneak in. Show a bold front. Maybe I got you all scared up for nothing. Paddy never has got rough with me. You can see what the Inn is, now. Nothing but a flimsy frame shack; 'tain't no fort or anything like that. No use for that when everybody gives it a wide berth. Coburn pays the deputies and counts the votes out here—what he don't chuck in the sewer for being marked the wrong way. Well, here we are. She sure is stripped, too."

Beyond the Inn the road sneaks down into a hollow of Stygian gloom crossed by a culvert which, meandering on east, cuts clear around the hill upon which the Inn is built. Miller had picked up other cars in this same spot and he knew just how to go about it. He got the big rear wheels against two rocks close at the edge, tickled the hoist clutch in reverse to loosen the hawsers, for his trucks always rode tight to cut down rattles, and then jumped to the ground. With the cessation of motion a wisp of green smoke arose from the paint on the tortured hood, curling about the riding lamps. Miller made an observance, although the overheated motor did not worry him. That was to be expected with a newly rebored block and pistons running tight.

"Pretty hot, but not too hot," he said succinctly.

There was a shadow standing beside a peach tree half way back to the Inn; a man's shadow it looked like, but he could not be sure, for it was a clever shadow. It stood still. A move would have screamed its identity aloud.

The raucous noise in the heavy air emanated from a player-piano at the Inn. Occasional loud voices drifted from the open windows, and gaily clad figures flitted across the lighted spaces. Paddy and the boys and their molls were holding forth in celebration. But when the police investigation and customary roundup began there would be definite alibis to prove conclusively that each and every man at Lowrie Inn had spent the whole night at a wake in the north end, and had been oblivious to the Grand and Rialto affair until he read of it in the morning papers and was very much shocked thereat. It always went that way.

As Miller adjusted the hooks he had an eerie feel like a shudder. He had gone into detail to explain to his new driver the intricacies of city politics, the tactics of Coburn's gang, the inefficiency of the police department, and certain views of his own on kindred subjects. Yet he had never possessed a name for garrulity. Consequently there must have been some reason for his extreme talkativeness that evening. It seemed to simmer down to worry over losing the police contract. He could not deny that the police work meant a great deal.

McCarthy's move was clear enough. McCarthy had not expected Miller to come out to the Inn after that car until morning. McCarthy was in no particular hurry for that car. But if Miller had refused to come immediately the fact would have been reported in due time to the Board, and lost nothing in the telling. And as a result the Board would be more inclined to consider the fact that he had refused a hurry-up order, rather than to contemplate the danger which compliance would have involved.

Still turning the matter over and over, Miller started the hoist. The wreck lay just as its despoilers had left it. Wheels, spare tire, seat cushions, radiator, plugs—everything movable, in fact, had been stripped. That was Coburn's strategy. A gangster of his wealth and influence never stooped to stripping cars. It made it appear as though someone else had really left it there!

A cloud of smoke from oil burning on the outside of the motor zoomed back along the sticky green sides. Slowly, evenly, like a ship being launched, the wreck came up on the big power winch.

As it hung for a moment on the end of one of the dilapidated bridge boards Miller leaped for a pinch bar. Colton, operating the hoist at his superior's commands, peered from the cab window in order to

see when to give it power. As the wreck swung clear he turned again to the clutch lever, leaning back to pull it lustily.

Neither knew just how it happened, unless Miller overestimated either his own strength or the distance. Instead of the bar clattering back into the tool box as he had intended, it glanced sparking from the hoist brace, flew upward like a whip-lash and struck Colton a thudding smash on the back of the head. The unfortunate driver slumped down like a sack of wet sand.

"Good Lord," groaned Miller. "Boy, have I killed you? For God's sake——"

"I'll—be—all right," muttered Colton. "In a minute I'll——"

"I never meant to throw that bar so hard. Gosh, Son! I'll get some water from the creek. Wet my handkerchief, maybe——"

But Colton was biting his lower lip and smiling bravely through. "It's all right. Stars jumped for a little bit. Are we ready?"

"All K. O. An' no excitement, either. Maybe I'd better drive——"

"I'll drive," announced Colton firmly, and out of compassion rather than the arrangement previously made Miller let him keep the wheel. Still smokier grew the atmosphere within the snug-built cab, but a touch of open road would quickly clear it out. The other coughed softly.

Half way up the short rise Miller glanced sideways at Colton bringing five tons of steel and scrap up the side road with a wheel firmly gripped while he fed the big eight gas. But what was that wild, glassy stare in his eyes?

UP IN the front gable of Lowrie Inn four men sat around a table—the four active participants in the Grand-Rialto hold-up. These were Paddy Coburn, Ray Fox, who drove. Pinky Smith a marksman, and Blackie Doran, a thug. At least so went the testimony of Ray Fox at a trial some few months later. However, at least six others were employed as lookouts on the lay, leaving the scene directly after the flight of the yellow car and proceeding unmolested to the Inn.

Coburn himself was engaged in ripping open bundles of currency bound in inch-wide pink paper strips bearing the legend, "National Amusement Company, Inc.," and beneath it the amount of each bundle in purple ink.

"We'll take their word for the count," he leered good naturedly, "but the bands will have to go. See who's knocking, Pink."

"There's a truck picking up that car," came whispered tones as he opened the squeaking pine door.

Coburn laughed shortly. "It's all right, John. I called McCarthy and told him to come and get it. Damn' shame, I call it, that people can dump junk on my property and go off and leave it. Miller's all right. Just another poor damn' fool trying to make an honest living. Close the door. There's yours, Pinky. Here, Blackie—and Ray. Don't spend it all one place. Not so bad."

Each stowed away his share in numerous pockets, for the bills were bulky. Only Fox continued to scowl thoughtfully until it arrested the attention of his mates. Fox was a tall youth, not more than twenty, lean, tanned and possessing shrewd eyes. Fox was just that—Fox. The name suited him well.

"Cheer up, Ray. You got yours, didn't you? What are you crabbin' about?"

"Nothing—only I was wondering whether I killed that old guy I hit at the corner of Park. His head hit the asphalt like a pistol shot."

"Hell," scoffed Pinky. "Paddy'll send him a coupla hundred in the morning, won't you, Chief?"

"I'll see how I come out with the others," said Coburn warily, although not displeased with his acolyte's suggestion. He wanted to appear magnanimous. In the furtherance of this desire he kept two boys busy stealing the automobiles of prominent citizens that he might restore them and add to his long list of acquaintances. These recoveries, of course, were made quite accidentally. He had merely happened to hear of the stolen car through gangster friends.

Blackie had staggered over to the west dormer window and was looking out over the roof. An advance flurry of rain played coolly upon his upturned face, poorly shaven and grimy. As Fox began to speak again Coburn glanced significantly at Pinky Smith.

"I've got something to say that maybe you won't like. But I guess I've been driving for you long enough to have the right to talk."

"Just what do you mean—talk?" inquired Coburn. "Blackie, get away from that window before Miller gets back up. You're not supposed to be out here tonight. Go ahead, Ray."

"Talk," repeated Fox. "I don't mean

squeal, if that's what you thought I meant. It's about this job we're planning in Illinois. I got a hunch, that's all. I've been driving you wherever you went, and I've been in on some bigger jobs than the one tonight. But on this one I've got a hunch that it's fixed. The cards are stacked against us. Sooner or later they're going to rap us for a nice long stretch. You've never been cooped up in the stir, Paddy, and you don't know what it is. I have. Lately we been getting too much publicity. I tell you something's going to break. That's why I'm callin' quits on this—after tonight."

Coburn's long, white fingers tapped the table gently for a moment. He rustled the discarded pink slips from the bundles idly. And his eyes glinted a greenish blue, singularly hard.

"So you're leaving us, eh? Well, that's all right so far as I'm concerned. The boys may have something to say, but that's up to them. On tonight's dividend, for instance. We split five ways, and I got two, besides chicken feed to the others. But we thought you were with us permanently, Ray. Since you're not it's hardly fair that you get a fifth. Suppose we call it a hundred dollars for driving us tonight, and the boys can re-divide the rest."

Fox shifted slightly in his chair. He had received something over two thousand dollars for the night's work. If he relinquished it Pinky and the black one would each get half. From their silent, expectant demeanors he knew that already each had computed that half to a brass farthing. And each of them had killed more than one man for less than one thousand dollars! Coburn had practically told the other two to get him!

Blackie had stepped back from the window; Pinky sat across the table and had his gun in hand beneath it; Coburn was waiting with a sneering smile. In a flash Fox knew just where he stood. He had noted a coolness in Coburn's actions previously, and this verified his intentions.

He knew that he was marked for death within a few seconds. To delay those seconds was not possible, but at least he could make the most of them before someone found him dead in an alley in the morning.

Slipping his hand into his inside pocket almost calmly, he produced the largest packet of bills. It was the best move he could have made, for the greed of the other two by far transcended caution. The next instant he had fired his own .38 through his right hand coat pocket at Smith, jumped clear, and driven two more pellets at Blackie as he bowled inward from the wall. Then the room was a hell of flying lead, in the midst of which a crash unlike anything he had ever heard shook the flimsy Inn to its very tap-roots.

COMING up the short hill Miller had been thinking rather rapidly. The almost maniacal gleam in Colton's eyes frightened him. The veteran was not mentally right; that he was assured. He had said that smoke made him dizzy. There was plenty of smoke from the fresh paint. And he had just received a blow on the post-crandial nerve-centers that would rock an ordinary elephant.

"Feeling better now?" inquired Miller uneasily.

When the query brought no response he stole another glance. Colton's eyes were wide open and glazed. A sharp jab in the ribs produced no effect. Miller reached out to take the wheel. And at that very instant a blast of lead poured down upon them from the upper window of the Inn, one of the bullets cracking the windshield not ten inches from Miller's anxious face.

With an unearthly screech Colton climbed the wheel and swung Seven squarely at the painted weatherboards of the Inn, directly below the offending window. And Miller knew his nerves had popped.

One desperate grab he made at the switch key, but Colton's knee swooped to his jaw as he bent forward, closing his teeth like a steel-springed rat-trap.

Then the eight inch channel iron bumper rammed its point into the white side of Lowrie Inn; eighty throbbing gas-horses in low gear galloping beneath the sticky green and gold paint thundered over a six-six nail-tie, and Seven nosed through the Inn wall as though it had been cardboard!

Two posts four feet apart in the center of the main ground floor room supported the whole center weight of ceiling and half story above. Seven flung off debris like cobwebs and made straight for them. Miller saw them coming, but it was too late now to stop.

He heard frenzied shouts and agonized cries and seemed to feel the crunch of a wheel over a prostrate body. A girl staggered back from the truck, dazed, and wearing a bright smudge of green paint on her shoulder where the heavy, rolled-iron fender caught her in a side-swipe. Stairway went down in a whirl of painted kindling; Seven leaped at the posts like a live thing and snapped them off like soda-straws. The whole upper floor seemed to disintegrate before his eyes, and more bodies came hurtling down, guns in hand, one of them spitting flame.

Even above the ungodly turmoil he could hear Colton bellowing at the top of his high-pitched voice.

"At 'em, Betsy! The port. Bonev, the port—an' give 'em hell!"

A flutter of something like confetti showered the truck and a paper streamer flew through the shattered windshield.

"Godamighty!" gasped Miller, spitting it out.

Then darkness; the Inn lights were gone with a flash of burning fuses; Seven's drum heads were crushed beyond repair. Even before Miller realized it the truck had parted the rift from end to end, climbed over the wood girder on the opposite side and was out in the warm rain.

Behind a bellow of rage went up, and guns began to belch. Not until then did Miller recall the Lüger. Aware that nothing now could make the situation worse, he deliberately raised the blue weapon and sent a stream of steel-jacketed projectiles back alongside.

He caught one glimpse of Seven as he looked back, and it made him sick. The hoist was literally hidden by piled debris, clear out over the hoist cables and the wrecked hulk, which hanging sideways, made the devastation worse. Seven had dragged the stripped car sideways through the wrecked Inn, sweeping everything before it.

As the elements dashed a hat full of water in his face, Colton's head seemed to clear. In fact he looked sideward at Miller with an expression of complacent naivette, shifting gradually into wonderment.

"We went through the boches that time, old man," he cried. "But where's Bones? My old friend, Bonny McAllister. You're not Bones!"

"Never mind," snapped Miller. "It ain't your fault I'm not. No matter who I am, but *gimme that wheel.*"

It was fairly clear what had happened. The smoke first of all, and then perhaps that tap on the back of the head, had done for Colton. In five minutes his brain, traveling wild and light, had traversed a half dozen years and for the moment he had actually thought himself back in a tank on the western front. The result was all that could be expected. Only Seven was no tank, and Coburn's Rats no organization to forgive the transgression. Already they were probably piling into fast cars out in the shed and preparing to redress their wrongs.

As he swung onto the macadam again, Miller coldly counted chances. The radiator leaked like a sieve; it was a wonder that any radiator remained at all. The right fender was bent down until it scraped the tire. The whole cab wobbled crazily. What Seven looked like to passersby on that late road he hesitated to suggest, even to himself. The big idea was to reach city limits where there should be police, unless McCarthy——

He put that thought aside, driving as he had never driven before.

As the truck skidded from side to side on a partial strip of concrete, Colton slumped unconscious to the floor among the flinders of broken glass and miscellaneous debris. But all Miller could do was drive.

Ten minutes of it and the thirsty motor was so hot that the floor boards and pedals radiated the heat into the cab. The motor began to knock pitifully and slow down until he barely made headway. Then it stopped.

Flashing back a glance, he reloaded the Lüger. There were cars coming up behind him at a furious speed. There was a car coming ahead with lights too bright for comfort. It flashed past, brakes screamed. He caught the gleam of red and green "hearse lamps," the symbol of the police department. Then Miller heaved a sigh

"Miller! Holy Patrick! Is it you?" It was Chief O'Rourke himself, fresh from Headquarters where he had learned what McCarthy had done and gone into explosive convulsions that have yet to be equaled.

"You may inquire," said Miller, climbing stiffly down. He was feeling every year of his forty-five since the danger was over and the cars behind had shied off into a side road. "I guess it's me. I ain't sure. Have one of your men take this boy to the hospital. I'm afraid I've killed him."

"But what's happened. Where—what —— Is that McCorkle?"

"No," said Miller laconically. "Worse."

He would have launched into a recital of woe had not one of the officers accompanying O'Rourke uttered a sudden exclamation and begun to prod about in the rear end of Seven. Miller had wondered what became of the men on the second floor. He had seen some of them coming down, arms spread wide. But none were known to him—it was too sudden.

"Well, anyway," Miller was saying, "We brought in that car—what's left——"

"Chief! It's Coburn!"

Wedged between the hoist braces, white and blood streaked, but swearing too coherently for a dead one, was a man! Coburn, himself!

O'Rourke smiled grimly. He was beginning to understand. Moreover, he had been engaged in picking off a number of damp, painty, pink streamers from the sticky hood of Seven! Upon each one was the legend: "National Amusement Company, Inc.," and an amount written in ink beneath. Evidence—positive evidence!

"Miller! We've got him! If I can't get fifteen years out of these wrappers I'm a dago. So help me God, Miller! You've caught Coburn—*with the goods!* And to think I was thinking about taking the police work away from you! To think of it! Damn McCarthy! I'll send him to the sticks!"

A BURDEN had slipped from Miller's shoulders. The word of a physician the next morning, to the effect that Colton was not injured, relieved the last worry. In fact, the medical man declared that the tap on the head was probably all that Colton needed to set him straight. He would be normal henceforth.

There were the reporters to be met, and Miller met them in the big lot where One had towed in Seven and left her standing in a glistening pool of rain.

"You see," he explained chuckling, "me and one of my boys were out there anyway, and I'd heard that O'Rourke wanted Coburn so I thought we might as well pick him up as we came drivin' through. The wet paint——"

"I never thought much about paint before," interrupted O'Rourke, who was present to share honors. "But when it's good substantial, sticky green paint——"

"'Tis the color of yer Saint," said Miller. "Paint helps a whole lot. A little paint on the surface and you——"

"Miller! Have *you* been reading the popular magazines?"

One of the reporters strolled over to Seven, a thoroughly tested Seven, a battle scarred veteran already.

"Drivin' through!" he muttered. *"I'll say!"*

## THE SHOTGUN MESSENGER

GUARDING the overland stage coaches in the days when every road and trail west of the Mississippi had at least one active highwayman was not at all an idle nor exactly safe occupation. The majority of the men who accepted such jobs were dead shots, if not actual gunmen, but the road-agent usually held the advantage of surprise and was not a bad shot himself—else he would not have lasted long. Nevertheless, the double-barreled sawed-off "scatter gun," which was the principal armament of the messenger, decimated more than one powerful gang, and materially reduced the number of the rest. The lone bandits—the latter day and most dangerous class—were particularly hard put to it to keep buckshot out of their hides.

One hundred and forty dollars was the monthly pay of the shotgun messenger, a salary that was considered princely and well worth risking life for. The duties consisted merely of shooting if the stage was attacked, or to be shot. Naturally enough, the messenger did not take kindly to feeling the shock of a bandit's bullet, so he was careful to shoot first. So disastrous did the "interviews" between bandit and messenger become that most of the stick-up fraternity was scared into turning to a less hazardous occupation.—J. R. J.

# ACES, CINCHES AND HUNCHES

*A Bear Paw Range Story*

By BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

*Author of "Red Willow," "Twice in the Same Place," etc.*

THERE WAS ONLY ONE THING YOU COULD SAY FOR SURE ABOUT SLIPPERY SAM—HE WAS PLUMB GOOD AT KILLING WOLVES. OTHERWISE HIS REPUTATION IN MONTANA WASN'T SO GOOD—UNTIL THE NIGHT HE FOUND HIMSELF MANACLED TO A SMUGGLER OF THE RANGES

"WHO is he?" Nick Horn asked.

"Sam Good," Johnny Fee replied.

"Commonly known as Slippery Sam," Rube Taylor put in. "An' he may be named Good, but they say he ain't."

"Good, bad or indifferent," said Johnny Fee, "here he is an' he's announced that his intentions are honorable. So let's ride. I'm friz to the bone."

A northwest wind sighed in the faces of the four men across three hundred miles of plain. Their breath exhaled in steamy puffs. Rube Taylor's black mustache bore a white fringe of tiny icicles. Despite heavy clothing, chaps, overshoes, mittens of wool and buckskin, that frost-fanged wind chilled their flesh. Yet they held rein on their horses a minute longer to gaze after the man who jogged eastward leading a heavily packed bay horse. Four great brindled wolfhounds trotted at his heels.

"He might be goin' wolfin' and then again he might not," Rube Taylor remarked. "It'll be interestin' havin' him around in this neck of the woods."

"Come on." Johnny Fee turned his horse. "The fireplace at the Fleur de Lys interests me more right now than Slippery Sam."

They loped west across a plateau between two shallow creeks. The earth was like iron. It rang under shod hoofs as a pavement rings. The sun hung in a bright cobalt sky but it was a heatless sun, a brilliance of light without warmth. The two Cross Seven men with the brothers Horn had been abroad in that twenty below zero atmosphere long enough. They pointed for the Fleur de Lys horse ranch and they rode fast.

With his back to that cutting wind Slippery Sam, when he parted from this quartette of range riders, moved at a leisurely pace. He was heavily clad and he was a hardy soul, in more than one way unless his reputation belied him. Rube Taylor's comment was based on rumor. Said rumor extending over several seasons was presumed to have a basis of fact. Slippery had come by his name with reference to his deeds. But conviction in men's minds, without legal evidence to substantiate, does not produce conviction in court. So Slippery Sam had circulated freely in

northern Montana, neither toiling nor spinning, for a matter of five years and the scope of his operations had irritated and baffled the authorities on both sides of the Montana-Canada line. County and Federal officers in Montana, Mounted Police in Canada, felt about Slippery very much as a child feels about a wasp that stings and buzzes away.

Slippery had an engaging manner, a ready smile, a plausible account for his every action. He dangled his long legs in his stirrups and chuckled when Johnny Fee bluntly asked him what he was doing along the edge of the Bad Lands in the heart of the Cross Seven range. Slippery went further than mere statement in his answer. He humorously explained that he was trying to live down his reputation. That if he was half as hard a case as people said, it was time to reform. So with trap and dog and gun he proposed to wage war on wolves for the next three months.

Slippery resembled an animated lath. He was six foot four in his socks and about six inches wide. He looked as if it might be easy for a strong man to break him in two, but strong men had tried that without much success. His hair was a fine Nordic blond. The eyes that straddled a thin nose were bright blue. He was reputed handy with a gun although he had no known notches on his pistol-grip. He was likewise deft with a rope and his ability to ride anything, anywhere, any time was on a par with his endurance in the matter of long trips in the saddle for questionable purposes. Johnny Fee had looked at this elongated person for some time before he replied.

"If you confine yourself to wolfin' down here, you'll probably do well."

Sam grinned cheerfully.

"They've talked a lot about me here an' there," said he. "Nobody's ever hung anything on me yet. You fellers got away with Highflyer. Me an' Highflyer was supposed to be the longest, leanest, meanest an' crookedest pair of hombres in the state. So I reckon you're well able to hold your own. I'm goin' to hang out at Ole Swanson's claim shack on Chase Hill. Any time you miss your watches, or your extra pants, or a couple of hundred saddle horses, you can ride down an' search the premises. I'm goin' to hunt wolves. I'm goin' to 'tend to my legitimate business. I can't help what people say about me. If I was goin' to rustle calves or steal horses I know easier pickin's than this range of yourn, Johnny Fee."

"I expect you're right about that last, Sam," Johnny had replied.

Two hours later, while Slippery Sam was still jogging southeast toward a deserted cabin, Johnny Fee, Rube Taylor, Nick and Bud Horn stabled their horses and fell upon fried steak and hot coffee in the big messroom at the Fleur de Lys.

"Say, Shorthorn, you better keep an eye on your pet belongin's while Slippery Sam's circulatin' hereabout," Rube bantered that youthful Horn whose mother had christened him Nick.

"Who-all is this Slippery Sam, anyhow?" Shorthorn inquired over a cigarette. "You forget we ain't here a year. We don't know it all. Cough up his history. Is he likely for to raid our stock?"

"Naw," Johnny Fee forestalled Rube, who was an inveterate joker. "He ain't exactly a thief, though he's been suspected of knowin' where stolen stock goes to. Maybe Slippery's been the victim of loose talk. I don't know. He's had a hangout in the Sweetgrass Hills for a long time. Run a one-horse saloon at Gold Butte once. They've credited him with all sorts of devilment—runnin' off horses an' sellin' 'em to the Dakota farmers, for one thing. They say his main hold is slippin' into Canada with a pack load of Bull Durham an' cotton overalls, which sells for double north of the line on account of the high duty. They say that he buys up all the coyote hides in sight over there an' sneaks 'em into Montana an' collects the bounty. Coyote pelts are worth about fifty cents apiece over there. There's no bounty in Canada. We pay a three-dollar bounty on coyotes. There's lots more they accuse him of. But, as he said, nobody's ever hung it on him. They've chased him a lot, but he always has a cast-iron alibi. That's why they call him Slippery Sam."

"Has he got anything to show for all these here enterprises?" Shorthorn inquired.

"Yeah. Got a little bunch of cattle runnin' around the Sweetgrass," Johnny said. "Maybe tha's what was in the back of my mind when I wanted to know what he was doin' on this range with a pack outfit."

"I kinda liked his looks," Shorthorn confessed. "But he might bear watchin' at that."

"So long as he watches his p's and q's I wouldn't worry him, or about him," Johnny said. "If he gets gay an' festive around here, he'll bust his fool self."

Johnny, having announced this demonstrable truth, which the Cross Seven and Block S had proved many times in years past, turned the conversation into other channels. The winter sun thrust his last cold beams through the west windows of the Horn horse ranch. The northwest wind hauled south and rose to a gale as the sun went down. It huffed and puffed as if it were furious at the stout log walls and the glowing fireplace. Its whistle and whine sounded faintly in the ears of sleeping men all night. And at dawn they rose to find the eaves dripping under the warm breath of a chinook.

Whereupon Johnny Fee and Rube Taylor rode forth upon such business as took them abroad on a winter range. They forgot Slippery Sam Good. They pulled for the Cross Seven that afternoon with their coats unbuttoned, caps jauntily on the backs of their heads, marking cattle in hundreds forsaking the low sheltered bottoms for the high ridges and better grass. It had been a fairly hard winter. The blizzard and the wolf had held high carnival.

"If Slippery is as good at wolfin' as they say he is at other things," Johnny remarked when they halted to gaze at the mutilated carcass of a fresh killed heifer, "I'd be willin' to pay him a bonus on top of the bounty. Darn these wolves anyway. They're hell on stock."

"Yeah. They got away with a lot of weak stuff lately," Rube agreed. "Say, Sam is a dead ringer for Highflyer, ain't he, Johnny?"

"Sure. Same beanpole build. But Highflyer looked mean an' *was* mean. Slippery's got a innocent look. Only that don't mean much, I guess."

"I was just thinkin'," Rube continued. "Highflyer operated a lot around the Sweetgrass. Maybe that border country just naturally breeds cussedness."

"Maybe," said Johnny. "But Highflyer's dead an' Sam's still in the ring. I don't care what he is or what he does so long as he plays a legitimate hand whilst he's south of the Bear Paws. If he confines hisself to workin' on wolves with traps an' dogs an' poison, we'll disregard his sinful past."

The task of running a cow outfit comprising of thirty-odd thousand head of cattle occupied Johnny Fee's mind to the exclusion of Slippery Sam for some time thereafter. The warm Chinook wind cleared the range of snow, drew the frost out of the ground, gave range cattle ten days of balmy weather. Then winter set its teeth again. A flurry of snow brought the thermometer down. The range lay glittering white under the yellow eye of a cold sun. The wolves lifted their sobbing howl in moon bright wastes at night,

prowling hungry on the flanks of the range herds.

Since there was little man could do on a range where wild stock lived by its hardihood through those bitter days, the Cross Seven and Block S men, with their fellows on lesser ranches scattered through the Bear Paws, were free to play when they wished. The people of the south slope danced a few of the frosty nights away. At one of these light hearted gatherings in the schoolhouse on Little Eagle close by Block S headquarters Johnny Fee encountered Slippery Sam once more.

Johnny and his wife were late arrivals. The fiddle and piano were beating time for thirty couples when they took the floor. Slippery Sam danced with a redheaded girl from Sand Creek. In his blue serge and starched collar Sam looked and acted like a gentleman. The girls seemed to like him. And since it was part of the range code to take a man at his face value Mr. Sam Good appeared to be reasonably popular on this night of pleasure.

"Maybe," Johnny reflected, "he ain't so black as he's been painted."

Half an hour later Slippery led an immaculately dressed stranger up to Johnny Fee and introduced him as Mr. Paul Howard-Howard. The hyphenated name tickled Johnny, and the man himself stirred in Johnny Fee mingled feelings of pity and amusement.

He was about thirty, of medium height, very well kept as to hands and skin. His hair was plastered flat with pomade. He might have been the embodiment of a book of deportment in his manner. His language was that of a professor of English with a passion for polysyllables and detailed explanations about everything about which he knew anything whatever. Johnny

lent an attentive ear. This was a new specimen, doubly interesting because he proved to be a friend and household companion of a hardboiled egg like Slippery Sam Good.

"It is a wonderful experience for me to be privileged to view the great beating heart of the West with my own eyes," said Mr. Howard-Howard to Johnny Fee. "Simply wonderful. I shall always be under an unrepayable obligation to Mr. Good for the opportunity thus afforded. It means a very great deal to me in my career, I assure you, Mr. Fee. I am a writer."

"You don't say," Johnny commented politely.

"Yes. You may have seen one or two of my little things—modest contributions to literature in current periodicals," said Mr. Howard-Howard diffidently. "All life, all human emotion, absorbs me, but I am at present particularly engrossed in the picturesque aspect of certain phases of American frontier life, the great pastoral drama which has been, and is being, enacted on the vast plains. It is my ambition to write the Great American Novel, to delineate heroism and tragedy in epic form. The fortunate circumstance of my encountering Mr. Good in Fort Benton and being invited by him to spend some time at his quarters on Chase Hill has put me in the way of securing an undreamed of mass of extraordinarily invaluable material. The cattleman and the great herds, the stampedes, the broncos, the great West generally has never been adequately portrayed in fictional form, Mr. Fee. I find that in the East we have a very erroneous conception of life as it is lived in these vast unpeopled spaces."

"That so?" Johnny said. "You goin' to write a book about us, eh?"

"I am engaged in that undertaking already," Mr. Howard-Howard admitted. "I have sketched out a number of the preliminary chapters. The skeletal outline took form in my mind shortly after hearing a few of the exceeding colorful details of Mr. Good's personal history. One must have a central character in a novel, you know, Mr. Fee. Mr. Good is a splendid type—though much maligned, as he has candidly confessed to me—and his career has been a sequence of dramatic incidents, all typical of the great West, the necessary corollary of the magnificent compass of frontier existence. Even the highly suggestive cognomen affixed to him by ill-informed and malicious persons possesses a distinct value for my purpose. In fact the title of my novel is to be, 'The Saga of Slippery Sam.'"

"I expect," Johnny said, somewhat overwhelmed by these phrases, "you could make quite a book about Slippery."

"It will be an epic," Mr. Howard-Howard replied enthusiastically. "An epic."

"But of course," he confessed, "I shall require to paint in my background with great care as to verisimilitude. I hope to have the privilege of meeting many pioneers in this region. I should like to be accepted by the people generally as one of themselves, thereby enabling me to gain a clear insight into the modes, customs, characteristics and psychology of the frontier. I stand lost in admiration, Mr. Fee, at the courage, the fine democratic spirit, the resource and initiative which has been and is being displayed here on the great cattle ranges. One could write great literature about such a people."

"I got a partner for this dance," said Johnny. "You might amble over to the Cross Seven some day an' stay with us a spell. Old Eph Marks come up the trail in '79, an' shoved the buffalo out of his way as he come. He can tell you all about old times. He's fought Injuns an' seen plenty wild west. You goin' to stay with Sam long?"

"For an indefinite period," Mr. Howard-Howard responded. "He is much interested in my literary undertaking and we find the companionship mutually desirable. Thank you for the invitation, Mr. Fee. I shall be delighted to avail myself of your generous hospitality at an early date."

Johnny repeated, verbatim, as much of this conversation as he could recall in the Cross Seven bunkhouse next day. Rube Taylor had also talked, or rather listened, to Mr. Howard-Howard.

"Him an' Slippery Sam is some combination," Rube chuckled. "He's 'most too good to be true, ain't he, Johnny? He speaks of practisin' the gentle art of cookery. He rustles grub while Sam hunts wolves. Calls 'em savage, predatory scourges of the range. Thinks Sam's a hero for chasin' 'em with four dogs an' a Winchester carbine. Say, this here book he's writin' about Slippery Sam ought to be some punkins."

"Epistle of St. Paul to the Montanans," Johnny drawled. "He sprays language like a garden hose, that feller. Eph'll give him somethin' to write about. What the old man don't know he'll invent. We'll have to go down on Chase Hill some day and look him an' Sam over again."

Johnny and Rube rode to Chase Hill sooner than they expected. That dance had been given at the height of a cold snap. The Chinook breathed softly across the plains once more and since the spring equinox drew near the sun had acquired a genial warmth in his one-eyed smile. So the Cross Seven riders went abroad in pairs on the range picking up stray saddle horses against spring roundup. On one

of these rides Johnny Fee and Rube Taylor met Nick Horn coming up from the broken country beyond Birch Creek. Nick led a packed horse. He sat sidewise in his saddle, looking worn and sleepy. Johnny eyed him shrewdly.

"You look like you'd been hitting the high spots, Shorthorn," he remarked.

"I have," Shorthorn replied briefly. "Bunch of our horses has took up with somebody."

"Ain't just strayed, have they?" Johnny asked.

Shorthorn shook his head.

"Twelve head of four-year-olds that we broke last fall—the pick of a hundred. Eight good workhorses. We turned 'em out in October. They been rangin' a couple of miles below the ranch all winter. They vanished day before yesterday. Drove off. Tracks showed that. Went east. You know how wild horses has the country all cut up between here and the Gros Ventre Reservation. I lost 'em."

"Huh!" Johnny grunted. "Well, we got back them horses Highflyer stole last summer. Suppose our friend on Chase Hill knows anythin' about this?"

Shorthorn grinned bleakly.

"I thought he might, so I stopped in on him. Says he seen 'em pass. That didn't help me much."

"If half they say of him is true," Johnny murmured. "Say, let's pay him a call. We figured on holin' up at old man Carr's for the night, but we can just about make Slippery's hangout by supper time. I wouldn't worry, Shorthorn. Horses of a well known brand ain't easy to get away with. I don't think Sam would be fool enough to monkey with your stock."

"Bud's done sent word to the Valley County people to watch for Fleur de Lys horses drivin' through," Shorthorn said. "I expect we'll get track of 'em all right. But it sure annoys me."

"You let me do most of the talkin' at Slippery Sam's," Johnny requested. "I'm gittin' curious about that jasper. Maybe we'd ought to kept closer tab on him."

But Slippery Sam forestalled them all in the matter of talking. He made them welcome and asked them to stay overnight. They unloaded their packs at the door and turned their horses into a little pole-fenced pasture. The chill of a March evening followed sunset. They gladly toasted their feet by a fireplace of rough stone over the coals of which Mr. Howard-Howard in flannel shirt and torn overalls occupied himself with two Dutch ovens and a coffee pot. He was very polite and also very intent on his cooking

Johnny Fee, whose keen eyes took in everything wherever he happened to be, noted wolf and coyote hides stretched on the outside walls of the cabin—two big wolfskins with bloodstains still fresh on them. He counted thirty-six skins inside, stretched and dried and slung to the roof beams.

"You sure been death on the wolves," he observed.

"Yeah. I'll make a real killin' on the lobos from now on," Sam replied. "They're beginnin' to den up to have their pups. But you fellers," he drawled, "kinda suspect that ain't all I've occupied myself with, lately, in these parts."

"You a kind of a mind reader along with your other gifts?" Johnny returned dryly.

"I ain't a fool," Slippery answered bluntly. "An' I got the sort of rep that makes fellers like you camp on my trail if I'm in their territory when anythin' happens. Shorthorn here he loses a bunch of horses. He come by here the other day an' he ain't in a good humor—which is natural. You fellers ain't stuck your feet under my table this winter. You wouldn't be here now if you wasn't kinda interested in me on account of this horse stealin'."

"Well," Johnny drawled, "none of us has accused you. I expect you got a first class alibi."

"I have if it's needed," Sam retorted. "I ain't been over fifteen miles from this cabin for a month, barrin' the night we rode to that dance. I ain't got twenty head of stolen horses concealed in my hip pocket. I seen 'em go by, as I told Shorthorn. I wasn't close, but I got a good pair of field glasses. The chances are you'll

locate 'em after a while sold to farmers in Dakota or Minnesota. They'd just about hit the farm country in time for seedin'."

"You seem to know how it's worked," Johnny said.

"Shucks!" Slippery grunted unruffled. "You know that as well as I do. It's been done plenty. They pick up broke horses here an' there, drive 'em east a few hundred miles, hit the Great Northern or the N. P., load 'em in boxcars to the wheat country, sell 'em cheap to the farmers an' drift with the plunder. Wherever there's stock there's bound to be an odd thief. That's why you have stock detectives goin' around with eyes an' ears open and their mouths shut.

"An' I'm spittin' this out at you," Slippery went on after a brief pause, "because I got a bad name an' I want to get rid of it. I ain't foolish. I told you before that if I aimed to rustle I sure wouldn't pick this range where Eph Marks an' Adam Sutherland has been for years a terror to rustlers. I ain't sore because you fellers suspect I might know somethin' about this. I been suspected plenty. Stealin' horses ain't my game because I know it's a losin' game. Every darned officer in Choteau an' Valley counties has chased me up one time an' another in the last five years, till I hate the sight of 'em. This Highflyer that you fellers blowed up in Big Sandy last summer got me into more than one jackpot. He was a horsethief an' a slick one. Him'n' me looked a lot alike. He took advantage of that. I got blamed for some of his work, when I was attendin' to my own business. Here's the point I'm gettin' at: if you fellers get too suspicious of me on general principles, you'll just naturally run me outa here. An' I'm doin' all right here. I'm doin' both myself an' you lots of good on this wolfin' proposition."

"All right Sammy, old boy," Johnny said. "You'll get all the chance there is. We'll admit we was curious about you. If you're shootin' square, we're with you both ways from the ace. If you ain't, we can protect ourselves in our own way. So there's no argument on that subject. We'll spend a peaceable evenin' together."

Slippery grinned. His grin might have meant anything, but at least it seemed genial.

"How's the Epistle of St. Paul to the Montanans comin' on?" Johnny inquired of Mr. Howard-Howard, who had been squatting by his Dutch ovens taking in this very frank conversation with bug-eyed wonder and a trace of alarm. He looked properly mystified at Johnny's playful query.

"How's the book comin' along?" Johnny interpreted. "This here Saga of Slippery Sam. She ought to be a humdinger. You gettin' lots of stuff to work in?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," Mr. Howard-Howard assured him. "I am making very satisfactory progress. There is such a wealth of magnificent material. Space and color and highly spectacular action. I feel so enthused over the literary possibilities. But at present," he grew facetious, "I am functioning in my capacity as a culinary artist. If you gentlemen are ready I shall be delighted to serve dinner. I have here a haunch of venison prepared according to the recipe of a celebrated European chef."

"Got a blacktail deer in the brakes the other day," Sam exclaimed. "Paul ain't kiddin'. He sure can cook to a queen's taste. Line up to the table, fellers. I guess we got dishes enough to go around."

"St. Paul, if you can write a yarn about the wild an' woolly West half as good as the grub you sling, you'll have 'em all sittin' up an' takin' notice," Johnny Fee declared sincerely when he reached the coffee and cigarette stage. "I never eat such good stuff out of a Dutch oven before."

Mr. Howard-Howard glowed under praise. He explained volubly the science and technique of preparing meats, vegetables and sauces in language which if sometimes difficult to comprehend was impressive as it rolled sonorously off his tongue. After the table had been cleared he read them part of a chapter of the Saga of Slippery Sam, certain descriptive passages about the great plains, the sagebrush haunted by wolves and jackrabbits. It was very ornate and flowery. To Johnny and Rube and Shorthorn it didn't somehow convey a picture of their own habitat. But it served to exhibit a wonderful vocabulary. St. Paul's writing was even more elaborate than his speech. They admired his flow of words if nothing else.

"You're sure gettin' a lot of distinction,

bein' embalmed in literature that way, Sam," Johnny waggishly suggested.

"Oh, well, hell," Sam replied in some embarrassment. "Paul he's all het up over this writin' me up. I can stand it if he can. Between cookin' and writin' he's the busiest thing on Chase Hill. He allows it's doin' him good. An' he can sure cook fancy grub."

"What you think of that pair?" Rube laughed when they rode away at sunrise. "Sort of human odd an' even, them two. What you think of Slippery's spiel about himself, last night, Johnny?"

"I don't know," Johnny said thoughtfully. "I'll say this much: Sam makes out a good case for himself. Yet I ain't convinced. I got nothin' against him, an' I got nothin' to go on. I know that when a dog gets a bad name it sticks an' makes you leary of him even when he's on his good behavior. I aim to give Slippery the benefit of the doubt. Same time he might be foolin' us. It's a cinch *he* didn't steal them Fleur de Lys horses. But he might know more about it than he lets on. Darn it, you can't help likin' the beggar. I'd hate to think he was puttin' it over us. Yet accordin' to all accounts he's so crooked he can't lay straight in bed. What you think, Shorthorn?"

"Darned if I know," Nick answered. "I like him, too. Yet I've knowed nice fellers you couldn't trust. Same time old Slippery is sure devotin' himself to exterminatin' wolves. That don't leave much room for horse stealin' expeditions. Naw, I guess Slippery isn't it, this time. Naw, that literary gent's a lulu, ain't he?"

"Old St. Paul he's sure gettin' himself crammed full of red-hot stuff for publication, all right," Johnny grinned. "We got to get him up the Cross Seven an' let Eph Marks have a crack at him. He said he might amble over any day soon."

St. Paul did amble over. Slippery Sam and his four brindle wolfhounds came with him. Mr. Ephraim B. Marks had Mr. Howard-Howard up at the big house for a visit. Slippery held forth with the riders in the bunkhouse, played stud poker with them till midnight and went to bed twenty dollars richer for his efforts.

"Sam," Rube Taylor said whimsically, when Slippery called a perfectly fortified bluff for a good pot with only a pair of fours, "what kind of poker do you play anyhow?"

"Aces, cinches and hunches," Sam told him genially.

They stayed three days. St. Paul hung on the words of all and sundry about this old-time cow ranch. The kind and quantity of local color he absorbed was sufficient for a series of novels. The cowpuncher had a fertile fancy and a ribald sense of humor. A tenderfoot was his meat. So that a most enjoyable time was had by all. And Slippery Sam combed the ridges above the Cross Seven at dawn and dusk and nailed three big wolves, which commended him greatly to Mr. Ephraim B. Marks. The morning of the fourth day the pair departed for Chase Hill.

Finally the last of March merged into early April. Nature seemed striving to make up for the remorseless rigor of midwinter. Young calves and colts looked their first on a world of balmy air, blue sky and bright sunshine and their mothers forgot the sting of the blizzard and the howl of the hungry wolf. Saddle horses shed matted hair, grew sleek and shiny coats, were gathered into the *remuda* against spring roundup, until the first week in May the Cross Seven and the Block S together, forty riders strong, with all their gear in order, moved out toward Big Sandy to load supplies and begin to comb the range.

During this time Mr. Howard-Howard and Slippery Sam had done well by themselves. Sam hunted wolf dens with field glasses, a deer-stalker's skill and infinite patience. Each den yielded from six to nine pups. Sometimes the old dog wolf or his mate fell under the hunter's rifle. The buffalo wolf of the plains, the lobo, any age or sex, was worth eight dollars to a wolfer. So that Slippery Sam enriched himself and greatly benefited the stockman.

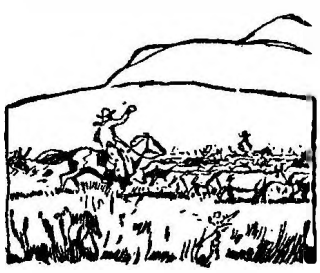
When the outfits pulled for the railroad the wolfing season was over. Slippery joined the Cross Seven, with his pelts lashed atop of his bed and kyaks, at the first camp below the home ranch where the Bear Paws ran out into grassy plains. Mr. Howard-Howard, who rode like a sack of meal, gazed wondering-eyed over this concourse of horses and riders whose spurs and bits jingled and whose silver ornaments flashed bravely in the sun, while Slippery Sam sat sidewise in his saddle and said to Johnny Fee, "Look. I'm goin' up to Benton to cash in these scalps an' sell the hides. There's a long summer ahead. I got a few cattle runnin' with a granger's outfit in the Sweetgrass. I'm ambitious to own more. What's the chance of makin' a hand with the Cross Seven this summer?"

"Good as the wheat," said Johnny Fee.

"You can make a hand anywhere, I guess. But this literary sidekicker of yours. If he comes along he'll have to be a guest."

Slippery grinned.

"I expect Paul'll be goin' East pretty soon. He'd like to look over a big roundup before he goes though. He's a little bit shy about askin'."



"I ain't noticed his shyness particular," Johnny replied. "He can look all he wants. Long as he don't hanker for to be a cowboy. I ain't runnin' a kindergarten. All right, Sam. You can trail along with us to Benton, cash your pelts and catch us where we join the other outfits for the general. We start work at Grassy Lakes."

The Cross Seven hit Big Sandy next afternoon, loaded the chuck wagon and sent it out to pitch camp on the brink of Lonesome Prairie Lake, five miles north of town. Johnny and most of the riders stayed in Big Sandy. Bobby Sneyd, Rube Taylor, and Slippery Sam, went with the wagons to help the cook and horse wrangler set up camp. St. Paul journeyed with them to satisfy his avid curiosity about every detail of a cowoutfit's technique. He was not only useless, but in his eagerness to miss nothing he frequently got in the way. The riders regarded him with the tolerant amusement grown-ups usually bestow on a small, exuberant boy.

At sunset, therefore, Johnny was not surprised to see the quartette ride in again. He did, however, wonder why Slippery Sam returned leading his pack horse. Probably a flicker of that showed in Johnny's eyes, because when Sam hitched his two nags to the rack before the Silver Dollar he said to Johnny, "I reckoned I could beat the outfit to Fort Benton. So I figure to mosey on by myself after a while. I'll lay up a couple of hours on the Marias an' make the Fort in the cool of mornin'."

That was reasonable and practical. Johnny went about his business, which consisted chiefly of sauntering from one to the other of three saloons and the hotel bar. Johnny wasn't drinking. Most of his crew were, and he had to have a full count of riders in camp at daybreak. St. Paul, who likewise refrained from crooking his elbow, attached himself to Johnny. Between poker games, and the hilarity forty riders generated in this little town, the man of letters apparently soaked up local color in generous gobs.

About ten o'clock a clatter of hoofs came up before the Silver Dollar. A rider dismounted, tied a pack horse and his mount to the rail and clanked in. He blinked in the lamplight and the riders hailed him with welcoming recognition.

"I put my string in the stockyards," said the newcomer. "Gosh I sure burned the earth to catch you before you got started. Where's camp? Say, bartender, tap a case of beer. I'm one big thirst. Them Box Elder flats is all same Mojave Desert."

He bought a drink for all and sundry, after the custom of the country. The next man treated and the next, on down the long line at the bar. St. Paul and Johnny Fee rolled balls on a billiard table. St. Paul asked, "Who is the gentleman so diligently assuaging a great thirst?"

"Buck Stanley. A rep from the Capital K."

Johnny had to go into a detailed explanation of the system whereby the big outfits exchanged representative riders while on roundup. And while he talked the voice of Buck Stanley, which was a naturally loud and genial bellow, grew louder and less genial as the potent liquid with which he drowned his big thirst took effect.

Johnny began to take notice. Buck was a top hand. Every man in the two outfits knew him, liked him. In three seasons repping for the Capital K with upper country outfits, Buck, drunk, sober, tired or playful, had held up his end without a collision with anyone. Yet he had a reputation as a bad actor, a very bad actor indeed when he got going. He seemed to Johnny Fee to be under way now. Whether it was liquor or natural cussedness wasn't clear. Certainly Buck was stacking up for trouble. And trouble was no welcome contingency among range men.

Buck's animosity seemed to focus on one particular Block S man, a peaceable enough individual who was becoming restive under Buck's hostile mood. Johnny Fee hadn't run a big outfit three seasons without the gift of stepping diplomatically into a breach. He called Pete Malone aside.

"Say, Pete," he confided, "Buck's all set to start somethin' if we don't head him off. He's drunk an' don't give a damn. You talk him into makin' a break for camp. He'll forget this grievance stuff once he's slept on it."

Pete nodded. He was an old-timer and a friend of Buck's. What persuasion he used Johnny couldn't tell. But he got Buck out and mounted and they rode away singing merrily, lustily, unmindful of pack horse or the string in the stockyards or aught else.

"It's great to be happy," Johnny grinned at St. Paul. "Nothin' on Buck's mind now but his hat. Like as not though," he added to Mr. Howard-Howard, who stuck close at his elbow, "Buck'll recall his stock about the time he hits camp. If he does he'll come back in spite of hell an' high water and start the *baile* all over. You bring that pack horse of his along, Paul. Ride out across the tracks, slow. I'll get his string and join you."

Johnny took a last glance around the Silver Dollar. The bar was lined with riders, talking, laughing. A hum of conversation filled the big room. Slippery Sam sat in a poker game, soberly intent, engrossed in the play, red chips stacked chin high before him.

Johnny mounted, loped to the stockyards, turned out the fourteen head of Capital K horses and headed north. Just across the railroad that crossed an arid adobe flat St. Paul loomed in the night with Buck's packed bed. They climbed a slope that lifted to the dim level of Lonesome Prairie. Jogging at a slow trot they came at length into a silent camp. The nighthawk took over Buck's loose horses.

Johnny and St. Paul began unlashing the pack.

"Suffer-in' cats!" Johnny Fee exclaimed. "You took the wrong text for your midnight sermon, St. Paul. This is a horse on us, all right."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said Mr. Howard-Howard.

"Bein' a author, you should," Johnny replied. "This is where the plot thickens. This here is a case of mistaken identity. You took the wrong pack animal, St. Paul. This is Slippery Sam's outfit."

"I'm dreadfully sorry," St. Paul murmured. "Are you positive?"

"I am," Johnny replied. "You'd ought to know your partner's horse. You lived with him all winter."

"I do not see clearly in this darkness," said St. Paul lugubriously. "What shall we do?"

"Mistakes occur in the best regulated families," Johnny remarked. "They was both tied to the same hitchin' rack. We'll have to take him back. Sam'll think somebody got away with his wolf scalps."

Mr. Howard-Howard said nothing. He groped about in the unfastened pack, in the kyaks, as if he could not otherwise convince himself that this was indeed his partner's outfit, even though the feel and smell of wolf hides was plain.

"Here, lemme lash her up again," said Johnny. "Buck's dead to the world now. We'll restore Slippery's pack an' get Buck's bed."

They swung up. Johnny jogged back through the velvet night. Off in the southeast Old Centennial made a faint blur against the sky. A cloud haze blanketed the stars. In the plains stillness the jingle of their gear, the creak of leather and the patter of hoofs under them sounded to the thin accompaniment of reedy frog voices that died as Lonesome Lake fell away behind them. An immensity of blackness enfolded, but Johnny pointed straight for Big Sandy with the sureness bred of years in that environment. In half an hour the rim of the prairie dipping sharp to the flats opened the yellow lights of town. Nearer, voices uplifted in song to the plunk of a tinny piano apprised them of unabated merrymaking. Throughout that ride St. Paul kept uncommonly quiet. Slippery Sam met them as they dismounted before the Silver Dollar.

"Think somebody'd swiped your outfit?"

"Naw," Sam grunted. "I called the turn. Figured you grabbed my horse instead of Buck's in the dark. Guess I'll put this critter in the livery barn till I'm ready to start."

He led the animal away. Johnny and St. Paul stood on the porch of the saloon. They saw Slippery fade into the dark toward the nearby stable. A minute later he emerged, a dim figure in a thin haze of light from the windows. He crossed the dirt street to the hotel.

St. Paul gripped Johnny's arm.

"Listen, Fee," he said. "Will you do something for me?"

"Gosh!" Johnny breathed. It wasn't surprise at the request, but at the unheralded transformation in tone, voice, attitude. The light from the Silver Dollar fell faintly on Howard's face. Johnny stared.

"I'm not fooling. I'm not clowning

now," Paul went on quickly. His voice was decisive, his speech clipped to curtness. "This is important. Will you do what I ask and keep your mouth shut?"

"Name your poison," Johnny said. "I don't make blind stabs in the dark."

"There is a man from Helena at the hotel. Sam Good's probably talking to him in the bar. He's a stout, heavy set fellow in a gray suit and a brown derby hat. I want you to go over there. Step in casual. Stand around careless. Keep your eye on the two. When Sam and this fellow go out, stroll into the street. Can you whistle Dixie?"

"Yeah."

"Walk over to the Silver Dollar, whistling Dixie. Leave the rest to me. If you hear a fuss around the livery stable keep your men from horning in and spoiling my play."

"What is your play?" Johnny demanded. "Who are you? What's your game?"

"It's legitimate. I've got authority for what I do," St. Paul answered curtly. "Will you do what I ask? I'll explain later. It'll interest you."

"It ain't much. I guess I will," Johnny agreed. "But I wish to remark that you've got me guessin'. You sure ain't what you seemed to be."

"I'm on the square," St. Paul assured him in a tone that somehow carried conviction to Johnny Fee. "Be a sport and step across to the hotel. Whistle Dixie a minute or so after those two step out."

"How do you know they will?" Johnny asked.

"I know more than I've got time to tell right now," St. Paul said dryly. "Fly at it, Johnny Fee."

He stepped off the porch. Johnny watched him melt into the dark toward the stable. Johnny himself walked slowly across to the hotel.

"*He* ain't no tenderfoot," Johnny said to himself. "He's been stringin' us all the time. I wonder why? Well, here goes."

Sure enough, Slippery Sam leaned elbow on the bar in confab with a thick set man in a gray suit and brown derby. Traveling salesmen frequently stopped off in Big Sandy. This was a typical specimen. As such he would have attracted neither notice nor comment. Johnny included him and Sam in a casual grin, bought a drink for all hands without drinking himself. Then he took a chair at an empty poker table and laid out a spread of solitaire.

Five minutes later Slippery Sam walked out. Brown Derby strolled into the hall. Johnny heard his heavy feet clumping up uncarpeted stairs.

"This ain't quite accordin' to the gospel expounded by St. Paul," Johnny thought. "But they've gone out. So I guess I'll put on the next act."

He wandered into the dusky street. There was no one in sight. Johnny whistled Dixie merrily as he crossed to the Silver Dollar.

Slippery hadn't gone into the Silver Dollar. Johnny, curiosity personified, went to the Exchange, to Monty's Place. No Sam there. For two pins Johnny Fee would have stolen to the livery stable, but he remembered St. Paul's injunction. Also with a very human curiosity, a blithe courage which could be reckless when occasion required, Johnny had a streak of prudence. Other people's business—it wasn't his affair. So he went back to the Silver Dollar and watched the give and take of a poker game.

Over and above the click of chips, the hum of voices, Johnny's ears were cocked for sounds of a "fuss." The terse phrases of St. Paul on the porch sounded strange in the mouth of a man who had previously seemed unable to express the simplest idea in words of less than four syllables.

The wide door of the Silver Dollar swung inward. Slippery Sam and Brown Derby appeared side by each. They traveled abreast for the simple reason that they were locked right wrist of one to left wrist of the other by a shiny pair of handcuffs. Each in his free hand carried a bulky suitcase.

St. Paul stepped in behind them with a six-shooter in his hand. His face was wreathed in a broad smile of satisfaction.

At this strange spectacle a hush fell on the gathered company. Those at the bar stood with glasses suspended. The poker players turned in their chairs. St. Paul shoved his gun inside the waistband of his trousers with a deftness never learned in literary circles.

"The drinks are on me," he said expansively, "and I'll have one myself to celebrate this suspicious occasion. Lead your partner to the bar, Sam," he commanded. "You won't have a chance to hoist one when you feel like it—not where you're going."

Paul poured himself two fingers of rye whisky, raised his glass with a smile.

"Here's looking at all you boys," he said. "You've had a lot of fun with me, and I have had some myself. You're beginning your roundup. I've just finished mine. Here's how."

"You two can sit down for a spell," he instructed his prisoners. "It's after twelve. The passenger will be along about two-thirty."

"Uncork yourself, St. Paul," said Johnny Fee. "What's it all about?"

Slippery Sam backed his unwilling twin up against the billiard table and perched himself on its edge. Slippery seemed quite himself, except for a faint scowl. He towered above Brown Derby like a flagpole. The Cross Seven and Block S men gathered in a silent circle, curious, intent.

"Simple," said Mr. Howard-Howard crisply. "I'm a U. S. revenue service agent. Those two suitcases contain sixty pounds of opium in two-ounce tins. Slippery made a trip north two weeks ago.

This stuff was in his pack when he came back. It was in his pack tonight. He was turning it over at the stable when I nailed 'em. Slippery's the opium runner. This other's the receiving agent for a hop ring in Helena. I've got 'em with the goods. They'll get five years."

Johnny Fee whistled. Somehow he felt sorry for Slippery Sam. Johnny had begun to like him. He had begun to entertain the idea that Slippery had been maligned. And he was death on wolves, even if his wolfing had been a blind.

"You fooled me," Slippery said with a slight frown. "An' I suppose you feel good over makin' a killin'."

"I think the department will admit I've done well," Howard replied. "These opium leaks across the line have been worrying me."

"Maybe. But that ain't all of it by a long shot," Slippery's thin face suddenly wrinkled in a grin. "Cast your eye over these, St. Paul."

Sam dug with his free hand into the inside pocket of his coat. He produced a wallet, opened it, drew out several folded papers.

St. Paul glanced over them one by one. His eyebrows went up. He read them carefully and his face seemed visibly to lengthen.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed at last in a tone of deep disgust. "How'd they get their wires crossed this way?"

"It's a habit they have," Slippery said grimly. "They've got me in bad before now, the same way. They have a way of not letting the right hand know what the left hand's doin'. Are you satisfied?"

"I guess I have to be," Howard grumbled, as he handed back the documents.

"All right. This feller's it. He's your meat," Sam said. "Take this bracelet off'n me."

St. Paul produced a key, released Slippery Sam, and manacled Brown Derby's wrists together.

Slippery drew himself erect, put his hands in his pockets, faced the group.

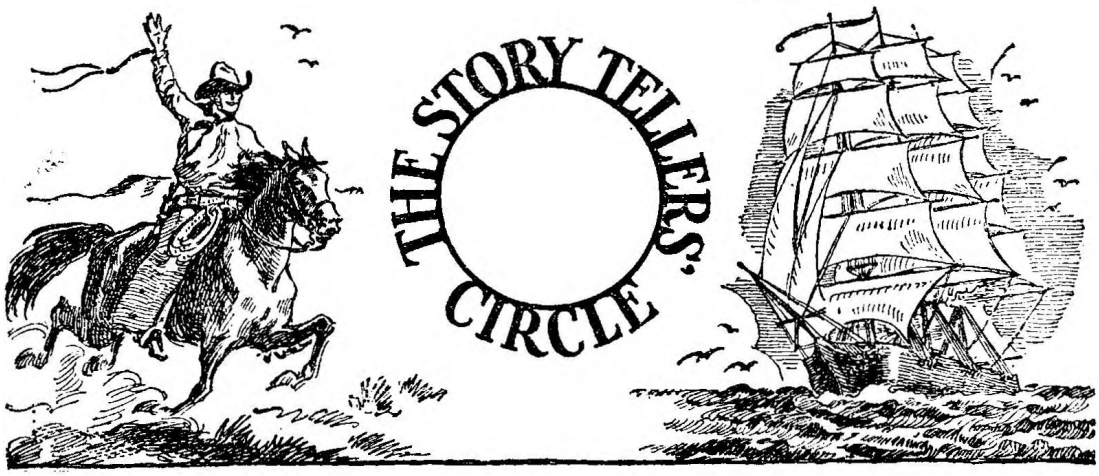
"Now I'll explain myself," he drawled. "I'm through. For five years I've taken the dirty end of it along the border as a secret agent for Uncle Sam's revenue department. All I've got out of it is common laborer's wages an' a reputation that stinks to heaven. Every county officer an' half the people in northern Montana think I'm everything I hadn't ought to be. I've been a damned useful servant to the customs. I've broke up a lot of crooked games. I've worked on this particular case quite a while, Howard. You're welcome to all the glory you can get out of it. This jasper has lots of information which he'll cough up, because he'll weaken to save his own hide. I was about ready to quit, because I'd like a chance to live down the name I got. An' this settles it. I'm through. Absolutely an' completely through. Does that job with the Cross Seven still go, Johnny?"

"It does," Johnny answered. "You bet."

"I'll punch cows in summer, an' wolf in the winter an' forget all my tarnished past in the revenue service," Sam declared. "It's a thankless job. You can tell 'em I said so. I ain't even goin' to write a resignation."

"An' this here episode, Paul," he concluded with a cheerful grin, "you can set down an' write as the last chapter in that there famous novel of yours entitled 'The Saga of Slippery Sam.'"

"If I was a real author instead of a fake one," St. Paul answered with a wry sort of grimace, "I sure would. And it would be a peach of a story."




## COLORADO RIVER PROJECT STILL BLOCKED

IN FRANK C. ROBERTSON'S story "Grass vs. Gold" in this issue of SHORT STORIES he gives us a chapter from an age-long struggle of rival interests on the frontiers of the world. Gold will bring wealth to those who dig for it, but will lay waste the country. Grass land will fodder cattle, and in cattle is also wealth. Which of the great interests will win out? The story is fiction; the problem has been fought out in many an outland.

Just at the present time in the West there is being staged on a gigantic scale another sort of struggle, with rival interests contending for a colossal stake. In a recent special session the California state legislature again failed to pass legislation that would allow the great Colorado River irrigation project to be put through. So, for still another indefinite period anxious Imperial Valley must remain imperiled by the fierce marauding river that has already submerged one great district under its flooding waters.

From its inception this tremendous project, which has the triple purpose of irrigating thousands of square miles of now arid lands, safeguarding the Imperial Valley from destruction by flood, and providing electric power for a half dozen states, has been obstructed by conflicting agricultural and political interests. Seven states —Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico and California— have claims on the waters of the Colorado River. In 1923 a Federal Commission evolved a plan for cooperation which was satisfactory to all the interested states except California and Arizona. Later a compromise plan was evolved by which the approval of only six states was necessary for the undertaking, thus fixing it so that California's approval would put the project through. But California failed to take advantage of the new provision.

Meanwhile magnificent Imperial Valley, with sixty thousand residents and invaluable agricultural lands producing over sixty thousand carloads of foodstuffs per year, lies at the mercy of the Colorado. The Imperial Valley is already far below the water level in the river. Between it and the water lies only the river's own frail banks of soft silt. And every year the Colorado is raising the level of its own bed one foot through deposits of silt on the bottom, thus uprearing higher and higher above the imperiled valley and placing more and more strain on the soft earthern river banks. One break through in flood time, and great irrigated Imperial Valley may become the bottom of another Salton Sea.

## AN INDIAN SIGN

IN CONTRAST to that grim note of changing condition in the great West is the following item from the New York *Times* of a recent date, showing another side of civilization's progress:

"Lawrence, that Kansas city once memorable for its massacre, saw a considerable massacre of fat beeves not long ago. It is the site of the Haskell Institute, a great Government industrial school for Indians. Cherokees, Creeks, Osages, Pottawatomies, Quapaws came from afar, pony-back, by rail, in limousines, in high-powered cars, to dedicate the $250,000 stadium, built with their money.

"There were three or four days of high jinks on the Government reservation near the institute. There was a deserved 'free blow,' but the Indian girls and women, 'with a blanket roll of greenbacks,' bought sweets and preserves aplenty at the camp grocery. The sound of opening 'pop bottles' mingled with the throb of tomtoms. There were powwows and smokes; dances, eagle, rainbow, sun, snake; multi-colored costumes. 'Hiawatha' was performed with the original Indian cast, so to speak.

"There was a buffalo barbecue 'under the supervision of the brothers BIG HORSE.' Most of the Indian guests got their first taste of bison. If there were but four buffaloes, there were twelve supplementary steers. The merry-making ended with a football game. The best of luck to these plutocratic and generous Indian friends of sport and education! May they often lick at football! Sometimes we think they are the last hope for the 'Americanization' of the palefaces still so adept in chousing them."

## MR. SINCLAIR ON THE CHANGES

BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR has seen and lived so much of the life he writes of in the Bear Paw Range country stories and knows so much of Montana, that his letters are always interesting. This one was in answer to one of ours commenting on a visit to the Sun River Basin last summer during a packtrain trip in the Flathead and Sun River country of Montana:

"First thing I know I shall be qualifying as an old-timer; I don't suppose game animals are as plentiful in the Sun River Basin now as they were when I was there in the fall of '99. Elk were like cattle on the lower slopes. There was a good deal of trapping going on in there. When said trapper needed meat he rode forth and sized up a band of elk, much as a cowpuncher sized up beef cattle, picked out what suited him and butchered it quite casually. I never realized there was such a thing as local color those days. Had nothing on my mind but my hat. Going out on the Great Northern one must pass through several places where I used to blow in out of the grass country with beef herds. I haven't seen Montana since 1907, but they tell me it is given over—on the plains, at least—to barb wire, irrigating ditches and Russian thistles. Such is life in the Far West. During the few years I rode there, Montana sent annually to Chicago three hundred and fifty thousand head of beef, all range stuff, besides what went to Omaha and St. Paul. Yes, yes. Broadway wasn't the only place where they could talk in big figures those days.

"BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR."

To return to the Sun River Basin. We suspect it looks exactly the same now as it did when Sinclair saw it in '99 and we suspect that the game is just as plentiful now as it was then. It is a part of the Lewis and Clark National Forest and the lower Sun River Basin which from time immemorial has been a favorite grazing ground for elk, has been made into a game preserve especially for elk. No cattle are allowed to graze there and even pack outfits are restricted in their stay. In the winter the elk come down from the surrounding mountains and browse on the rich bunch grass which makes the lower Basin the envy and despair of every ranchman who has ever seen it. The elk are so thick in the winter that at the beginning of the season the hunters mass themselves across the creek on the boundary of the game preserve down by Sun River hot springs and usually get their legal supply of elk within an hour after sunrise of the first day of the open season as the animals cross the boundary of the preserve. Of course, there is no legal trapping there but the mountains on one side of the Basin are known as the Sheep Ridge and probably in the winter there are some sheep taken out by hardy hunters who risk capture by the rangers and game wardens.

## TWO NEW CIRCLEITES

IN THIS issue we have two writers who are new to SHORT STORIES readers, and so we are very glad to have them introduce themselves.

First is John J. Rowlands, author of "The Master Trapper" who says:

"North of Lake Superior in the Ontario wilderness that stretches away in unbroken forest to the shores of Hudson Bay lies a country from which not even the swift encroachments of civilization has entirely banished the color of romance.

"'The Master Trapper' grew out of tales and observations gathered during seven years of prospecting, mucking in mines, some exploring and surveying with men who came from every corner of the world to seek their fortune in the then new gold and silver fields of Cobalt and Porcupine.

"But not even the lure of the wilderness from which I never since have been entirely free, could down the desire to write. Then came newspaper work, and later magazine articles, in between which memories of the old days in the North crowd to be moulded into fiction.

"I have tried in this story to be as true to the country and the men who dwell there as they were to me, asking only that I be allowed to place them in situations necessary for the purpose of my tale.

Faithfully,

"JOHN J. ROWLANDS."

THEN from the North to the sea as is only proper, and listen to the letter of Millard C. Ward whose story, "Deep Sea Silver" is his first appearance in our pages:

"Any dope about 'Deep Sea Silver' and, incidentally, myself, must start when I went to work in a shipyard during an unusually long Christmas vacation from high school. I filled the lowest known job in a riveting gang, passer boy, and it was mean work and cold work, mostly down in the ballast tanks of nearly completed ships. One day when I had been there about two weeks, I, with several others, was sitting on a very cold log during the half hour for lunch, eating a very cold sandwich and looking at the very cold Patapsco River when all at once an old cargo tramp nosed out past the end of the drydock and went plugging off down the river, very close to

**DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER**

## READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1_____ 3_____

2_____ 4_____

5_____

I do not like:

_____ Why? _____

NAME _____ ADDRESS _____

shore. Now, just as she came abreast of us, the cook in a white apron and high white hat came out of the galley and heaved a bucket of steaming water overboard. That was absolutely all; but when school closed that June I found a cadet's job in the now defunct Green Star Line and went to sea.

"I stayed at sea for nearly two years and then, conceiving the idea of a naval career, got myself appointed to Annapolis. Well, owing to bronchial pneumonia and some difficulty with higher mathematics, I remained there only eight months and then went back to sea as quartermaster in a merchant ship.

"I made a good many trips through the Caribbean while at sea and was always interested in the great variation in depth of water there. That, together with a great admiration for the tricky navigation which some of the officers I sailed with delighted to use, was really all the truth that went into 'Deep Sea Silver.' The rest is pure romance.

"I have lately been third mate in a tiny, coastwise freighter and given a whirl to college. A little too much football in the latter place put me hors de combat for quite a while and that is another reason for 'Deep Sea Silver.'

"So here's wishing you luck until we meet again.

"MILLARD C. WARD."

## NEXT TIME

"TERROR OF THE SNOWS" a creepy, mysterious, thrilling story of the North and of the coming of a new god —Radio—to the barren lands, is the complete novel in our next issue. It is by Edison Marshall, and an outstanding tale on the list of a man who has written many of the best-sellers among Northern novels.

Then, too, in our next issue will be the first of many Harwood Steele stories which we hope to have in SHORT STORIES. Steele writes of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the "Northwest Mounted" so famous in fact and fiction; and he writes from knowledge it is given few men to possess. For as Mr. Steele writes us:

"My knowledge of the Mounted Police goes deep, as I've been in close touch with them nearly all my life. My father, called by Western Canadians 'Sam' Steele, a Canadian son of a naval officer who fought under Nelson, was the first man to be taken on by the recruiting staff when the force was formed in 1873 and he eventually became superintendent and crowned 30 years of the wildest kind of exciting service by commanding in the Yukon during the Great Gold Rush of '98. I myself was born in the dear old outfit at Fort Macleod, one of the real frontier posts of those glamorous days and I'm lucky to have friends among the boys of the force, ancient and modern. I draw largely on what they tell me for my stories. I've had many great adventures described to me by the giants who saw them through—though to get them to talk takes a lot of doing, even when you're more or less on the inside. Incidentally, all you hear is true. There are no finer fellows alive; you can't beat them; and you can't buy them."

Harwood Steele's first story in SHORT STORIES will be "Prestige of the Scarlet" in our next number and it will be followed by others during the coming year.

There will also be in the next issue stories by Bertrand W. Sinclair, Lemuel De Bra, Karl W. Detzer, H. C. Wire, etc.

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