

Hashknife's Partner W. C. TUTTLE

Short Stories

Twice A Month

December 25th

25c

A Rogue, Unhung but Honest!

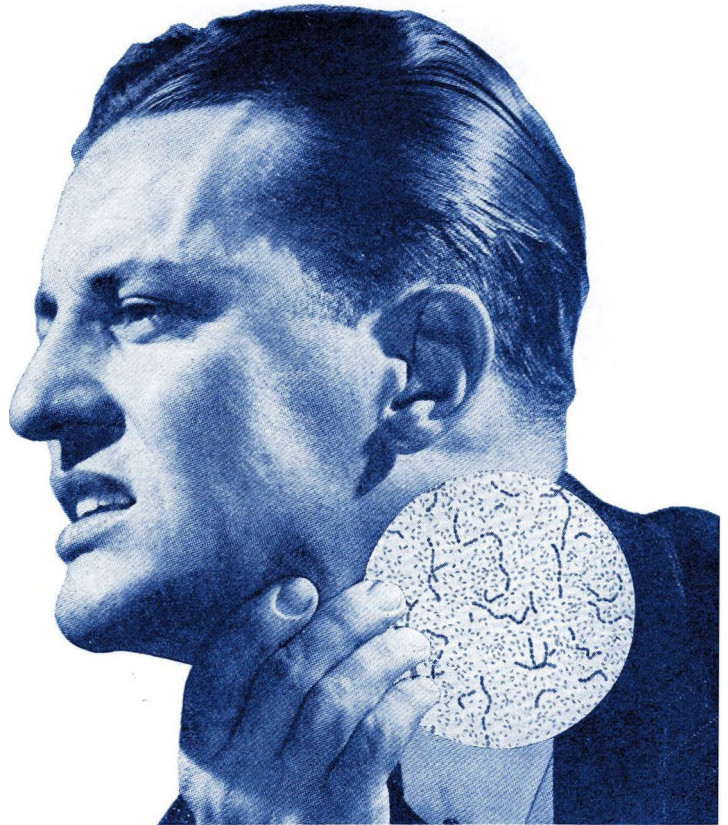
DARK PASSAGE

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A Christmas adventure "NESTER" Bruce Douglas

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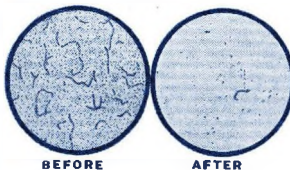
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Short

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Stories



latest stories—no reprints

DECEMBER 25th, 1939

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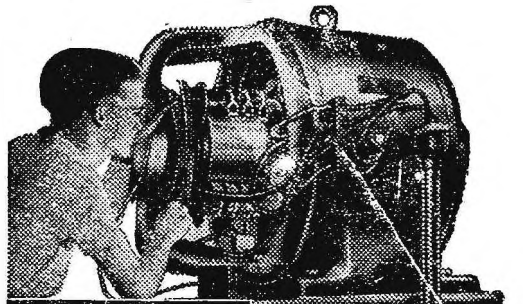
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for Luck" starts in our next issue.

* * * * *

ACCENT on aviation in our next number—and in very different settings The first one is in one of Bedford-Jones' interesting stories of the beginnings of the airmail—Paris during the Franco-Prussian war when the tide of history was turning on attempts to get news to beleaguered Paris; next, Federal Proving ground where some of A. A. Caffrey's likeable characters are in on an experiment that many men are making in wishful thinking these days—a ray ship; and then we turn northward to the land of the Strong Cold, and hear about H. S. M. Kemp's "Three Fares from the Arctic."

* * * * *

ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN'S sea stories have always been popular with our readers, and we feel that Wetjen has been absent from our pages for too long a while. We were glad to welcome him back with "A Question of Insult" in our last number, and to keep up the welcome with "The Small Man" in our next one.



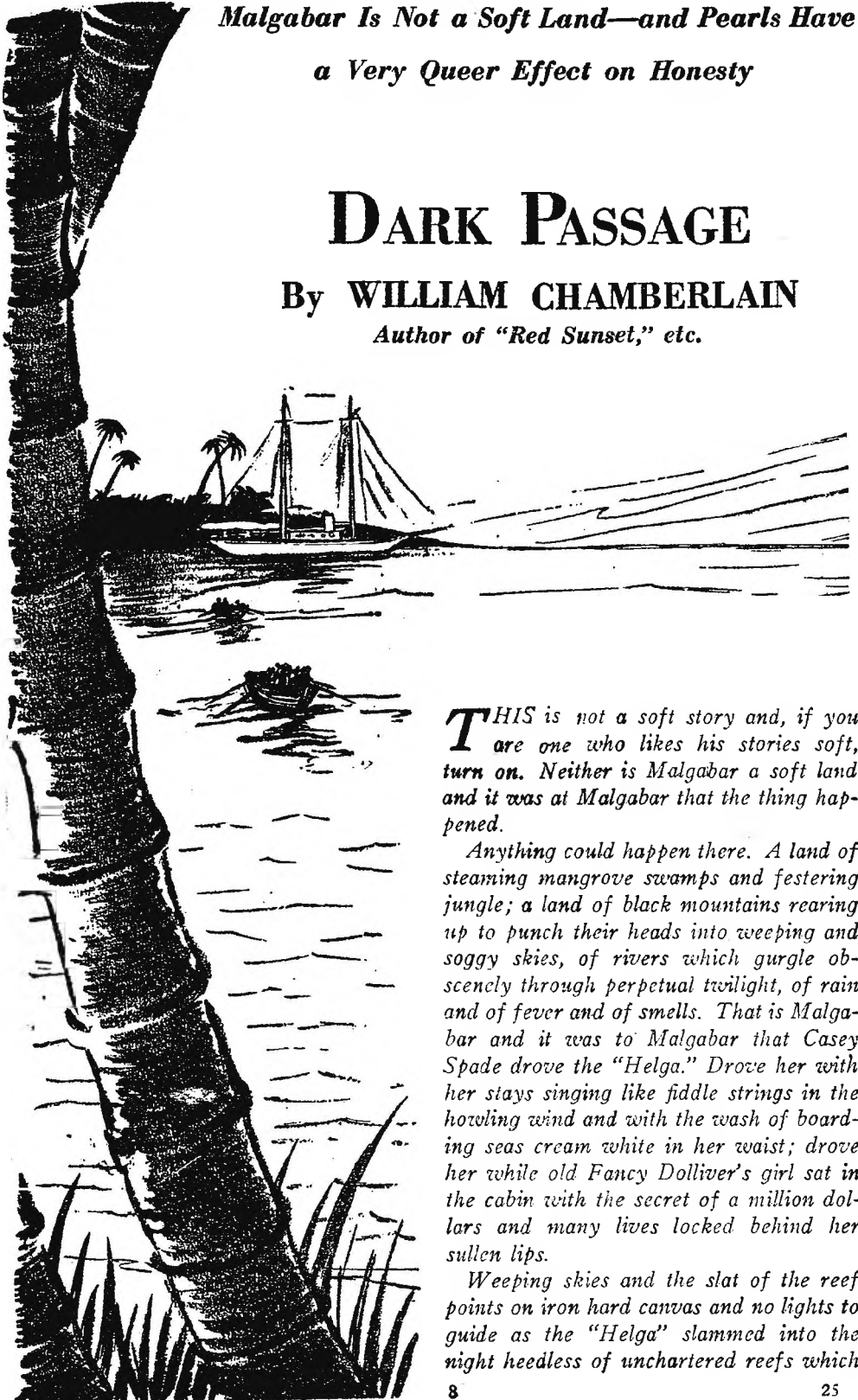
Coming up in the next issue

*Malgabar Is Not a Soft Land—and Pearls Have
a Very Queer Effect on Honesty*

DARK PASSAGE

By WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

Author of "Red Sunset," etc.



THIS is not a soft story and, if you are one who likes his stories soft, turn on. Neither is Malgabar a soft land and it was at Malgabar that the thing happened.

Anything could happen there. A land of steaming mangrove swamps and festering jungle; a land of black mountains rearing up to punch their heads into weeping and soggy skies, of rivers which gurgle obscenely through perpetual twilight, of rain and of fever and of smells. That is Malgabar and it was to Malgabar that Casey Spade drove the "Helga." Drove her with her stays singing like fiddle strings in the howling wind and with the wash of boarding seas cream white in her waist; drove her while old Fancy Dolliver's girl sat in the cabin with the secret of a million dollars and many lives locked behind her sullen lips.

Weeping skies and the slat of the reef points on iron hard canvas and no lights to guide as the "Helga" slammed into the night heedless of uncharted reefs which



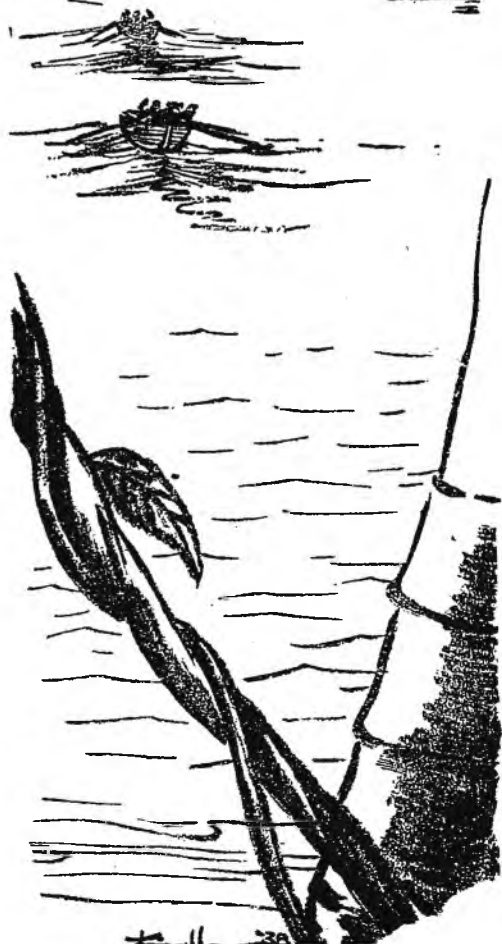
might lie in wait. Casey Spade didn't care. Neither did Casey Spade care about those virgin shell beds or Fancy Dolliver's daughter with her ragged canvas trousers and her man's shirt which could not hide the swell of her breast.

She was just trouble to Casey Spade. Presently, at Liantang, he would turn her over to the magistrate and she and her pearls and the secret of her shell bed could all go to hell.

Meanwhile, he would keep his word to old Fancy Dolliver who was dead and in hell already. A man was a fool who came to this country of dysentery and mosquitoes and stinking heat in the first place. He was better off dead—and what business did he have with a daughter anyway?

Malgabar is no place for a woman. Particularly if that woman is white and young and carries a fortune in pearls belted about her waist; worse, still, if she alone knows the hidden bed where more of those pearls may be found.

The thing had begun at Biltgree Atoll.



CHAPTER I

DEATH AND FANCY DOLLIVER

THE boy, bringing the chit, had found Casey Spade in Murphy's Bar with a beer in front of him and Joe Purcell, his mate, slouched opposite at the small table. Purcell watched with red-rimmed eyes while Casey Spade unfolded the note. It was two short lines written in sprawling and immature handwriting.

Father is dying of dysentery. He wants you.

Peg Dolliver.

Casey Spade shrugged and tossed the note onto the table top while he reached for his beer. Well, people had to expect to die of dysentery down here, and old Dolliver was no better than any of the rest of them—he didn't know just what the old fool thought *he* could do about it. The *Helga* was ready to sail as soon as the tide was right and the *Helga* wasn't going to wait just because some worthless old goat like Fancy Dolliver picked this particular time to cash in his chips. As for Peg Dolliver, Casey neither knew nor cared who she might be—probably some half caste whom the old man had been fool enough to marry.

Joe Purcell ran a hand through his yellow hair and then reached for the note. He read it without interest; pushed it back across the smeared table and picked up the whiskey bottle.

"What's he want yuh for, Casey?" he asked.

Casey Spade scowled at his mate across the rim of his glass. Young Purcell was as worthless as they come. Still, he was a fair enough seaman and a good hand with a gun—that counted in a business which was not too particular if sometimes it wandered a little onto the wrong side of the law. Young Purcell had sailed with Casey Spade for two years now.

Casey said, "How in hell would I know what he wants me for? If I was good at clairvoyance I would have set up a fortune telling shop—then I wouldn't be bothered with gunboats nosing around from time to time."

Purcell grinned and lifted his glass. It was no secret, up and down the Islands, that there were several frock-coated men in Sydney who would like to question Casey Spade. They were even willing to pay for that privilege according to weather beaten notices which could be found here and there. These notices promised the sum of four hundred pounds, gold, for Casey's head and made no stipulation that his body need be attached to it.

YOUNG Purcell tipped his liquor down and wiped his lips on the back of a hand as Casey kicked back his chair and stood up. Beyond the open lattice work of the veranda, dusk was beginning to settle, but the blistering heat of the day still lingered.

"Maybe he wants tuh make a will," Purcell said solemnly, going back to the subject of old Dolliver. "He must have heard yuh use a two-bit word like that clairy-what-ever-the-hell yuh call it an' figures that you're a lawyer."

Casey Spade grinned thinly.

He was a tall and red headed man with a fine flare of shoulder and big hands, the knuckles of which were eloquently scarred. Another scar at the corner of his mouth gave him an expression of sardonic amusement—amusement which could be belied at times by the hard ice of his eyes. A tough man who could take care of himself.

Murphy's Bar was beginning to fill up as the night fell. A yellow boy padded softly through, lighting the kerosene lamps as he went; a man with stooped shoulders and a gaunt and sallow face beneath his eye shade climbed onto a stool and began to hammer a tinny melody out of the piano. Presently the foreshore would be going full blast.

Young Purcell reached for the bottle again. Casey Spade said shortly, "You've squeezed that bottle enough for one day. Round up the crew and get back to the ship—I'll be along in an hour or so."

"Got a belly-ache, chum," young Purcell told him, splashing fresh whiskey into his glass. "You go on about your undertakin'—I'll cure my belly-ache. When you're ready to sail me an' the crew'll be there all right."

Casey scowled and then shrugged as he turned toward the door. Young Purcell was an insolent pup—still, the chances were that he would be on board the *Helga* when Casey got there. The crew, too; young Purcell was a good hand with natives. He could boot a black bottom with the best and have the Kanaka laughing about it ten minutes afterwards.

The moon was just beginning to come up as Casey left the veranda and stepped down onto the shell. A man was coming toward him along the path and Casey scowled a little as he recognized the heavy shoulders of Frenchy Marquat. He didn't like Frenchy Marquat; one of these days he was going to have to tack Frenchy's skin out on a hatch cover to dry.

"Ho!" Frenchy said. "Eet ees Meester Spade, eh? Too bad—Frenchy ees hear that they 'ave hang you down at Liantang. Maybe preety soon, eh?"

"Hello, Frenchy," Casey told him. "You won't be around the day they do."

HE WOULD have gone on by the other but Frenchy thrust out a big paw and stopped him. A big man with a raven flare of beard which reached halfway to his belt; as tough as they come and bad with a gun or with a knife or with nothing but his sledge hammer fists. There were stories about the *Maria*—Marquat's fast schooner—and the white crew which the *Maria* carried.

"You go too fas', my fren'," Frenchy said. "Maybe you are afraid of Frenchy?"

He threw back his head and laughed—

booming laughter which jarred his shoulders as it bubbled up from deep within him.

A little drunk, Casey saw, as he stood there rocking back and forth a little on the balls of his feet. Well, he thought sourly, this was a poor time to be standing here and listening to the big hyena—old Doliver would likely have shuffled on by the time that he got there at this rate.

He said, "It's been nice to see you, Frenchy. Except for the time I had black water fever I don't know when I've enjoyed anything so much."

Marquat leaned forward to stab at Casey's chest with a thick forefinger. "Ho, Meester Casey Spade, sometime maybe I break your neck—but not now. You come 'ave thee dreenk weeth me."

"No drink. I'm particular who I drink with—just funny that way."

Marquat's laughter stopped suddenly, but then it rumbled forth again.

"Ho, Meester Casey Spade! I theenk that some time we have vairy gran' fight—me an' you, eh? But we don' make that fight over thee leetle drink, eh? No! We save that fight for thee woman—for thee pearl, maybe. We mus' not make thee fight over one so leetle drink, Meester Casey!"

Casey Spade swore and turned away into the moonlight. Behind him he could hear Frenchy Marquat still laughing.

Back in Murphy's Bar young Purcell poured another drink into his glass. He was beginning to feel good now. Presently he would go out and kick his crew down to the whaleboat. Casey wanted to go down End o' Land way—though why the devil anybody wanted to go down End o' Land way was beyond young Purcell. Still, if Casey wanted to go he wanted to go. Good old Casey.

A man left the bar and slouched across to sit down in the chair which Casey Spade had left. Young Purcell opened one eye and looked. It was Pete Spence, he saw; one of Frenchy Marquat's crew. A fat slug with thick fingers. Looking at Pete Spence

made young Purcell's stomach hurt again; he had another drink.

Pete helped himself to the bottle likewise and grinned wolfishly so that the lamplight fell on the discolored and broken stubs of his teeth. He reached up to wipe his hand across the dirty stubble which covered his jowls.

"Where'd Spade go?" he asked.

Young Purcell peered at him owlishly. "Gone to make a will," he said in a solemn voice. "Very important will."

"Will?"

"Sure! Sure! Sort of thing yuh make when you're goin' tuh leave somebody a million dollars, see?"

Pete Spence laughed moistly but there was a faint speculation at the back of his nasty eyes. "You're crazy," he said, "an' drunk besides. Who in hell's got any million dollars in this dump?"

Young Purcell's expression became more owlish than ever. "Don' you just wish



you knew," he said. "Got tuh be goin'—got tuh get the crew down to the whaleboat for Casey. Good ole Casey. Wouldn't disappoint Casey for th' worl'."

He got to his feet, surprisingly steady, and headed for the door. For a minute

Pete Spence sat there looking after him and sucking at his fat lips. Then he reached out and picked up the sodden slip of paper which still lay on the table. He studied it for a second and then thrust it into the pocket of his dirty canvas trousers.

Pete Spence didn't know much about wills but he made it a point not to overlook any bets. This might be one, he reflected as he got up and followed young Purcell to the door.

He went on down the veranda steps and out into the moonlight. Stood for a moment, thinking. Then he turned toward the foreshore where old Fancy Dolliver's shack stood.

CHAPTER II

A ROGUE UNHUNG BUT HONEST

A KEROSENE lamp made a smudgy glimmer of light in the single window as Casey Spade knocked at the door of old Fancy Dolliver's shack. Coconut palms threw a spidery tracery of shadow across the ground and, a hundred yards away, Casey could see the white cream of the surf in the moonlight.

Casey was lifting his hand to knock again when he heard the soft scrape of feet across the floor. The door opened to permit a thin shaft of light to fall across him.

A girl's voice said, "Who is it?"

"Casey Spade," he told her.

She said nothing but opened the door wider to let him through. He glanced at her, faintly surprised, for a moment before he turned to where old Dolliver lay.

White, he saw, and maybe nineteen. Pretty, too, in a way with dark hair and sullen eyes and a rich aliveness to her skin. She was barefooted and wore ragged canvas trousers and a man's shirt which showed the soft curve of her throat. Old Dolliver's daughter, Casey guessed, although it was hard to believe that that old scarecrow could ever sire anything even remotely handsome.

Dolliver lay on a tumbled bed in the corner. A glance at his caved and yellow face was all that Casey needed—old Fancy was turning in his chips for good and all. Casey felt no emotion over that fact. He went across and kicked a chair around to face the bed.

"Hello, Dolliver," he said. "Your girl said you wanted me—well, here I am."

The air was hot in the room. Old Dolliver said hoarsely, "Give me a whiskey!"

Casey Spade looked inquiringly at the girl. She shook her head. "I was afraid to give it to him. I think perforation has set in."

He was surprised again at the emotionlessness of her voice, the composure of her face. As he had turned he had caught her studying him with her sullen eyes. He turned back to old Dolliver and bent to feel for a pulse—the beat was feeble and unsteady.

"It's going to do him no harm now," he told her curtly. "If you've got any bring it here."

She didn't question him but turned to open the door of a cupboard built against the wall.

Presently she came back with a bottle and a tin cup and Casey took them out of her hands. Old man Dolliver's eyes watched feverishly.

"Drink hearty," Casey said in a flat voice.

He slid an arm beneath the old man's shoulders and lifted him up, holding the tin cup to his lips. Old Dolliver gulped greedily, spilling the liquor down across his chin—then lay back. A tough old customer, in a way, Casey thought as he placed the cup back on the table. The girl was just standing there.

DOLLIVER'S voice was stronger. "Whiskey's good," he said. "Warms a man up, Casey. It's a hell of a thing tuh start out on your last trip with a cold belly."

Pain struck him swiftly for a moment

then and he doubled up, his fingers plucking at his shirt. Spade eased him back; straightening him—then the whiskey began to bite and the old man's face relaxed.

"Talk fast—if you're going to, Dolliver," Casey Spade told him. "You're about through."

"Yeah." The old man blinked against the smoky light and plucked at his shirt again. "Give me another drink first, Casey. It clears my mind, sort of."

Casey shrugged his shoulders and then turned to pick up the bottle. The girl still stood there by the table, her hands at her sides and her face wooden.

"Talk on," Casey said curtly. "I've got a tide to catch tonight, Fancy."

"You ain't goin' to catch no tide tonight, Casey," old Dolliver told him. He cackled hoarsely; went into a spasm of coughing and then lay there blinking again. Finally he went on. "You're goin' to do me a favor, Casey."

"I don't do favors," Spade said curtly.

"You'll do this one, though. Maybe you remember five-six years ago. You were on Berande an' crazy with black water fever at the time."

Casey Spade scowled and stuffed rank tobacco into his stubby pipe. "I'm not likely to forget it."

He wasn't, either. For three weeks he had lain there in a shack at the edge of the lagoon and too sick to lift a hand. Alone except for Anamoku and the *Helga's* Kanaka crew. In the lucid intervals, between bouts of delirium, he had wondered that the Kanakas had not gone, taking his head along with them. Then, finally, Ross Finister had come by in the *Dolphin* and had taken him to Liantang.

Old Dolliver chuckled thickly. "I saved your life down there, Casey. Now you're goin' tuh do me a favor."

"More likely you'd have told Castner—if you'd know I was there," Casey said sourly. "Then he'd have come around with his gunboat and collected me for a ride to

Sydney—splitting the reward with you, of course."

"Nope. Castner wasn't around—he was over in the Andalones when the word come that you were down with the fever at Berande. Pete Spence figured that the best way was tuh go down an' put a bullet into you an' then wait for Castner to come back."

Casey murmured, "Nice of Pete. I'll remember that."

OLD Fancy Dolliver grinned sardonically, his spike of gray beard thrusting stiffly up against the lamplight. His voice was stronger now but Casey Spade knew that that wouldn't last. The old man had an hour left maybe—maybe not.

"Me an' Pete were partners at the time," he went on, paying no attention. "I never cared for the idea from the start—I've done a lot of things in my life but I ain't ever touched no blood money like that. Still, I needed it an' Pete talked me into it, so we started down there in Pete's schooner."

Old Dolliver's eyes were unnaturally bright as he stopped for a minute. Casey tamped at his pipe and listened indifferently. He had no reason to believe that the old man wasn't telling the truth—even Fancy Dolliver would hardly lie while he was on his death bed and over a matter which was of no importance any longer.

"Go on," he said. "I've got other things to do tonight, Fancy."

"Well, maybe you'll believe me—maybe you won't. Anyway, when we put into End o' Land I put a gun into Pete Spence's belly an' told him the deal was off. Ross Finnister was in there in the *Dolphin* at the time an' I passed the word to him that you were down at Berande an' that he'd better go down an' get yuh."

"Ross never mentioned it."

"He wouldn't be likely to. We ain't been good friends since the time I did him out of that load of shell up around Lord Howe. Anyway, I didn't tell him myself

—I sent one of the boys with the word."

A fresh spasm struck old Dolliver and, for the space of thirty seconds, he lay doubled up in a knot with his eyes closed and his face twisted into a dirty yellow mask. There was nothing that he could do, Casey Spade knew—he had seen plenty of others go this way. Old Dolliver understood, too.

He whispered, "More whiskey, Casey. I ain't done yet—an' I ain't goin' until I finish."

He got it. The girl had gone to stand in the doorway, Casey saw; her back to the tumbled bed. The freshening wind stirred her cropped hair. For a moment Casey stared at her. Not so good, he thought. Alive, old Fancy Dolliver—good for nothing though he was—had afforded her some measure of security in a land where women were cheap.

With old Fancy Dolliver dead it would be different. Casey Spade had seen other kids like this—seen them maybe a year later at Mother Spandau's or the Oriental House. He shrugged and turned back to the bed but the thought still bothered him.

Dolliver said, "You believe, don't yuh, Casey? Man—you *got* tuh believe me. You got tuh do me this favor!"

"I'd have done it anyway," Casey told him sourly. "I am a fool that way. Talk on."

The last whiskey hadn't helped, he saw; old Dolliver's life was burning swiftly out. The old man hunched himself up and his voice was getting thicker—his words hard to understand. Casey leaned forward with his hands on his knees.

"You got tuh take care of my girl for me, Casey."

Casey Spade laughed harshly and slammed the dottle out of his pipe and into his hand.

"You're crazy! Hell, I'd make a fine guardian for any kid—let alone a girl—wouldn't I? Maybe you've forgotten that I've got a price on my head, Dolliver. Or maybe you don't give a damn as long as

you can die easy, knowing that you've shoved her off onto somebody."

"You got tuh do it, Casey."

The old man's eyes were bright with the fire that was burning him up. He hunched himself on the bed; reached out a claw-like hand to fasten fingers on Casey's wrist.

"I'll get hold of the magistrate—it's his job to take care of things like this. He can send her to Sydney. I can't take her, you fool."

Old Dolliver's fingers tightened. "You don't understand," the old man whispered in his hoarse voice. "She's been in a convent, Casey—I've kept her there ever since she was a baby. I didn't want her to know anything about the Islands. Six months ago she ran away an' came out here."

Well, that was a way out, Casey Spade thought. He could raise cash enough for her passage back to Sydney and a convent was a hell of a good place for her. He turned a little. She was still standing in the doorway and, if she had heard, she gave no sign of it.

OLD DOLLIVER read his thoughts and his fingers clawed at Casey Spade's wrist again. Sweat stood out on the old man's forehead in big beads which caught the flickering lamplight.

"No," he said. "She don't need tuh go back to no convent, Casey. That's why yuh got to look out for her. That's why I sent for you."

"Talk sense."

Old Dolliver hitched himself higher and turned a little. "Come here, girl," he said. She came slowly as a fresh spasm of coughing shook the old man. He gasped finally, "Show him the pearls."

"No."

"I know what I'm doing, girl." Old Fancy's voice was growing weaker but there was command in it still. "I know Casey Spade—show him the pearls!"

She stood there for a long minute with the lamplight over her while she looked

at Casey, a level, mistrusting stare. Then she turned away a little, shrugging, while her fingers lifted to the buttons down the front of her shirt. Presently she dropped a worn money belt on the table beside the lamp.

"Give it to me," old Dolliver said.

He laid it across his chest and fumbled at one of the pockets with shaking fingers while Casey Spade watched. For a moment the old man had to stop while a fresh stab of pain racked him. Then he probed in the pocket—drew out a wad of cotton the size of a small egg. He passed it to Casey Spade.

"Look—at it—Casey. It's a—beauty."

Casey could feel the hard core of it as he took the wad in his hand—a pearl, he guessed. Then he whistled softly. He had not expected to see a pearl like this.

As big as the end of his thumb and perfectly formed—such a pearl as a man may find once in a lifetime. Its shadowy depths seemed to trap the smoky lamplight twisting it into whorls which shifted fluidly like the slow drift of thunder clouds at sunset. It carried a hint of the scarlet of that sunset; a hint of the deep purple of late evening.

"It's a beauty, Dolliver," Casey said softly. "There are plenty down here who would cut a throat or two for that. Where'd you get it?"

Old Fancy Dolliver was going fast. He tried twice to speak and then his words were only a whisper.

"No—time to tell—that," he said. "Peg—knows—will tell. Six more—good—pearls in the—belt, Casey. Now you know—why—you got to look after—her. Bad—country—"

The old man's voice trailed away in a husky rattle and Casey, reaching forward to tighten his fingers on the other's wrist, knew that it was a matter of minutes now. He picked up the belt and other hard lumps in the pockets told him that Dolliver had not been lying. Slowly he rewrapped the pearl, slipped it back and fastened the flap.

Old Dolliver's lips moved again. "Whiskey," he said shakily.

Casey Spade eased him back again and the old man lay there, blinking slowly in the shadows which danced across the wall as Casey got up. He went slowly around the table and his voice was gentle as he spoke to the girl.

"He's going," he said. "If you've got anything to say to him you'd better say it."

Then he went on out to stand on the porch and stare into the moonlight. A hell of a way to die, he thought; still, everybody had to die sometime. He'd probably end up with a noose around his neck and a trap under his feet. No pearls and no daughter to mourn him, either.



A crack, such as a man might make stepping upon a dried coconut frond, stirred him out of his moody contemplations. Scowling he moved swiftly to the corner where the window was—nothing there but the moonlight. He completed the circuit of the shack and came back to stand on the porch again. He was getting spooky, he guessed. Still, there were plenty in Murphy's Bar—scattered along the foreshore—who would be glad enough to know about that fortune in pearls which lay in there on the table beside the smoky lamp.

Presently he went back into the hot room.

Old Fancy Dolliver lay quietly with the girl standing beside him as Casey Spade went slowly across to the table. He wondered if the old man was dead and the girl didn't know—she stood so quietly with

her back to him. Then old Fancy Dolliver opened his eyes again and his mouth twisted sardonically. His voice was surprisingly clear and strong as he spoke.

"You're the blackest—devil—I ever run into—Casey," he said, "an'—the only man I'd trust. Take care of—her."

It was ten minutes later when Casey Spade dropped an arm across the girl's shoulders. "He's finished, girl," he said soberly. "It's better so."

She didn't answer but he could feel the tremble of her slender body. Then she twisted away; dropped on her knees beside the tumbled bed. The sound of her choked sobs disturbed Casey Spade unaccountably.

He scowled and picked up the whiskey bottle.

CHAPTER III

PETE SPENCE DRAWS CARDS

CASEY SPADE did what there was to be done which wasn't much. He had lifted the girl and made her sit down in the chair while he fed her a stiff jolt of whiskey. Then he had straightened old Fancy Dolliver out on the tumbled bed and had pulled a blanket over his face. Dolliver had still seemed to be grinning sardonically up at him.

Casey came back to the table and stood there for a moment looking down at the girl. There was nothing for it, he thought morosely, but to take her out to the *Helga* now. Word of the pearls would get around sooner or later and there were plenty around Biligree Atoll who would like to have those pearls. Frenchy Marquat, for example. The belt still lay there and Casey picked it up; ran his fingers over it again and then held it out.

"Put it back on," he said. "I'm taking you out to the ship."

She turned a little to look at him—that sullen twist had returned to her mouth, he saw, but her eyes were scared. Well, he couldn't blame her a hell of a lot.

"I'm not going with you," she told him in a flat voice.

He stuffed tobacco into his pipe again and his gaze was sober. "There's nothing more that you can do here, sister," he said gently. He nodded toward the bed. "He don't need you—I'll bring a party back from the *Helga* and bury him. It'll do no good for you to wait."

She stood up to face him, the lamplight bright across her face and the belt in her hands. Suddenly she snatched at the fastening of one of the pockets; pulled out the cotton wad which wrapped the big pearl and thrust it at him.

"Is this what you want? Then take it and get out, Casey Spade! He was my father—I'll bury him!"

Well, he couldn't blame her much, Casey thought. He could hardly expect that she would put much faith in the good intentions of Casey Spade—a man with a price on his head. He scratched a match and lifted it in his cupped hands while he considered how best to handle this. She mistook his deliberation.

"One's not enough?" Her voice was scornful but it trembled a little. Scared—but she had nerve. "Take them all, then, damn you, and then get out!"

She threw the belt at the table. It slid across and dropped to the floor and Casey stooped to pick it up; place it back beside the lamp.

He asked curiously, "And if I did—what then? What would you do?"

"What do you care?"

Casey smoked thoughtfully while he looked at her, the smoke trickling up across the lean brown of his face. She was prettier than he had thought at first, he found. And innocent beneath the sullen droop to her mouth—a convent was poor training for this.

"Maybe I don't care," he told her. "Maybe I'm just curious."

She turned her head to stare at him level-eyed. "I'd get along. There must be *some* honest people—even at Biligree Atoll."

"I never happened to run into them,"

Casey told her dryly. "Pearls have got a funny effect on honesty, sister. If I left you alone here the chances are that you would have that pretty throat cut within twenty-four hours after the first honest man learned about the pearls."

"So you'd have me come out to your schooner and get my throat cut there, instead!"

Casey stared at her soberly. "Then, again, some of these honest men might be curious about where you got those pearls. Such people have been known to have cute little ways of finding out things that they want to know."

"You seem to know all about those cute little tricks!" she said in a tight voice.

Casey shrugged.

"Maybe. Put the belt back on."

"No!"

"Then I'll put it on for you."

Her eyes clashed with his for a long minute. Then a dull red dyed her neck and began to spread up across her cheeks; she reached out shaking fingers for the belt. Casey turned away to pick up the whiskey bottle and the tin cup. He poured a big drink and turned back presently, the cup in his hand.

"Sister," he said in a flat voice, "Fancy Dolliver did me a favor and he asked one in return. You'll have to take it on trust that I'm going to do that favor for him. Drink this—you'll feel better. Then we're going out to the *Helga*."

He held the cup toward her—saw, too late, the intention in her eyes. The whiskey splashed into his face, half blinding him, and then she was whirling for the door. The chair was in her way and she half stumbled; then Casey Spade had a hand about her wrist and turned her about. She beat at his face with her fists but he got an arm about her; pulled her own arms down and back so that she lay close against him.

"Be good, sister," he said harshly. "You are going to the *Helga* if I have to carry you there!"

The fight went out of her suddenly and she lay, limp and unresisting, against him. He picked up the overturned chair and put her in it; then poured more whiskey into the cup.

"Drink it."

She drank, choking a little as the liquor bit at her throat, and then sat down silently, her shoulders drooping and her eyes staring straight ahead. Casey pulled the blanket higher across old Fancy Dolliver's face and then came back to her.

"Are you ready to go now, sister?" he asked gently.

"Yes," she said in a listless voice.

Casey Spade blew out the smoking lamp and lifted her to her feet. They went through the door, Casey latching it behind them, and turned down through the aisle of coconut palms which stretched to the foreshore. A mile away the *Helga* rocked on the gentle swell, her masts black against the moonlight.

FAT Pete Spence, crouching in the deep shade of a tree, waited for a long ten minutes after the two had gone. Then he loosened the knife at his belt and padded softly up to the shack where old Fancy Dolliver still lay. He listened at the door for a moment and then went in.

The moonlight from the square window guided him across to the bed where he crouched, one hand feeling cautiously for the old man's wrist. No pulse and he grunted with satisfaction. The old fool was dead all right—that saved him the trouble of putting a knife into him.

Pete worked swiftly.

He stripped away the blanket, with which Casey Spade had covered the other, and draped it in front of the single window. Lighted the lamp, then, and went across to drop the bar in place on the door. He stood for a minute, sucking his fat lips while the lamplight fell across him.

Old Fancy Dolliver had not told where he had found those pearls. Likely, though,

that he had written it down somewhere. If he had, Pete Spence meant to find that writing—it would save trouble later.

There was a worn and leather bound trunk beneath the bed and he dragged it out and pried up the cover. Not much there. Some old clothes and a bundle or two of papers. Pete pawed through them eagerly—copra receipts, a bill for goods made on a Sydney firm, a couple of faded newspaper clippings—nothing more. Pete swore disgustedly and slammed down the top of the trunk.

He swore again a half hour later as he came back to stand by the table and pour himself out a heavy drink from the bottle which Casey Spade had left. He had gone through old Fancy Dolliver's shack with a fine toothed comb and there was nothing there which gave any clue as to where that virgin shell bed lay. It must be a virgin bed, Pete reasoned darkly. Pearls like the one he had seen through the window weren't taken unheralded from beds known to the pearling fleet.

Well, Pete thought viciously, he'd do it the hard way, then. The girl knew where that bed was, so he'd find out from her. It wouldn't be too unpleasant a job, at that.

He blew out the light; tossed the blanket from the window back over old Fancy Dolliver. Casey Spade, with a fortune in his grasp, was just fool enough to come back and bury the old man, Pete reflected. It would be just as well if Casey Spade didn't know that there had been a visitor at the shack in his absence.

He went on down the white coral road which led to the cluster of shacks along the foreshore. Murphy's Bar was going full blast, but Pete Spence didn't stop. Frenchy Marquat would be in there, he knew, and he didn't want to see Frenchy Marquat right now. A quarter of a mile farther on a house with dimly lighted windows sprawled under the coconut palms almost at the edge of the beach.

Pete Spence turned in here. He avoided the open front door with its murmur of

noise—the whine of a gramophone, shrill laughter, a man's drunken voice—and let himself into a small room on the side. A kerosene lamp flickered in a bracket on the wall; a table, with a red cloth, and three chairs made up the furniture. Pete closed the door and bolted it; then went across to hammer with his knuckles on a second door.

A girl came presently, slipping through and closing the door behind her. A slender girl with the exotic beauty of the quarter caste.

She hummed under her breath as she turned.

"'Allo, Pete," she said.

"Hello, Rosa," said Pete Spence with easy familiarity. "You know where Duff Kellet is?"

"Sure." She sat on the edge of the table swinging one leg. "Duff ees out front. W'y?"

"Tell him I want to see him, will you? Right away—and send in a quart of gin, eh?"

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Rosa ees not like thee gin, Pete. I bring whiskey."

"You bring gin, baby. You're not in on this party an' so it won't make a damn bit of difference what yuh like an' what yuh don't like. Now hustle that good lookin' shape of yours out of here an' get Duff Kellet."

Duff Kellet came presently.

He was a tall and angular man with a seamed face and aristocratic hands—a man burned dry by cheap whiskey and cheap women. His white suit was reasonably clean, however, and there was an aura of respectability about him. That false respectability was Duff Kellet's stock in trade. He sat down at the red covered table.

"You don't expect me to talk dry, do you, my friend?" he asked with a lift of his eyebrows. "It is bad enough to talk with you drunk—impossible sober."

"Take it easy. I got a job that is down

your alley, Duff. This is where them gentlemanly manners of yours will pay you dividends maybe."

"Interesting," Kellet murmured sardonically. "I was beginning to think that the old man had wasted all the money which he used up to send me through Harvard."

CHAPTER IV

ROSA KONAUA ALSO DRAWS CARDS

THE whaleboat, which young Purcell had left on the beach for Casey Spade, slid gently alongside the *Helga* where a lighted lantern had been hung in the shrouds. Young Purcell's voice, a little fuzzy, came out of the moonlight.

"That you Casey?"

"It's me. Lend a hand."

He steadied the girl on a thwart as young Purcell reached over the rail. She went up and Casey Spade followed, pausing for a moment to tell the boat's crew to stand by. Young Purcell was standing with his feet spraddled and his mouth a little open while he stared—he was not accustomed to having Casey Spade bring girls aboard the *Helga* at sailing time.

"Well," he said, scrubbing at his unshaven chin with the palm of his hand. "Well an' well. There are miracles after all."

"Shut up," Casey told him. He turned to the girl who stood in the circle of the lantern light, looking at young Purcell with her sullen eyes. "This is Joe Purcell, my mate—he's harmless enough even when he's half drunk like he is now. We're



taking Miss Dolliver to Liantang, Joe, where she can get passage to Sydney. Her father died tonight."

"Sorry to hear it," young Purcell said.

"Old Fancy Dolliver, eh? Now there was a man——"

"Shut up!" Casey Spade told him again curtly. He turned back to the girl. "I'll show you below."

Young Purcell blinked owlshly. "That's a good idea," he said. "Mighty good idea, Casey. I'll go along an'——"

"You'll stay on deck," Casey Spade told him. "Get a bucket of water and douse your head in it—unless you want me to do it for you."

He took the girl by the elbow and turned her toward the companionway. She didn't resist; she was probably expecting him to stick a knife between her shoulder blades as soon as he got her out of sight, Casey thought sourly. Back by the rail Joe Purcell turned around to old Anamoku who was padding along the deck.

"So he's goin' to be a dog in the manger, is he?" Purcell demanded in an aggrieved voice.

Old Anamoku wrinkled his scarred face. "What name?" he piped.

Joe Purcell swore disgustedly. "Forget it. You catch'um one bucket sea water strong fella, eh? Jump, you damned old heathen!"

The cabin lamp was lighted, swinging back and forth gently in its gimbals, as Casey Spade stood back to allow Peg Dolliver to step over the raised sill. She walked across the deck and then turned to face him, her eyes defiant.

"Well?" she asked.

Casey Spade's temper flared. "Well, nothing!" he said. "Get this into your head, you little fool. I'm going to haul you to Liantang, get you a fair price for your pearls and then put you on the Sydney boat. Nothing more! And I'll be just as damned glad to see the last of you as you'll be glad to see the last of me. Maybe you can get that through your silly head!"

He could see that she didn't believe him and he swore under his breath as he went across to slam back the door of the *Helga's*

spare stateroom. He stepped in, lighted the lamp and then went back to the main cabin.

"You'll sleep in there," he said curtly, jerking his head toward the open door. "There's a lock so that you can bolt yourself in."

She didn't answer but her eyes followed him as he crossed again to his own stateroom. He came back with a gun in his hand which he tossed onto the cabin table in front of her.

"You know how to shoot?"

"Yes."

He'd bet a load of shell that she'd never had a gun in her hands in her life. "Keep that with you then. Then you can put a bullet into Joe Purcell or me whenever you see us coming with a knife."

He went on out, slamming the cabin door behind him, and stomped up the companion steps to the deck. Joe Purcell was standing beneath the lantern and the youngster seemed to guess the thing that was going through the older man's mind "I ain't curious," he said. "She's just a passenger for Liantang if you say so, Casey."

Casey Spade made up his mind swiftly. He had a hunch that there was going to be trouble—plenty of trouble before this thing was over. It was likely that he was going to need young Purcell's help and he'd get it best by putting the cards on the table.

"She's not just a passenger," he said morosely.

Briefly, he told young Purcell of what had happened back there in old Fancy Dolliver's shack. The latter listened in silence, his face more sober than usual. When Casey Spade had finished Purcell walked over to where the bucket of sea water stood; he thrust his head in and came back, shaking the water out of his eyes.

"Well, I'll be damned," he mumbled. "Old Dolliver—now who'd ever thought that that old coot— Well, I'll be damned!"

Casey Spade said, "I'll take the boat's crew up and bury him. Be ready to sail when I get back—it'll be maybe two hours."

"Better let me go—you stay here with the girl."

"I'll go," Casey told him briefly. "I'm not going to take any chances of you stopping in some place for a quick one—a couple of shots of that rat poison and your tongue swings loose at both ends. See that the girl stays below decks while I'm gone. I don't want anybody to know that old Dolliver is dead before we get away from here—they might ask questions."

"Suppose somebody comes out from shore, Casey? What do I do?"

"They're not likely to—the word was around that we were sailing tonight. If they should, act natural and say nothing. If you try and chase them off they'll know that something isn't right."

"Okay," young Purcell said sourly, running a hand through his wet hair. "I'm goin' to feel like I was settin' on a powder keg until you get back."

Casey Spade didn't reply. He swung a leg across the rail and dropped down into the waiting whaleboat. The Kanakas swung into a long stroke at his word.

A THIRD of the gin in the square bottle was gone as Duff Kellet lifted his glass. It was hot and Pete Spence wiped the perspiration from his fat, pasty face as he leaned forward to tap a forefinger on the red tablecloth.

"You got the picture straight, have yuh?"

Duff Kellet's eyes were bright and spiteful in his cadaverous face as he deliberately poured more gin into his glass. He allowed it to stand on the table while he took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped a drop from the sleeve of his coat; returned the handkerchief leisurely.

"No," he said in his faintly condescending voice. "For one thing, you haven't

told me yet why you want the girl. I'd like to know that."

"That ain't any of your damned business, Kellet. I'm offering you a hundred, gold, for this job. You don't need tuh know any more about it. I tell you she's on the *Helga* an' she don't want tuh stay there.

"All yuh got to do is tuh tell her that you heard that she was in trouble an' that you've come to take her away where she'll be safe. She'll figure that you're honest as a church in that fine gentleman get-up of yours."

"Thanks," Duff Kellet murmured. He lifted his glass and drained it. "And suppose that Casey Spade, or that mate of his, should object to my extending a helping hand to old Dolliver's fair daughter?"

"They won't, I tell yuh. Spade will be on shore buryin' the old man. I seen Joe Purcell in Murphy's an hour ago lapping it up. He'll be out stiff—an', if he ain't, I'll take care of him. The Kanakas ain't goin' to put up no fuss against a white man."

"A hundred gold," Duff Kellet said. His grin was more sardonic than ever as he turned his empty glass around and around. "It's surprising the things that a man will do for a few filthy dollars, isn't it, Spence?"

Pete Spence said viciously, "That'll buy you a lot of gin, Duff."

"Won't it? Well, if I hadn't been low enough to do dirty tricks like this, I wouldn't be in Biligree Atoll in the first place. Tell me one thing more, my fat friend."

"Well, hurry it up. Casey Spade is just about getting back with his burial crew by now. We got tuh be movin'."

"Why don't you, and a couple of your ugly friends, just go out to the *Helga*, knock the girl over the head and carry her off? It's not likely that she could hurt you."

Pete Spence's fat lips twisted. "What's the use when I can get her all nice an'

easy this way? Besides, I'm not ready to slug her—yet."

"Pleasant character," Duff Kellet murmured. "Well, it's a go."

Spence reached for the gin bottle again and filled both of the glasses. He pushed one across; lifted his own. "Good! I thought that you'd see the light all right."

He paused and his upper lip curled up a little bit.

"Gentleman Kellet!"

Duff Kellet's hand went out unsteadily toward the glass; then the man stopped—dropped his hand to the table.

"I'll do your dirty job for you, Spence," he said thickly. "I'll be damned if I'll drink with you over it." He got up unsteadily, his eyes bitter.

Pete Spence laughed, his lips making a sucking sound. "Come on," he said. "We ain't got all night. Casey Spade ought tuh be on the beach by now."

BYOND the door the quarter caste, Rosa Konaua, straightened swiftly and went on down the dim corridor to turn into the smokey light of the bar! Pete Spence and Duff Kellet stood in the doorway for a moment; then crossed, threading their way between the tables, and disappeared into the soft dusk.

Rosa's eyes were dark and vindictive as she, too, went through the door into the night. She stepped into the coral road and turned in the direction of the shack where old Fancy Dolliver lay on his tumbled cot.

Pete Spence had a little game, did he? Well, she—Rosa Konaua—would play a little game, too. Casey Spade would listen to her and Casey Spade would be interested in hearing that Pete Spence planned to kidnap old Fancy Dolliver's girl—though what Pete Spence, or any other man, would want with that flat-chested cow she wouldn't know. Anyway it would teach Pete Spence that, at Biligree Atoll, you didn't turn down Rosa Konaua's favors and get away with it.

CHAPTER V

"I PREFER AN HONEST MAN"

YOUNG PURCELL sat in a worn deck chair with his feet on the *Helga's* rail and his pipe between his teeth. A cool breeze had sprung up after sundown; it lifted young Purcell's hair and made his headache feel better. The deck was deserted except for old Anamoku who sat up in the bow and crooned a heathen song to himself. The *Helga* carried a crew of six besides Casey Spade and his mate—four of them had gone in the whaleboat, and the cook, having indulged in too much trade gin down in Ah Kee's hop house, was asleep in the forecabin.

Young Purcell held a fresh match to his pipe and hunched himself deeper into the chair. The faint shine of light on the cabin skylight returned his thoughts to the girl below.

He had gone down after the whaleboat had left and knocked on the door of her stateroom—given her Casey Spade's orders about remaining below decks until the *Helga* sailed. At first she had answered him through the door; then had opened it and stood there for a moment with the light of the cabin lamp across her face. She had combed back her cropped hair and young Purcell had realized, with a start, that she was pretty—pretty as hell.

She had said, "I've got to get ashore. Will you take me?"

Damned if he hadn't almost said yes, young Purcell thought sourly. There was something in that scared voice of hers that got to him. He had had to tell her that Casey Spade would take him to pieces bone by bone if he allowed her to leave the *Helga*. Tried to assure her, too, that Casey Spade was right and that, for the moment, she was safer about the schooner than she could be any place else until the steamer put her down in Sydney.

She hadn't believed him—he could see that. So he had stood there like a big

fool, twiddling his thumbs while she closed the door again. He had heard the bolt slide home.

Imagine having a girl like that with fifty thousand dollars thrown in—for that matter it wouldn't be too tough to take the girl and let the fifty thousand dollars go to the devil.

His reflections were disturbed by the pad of old Anamoku's feet along the deck. "Boat he come," the Kanaka said.

Young Purcell grunted. "The captain?"

"Not fella whaleboat. Fella dinghy."

Purcell swore and heaved himself out of the chair. A hundred yards away a small boat was pulling toward the *Helga* across the silver water, one man rowing and another sitting in the stern. Purcell recognized both—Pete Spence and Duff Kellet. The dinghy had closed to some twenty yards when he hailed them.

"Where yuh goin'?"

Pete Spence swung twice again at the oars and then allowed the boat to drift gently up while he turned around. He waved a fat hand and his voice was cordial.

"Hi, kid. Where's Casey?"

"Gone ashore," Purcell told him. "He had a little business tuh finish up—we're pullin' out tonight."

"Yeah, so I heard. Hell, I wanted Casey tuh do a little business for me down Kapa-hulu way. Guess we'll come on board an' wait for him—there ain't no point in rowin' back an' takin' a chance of missin' him."

Young Purcell scowled. He didn't like this; still, if he didn't allow them to come on board, Pete Spence was likely to carry the word to Frenchy Marquat and then the *Helga* would have a whaleboat load of visitors instead of only two. He tossed over a rope's end and Pete came up with Duff Kellet behind him. There was something malicious about Pete Spence's grin that young Purcell didn't like.

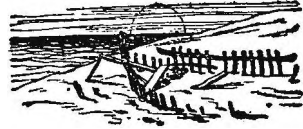
PETE pulled a flat bottle from his pocket and held it out. "Have a drink, kid."

Joe took a short swallow and passed it

back. Pete tipped his head back, took a long pull and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He grinned again and looked across at the lighted cabin skylight.

"Let's go down below an' set comfortable while we wait for Casey," he suggested.

"Too hot," young Purcell said. "We'll stay up here." He swung sharply with his back to Pete Spence to bark at Kellet



who was moving toward the cabin companion. "Where in hell are yuh goin', Duff?"

Then stars exploded suddenly in his head and he felt the deck coming up to meet him. Spence slipped the belaying pin back into the rack and pulled a gun from the waistband of his trousers.

"Go on down an' get her," he snapped softly at Duff Kellet. "I'll take care of things up here."

Kellet nodded and disappeared down the companionway as Pete Spence turned, his lips lifting a little from his broken teeth. Old Anamoku was padding down the deck; he caught sight of young Purcell sprawled there on his face and stopped.

"What name?"

Pete Spence padded toward him, the moonlight glinting along the dark metal of the gun in his hand. Old Anamoku saw and understood. He stopped and scratched his head in puzzled wonder. These crazy white men—my word!

"You talk'um true talk along me," Pete Spence snarled at him. "You no talk'um true talk along me I kick Merry Christmas out of you strong fella. Savvy?"

"Me savvy."

"How many fella boys along this ship?"

"Six fella boys." Anamoku held up his fingers.

"Other five fella boys all catch'um ride along shore in fella whaleboat?"

Old Anamoku shook his head and pointed to the open scuttle of the fore-castle. "One fella Matori catch'um sleep strong fella along bunk."

"Good!" Spence reached out and prodded young Purcell's unconscious body. "Head belong white marster walk about strong fella. You tak'um white marster along bunk all same fella Matori. You savvy?"

"Me savvy."

Pete Spence followed as Anamoku got Joe Purcell onto his shoulders and shuffled up the deck to the fore-castle. He waited until the two were down the ladder; then kicked the cover shut and wedged it. His face was satisfied as he padded back down the deck.

DOWN below, Duff Kellet stood across the cabin table from where old Fancy Dolliver's daughter sat. Kellet's face was grave, compassionate and his voice carried a nice blend of regret over her father's death and indignation over the high handedness of Casey Spade. Peg Dolliver watched him, her eyes grateful and the sullen droop had gone from her mouth.

"I came as soon as I heard that you were in trouble, Miss Dolliver," Kellet told her gently. "It is unthinkable that you stay here. Of course, Spade may mean what he says but his reputation is—shall we say?—unsavory and, with the pearls——"

Kellet stopped and shrugged his shoulders eloquently. Peg Dolliver got up and came around the table to stand close to him. The hardness had gone out of her face and she looked like a lonesome and scared kid.

"Oh, it's good of you," she said huskily. "I was afraid—afraid."

Kellet put an arm about her. "There, there, my dear. Everything will be all right. Mrs. Kellet and I will be more than glad to have you as our guest until your affairs can be straightened out and

a safe passage can be arranged for you for Sydney."

The girl's eyes were suddenly bright with tears as she lifted her face to him. "And he told me that there were no honest men at Biligree Atoll," she whispered.

Duff Kellet patted her shoulder and stepped back. "We had better be going, my dear. Have you anything that you wish to take with you?"

She shook her head. "Nothing." Then her eyes darkened again. "Suppose that we meet Captain Spade—he's a hard, terrible man. He'll try to make me come back."

"I've taken care of that," Kellet told her in a soothing voice. "I brought the sheriff along with me—he's up on deck now. Spade won't dare interfere."

The hell he wouldn't, Duff Kellet thought sourly.

"I'm ready," Peg Dolliver said smiling—almost gaily. "How am I ever going to be able to thank you?"

"Don't try, my dear," Duff Kellet said as he followed her toward the companion-way.

CASEY SPADE'S Kanakas dug a grave for old Fancy Dolliver beneath the coconut palms a hundred yards from the shack. There was no time to knock a coffin together—old Fancy would rest just as easy without it, Casey reflected sardonically.

"I'm sorry, old man," he said, "but I don't remember any of the burial service. Rest easy and I'll look after the girl."

He turned. The Kanakas were regarding him curiously and he gestured harshly toward them. "Fill it up!" he said.

He leaned against one of the slanting trunks of the coconut palms and loaded tobacco moodily into his pipe. One of his occasional black moods was on him. What the hell was the point of it all, he thought. For forty years, old Dolliver had been scraping about the Islands always looking for the strike that was just ahead.

Then old Dolliver had made his strike—the dysentery had plucked him off like a man would pluck a tick from his arm.

The Kanakas talked in low and musical voices as they dug their shovels into the yielding sand. From down the foreshore came the discordant sounds of the revelry which would carry on until dawn. Romantic Islands! Casey Spade spat.

A voice behind him said, "Casey Spade! Casey Spade!"

He turned, the unlighted pipe between his teeth. Rosa Konaua stood there in a little patch of moonlight. He knew the girl; had joked with her in the bars along the foreshore—liked her quick laughter and the carefree way in which she took what life offered to her.

"Hello, Rosa," he said. "Aren't you afraid to be out so late at night?"

She didn't smile at his joke but came to stand close to him. There was a faint odor of jasmine about her. Casey saw that her eyes were hot and angry.

"Casey, you 'ave thees Dolliver girl on board thee *Helga*?"

All thoughts of joking left Casey Spade's mind. He was suddenly hard and alert.

"What makes you think that, girl?"

"I 'ave hear Pete Spence say so to thees damn Duff Kellet."

Casey swore under his breath. Next to Frenchy Marquat Pete Spence was the one man whom he wished least to have knowledge of the pearls. He dropped a big hand onto the girl's arm and pulled her around so that he could see her face.

"You're sure? How'd you find out?"

"He ees listen at thee window there." She gestured toward where old Dolliver's shack stood. "He ees hear w'en you 'ave talk weeth her."

"And he told Duff Kellet? Who else?"

"Nobody else. He an' thees Kellet 'ave gone out to the *Helga*. They are going to breeng her ashore an' cause her much trouble, I theenk."

"They've gone out to the *Helga* already?"

She nodded.

"How long ago?"

"Maybe wan hour. I 'ave come here to find you but you 'ave not come yet so I am go back to thee beach to watch for you. W'en you don' come I theenk maybe I 'ave mees you so I come back here."

Casey swore again. "They've had time to get out there and back by now," he said harshly. "Where were they going to take her, girl? You know?"

"Yes. Pete Spence ees say they take her to Gert Noonan's bungalow. Gert Noonan—that cow—ees thee good fren' to Pete. He does not weesh Frenchy Marquat to know."

"Where is this bungalow?"

"Over by thee creek. I show you."

Casey thrust his unlighted pipe back into his pocket and swung around to the Kanakas. "You finish'um up quick fella," he said sharply. "Then you stop'um alongside whaleboat long time little bit. Bimeby me come. Savvy?"

"Me savvy."

Casey turned back to the girl. "Come on," he said.

CHAPTER VI

GERT NOONAN'S BUNGALOW

ROSA KONAUA dropped a hand on Casey's arm and halted him in the sable shade of a tree. A hundred feet ahead he saw a small bungalow half hidden by the lush vegetation which surrounded it — a lonesome place set well apart from the rest of Biligree Atoll.

The girl said, her lips close to his ear, "Those are Gert Noonan's place, Casey."

Casey Spade nodded, his eyes hard. He tipped the girl's chin up with his fingers and kissed her lightly on the mouth. "Good kid," he said. "Now you scat on back to the foreshore. Pete Spence will cause you trouble if he finds that you've been mixed up in this."

She stood there looking after him soberly as he went toward the bungalow,

keeping in the shadows. There were lights in two of the windows, Casey saw, after he had got closer. A thick hibiscus shaded the rear one and he made his way cautiously toward that while he damned himself for a fool because he had left the *Helga* without a gun.

The hibiscus sheltered him while he listened. He could hear the low mumble of voices from the front of the house but he could neither make out what they said nor distinguish their owners. Well, he thought sourly, he couldn't sit there in a clump of bushes sucking his thumb all night—he might as well see what was to be seen.

He reached for the rail of the veranda and pulled himself up. A board creaked as he stepped on the veranda floor and he stopped to listen again. The mutter of voices went on and he guessed that he hadn't been heard. The window was half a dozen feet away and he crossed swiftly to stand just outside the light where he could look into the room.

A sitting room, he saw. There were a few pieces of cheap furniture, an ornate china lamp on the table in the center and two doors leading away into other parts of the bungalow. He swore under his breath as he saw Peg Dolliver.

SHE was sitting beside the table and with her back to the door while the light was bright across her cropped hair. She was alone and that was a break, Casey thought. He slid a leg across the window sill and stepped into the room; the carpet muffled his footfalls until he was nearly at her side. Then she seemed to sense his presence and turned swiftly, her eyes widening with fear.

"Keep quiet or I'll break your silly neck!" Casey whispered harshly.

"Wh-what do you want?"

"You—though God knows why," he said bitterly.

He reached for her arm and his movement seemed to break the spell which had held her. She jumped to her feet, jerk-

ing away from him, and fled to the far side of the table.

"If you don't go I'll call Sheriff Spence."

"You little fool! Come on out of here with me while there's still time!"

He started around the table toward her and she screamed, then—a tight pitched wail of terror—she stumbled across the room. Casey Spade swore bitterly as he lunged toward her. It was too late. Feet pounded outside in the corridor and the door slammed back. Casey tried to reach the lamp, sweep it to the floor, but there wasn't time.

Pete Spence's voice rasped, "Don't try it, Casey!"

Casey stopped—turned. Pete Spence stood in the doorway, a black and heavy gun in his hand and his thick lips curled up unpleasantly. Behind him, Casey could see Duff Kellet's saturnine face. Spence walked slowly forward into the room, his eyes not leaving Casey Spade's face.

"Payin' a friendly little call, huh? That's nice."

"I came to get this girl," Casey told him thinly. "I'm taking her back out to the *Helga*—we'll be going now."

Pete Spence's grin became looser, more nasty. "You wouldn't be meanin' Miss Dolliver, would yuh, Casey?"

"I would." Black anger raged over Casey in a hot wave. Everything in him urged him to jump forward and smash that fat face into a bloody jelly—to hell with the gun. It wouldn't do. "We'll be going."

Pete Spence chuckled throatily and his voice was mocking. "Why of course Miss Dolliver can go back to the *Helga* if she wants to, Casey. Maybe you better ask her."

Casey Spade turned and stared at Peg Dolliver with curious, half pitying eyes. The little fool! It was incredible that she should believe the lies that they had told her but he could see that she had.

"Kid," he said, "when I start the ball

rolling here you make a break for that window. Get down to the whaleboat on the beach and beat the Kanakas until they take you out to the *Helga*. Tell Purcell to head for Liantang—now! Do you understand?"

He could see by the look in her eyes that it was hopeless. Pete Spence laughed hoarsely.

The girl said, "I'll stay here. Mr. and Mrs. Kellet have offered to let me stay here with them. Please go away. I don't want any more trouble."

CASEY SPADE'S laugh was short and hard. "Mrs. Kellet! You little fool! She's about as much Mrs. Kellet as I am!" He jerked a hand toward the cheaply furnished room and laughed again. "This ought to tell you but I forgot—you're convent raised and wouldn't know about such things. Well, Mrs. Kellet is nothing but a beach tramp who commands a little higher price than the others do. Now do you understand?"

"You've no right to say such things."

"Right! You jump for that window!"

"No! Please go now."

Casey Spade stared at her for a long minute and then shrugged as he turned back to Pete Spence. The latter grinned but there was a cold, calculating look at the back of his eyes and the muzzle of the gun was steady.

"Yeah," he said. "It's time tuh go now—I'll just take yuh along with me, Casey. I'm goin' tuh put you where you won't cause this young lady no more trouble."

The girl spoke haltingly. "Wouldn't it be all right if you just sent him back to his ship, Sheriff? He did take care of my father."

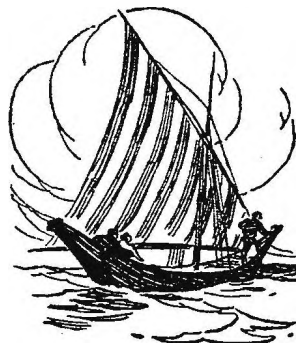
"Don't you worry, Miss," Pete said with a heartiness which did not conceal the threat of his words from Casey. "He won't bother yuh no more. Come on, Casey, I ain't foolin' with yuh."

Casey spat on the carpet. "Sheriff Spence!" he said. "Hell!"

He went down the corridor and across the veranda with Pete Spence close behind. There was nothing else to do at the moment, he thought sourly. He had not missed that light at the back of Pete's eyes and he knew that the other would shoot if he made a break. Pearls, such as the ones Peg Dolliver carried in the belt beneath her shirt, were stake enough to kill for. A path led away through the bushes and toward the creek.

"Take it," Pete Spence said.

They followed it for a hundred yards along the bank of the sluggish creek. Then an iron-roofed shack loomed in front of them and Casey stopped at Pete Spence's curt command. Some sixth sense warned him and he tried to throw himself away but he was too late. Spence slashed down viciously with the barrel of the heavy gun



and Casey Spade dropped to his knees—tried to get up and then slid forward onto his face.

Pete Spence grunted with satisfaction and then kicked open the door of the shack. He worked swiftly with a coil of thin line and, when he had finished, Casey Spade was bound up tighter than a mummy. Pete Spence dragged him into the shack and stood looking down for a moment.

"I'll know where tuh find yuh now when I want yuh, Casey," he snarled. "Pete Spence ain't the one tuh overlook four hundred pounds—even when he's got a pocket full of pearls."

He closed the door behind him and went on back up the winding path to the bungalow.

DUFF KELLET was sitting with the girl in the parlor as Pete came back down the corridor. Kellet had got hold of a bottle and had been drinking again, Pete saw. There was a hard brightness to the thin man's face that he didn't like.

Spence said harshly, "All right, Kellet. You can get out now—I'll talk tuh Cissy here alone."

Kellet's lips lifted thinly as he slouched in his chair and stared up at the other. "I'll go after you've paid me that hundred," he said. "Not before."

"You'll get out now, damn you!"

"No, no—my hundred first, friend."

Anger suddenly darkened Pete Spence's fat face and he moved forward a step or two—there was a sort of feline springiness in the big man's movements despite his bulk. Kellet's stare became more spiteful.

Behind him, Peg Dolliver was looking at Pete Spence with a mixture of perplexity and growing fear on her face. She stepped up to touch Kellet's shoulder.

"I don't understand," she said in a low voice. "Why should you go, Mr. Kellet? When is Mrs. Kellet coming?"

Pete Spence shifted his gaze to her and then threw back his head. His coarse, obscene laughter filled the smoky room; he laughed until tears ran down his fat cheeks.

"By God, that's good!" he howled. "You hear, Duff? When is Mrs. Kellet coming?"

Peg Dolliver's eyes were wide and the color had drained out of her face leaving it gray and drawn. Even now she could not believe—this thing couldn't be so. She put out a hand to touch Kellet on the shoulder again. He showed no sign that he was aware of her presence.

She forced the words out between her set teeth. "You—mean—Casey Spade—told—the—truth?"

Pete Spence leered at her. "Hell, baby, you're goin' tuh like me better than Casey Spade."

The girl's mouth opened slowly; she jammed the back of her hand against it.

Then she screamed and stumbled blindly toward the window. Pete Spence grabbed her before she had taken two steps. Pete Spence turned back to Duff Kellet.

"Get out!" he said thickly.

Kellet shook his head. He said in a thin, strange voice, "I done a lot of things in my time, Pete, but I've never beat a woman. I'm taking her back to the *Helga*."

"You're what?"

"You heard me. Get your hands up and away from that gun, Pete. I'll put a bullet through your bowels if you don't."

Pete Spence saw the gleam of a gun in the thin man's hand as he slowly lifted his own arms. His mouth drooped loosely, but there was a cunning, snaky light at the backs of his eyes.

"Listen, Duff," he mumbled, "let's talk this thing over, eh? No use to go off half cocked this way. Hell, man, I'll even cut yuh in on this."

"Get on outside, girl," Duff Kellet said in his reedy voice. "Start for the beach—I'll join you in a minute."

He turned his head a little as he spoke. Not much but enough and it was the thing that Pete Spence had been waiting for. The fingers of his right hand—shoulder high—closed on the hilt of the knife, which hung beneath his shirt at the back of his neck, and he threw with a vicious, over-hand motion.

Duff Kellet coughed—a dry hack—and then stood up straight, his gun dropping from fingers which had suddenly gone limp. The knife hilt stood out solidly against his breast. For a moment he swayed—tried to speak; then he staggered through the door and his footsteps dragged away down the corridor. Presently they stopped.

Pete Spence grinned wolfishly and went across to fasten the door. He turned back. Peg Dolliver slumped on the settee, a thick bruise darkening her pale face and a dazed and uncomprehending stare in her eyes. Pete Spence laughed at her and

took his time as he approached. It tickled him to see the fear deepen in her eyes.

"You an' me'll get along, baby," he said. "Plenty of time later for love makin'. Right now I want tuh have a little peek at what you're carryin' in your belt."

He took it from her, and after he had got it he pushed her roughly down into the settee again and then went across to pull a chair up in front of the table. His breath sucked greedily as he pried open the flaps which closed the pockets of the belt.

It was a half hour later when he got up and came back to her, walking with the unsteady step of a drunken man.

"You're goin' tuh tell me where they came from," he said thickly. "You're goin' tuh tell me or I'll break every damned bone in that pretty little body of yours! You understand?"

CHAPTER VII

"WE'VE GOT TO RUN FOR IT NOW."

TEN thousand merry little devils pried at Casey Spade's head with red hot pitchforks as he struggled to get his eyes open. He shouted at them to scat but they wouldn't go. He tried to get his hands up to bat them away but his hands wouldn't move. He was thirsty with a blistering, searing thirst.

Consciousness flowed slowly back into him and, bit by bit, he pieced together the thing that had happened. He finally got his eyes open. Moonlight was flooding in across him from a window above his head; he tried to sit up, then, and found that he was bound, wrists and ankles. He swore and lay back again while he fought off the blackness which threatened to engulf him once more. A pretty kettle of fish, he thought bitterly.

Then he remembered Peg Dolliver back there in Gert Noonan's bungalow.

He groaned aloud and then set to work, with methodical persistence, to free himself from the ropes. Pete Spence had

done his job well. After ten minutes of trying Casey knew that he would never get them untied. He hunched himself across the floor so that he could rest his back against the wall while he tried to think of some plan.

He saw, then, that the door of the shack was opening cautiously. A thin sliver of moonlight slanted across the floor. That sliver widened.

A voice said softly, "Casey. Casey Spade."

Casey thought that he had never heard a sweeter sound. It was Rosa Konaua's voice and, as he answered it, she slipped in and closed the door behind her. A moment later he felt her soft shoulder against his own; her fingers working at the ropes which held his wrists.

"What are you doing here?" he asked her. "I thought you'd gone back to the beach."

She told him in a low voice while she worked.

TEN minutes ago she had been sitting in one of the back rooms of Murphy's Bar, having a drink with Frenchy Marquat. Someone had hammered on the rear door and Frenchy Marquat had opened it. Duff Kellet was lying there on the steps with a knife in his chest. He had told Frenchy about Pete Spence and the girl up here at Gert Noonan's bungalow.

Duff Kellet had died there on the steps and Frenchy Marquat had left him; gone, probably, to round up his crew and come up here. She had guessed that something had gone wrong and so had slipped away. As she had come up the path she had heard Casey Spade's groans.

The ropes loosened about Casey Spade's wrists finally. His hands were numb from lack of circulation and he beat them together and swore under his breath as slivers of pain ran down into his fingers. The girl's fingers were fumbling hastily at the ropes which still held Casey's ankles.

"We mus' hurry, Casey," she panted,

her voice scared. "Thees Frenchy ees see me as I leave Murphy's Bar. He ees yell at me to come back but I am run very fast."

Casey Spade brushed her hands away. "Let me," he said curtly.

He jerked viciously at the knots, feeling the rope cut into him at each jerk. No matter. There was something to be taken care of up there at the bungalow before Frenchy Marquat arrived and time was getting short. Maybe it was too late already. His head ached with a dull throb and he found it difficult to think clearly. Then the ropes loosened and Casey stood up, the girl helping him. He swayed dizzily for a moment; put an arm about her shoulders to steady himself.

The fit passed. Casey walked to the door and the cool night wind across his face helped to clear his brain. The shakiness was leaving him and he started slowly back up the path with Rosa Konaua following.

They had gone halfway to the bungalow when a muffled scream cut across the moonlight.

Casey Spade swore as he broke into a loping run. He rounded a thick hibiscus bush and the bungalow lay in front of him in the moonlight. He went up the steps and into the corridor through which he had come earlier. A second scream prickled the hair at the back of his neck—Peg Dolliver's voice and it came from behind the door at the end of the corridor. Casey Spade drove himself at it.

Dimly, he knew that Rosa was crying behind him, "No, Casey! He ees got thee gun! Wait!"

The door splintered under the drive of Casey Spade's shoulder and then he was through and into the parlor with its cheap furniture and the porcelain lamp on the table. For a split second he blinked in the sudden light.

At the far side of the room Pete Spence was stooped above the girl, his fat hands on her throat. He looked up, his mouth dropping open a little, as Casey Spade crashed into the room—then dropped the

girl and twisted around swiftly, reaching for his gun. Peg Dolliver slid to her knees on the floor.

The gun *spanged* wickedly, but Pete Spence had not been fast enough and the bullet burned across Casey's back as he drove. He hit the fat man just above the knees, drove him backward and the settee splintered under the impact. The gun dropped and Casey kicked it toward Rosa Konaua as he twisted away from Pete Spence's flailing arms.

"Take it. Get the girl and head for the beach!" Casey snapped at her.

PETE SPENCE clawed himself free of the wreck of the settee, crouched with his arms out as he watched Casey Spade. Suddenly he turned his head to look at the table; swung back toward Casey, making slobbering sounds in his throat. Casey saw and understood. The belt lay there beneath the lamp.

He moved swiftly; got his fingers on it and flung it at Peg Dolliver who was trying to get to her feet over by the window. Spence mumbled crazily as he lunged for it but Casey Spade drove him across the room with a right hand smash which cut the fat man's mouth to ribbons.

Casey yelled again, "Get started! You fools, we haven't got all night!"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Rosa Konaua push old Dolliver's daughter through the window; follow herself a moment later. Good, he thought grimly; he could now attend to this little business that he had with Pete Spence.

The latter had seen the two girls go, too—the pearls with them—and the sight drove him into mad and roaring frenzy. He tried to break for the window but Casey was watching for it and smashed him back up against the wall. Blood dripped down from Spence's broken mouth and was a red smear across the front of his dirty shirt.

"You're good with a gun from behind," Casey Spade said between his teeth. "Now

let's see how good you are at a different sort of a little game, Pete."

Sanity suddenly came back into Pete Spence's eyes and he got his hands up and backed away from those stabbing fists which were cutting his face to pieces. A vicious swing caught Casey Spade high on the head and, for a split second, he thought that his skull had been split in two. Pete Spence was a big man—strong and dangerous in spite of his fat—and he understood now that he would never get back those pearls until he had beaten Casey Spade. He gave ground a little, his eyes darting about the room for a weapon.

"Come on, Pete," Casey Spade taunted hoarsely. "Maybe you'd like to try choking *me* for a little while?"

PETE SPENCE'S breath bubbled mostly through his broken mouth as Casey's left hand flayed open his cheek with knuckles that cut like knives. Spence lunged forward but Casey, his eyes icy and his face merciless, side-stepped and slammed a right hand against the fat man's heart. The blow struck with the sodden thud of an axe striking a chopping block and Pete Spence's knees sagged. He went down on all fours, stayed there for a minute shaking his head stupidly back and forth; then crawled to a chair and began to pull himself back up.

Casey Spade waited, careless for a second.

That was almost too long. Pete Spence was still strong and he swung the chair up; smashed it down viciously. Casey Spade got his left hand up to protect his head and felt his arm go limp while red hot pain clawed at his shoulder. He swore bitterly at his own carelessness but there was no time to cry about that now—the fat man was rushing, his big fists swinging wickedly and crafty triumph at the backs of his eyes.

"Goin' break your neck!" he was yelling thickly. "Goin' stamp your damned brains out!"

Casey Spade slid away from the rush. His left arm hung numb and useless—probably broken, he thought. He slipped



one of Spence's swings and drove the fat man back with a right hand smash to the mouth.

He came on. This couldn't last, Casey Spade thought with curious detachment. His head was ringing as though a thousand sleigh bells had been dumped in there to tumble loosely about. Presently Pete Spence would catch him with one of those swings—then it would be all over and Pete Spence would catch old Fancy Dolliver's girl and choke her some more. That was bad; mustn't let that happen. He shook his head violently and his vision cleared a little.

THEN, for a split second, he saw his opening. Pete Spence was rushing him again, his big arms high, and Casey Spade saw his target—that roll of flesh which bulged the big man's shirt just above the belt. He'd put everything on this one, Casey thought. He stepped in, careless of those flailing arms and drove at that bulge with all the weight of his body.

Breath exploded out of Pete Spence in a long sigh. He seemed to wilt at the middle; to crumple slowly. Casey Spade straightened him with a vicious hook to the face—then slammed him in the throat with a right hand that was as cruel as a war club.

Pete Spence swayed backward, crashed down, taking the table and the lamp along with him. The lamp splintered and hot darkness, filled with the stink of hot kerosene, dropped like a curtain across the room. Then red shadows began to lift and flicker—those shadows grew swiftly taller.

Casey Spade, his feet spraddled as he

swayed a little, stood and watched the flames lick greedily across the floor in the wake of the spilled oil. The flames grew higher, Weird half light danced across the wrecked room.

Pete Spence was trying to roll over onto his face, babbling crazily — incoherent sounds which had no meaning. The flames reached the wall; began to crackle wickedly as the dry wood caught. With an effort Casey Spade aroused himself. Red hot pain raced through his left arm as he felt of it with the fingers of his other hand—it wasn't broken, he found.

Heat beat at his face as he got down to his knees and, working slowly and painfully, got Pete Spence across his shoulder—couldn't leave even that rat to fry in here, he thought morosely. It took him three tries to get to his feet and he staggered drunkenly as he turned toward the door. He was not too soon; already flames were beginning to make a leaping barrier. The room was a furnace behind him as he reached the veranda.

The cool air helped to drive the cobwebs out of his brain and he moved faster, easing himself down the steps with his right hand clinging to the railing. Pain bit at him like a knife but there was no time to worry about that now. Voices were lifting hoarsely from the direction of the beach and the sound was swiftly coming nearer.

Frenchy Marquat meant to take a hand!

CASEY SPADE staggered across an open patch of moonlight—dumped Pete Spence's limp body into a bougainvillea clump fifty yards from the bungalow. Frenchy Marquat could find him or not—Casey didn't care. It was too late for that to make any difference now. As he turned toward the shelter of a tree he hoped that Rosa and the Dolliver girl had reached the whaleboat.

They had not. Rosa's voice called to him softly out of the shade, "Casey!"

He stopped short and swung about;

caught a glimpse of her slender shape off to his right and went swiftly in that direction. As he reached her she thrust out Pete Spence's gun to him and he took it, pushed it into the waistband of his trousers. The sound of voices was growing louder.

"Why didn't you get to the boat?"

She shrugged and turned her head and Casey saw. Peg Dolliver was lying at the edge of a patch of moonlight, her eyes closed and her face a stark, dead white.

"She ees so scare that she cannot walk. She ees faint, Casey."

Casey swore. "Help me get her across my shoulders," he ordered curtly. "If we're ever going to get out of here we've got to do it now."

He was feeling stronger now and the girl's weight was little compared to that of Pete Spence. Rosa led the way deeper into the trees and Casey followed, the gun in his left hand. Behind them, the red light of the burning bungalow was beginning to leap up against the sky.

They crouched in deep shadow for a moment, five minutes later, and watched a dozen men go by, running hard. Frenchy Marquat's men, drunk and crazy with the lust for pearls. Then Rosa swung farther to the left and they went on toward the beach. Presently the bushes thinned; gave way to the scattered coconut palms which offered little concealment across the three hundred yards which separated them from the whaleboat. Well, they'd have to make a run for it.

"Come on," he said harshly to the quarter caste girl.

THEY had covered a third of the distance when Casey Spade heard a yell behind him. They had been seen. He guessed that Frenchy Marquat's men had reached the burning bungalow and then had doubled back, flinging out a net of searchers to catch the fugitives before they could reach the beach. Another yell answered from the left.

Peg Dolliver's weight had suddenly become lead across his shoulders and the sand sucked at his feet as he ran. He hoped to God that the whaleboat was where he had left it; if it wasn't things were likely to be a little unpleasant. Then he saw it through the trees, pulled well up onto the sand and with the Kanakas stretched out beside it.

A voice yelled behind them, "They're headin' for the boat, Rafe! Get down the beach an' head 'em off!"

Casey Spade's lips tightened into a hard line.

It was going to be a close thing—those voices were near and it would take time to get the boat into the water. He yelled hoarsely at the Kanakas and saw them sit up to stare stupidly about them. Another hundred yards to go now.

Ahead of him Rosa Konaua had stopped. "Geeve me thee gun," she said in a hard whisper. She jerked it from his fingers. "I keep them back for a little. W'en you get thee boat off I come."

Good girl, that Rosa Konaua!

It seemed hours later to Casey Spade that he reached the whaleboat; dumped Peg Dolliver into the sternsheets. He yelled at the Kanakas and jumped to lend his weight as the boat began to slide down the sand. There were more yells back there among the coconut palms. Then three shots banged out viciously against the moonlight; three more after a little interval.

The whaleboat slid into the gentle surf and, at Casey's harsh word, the Kanakas scrambled in. Casey, standing hip deep in the water, cupped his hands to his mouth.

"Rosa, come on!"

He saw her, then running like a deer through the coconut palms. He hauled himself into the boat and jerked open the cover of a locker built along one side; slid out a rifle and yanked a bullet into the chamber. Rosa flashed onto the white sand of the beach.

"Row!" Casey Spade snarled over his

shoulder as he dropped down in the sternsheets. "Row like hell, damn you!"

Rosa Konaua hit the water in a long, flat dive; came up beside the stern of the whaleboat which was beginning to gather way. Casey leaned over and dragged her in, dripping.

"I theenk I get wan of those fella," she said with a flash of white teeth. "He ees do thee somersault weeth hees feet een thee air, Casey."

THE whaleboat was a scant fifty yards from the shore when a dark figure broke out of the coconut grove. He yelled, his voice carrying spitefully across the water, and pointed. Three more dark figures joined with the first; more were coming. Casey recognized the broad swing of Frenchy Marquat's shoulders as the big man ran across the sand.

Frenchy Marquat was yelling, black anger in his voice, "You come back or I shoot you, Casey! By God, you come back here—Frenchy Marquat ees say so!"

"Get down," Casey said harshly to the quarter caste girl. He thought it unlikely that any of Frenchy Marquat's men had rifles with them, though, and it was a long shot for a hand gun—growing longer rapidly.

A bullet slammed viciously into the water a dozen yards away. More bullets spattered down; one chipped a long splinter from one of the oars and the boat slewed a little as the Kanaka lost his stroke.

Casey braced himself against the rock of the boat and slammed a bullet at the middle of that dark group ashore. He saw sand kick up a little in front of them as he jerked a fresh cartridge into the chamber and set himself again. A man yelled at his second shot and the group dissolved.

Frenchy Marquat's voice again drifted out, more faintly now. "Frenchy ees see you again, Casey. We make thee beeg fight over both thee women an' thee pearls, no?"

Casey Spade laid down his rifle and un-

shipped the steering oar. Three quarters of a mile ahead the *Helga* bobbed gently against the tide. Behind, a hot red glow lay across the sky where Gert Noonan's bungalow burned.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HIDDEN LAGOON OF MALGABAR

IT WAS well after midnight and the wind had stiffened with the promise of a blow in the steady gusts. The moon was still high but Biligree Atoll had dropped away astern as the *Helga* dug her forefoot into the oily swells and fanned out a silvery wake behind. Joe Purcell, nursing a sore head, had the wheel.

Down in the main cabin Casey Spade sat on a stool with his swollen right hand in a bucket of hot water while Rosa Konaua patched up a three inch gash in the side of his scalp. Peg Dolliver sat across from him, her arms on the table while she watched. Warm color had come back into her face now and there was a steady glow in her eyes as she looked at Casey Spade.

Casey pulled his hand out of the bucket and looked at it—it was swollen to half again its normal size. The knuckles were skinned and cut and he winced as he pressed at one of them with the fingers of his other hand.

"Your poor hand," Peg Dolliver said softly.

Rosa Konaua's lips tightened and she turned to stare at the other woman with smoldering eyes. "I'm theenk that thees Pete Spence ees feel more bad than Casey ees feel," she said tartly. "If you 'ave not been thee little fool to run away from the *Helga* thees ees not happen."

Peg Dolliver nodded her head soberly. "I know. Why didn't you let me go? You had done enough for me already."

Casey pulled his hand out again and squinted at it sardonically; then transferred his attention to the girl who sat across the table. He grinned maliciously.

"Hell, sister," he told her, "we wanted to steal your pearls ourselves! There's nothing like a little pearl stealing now and then to keep a man's hand in—and to keep up the price on his head."

He saw that she didn't think that that was funny. Well, maybe she wouldn't—she'd had sort of a disquieting evening, on the whole. She wouldn't be any happier, either, if she knew just how far the lot of them were from being out of the woods still.

Frenchy Marquat was not the man to allow a fortune to slip through his fingers so easily and, by now, he would know the whole story from Pete Spence. It would have been smarter, Casey thought sourly, if he had left Pete back there to fry in the bungalow.

Peg Dolliver was fumbling beneath the level of the table and presently she lifted the belt and laid it in sight. Casey watched indifferently as she pushed it across.

"I want you to take it," she told him in a low voice. "I never want to hear of pearls again—I even hate the sound of the word, Casey. Take them!"

CASEY squinted at her for a long minute. Then he lifted his hand and poured whiskey into a tin cup and passed it across to her. "Forget it, kid," he said. "Swallow that and you'll feel better. You just ran up against something that they don't happen to tell you about in convents. Hell, those pearls will take you back to England, the States—wherever you want to go. You'll forget about all this before long."

"I don't want them."

"Drink your drink. Then go climb into your bunk—you don't need to be afraid. Rosa will be with you."

She sat there with her arms folded on the table while she studied him thoughtfully. Then she picked up the cup and drained it; went slowly across the deck to the stateroom and the door closed behind her. Rosa Konaua dabbed viciously with

the swab which she was using to clean the cut in Casey's scalp.

"Easy!" Casey grunted at her. "That's my head you're playing with."

"You theenk she ees pretty, Casey?" Rosa's voice was sharp and Casey swung about on the stool to look at her.

"Who?"

"Those wan—those Dolliver?"

"Pretty enough," Casey told her indifferently. "Why?"

"She ees not pretty!" Rosa said suddenly in a passionate voice. "She ees thee skenny cow! Wan time maybe Rosa ees scratch her eyes out! Bah!"

She moved around the table to stand in front of him with her head thrown back and her eyes flashing darkly against the warm ivory of her face. The hibiscus flower still flamed against her hair. Casey grinned at her crookedly.

"What's the trouble, baby?"

She spat a word at him and flounced away to disappear up the companion. For a moment Casey stared after her. Then he shook his head and reached for the whiskey.

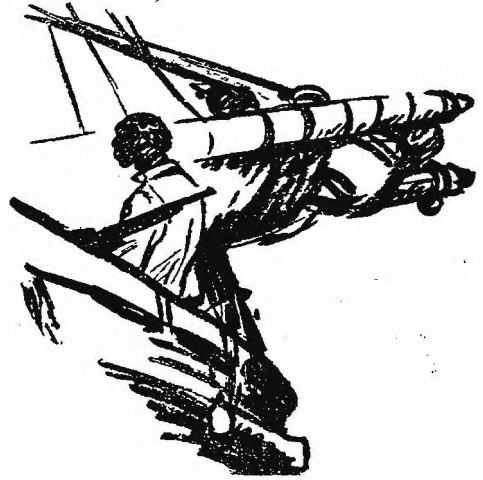
"It's not enough that I've got Frenchy Marquat and every other tough nut in the Islands on my trail," he observed sourly to the tin cup. "Oh, no. I've got to have a little war of my own right here on the *Helga*."

THE day broke gray and sodden with weeping skies and, by mid-afternoon, the *Helga* was digging her nose into slatey rollers while a half gale whined through her rigging. Old Anamoku had the wheel and Joe Purcell stood with Casey on the poop. The lookout had just reported that the schooner astern, which at noon had been hull down, had now come on up above the bulge of the world.

When that sail had first been reported Casey had gone aloft with the glasses; had seen enough to know that that was the *Maria*, Frenchy Marquat's big top-sail schooner. The *Maria* could outsail any-

thing in the Islands and Frenchy Marquat was the man who could drive the last knot out of her in good weather or bad.

He had been a fool to try for Liantang, Casey thought morosely. He should



have turned south! Lost the *Helga* in that cloud of islands down there until things had quieted down a little. Frenchy Marquat could have looked for him for a year down there and with no more chance of finding him than of finding a needle in a haystack. Instead he had turned north into the Tasmanade Passage — must run through that twisting channel for close to a hundred miles yet before he could swing the *Helga* across the tail of Malgabar Island and get away to open sea. Long before that the fast *Maria* would overhaul them and trouble would come aboard in big quantities.

Casey walked to the rail and spat.

There was no getting out of Tasmanade Passage once you got into it. A dozen miles to windward Terua Levu loomed dully through the rain—two hundred miles of volcanic range and jungle and cliffs which dropped straight down into the sea. There was no haven there. To leeward were the Andalones; a watery desert of half submerged islands and uncharted reefs which would tear the bottom out of the *Helga* in a matter of minutes once she had left the safe passage.

Young Purcell, balancing himself

against the lift of the ship, squinted at the weather. It was closing down. A squall marched across the water with a white line along its forefoot.

Purcell said, "Goin' to be dirty weather. Maybe we can give 'em the slip tonight."

"Maybe." Casey Spade's voice was skeptical as he glanced at the bulging canvas. The *Helga* was heeled far over and running like a dog with a nose to the ground. "If it keeps on getting stronger there'll be no chance to double back. We'll have to keep running before it and so will Marquat."

"What do we do then? He's got a dozen white men on board. They'll gobble us up, Casey."

Casey Spade thrust his empty pipe into his mouth, bowl down, so that the rain wouldn't drip into it. The hard recklessness had come back into his face as he turned toward the steps. Things didn't look so good, but he had beaten Frenchy Marquat before and he would beat him again.

"If worst comes to worst," he said over his shoulder, "we'll run the *Helga* ashore at Malgabar and take to the bush. Keep her as she goes."

"Worst is right," young Purcell told him sourly but the wind whipped the words away.

PEG DOLLIVER was sitting at the cabin table as he went in. She looked up and smiled at him uncertainly as he wiped the water out of his eyes. Above his head, spray rattled across the cabin skylight like driven shot.

"It's a storm, isn't it?" she asked.

"Maybe," he told her noncommittally while he packed tobacco into his pipe. He stared at her for a moment over the lighted match. "I may as well tell you, sister. Frenchy Marquat's schooner is coming up fast astern."

He was faintly surprised to see that the news made no great impression on her and glanced curiously at her again. She sat with her chin on her hand and her eyes

meeting his steadily. Without knowing exactly why he did it, Casey placed his pipe on the table and went around to slip his hands beneath her elbows and lift her until she lay against him.

She didn't struggle as he kissed her hard on the mouth and, after a moment he felt her lips return the kiss. The kind of a kiss that Casey Spade had not known for a long time; it disturbed him vaguely.

Rosa Konaua, hidden in the shadow, softly closed the stateroom door as Casey scratched a match and lighted the cabin lamp. He swore at himself under his breath then, and went back to pick up his pipe. Peg Dolliver had seated herself again and was looking at him with a faint color in her cheeks.

"Why did you do that, Casey?" she asked. There was no anger in her voice.

"Call it impulse," he said in a flat voice. "Call it whatever you like. It won't happen again."

"Suppose I wanted it to, Casey Spade?"

HE SHRUGGED and stabbed at the hot bowl of his pipe with a thumb. "I told you that Frenchy Marquat's schooner is coming up," he said presently. "I blundered when I headed into the Tasmanade Channel—but that can't be helped now, girl. The *Maria* is too fast for us and the way things stand she'll overhaul us before we can make open sea again. Our best bet is to run for Malgabar."

"Malgabar?"

Casey nodded. "A big island maybe eighty miles north of here. There's an anchorage or two where we might lose them. If not we'll beach the schooner and take to the bush. It's bad country, girl—jungle and the salt water tribes may give us trouble. No more trouble than we can expect from Frenchy Marquat, though, and that bunch of pirates that sail with him."

Peg Dolliver leaned forward and placed a soft hand on Casey's arm. "You think we can reach Malgabar before—they can catch up to us?"

"It's likely. Why?"

Her eyes were suddenly bright. "If we can, Casey, I know of a lagoon where we can hide for weeks and no one will ever find us. It's the lagoon where dad found the pearls!"

She talked swiftly, her words tumbling across each other.

SHE had sailed with old Fancy Dolliver on that last trip a month ago—a profitless, heartbreaking trip which had been a failure from the first. They had been coming back along the north shoreline of Malgabar when they had found that the water casks had leaked and that their fresh water was gone.

The wind had been light and for twenty miles they had crept along the coast looking for some sign of a stream where they could fill the casks but they had seen nothing except a monotony of sheer cliffs which dropped down to the sea's edge—sometimes with a narrow fringe of beach and jungle; more often with the rocky bastions plunging into the sea itself. It had been close to dark when they had made out a shallow cove and what seemed to be a break in the towering rims. Old Fancy Dolliver had thought that perhaps a stream might be there.

He had waited until daylight and had then gone ashore in the whaleboat, leaving the girl on board. The whaleboat had disappeared and it was four hours later when she had seen it nose out from the cliffs. Old Fancy Dolliver had come back on board the lugger with empty water casks but with his face flushed with excitement.

That was no river there. It was a deep arm of the sea which twisted for a half mile through a gorge and into an immense lagoon. They had worked the lugger through when the tide set in and had anchored that night off a shelving crescent of beach at the west end of the lagoon. It was here that they had found the bed of virgin shell.

Casey Spade held a fresh match to his

pipe and his eyes were bright. "You'd know this place again, kid?"

She nodded. "I'd know it, Casey. It's the only spot in thirty miles along that part of the Malgabar coast where there's any sort of a cove."

"And it's hidden?"

"No one would ever suspect that the lagoon lies in there. If we hadn't been desperate for water dad would never have put in there, either. If we can stay far enough ahead of the *Maria* to get in without being seen they'll never find us."

The cabin lamp rocked in its gimbals as the schooner crawled up a long slope of water; coasted rapidly down the other side. Casey Spade got up, balancing himself against the heave of the deck.

He said tightly, "The storm will take care of that. Marquat's got no choice except to run before it. He'll run on past Malgabar looking for sea room and figuring that we'll have to do the same. With luck we can work down the coast and duck into the lagoon unseen. Maybe we've got a card or two to play yet, sister."

He looked at her soberly for a moment and then turned toward the companionway.

CHAPTER IX

VIRGIN SHELL

THE storm blew itself out before morning and day dawned with sun and no more than a stiff breeze and the long rollers to remind the crew of the *Maria* of the hell which had roared up through the Tasmanade Passage twenty-four hours before. Frenchy Marquat sat at the table in the *Maria's* big cabin and poured whiskey into a tin cup while he squinted at Pete Spence.

The fat man's face was still swollen and cut—one eye closed and a gap in his front teeth where Casey's fist had caught him. Frenchy Marquat chuckled deeply and lifted his cup.

"You are look like hell," he said. "Nex' time you are see thees Casey Spade I'm

theenk you 'ave better run queek, my fren'."

Pete Spence swore and reached for the whiskey. "The next time I see that red-headed rat I'll put a bullet into him an' talk afterwards."

"You talk thee beeg war," Frenchy said maliciously. He drained his cup, tossed it to the table and leaned forward on his hairy forearms. There was a cold light at the back of his eyes. "Me, I tell you sometheng else, Pete. You 'ave make thee play for thee pearls all by yourself, eh? You don' weesh Frenchy to know about that?"

Pete Spence's shifty gaze slid across the big man's face and then slid away again. He was afraid of Frenchy Marquat and his voice was conciliatory when he spoke.

"Aw, hell—it wasn't nothin' like that, Frenchy. I was afraid that Casey was goin' tuh get away. I had tuh move quick an' there wasn't no time to let yuh know."

Frenchy Marquat slowly doubled a big fist and laid it on the table. His voice was cold. "Me, I'm theenk you tell thee beeg lie, Pete."

The fat man tried to bluster. "By God, Frenchy, you can't call me no——"

HIS voice trailed away under the black stare of the other's eyes. Frenchy Marquat pointed a finger at Spence's breast and there was a harsh finality to his words.

"Wan time you 'ave do eet. Wan time more you do eet an' you are feenish, Pete." He snapped his fingers. "Pouf! Jus' like that!"

Pete Spence believed him. Footsteps clattered down the companion steps then and Link Ballard—a thin, whipcorded man with a predatory face—stepped into the cabin. He flung himself down at the table and reached for the whiskey bottle.

"I been aloft myself with the glasses," he said to Frenchy Marquat. "There ain't no sign of the *Helga*, or anything else, that I can see."

Frenchy Marquat's face darkened an-

grily and he jerked at his beard—a big man, quickly roused to either laughter or rage. He slammed his fist on the table; jumped up.

"Bah! Ees eet that Frenchy mus' sheep thee boat full of fools all thee time? Thees *Helga* she ees not thee bird. She ees not fly!"

Link Ballard poured himself a generous drink and tossed it off, his eyes sardonic. He did not look at Frenchy but shifted his gaze, instead, to Pete Spence's battered face.

"There ain't no sign of her," he repeated sullenly.

"Where ees she go, then? Frenchy ees ask where, stupid leetle ape!"

"How in hell would I know where? Maybe she worked down behind Malgabar. Maybe she's piled up along the coast there some place."

"Maybe! Maybe! Maybe!" The big man's voice bellowed hoarsely at them. "Frenchy ees look for heemself, by God!"

HE STAMPED across the deck and they heard him climb the companion-way steps. Link Ballard's face was surly as he poured another generous drink into the cup and lifted it to his lips. He gagged a little over the raw liquor and spat.

Finally he said, "I'm gettin' damned sick an' tired of that!"

Pete Spence leaned forward with his arms on the table and his thick lips lifting a little above his broken teeth. His voice was oily.



"Listen," he said, "there's plenty more feel the same as you do. Suppose we find the pearls, what happens? He takes half an' nine of us split the other half. That don't suit me, Link."

The smaller man slouched in his seat,

his eyes beady while he watched Pete Spence. "Talk on," he said curtly.

Pete smiled nastily. "I ain't ready tuh talk yet, Link. Just keep your mouth shut an' your eyes open. Maybe things might break so that we split them pearls two ways between us. Are yuh on?"

"I'm on," Link Ballard told him, reaching for the whiskey again.

Frenchy Marquat's voice, bellowing with anger, summoned the two on deck. Frenchy, himself, had been aloft—damning the incompetents which served him for a crew as he went—but he had been able to find no more than Link Ballard had found. He boomed curses as they got sail onto the *Maria*.

Presently she headed east along the coast of the island.

The *Helga* had been sighted through the squalls as they drove toward her, and from where they had seen her Frenchy Marquat knew that it would have been impossible for Casey Spade to beat back to the south side of the island. Therefore, he reasoned, Casey must have taken a chance and held on down the coast, hoping to reach the south side when the storm was over. There were inlets there where a man might hide for a little while.

It was good enough reasoning. It was the plan that Casey Spade would have followed if old Dolliver's daughter had not told him about the hidden lagoon.

Well, Frenchy Marquat thought with satisfaction, his schooner could sail three feet to the *Helga's* two and Casey Spade, quartering a sea like the one that had been running yesterday, would have little lead. They ought to overhaul him before he reached the eastern tip of Malgabar—if not there, then on the beat back up the southern coast. Frenchy had no fear that Casey Spade would try to keep on going east. The Andalones laid an impassable barrier across his way there.

It was six days later when the *Maria* had completed the circuit of Malgabar and lay anchored beneath the cliffs a half

dozen miles to the east of the cove Peg Dolliver had told about which hid the passage to the lagoon. Frenchy Marquat, convinced now that the *Helga* had piled up on the north coast, had his two whaleboats out searching. His own he took to the east, keeping close to the cliffs while he scanned every rocky point for signs of wreckage; the other he had sent back to the west with Pete Spence in charge.

It was mid-afternoon when the latter boat rounded a bastion of fallen rock and came into the little cove. The four men at the oars stopped rowing to breathe a bit and the boat drifted closer while they looked.

"Funny lookin' place," Pete Spence said without much interest. "Maybe we better pull in an' look at it."

Big Swede Larsen leaned on his oar and spat, a scowl on his scarred face. "What the hell's the use?" he demanded. "We'll just have tuh pull out again. I say let's go back to the ship—I'm tired of heavin' at this damn oar!"

Link Ballard squinted. "Nothin' in there," he said. "You couldn't hide a whaleboat in there—let alone a schooner."

"I want a look," Pete Spence told him briefly. "There's something funny here."

Link Ballard's thin lips lifted unpleasantly. "Maybe you wouldn't think it was so funny if you'd been pushing this scow around all day. You been sittin' back there on that fat stern of yours—"

"Well, by God!"

LINK BALLARD stopped with his mouth open and turned to look in the direction in which Pete Spence had suddenly pointed. The whaleboat had drifted down until it was a scant fifty yards from the surf which creamed up in the little cove. Just beyond, the entrance to a passage loomed darkly.

"That's where the *Helga* went!" Pete Spence shouted exultantly. "We've got 'em trapped!"

The whaleboat slipped into the narrow gut between the walls. It was a half an hour later when sunlight began to mottle the black water again and Pete Spence lifted a warning hand. The boat drifted gently around the corner of the wall and the lagoon lay in front of them. Into that lagoon, storm driven, Casey Spade had brought the *Helga*, brought her as Peg Dolliver called the landmarks, only to crash her on the reefs at the end. Now, a mile away Pete Spence could see the wreck of her driven high up on the sand of a narrow beach.

Link Ballard stared for a moment and then glanced at Pete Spence, grinning wolfishly. He jerked his head back toward where the *Maria* lay.

"Maybe this is the chance you been lookin' for, Pete."

Pete Spence sucked at his thick lips and rubbed a hand across the bristle on his face, his eyes greedy. "Maybe it is," he said. "We'll just stick around in here until dark."

IT WAS close to sundown when Casey Spade left the jungle and came out onto the beach close to where the *Helga* lay. He was tired; his shirt had been ripped to ribbons by thorns and his shoulders were scratched and raw. He walked slowly across the sand to where young Purcell and two of the Kanakas worked, stepping a mast in the one good whaleboat that was left after the *Helga* had suffered her mortal wound.

Young Purcell dropped his hammer and wiped the sweat from his face. "Well?" he asked.

Casey Spade sat down on a box in the sand and stuffed tobacco into his pipe while he stared moodily down the beach. The *Helga* lay fifty yards away with the bottom ripped out of her. She had struck broadside on and lay on a nearly even keel and high out of the water, but she would never sail again. Beyond her and back toward the edge of the jungle, the Kanakas

had erected sail cloth shelters for themselves; Casey, young Purcell and the two women had continued to live on board.

"I got to the rim," Casey said finally. "There's no sign of the *Maria* unless she's lying to the east and close in. There's a big point that butts out there and she might be behind that, but I doubt it."

Young Purcell jerked a thumb toward the whaleboat. "Well, she's ready whenever you are. She's no cutter but she'll take us into Port McCoy all right, barrin' accidents."

"Good." Casey smoked thoughtfully for a moment. "We'll pull out tomorrow, Joe. We're running low on supplies—and I want to get to McCoy before word of this business gets around if I can. There'll be plenty besides Frenchy Marquat who'll be interested in old Dolliver's shell bed when they hear the news."

"Yeah." Young Purcell's voice was faintly reluctant. "Me, I ain't in any hurry tuh go, Casey."

YOUNG PURCELL sat down on the gunwale of the whaleboat and squinted at the wrecked schooner. Peg Dolliver was there, sitting on the cabin skylight with her knees hugged up while she stared across the lagoon at the sunset. Young Purcell had looked at her a lot these last six days, Casey had noted; Peg Dolliver, too, had always seemed to be particularly gay when young Purcell was around. Last night the two of them had been sitting across there on the sand in the moonlight when Casey had turned in; it had seemed to him that it had been a long while later when he had finally heard the sound of their footsteps on the companionway steps.

He shrugged and poked at the bowl of his pipe. Unaccountably he could not forget the feel of the girl's lips against his own when he had kissed her that night down in the cabin. He wondered if he could be jealous of young Purcell. Then he laughed shortly and put the thought away.

"How about the shell?" he asked.

Young Purcell unwillingly withdrew his attention from the deck of the *Helga*. "We've cleaned out the best of it," he said. "There's more there, but it's scattered an' it will take a diving rig to work it. The shelf that old Dolliver stumbled onto was rich all right—I figure the rest is only average."

"Any more pearls?"

"Three." Young Purcell fumbled in the pocket of his shirt and pulled out a small round box—handed it to Casey. The latter took it without opening it as he stood up.

"We'll load the whaleboat tonight," he said. "The tide will start to turn about four tomorrow morning—when it's running good we'll shove off."

Young Purcell said, "Okay, Casey," and turned to the two Kanakas who squatted in the sand.

PEG DOLLIVER met Casey as he climbed wearily over the rail. Her eyes were sympathetic as she looked at his scratched shoulders and torn shirt, but she didn't speak. Rosa Konaua sat on the rail across the slanting deck, her eyes sullen as she watched the other girl follow Casey down to the cabin.

Peg Dolliver said, "You've had a hard trip, Casey?"

"Not bad." Casey Spade went across to a cupboard and poured himself a stiff drink. Then he opened a locker and took out the leather belt and a square biscuit tin; carried them across to the table. "Sit down," he said.

The sunset was a crimson glow across the skylight as he opened the biscuit tin. He peeled away a layer of cotton as the girl bent above his shoulder. The dying light touched the pearls, bedded there in the cotton, with soft fingers. For a long minute Casey sat there looking; then he took the box, which young Purcell had given him, from his pocket and laid the last three pearls beside their fellows.

"Forty-one, not counting your original seven, kid. It's a good haul. I'm no pearl expert but there's not a runt in the lot of them and it's my guess that they'll bring better than a hundred thousand dollars."

"They're beautiful," she murmured. "I hated them once—they meant terror and beastliness and death. Now they mean life, Casey!"

He looked at her curiously. Her face was flushed a little and her eyes were bright—it was hard for him to realize that she was the sullen girl whom he had first seen in the smoky lamplight back there in old Fancy Dolliver's shack.

He shrugged and turned his attention back to the table. She watched as he picked out the original seven pearls, wrapped them carefully in cotton and slipped them into the pockets of the leather belt. He stood up, then, with the belt in his hand.

"We're leaving in the whaleboat tomorrow, kid," he said in a matter of fact voice. "I don't think that there's a chance that we'll run into any more trouble, but a person can't tell. These belong to you alone—keep them with you and, if anything should happen, keep quiet about them. You've got a sizable fortune right there."

She gazed at him steadily. "We share and share alike, Casey," she said. "I won't take them."

"Not those, we don't." He tossed the belt across her arm. "Old Fancy's legacy to you, kid—I told him I'd see that you got it. Now trot along and tell that worthless mate of mine that I want to see him immediately."

SHE stood there looking at him in the dying light from the cabin skylight for a long minute. Then she walked slowly toward him and held up her face. Her eyes were very bright.

"I didn't know that there were people like you, Casey Spade."

She kissed him quickly on the mouth and

then swung about toward the companion-way. He heard her singing as she went up the steps. After a little Casey Spade laughed mirthlessly to himself and picked up the biscuit tin. He paused on his way to return it to the locker and poured himself out another drink.

Rosa Konaua was still standing by the rail as Peg Dolliver gained the deck. The quarter caste came swiftly across, her dark eyes bitter and her mouth twisted, to drop a hand on Peg's arm and spin the slighter girl half about.

"You can't have heem!" Rosa spat viciously. "He ees mine an' you can't have heem! You understan'?"

Peg Dolliver slapped her hand away. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said in a flat voice.

"You leave heem alone. If you don't leave heem alone Rosa ees keel both of you!"

CHAPTER X

THE ROAD TO HELL

IT WAS hot in the narrow stateroom and Casey Spade couldn't sleep. For an hour he tossed and turned uneasily, his mind alive with a jumbled chaos of thoughts; then he swore under his breath, slipped into his trousers and padded in his bare feet across the cabin. It was a quarter to twelve, he saw.

Some impulse moved him to pause and lift his gun belt from the hook where it hung against the after bulkhead. He buckled it about him and went slowly up the steps.

The moon was high in the sky as he stepped out on deck and the crescent of beach shimmered in front of him. He paused in the shadow by the break of the poop and looked for a long minute. A little breeze was stirring up, here and there was a peacefulness about the night which drove away the gloomy reflections which had kept him from sleep.

He was just about to step out of the

shadow and go across the deck to drop down onto the sand when it happened.

A shot spanged out suddenly, the sound whipping viciously across the moonlight. Then one of the Kanakas yelled from the tents at the edge of the jungle—two more shots ripped wickedly through the peace of the night. A man's voice, hoarsely profane, bellowed from the jungle.

Casey Spade jerked his gun free and jumped forward. A bullet burned across his naked shoulder and he saw a thin rapier of flame leap across the gunwales of the loaded whaleboat. Then two shadowy figures came across the *Helga's* rail—Big Swede Larsen in the lead with a sawed-off shotgun in his hands.

He yelled thickly as he saw Casey Spade; swung the shotgun up and pulled both triggers. He was a split second too late. The buckshot slammed into the poop as Casey lunged out and down, shooting as he fell. He saw both of his bullets strike, Swede Larsen spinning about and toppling on his face as the lead ripped through his chest. He was dead when he struck the deck.

The Swede's companion was standing, his feet spraddled wide, and a jumping gun in his hand. Casey Spade rolled to his knees, shot, swore as he missed and shot again. The raider dropped his gun suddenly and jumped for the rail; a second later Casey saw him zigzagging across the sand toward the jungle.

A rifle crashed wickedly behind Casey and the runner doubled over and dropped to his hands and knees. He tried to crawl and then wilted onto his face as Casey turned. Young Purcell was jerking a fresh cartridge into the chamber of the smoking rifle.

"There's one by the whaleboat!" Casey Spade snapped harshly as he fingered fresh loads into his gun.

He heard Pete Spence's thick voice yell something from the shadows where the Kanakas were camped and he dropped to the sand and started there in a leaping

run. A lean figure darted back toward the jungle—Link Ballard, shooting as he ran. Casey Spade slammed a bullet at him, saw it kick up a little volcano of sand and shot again. Link Ballard dropped the rifle he was carrying but didn't slow down and the jungle swallowed him.

He saw nothing more of Pete Spence and guessed that he had got cleanly away. Casey swore bitterly.



One of the Kanakas, young Vatua, lay on his face in the sand with a great hole torn through the middle of his back. Old Anamoku, too, was dead with a bullet hole between his eyes. Dark and bitter anger suddenly swept gustily across Casey Spade. This had been cold, deliberate murder—nothing else. The Kanakas had not been armed and Pete Spence had crept up on them and killed them while they slept. He had been a fool not to leave Pete Spence to roast when he had the chance!

HE CALLED harshly, "Narui!" The voice of old Anamoku's son answered him from the jungle fifty feet away and, careless of the fact that Pete Spence might be watching him from ambush, Casey went across. He found the Kanaka, crouching and half scared to death, in a thick clump of fern and squatted down beside him.

"You listen along me strong fella," he said in a reassuring voice. "You stop'um along schooner. You tell'um all boy he stop'um along schooner. Plenty safe along schooner no fear. You savvy?"

"Me savvy."

Casey Spade held the black gun where the native could see and patted it. "Maybe fella try stop'um you I cross along that fella too much. I make stomach belong that fella walk about. You savvy?"

"Me savvy."

Casey slapped him on the bare shoulder. "Get going then!" he snapped.

Quiet had suddenly fallen over the moonlit crescent of beach again. Back by the *Helga* Casey saw a heavy-set figure get up from behind the whaleboat and go forward toward the wrecked schooner with his hands in the air. Young Purcell's voice snapped at him. Then Narui and the other three Kanakas broke from the velvet line of the jungle and raced across the moonlight as though the devil chased at their heels.

Casey cupped his hands about his mouth and shouted harshly: "Purcell!"

Young Purcell's voice came back at him. "Aye."

"Get the whaleboat into the water and tie it up on the lagoon side of the *Helga* so that it can't be seen from here. Then get all hands under cover—I'll cover you from here. Got it?"

"I got it!"

Casey slipped into the shadows and made his way cautiously toward where Link Ballard had disappeared, stopping to pick up Link's gun as he went. He stopped now and then to listen but heard nothing except young Purcell's voice as he shouted at the Kanakas. They ran the loaded whaleboat into the water and, wading, towed it out of sight behind the *Helga's* black hull.

Casey Spade had half expected a fusillade from the jungle but it didn't come. He had no way of knowing how many men Pete Spence had had with him—where Frenchy Marquat was with the rest. Well, there was nothing left to do now but wait for the tide and make a run for it, he thought sourly.

He turned and headed back across the

sand, indifferent to the fact that he was risking a shot in the back. He paused for a moment beside the crumpled figure of the man young Purcell had brought down; turned him over. It was Gus Radeke, a beachcomber who had used to hang about Liantang, Casey saw.

Purcell was lying flat on the *Helga's* deck, his rifle across his arms, as Casey Spade stepped back on board. He had armed the Kanakas and they were scattered along the rail likewise. A heavy-set man, with a pasty and scared face, lay in the scuppers across the deck with his arms bound behind him. Joe Purcell jerked his head and grinned.

"Got me a little playmate, Casey. Cute, ain't he?"

Casey spat and rubbed at his shoulder where the bullet had burned his skin. The Kanakas had got over their panic, he saw—they were good enough with a gun when they had white men back of them. Meanwhile, young Purcell's prisoner would tell him several things that he wanted to know.

"Take him down to the cabin," Casey said. "See that the women stay in their stateroom. I'll be down in a minute."

YOUNG PURCELL nodded. He laid down his rifle and went across to kick the bound man to his feet and head him for the companionway. Casey went forward along the deck and knelt to turn Big Swede Larsen over—not bad shooting, considering that he was falling when he pulled the trigger, he thought sardonically. Young Narui looked up as Casey squatted beside him.

"Father belong you all finish," Casey said in a flat voice.

The Kanaka nodded sullenly. Casey pointed toward the jungle where Pete Spence and Link Ballard had disappeared.

"Me cross along that white fella mak'um finish father belong you too much. You watch'um eye belong you. All fella watch'um eye belong him. Maybe you see that fella you sing out strong fella, eh.

Me come mak'um that fella finish. You savvy?"

"Me savvy," the boy said grimly.

Young Purcell had dumped his prisoner down on a settee in the cabin when Casey got there. The latter wasted no preliminaries. There was a harsh rasp in his voice as he stood, legs spraddled a little, in front of the man whom he recognized as one Jeff McKinnon.

"Talk!" Casey Spade told him in a flat menacing voice.

McKinnon talked, his words tumbling over one another in his eagerness to answer Casey's questions. When he had done Casey nodded thoughtfully and swung back to young Purcell.

"Keep him tied up and stick him in the galley," he said curtly. "Then check the whaleboat over again. We're going to have to make a run for it, Joe."

"Yeah. Looks that way." Purcell's face was sober. "I hate tuh think of that girl——"

He left the sentence unfinished as he went around to prod McKinnon savagely to his feet and shoulder him toward the door. The two went out. Casey Spade looked at his watch, saw that it was ten minutes to one. He scowled thoughtfully.

IT WOULD be hard going but they didn't need the tide to get back out through the passage. In the bright moonlight, though, they would be an easy target for Pete Spence and whoever else he had in the jungle with him—too easy a target to take the risk. The moon would set in another three hours; that would leave them close to an hour of darkness and, with the tide helping them, they ought to get through the pass unseen. After that it was a matter of luck.

He turned at the sound of a door opening and saw Peg Dolliver looking at him. She came forward slowly into the light and he saw that her face was pale. Casey suddenly was conscious that he was standing there barefooted and half naked and that

there was a smear of blood along his forearm. The girl did not seem to notice.

"I heard everything, Casey," she said. "It's bad, isn't it?"

He smiled at her suddenly and sat down on the edge of the table, swinging one bare foot. His holstered gun gouted at his leg and he shifted it so that it swung free.

"Not too bad," he told her. "Don't get ready to throw your hand in yet, kid. We've still got a few cards to play."

She shook her head. "Casey, it can only end one way. What can you do against all of them? Frenchy Marquat wants the pearls—let me take them to him. If I do it will end all this. He won't want you and—and Joe any more. Don't you see?"

Casey Spade stared at her quizzically for a long minute. A good kid; a thoroughbred, all right. He laughed and went across to drop a hand on her shoulder.

"Kid," he said, "Frenchy Marquat and I have had a tangle coming for a long time now. You, nor the pearls, wouldn't make any difference in it so get that crazy idea out of your head. Understand? Besides, Joe Purcell and I are interested in those pearls ourselves—we can't see making that bunch of pirates a present of them."

Her eyes were grateful.

"You think we've got a chance, then?"

"We've got better than a chance. The *Maria* is maybe six miles down the coast. Frenchy Marquat is not going to get worried about Pete Spence's whaleboat until maybe mid-morning. After that it's going to take time for him to find the cove and it's likely that he'll waste a day—maybe two—searching the lagoon before he figures we've slipped out. He'll find the shell that we've opened and maybe he'll spend more time looking for the bed that we fished it from. In the meanwhile we'll slip down the coast and find ourselves another hide-out."

"It sounds easy."

He grinned at her again as he turned

to go into his own stateroom. He closed the door behind him and reached for his shirt. It might not be so easy at that, he reflected morosely.

Rosa Konaua came out of Joe Purcell's stateroom and went swiftly across to the cabin companion without glancing at the girl who stood by the table. She reached the deck and young Purcell's voice drifted faintly toward her from the galley. The Kanakas were looking the other way as she slipped over the rail and into the water.

CHAPTER XI

A MAN OF HIS WORD

CASEY SPADE had been wrong when he said that Frenchy Marquat's schooner was half a dozen miles down the coast. When Pete Spence's whaleboat did not return that evening the *Maria* had up-anchored and beat slowly west along the coast keeping a sharp lookout for the missing boat. Frenchy did not trust Pete Spence any farther than he could see him.

The wind was light; by midnight had died away altogether. Frenchy Marquat swore and dropped anchor a quarter of a mile off the cove. They'd lie there until morning and then he would take the other whaleboat and run down that damned Pete Spence. When he found him he'd settle this thing for once and for all, by Gar!

The moon was drifting down toward the black ramparts two hours later when the lookout sang out hoarsely. Frenchy Marquat, sleeping in a canvas chair on deck, heard and was wide awake instantly. He padded forward.

"W'at you see, hey?"

Long Colberd, the lookout, pointed to the moonlit water which lay between the schooner and the cove. "You see what I see?" he asked.

"Hah! Somebody ees sweem, eh? You stand by, Long, to help heem aboard. Me, I'm theenk he ees tell where ees go that no-good Pete Spence."

The swimmer moved steadily toward the schooner, a stream of phosphorescence trailing out behind. Long Colberd leaned over the side of the rail with a coil of rope in his hand. The swimmer stopped to tread water for a moment—take a fresh bearing.

Colberd yelled, "Hi, you! Over here—I'll give yuh a line. Hell, Frenchy, it's a girl!"

He tossed the line and Rosa Konaua come across the schooner's rail like a cat. Frenchy Marquat stalked forward, his eyes narrow as the girl wrung the water out of her skirt and pushed the wet hair out of her eyes.

"'Allo, Frenchy," she said. "You are surprise to see me, I'm theenk."

Frenchy Marquat smiled with a flash of white teeth. "Oui. It ees thee great pleasure—thee vairy great pleasure."

THE moon had set and the night was dark with the cold, uncomfortable darkness which comes before dawn when Casey Spade dropped down into the waiting whaleboat. He spoke softly to the Kanakas and they pushed away from the *Helga* and began to row, the oars muffled in the oarlocks. The walls were black shadows against the stars as they moved slowly out into the lagoon and turned toward the passage.

They reached the entrance half an hour later and Casey Spade began to breathe more easily as they slid into that narrow slash which would lead them to open sea. He felt the run of the tide catch at the heavily laden boat and begin to pull it along. They were almost to the second turn when something warned Casey of danger ahead.

He whispered a sharp command to the Kanakas and they stopped rowing while he listened. At first he could hear nothing except the faint murmur of the wind blowing through the gut—then his ears caught a new sound. He swore bitterly to himself as he identified it as the creak of oars and

the low mumble of men's voices. The tide drifted the whaleboat to the far side of the turn and, as the rocky wall fell slowly away from in front of them, Casey saw the vague outline of a ship midway down the passage. It was the *Maria*; Frenchy Marquat was towing her through.

Well, that was that.

CASEY slapped a curt order at the Kanakas and they began to back the whaleboat, turn it about and work it around behind the shelter of the rocky wall. There was nothing to do now but go back to the *Helga*, Casey thought morosely; if they had to fight it had better be on ground of their own choice.

Young Purcell said under his breath,



"So that's where that damned girl went!" He spat.

The whaleboat crawled slowly back up the channel toward the other turn. An idea kept hammering at Casey Spade's brain as he squinted ahead into the darkness. He put it away as crazy—an idiot's scheme—but the thing came back. Well, why not? It was a gamble and the odds were all against him but he had gambled before. The audacity of the thing might win for him. He spoke shortly and young Purcell left his seat beside the girl and moved back beside him.

Casey outlined the plan in a low voice, his words clipped and hard. If Jeff McKinnon had been telling the truth there were not more than four or five men, besides Frenchy Marquat, left on the *Maria* most of those would be in the whaleboat. In making the last turn the schooner would swing close to the wall—that same jagged shoulder of rocks on which the

Helga had been wrecked—and it would not be impossible for a man to board her undetected by the crew in the towing whaleboat.

"I'll take two of the Kanakas with me and drop off there," Casey said thinly. "With luck we'll take the schooner, keep quiet until after she's been towed into the lagoon and then gather in the boat's crew as they come back on board."

"You're crazy!" Young Purcell's whisper was high and shaky. "Let's get back to the lagoon an' take to the bush!"

Casey shook his head with a hard finality. "We'd never get through, kid—this is Malgabar. If we did we'd rot on the beach waiting for a boat. This is our best chance."

"I go with yuh then!"

"No. You'll look after the girl. Work back into the lagoon, find a place to hide the boat and then wait for a signal from me. Understand?"

"What if it doesn't come?"

Casey Spade laughed shortly. "Then you're no worse off than you are now. Buck up, kid. We've scraped through tighter places than this."

"I don't remember 'em," Purcell mumbled sourly.

The dark shoulder of the turn loomed ahead and Casey spoke softly to the Kanakas. Young Narui answered sullenly and then he and another shipped their oars and picked up rifles. A second command and the other two stopped rowing and allowed the whaleboat to drift—a moment later it scraped against the rocky wall and Casey stood, feeling in the darkness for a hand hold. He found one and pulled himself up; whispered to the Kanakas to follow. They hesitated. Then young Purcell snapped at them and Casey heard them scramble up. A flat ledge a dozen feet above the water gave what he wanted and he moved cautiously along it—squatting down to wait with the Kanakas beside him.

Young Purcell's voice drifted at him out of the gloom. "Good luck, Casey."

"So long, kid."

The girl's voice was so low that he scarcely heard it. "Good-by, Casey Spade."

IT WAS three-quarters of an hour later and the sky was beginning to lighten a little above the rim when Casey heard the towing whaleboat come into the turn. The creak of oarlocks grew louder. The boat passed so close beneath them that Casey could have reached down and touched the heads of the crew. One of them shouted.

"N'other bend here, Frenchy. It's sharp as hell—watch it!"

"I watch heem." Frenchy Marquat's voice from the schooner. Casey Spade nodded with satisfaction. He leaned over the ledge and tried to see how many men there were in the boat below but darkness was still an inky blanket in the passage and he could make out nothing but the long outline of the boat and the shadowy movement of shoulders swinging back and forth. No matter. With the tide running against him it was likely that Frenchy had put all of the rest of his crew into the boat.

The whaleboat crawled slowly ahead and the sounds grew fainter as the rocky wall cut them off. It was a long ten minutes later that Casey's straining eyes picked out the thing that he looked for—the vague bulk of the *Maria*. She came on slowly, drifting down toward the ledge. Her bow slipped past and then her foremast loomed above the three; at last her poop was directly below and Casey saw the thick bulge of the shoulders of the man who stood at the wheel.

He touched young Narui with a warning hand and then dropped down, his gun out. Frenchy Marquat heard the sound and whirled.

"W'at thee hell!"

Casey's voice slapped at him viciously. "Keep your hands on the wheel, Frenchy, and keep quiet!"

"Ho! It ees Casey Spade!"

"Keep quiet, damn you! Narui!"

There was no answer and suddenly Casey realized that he had heard no sound of the Kanakas dropping after him. He swore with a swift, bitter explosion of breath as he understood. They had deserted and he was alone on the *Maria*. He jumped forward, swinging his gun at Frenchy Marquat's head.

Too late!

Frenchy Marquat laughed—a great bellow of sound which rolled up between the narrow walls—and flung up an arm to ward off the blow while he dove forward. Casey smashed at his head with his left hand and then Frenchy's weight struck him a numbing blow and the two slammed to the deck.

The gun was jerked from Casey's fingers as he twisted free, rolled into the wheel and jerked himself up. He had to keep away from Frenchy, he knew; there was no man in the Islands who could beat Frenchy Marquat in a close in fight. If the other ever got those great arms of his about Casey he would crack his spine like a match stick.

"Ho, Casey Spade! I 'ave tell you that wan time we are 'ave thee gran' fight, eh?"

Well, it looked as though this was the time. They had heard up there in the whaleboat. A man called back hoarsely; demanded to know what the hell was the matter.

The sable blackness which lay in the passage was beginning to turn gray as the dawn broke.

Frenchy Marquat rushed, his big arms spread wide. Casey Spade slid away from him and smashed at the big man's face with his whole hundred and ninety pounds behind the blow.

His right arm suddenly felt paralyzed—as though he had slammed his fist against a wall of solid rock—but Frenchy Marquat still came on, laughing.

A tough man! Casey Spade set his feet on the planking and slammed both fists at that white-toothed grin above the black beard. Left! Right! Frenchy Marquat

shook them off and came on. Help came unexpectedly.

"Casey! Casey!"

OUT of the corner of his eye Casey saw that it was Rosa Konaua and that she had the gun. He tried to call out to her as he backed from Frenchy Marquat's rush but he stumbled and then the big man's arms were around him. Frenchy Marquat was lifting him as though he was a baby; slamming him down against the deck.

A thousand knives were jabbing into Casey's chest as those vise-like arms tightened; nausea flowed over him in a hot wave as he fought for breath. He heard a shot—low, it seemed, and far away. Then, suddenly, the pressure about his chest was released and he gulped cool air.

"Leetle cat! You 'ave shoot Frenchy Marquat!"

The big man's swaying figure danced in front of Casey Spade's eyes as he shoved himself up to his knees. Then, for a split second, everything seemed to stand still there in the growing light. Rosa Konaua with a smoking gun in her hand. Frenchy Marquat standing on spraddled legs. Dimly, Casey was conscious of noise which ripped the quiet morning apart up ahead at the entrance to the lagoon. Shouts and gunfire.

"You 'ave shoot Frenchy Marquat!"

He shook his head slowly as though he could not understand the thing that had happened to him. Then he walked forward, took the gun from the girl's unresisting fingers and tossed it over the rail. He shuffled back across the deck and sat down heavily on the cabin skylight.

Casey Spade got slowly to his feet. Then a rifle sounded wickedly from up ahead and a sledge hammer blow smashed across his temple. He toppled backward and felt himself falling. Water closed over him and vaguely he knew that he was going down—down. Instinctively he fought against it

CHAPTER XII

TRAIL'S END

DAWN was beginning to break and a dirty gray haze lay over the lagoon as young Purcell brought the whaleboat out of the passage and turned it down along the edge of the jungle. Creepers come to the water's edge here—one place was as good as another, he thought morosely.

He snarled at the Kanakas and headed the boat into a tangle of vines which formed a curtain of vines along the water's edge. Too late he saw the trap ahead.

He yelled, "Get down!" to the girl and reached for his rifle—then slumped down on his face in the boat as a bullet ripped through him.

Gunfire ripped the morning apart and rolled back from the towering walls. One of the Kanakas jumped to his feet; then spun crazily and fell into the water. The other dived over the side of the whaleboat and swam frantically with bullets kicking up little geysers about him. Peg Dolliver, her mind stunned by the suddenness of the attack, sat still.

Pete Spence, a smoking gun in his hand, splashed through the shallow water and laid a big hand on the gunwale of the boat. He poked at young Purcell's limp figure, grunted and then turned his attention to the girl. Behind him came Link Ballard, his arm in a dirty sling, and Jeff McKinnon.

Pete Spence grinned, lifting his thick lips in sneering derision. "Well, just look who's here," he said. "I knew that you an' me were goin' tuh get acquainted one of these days, baby."

He snapped a command over his shoulder and his two lieutenants ran a second whaleboat out of the creepers and stopped it alongside. Pete reached for the girl. She struck at him and he gave her a vicious blow which flung her against the side of the boat. Pete Spence's fingers probed at her side and he nodded with satisfaction as he felt the belt. He lifted her

and dumped her into the bottom of the second boat.

A shot from the direction of the passage made the three pause for a minute. No more came. Pete Spence hauled himself across the rail.

"Let's go," he said. "We need a ship now an' by God we're goin' tuh get one."

SHARP, stinging pain drove consciousness back into Casey Spade. Salt water struck him in the mouth and he choked—fought away the blackness which was trying to engulf him again. His head finally began to clear.

He was jammed into a crotch in the rocks, he saw, and it had been one of those sharp edges gouging into his side which had aroused him. Shadows still were dark across the water but he knew that daylight had come. He inched himself up on the rocks and sat there for a long while, his head cradled on his knees while he vomited. Presently he felt better.

He was, he saw, midway between the first and second turns of the passage. He listened but there was nothing to be heard. Well, he thought sourly, his fine scheme had been a hell of a flop. Now there was nothing left to do but get back to young Purcell and the girl somehow—they'd have to take to the bush and hope for the best.

He swore and lowered himself into the water again. The salt stung at the shallow furrow which the bullet had ploughed across the side of his head.

The tide was running strong now and it was slow work. He rounded the second turn and stopped to rest for a minute beneath the ledge where he and the Kanakas had waited last night. The two of them were gone and he cursed all natives with a sudden surge of anger. There was no sign of the *Maria*—they had taken her on out into the lagoon, he guessed.

Presently he went on, keeping close to the walls where the current was less of a drag. It was a half an hour later when he got a hand hold on the rocks and pulled

himself up to look. The schooner lay two hundred yards out in the lagoon, her anchor down and her lines dim in the early morning haze. Then something else caught Casey Spade's eye and he felt a cold hand clutch at his stomach.

Fifty feet away his whaleboat bobbed gently, half hidden by the tangle of the jungle.

He swam toward it. Young Purcell lay on his face with blood making a moist, dark patch across the back of his shirt. He was unconscious but still alive. Casey turned him over gently and probed with swift fingers. The bullet had gone clear through, high in shoulder, but Purcell had lost much blood. There was no sign of Peg Dolliver or the Kanakas.

Casey ripped his shirt into strips and bound Purcell up as best he could to stop the bleeding—kicked the dunnage away, then, and eased him into a more comfortable position. He could see nothing of what went on there on the *Maria* as the haze had thickened so that only her masts were visible. Once or twice he heard the hoarse shout of men's voices.

Well, he thought sourly, there was no use sitting here and sucking his thumb.

He took young Purcell's gun from where the latter had dropped it, plugged muzzle and breech with a bit of his shirt and jammed it into his own holster. That haze would help him—at least he would be able to find out what the situation on the *Maria* was. He shoved the whaleboat into the concealment of the high bank and started to wade toward deep water—stopped as he heard a muffled splashing off to the left.

"Casey Spade! Casey Spade!"

A faint call but he recognized the voice and scowled blackly. It was Rosa Konaua. She had caused him enough trouble already—then he remembered how Frenchy Marquat's arms had suddenly loosened that killing hug back there in the passage. He owed the girl a good turn for that.

"Where are you?"

"Here, Casey. Come queek—Rosa ees hurt bad."

HER voice sounded closer now and he splashed through the shallow water in that direction—saw her after a minute or two. She was beating feebly with her arms in order to keep afloat in the shallow water when he reached her.

"I am afraid that you weel not come, Casey," she murmured.

She had been beaten—terribly beaten, Casey saw and he swore savagely. Her face was puffy and shapeless and bubbles of red foam spotted her lips as she breathed. He carried her back to the whaleboat and laid her down gently beside young Purcell. She tried to smile at him and then lifted one hand toward her breast.

"Here," she whispered.

Casey Spade pulled away the torn edges of her dress and then swore viciously again. A knife wound left ugly red lips against the ivory of her skin. He knew, suddenly, that she was dying.

"Who did it, kid?"

He had to bend close to catch her answer. "Link Ballard—McKinnon, Casey—they ask me—where you are—where are thee—pearls—but I don'—tell."

She coughed and the scarlet dyed her lips again. There was nothing that he could do for her, Casey knew bitterly. Nothing that anybody could do for her now.

"Rest easy, kid. You'll feel better in a little while."

She smiled again faintly and he knew that she understood. "You love me, Casey. Jus' a leetle?"

"Yeah, kid." He reached out his hand and smoothed her hot forehead. "I love you—rest easy."

She reached up for his hand and her eyes were dark. "I 'ave been very bad—Casey. I 'ave show—Frenchy—thee passage. I 'ave do that—because I 'ave hate her—I 'ave not weesh her to 'ave—you."

"I know," Casey told her soberly. "It's all right, kid. Things like that happen."

"You weel forgeeve me—Casey."

"There's nothing to forgive, kid."

Her fingers tightened convulsively on his hand. "You—mus' go to her—Casey. She ees on thee—*Maria* weeth Pete Spence—you mus' go—queek."

Black rage shook Casey in a whirling gust as she closed her eyes. He released her fingers gently and stood up. He looked for a moment at the *Maria's* masts, thrusting up out of the haze two hundred yards out there in the lagoon; then waded swiftly in until the water reached his armpits—began to swim.

HE COULD hear low voices on the schooner's deck as he hauled himself up onto the bobstays. He paused for a minute to pull the plugs from his gun and knock the water out of the action. Then he went up over the bowsprit and dropped to the deck. His face was lined and old and the mark of the killer was on his face—the Casey Spade who had hanged Jake O'Gada at Baradoon.

Four men lounged in a compact little group by the foremast. Their talk died away suddenly and their mouths were open as they saw Casey's dripping figure suddenly appear. There was fear in their eyes. Casey recognized one—Bill Holman, a fair enough young fellow whom he had used to like. Well, Bill Holman's number was up along with the rest. Casey swung his gun up.

"Wait a minute, Casey!" Bill Holman shouted, his face gone a stark white. "Wait!"

"Talk fast!" Casey's voice slapped at

They stood still with their hands lifted them with the merciless bite of a whip, and the fear of death deep on their faces. Bill Holman wet his lips.

"We ain't got anything tuh do with this, Casey. We shipped on with Frenchy but we didn't know nothin' like this was goin' tuh happen. For God's sake believe me!"

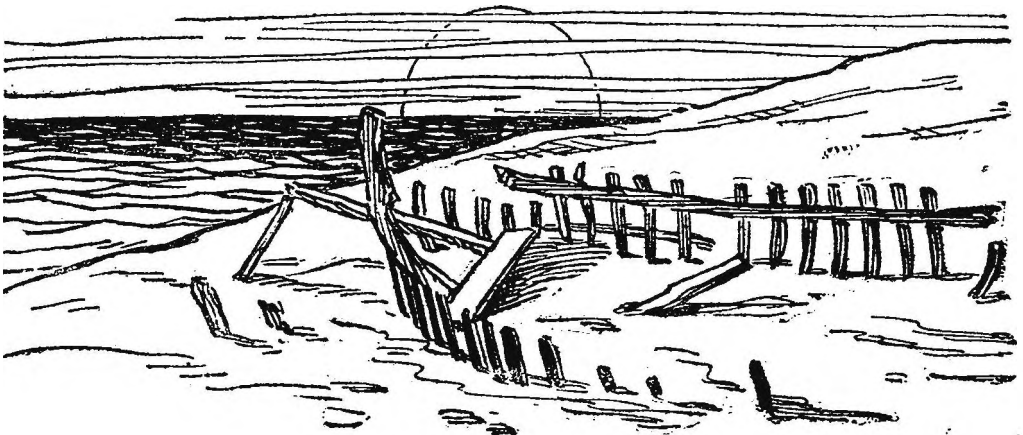
Casey Spade moved forward, cat-footed, and with the gun still raised. Little more than kids—the four of them. There was conviction in Bill Holman's voice.

"We didn't have nothin' tuh do with what went on down there in the cabin, Casey. We'd have tried tuh stop it but they had the guns!"

"Get below!" Casey snarled at them suddenly. "Jump, damn you!"

He kicked the forecastle scuttle shut after them; wedged it and went swiftly aft. He heard Peg Dolliver scream as he reached the cabin companion and he went down the stairs in a leaping run.

FRENCHY MARQUAT sat at the cabin table with his shoulders hunched and his big hands laid, palm down, on the table. Flecks of blood were bright against the blackness of his beard and deep lines slashed down across his face. There was



a choking rattle in his throat as he breathed. Frenchy Marquat was dying and he knew it but he was still master of the *Maria*.

Pete Spence stood on spraddled legs in front of the table, a triumphant smile on his face and a knife in his hand. Behind him, Link Ballard and Jeff McKinnon held Peg Dolliver between them. The girl's face was very white but her lips were firm.

Frenchy Marquat said slowly, "You 'ave hear me, Pete. You weel let thee girl go—Frenchy Marquat ees not torture women, eh? You understan'?"

Pete Spence laughed.

"Bring her up here, boys, where Frenchy can see. It'll give him something tuh think about while he's on his way tuh hell. Now you talk, girl!"

Crash!

The cabin door splintered and then Casey Spade was in the cabin, crouching a little and with the black muzzle of his gun covering the three across the table. His voice was as thin and hard as a razor edge.

"Get to one side, girl!"

Pete Spence's fat mouth hung open; he blinked as though he couldn't believe what he saw. The two men behind him had frozen to motionless statues. Fear had left Peg Dolliver's limbs ice and for a second she, too, stood motionless. That instant was long enough for Pete Spence to recover.

He reached out a fat arm and jerked the girl close to him, lifted the knife until its point was against her throat. There was a crazy look of triumph in his red eyes.

"Drop that gun!" he snarled. "Drop it or by God I'll cut her throat from ear to ear!"

A sick wave of hopelessness flowed over Casey Spade. It was in his eyes and Pete Spence saw—laughed viciously. Half dragging the girl, he edged around the table.

"It's a pretty little throat, ain't it, Casey? It'd be a shame to spoil it, eh?"

Frenchy Marquat slowly stood up, sway-

ing a little. There was more blood on his beard now but his eyes were bright. A tough man—Frenchy Marquat. He grinned a little, his teeth flashing white in the brown of his face.

"You weel let her go, Pete," he said. "Frenchy Marquat ees tell you."

"Get back there, damn you!"

Frenchy Marquat still smiled as he moved forward and Pete Spence broke under that smile. He shoved the girl away and his hand flashed forward. The knife buried itself hilt-deep in Frenchy Marquat's breast but it did not change his smile. Pete Spence screamed again as those big hands reached for him; pulled him close.

The scream died.

Link Ballard went for his gun and Casey Spade was suddenly cold with a deadly calm. McKinnon's bullets thudded into the bulkhead by his head as he deliberately raised his gun. It jumped in his hand and he saw the little black hole which suddenly appeared in Link Ballard's forehead. Still deliberate, he swung toward McKinnon and laid three bullets in a handsbreath over the big man's heart. He turned back.

Pete Spence lay on the deck with blood running from his mouth while Frenchy Marquat stood over him. Then the big man turned slowly; slowly made his way back to the table and sat down with his palms, flat in front of him, holding him up.

He said, "A gran'—fight—Casey—eh? Frenchy—'ave—tell—you."

He bent forward slowly and laid his head on his hands.

EPILOGUE

THERE was a stiff breeze but the sea was calm. Great piles of clouds crawled slowly up above the horizon, painted crimson and gold by the sunset. The *Maria* bowled along easily, her forefoot snoring through the gentle swells and

her wake a white fan behind her. Liantang was a short day's sail ahead.

Casey Spade had the wheel. He sucked on his stubby pipe and stared somberly ahead, his thoughts busy. What would the end of all this be, he wondered. There was old Dolliver dying in his shack back at Biligree Atoll. There was Duff Kellet dead with a knife in his chest and Rosa Konaua buried beside Frenchy Marquat back there in the lagoon at Malgabar. Well, the Islands were like that.

Joe Purcell and the girl he loved—and who loved him—were well out of it, he thought. He could see them up forward by the rail now. Young Purcell had his good arm about the girl's shoulders while the two of them watched the sunset.

Well, Casey thought, he could go, too. His share of the pearls would be enough to take him wherever he wanted to go—Paris, New York, London, Rome. He was still young. He'd sell the *Maria* in Liantang, cash in his pearls and go. To hell with this sort of a life. He'd go before he ended up like old Dolliver had — like Frenchy Marquat; he'd go before—

The *Maria* lifted sweetly to a long swell. A puff of warm wind lifted Casey's hair and the reef points cracked as the sails belled full. A sweet ship. She spoke to Casey—a language which he understood—and the blackness of his mood suddenly fell away. His pipe tasted good.

He'd sail awhile longer, he guessed. After all there was plenty of time for Paris, New York, London, Rome.

ON A FROSTY MORNING - WATCH YOUR BREATH TRAVEL

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It Isn't What You Start Out to Do That Counts



NESTER

By BRUCE DOUGLAS

Author of "Home Range," "The Build-up," etc.

"I MUST be silent," Marian thought, and sat looking at the two men, a slow pulse beating in her throat. "If I speak now, it would imply a doubt of him. All I can give him now is silence. Confident, expectant silence."

Shadows from the fire played across her face as she sat, a bowl in her lap, stringing popcorn for the Christmas tree. The tree stood in the familiar corner where they had had one every Christmas for four years—ever since little Billy was born. The whole room was poignantly familiar to her, familiar as an old shoe. It was hers. Part of her house. Hers and Ed's. She had even helped him build it, and had planned and fashioned the curtains and shelves and all those homey little

things which go to turn a ranchhouse into a home.

She looked at it now with different eyes, seeing a strangeness, now that she was going to lose it. But the feeling of loss was secondary, dulled by her fear of that big, dominant, slightly smiling man who stood with his back to the fireplace, towering over her husband.

What mattered now, above all else, was that Ed should prove that he had the right stuff in him. That he should come out of it truly worthy to raise his son by precept and example. It was bitter hard to lose all that you had built up in five hard-working years, to be set adrift to start all over again. But it would be infinitely harder if the honesty in Ed proved too weak to stand this final strain.

The muscles in Marian's throat tightened as she silently wondered what it would be like to go through all the future years scorning her husband.

It's the things inside a man that count, Marian's grandfather had stated many's the time, and had quoted Bible to prove his point. Now Marian was realizing how true had been his words. They could lose their home, yes; sell off all the cattle at starvation prices and let the little ranch which had become part of themselves go back again to original desert. Things like that could be won again with more years of work. But if Ed lost that bright thing within him which made her proud of him, it could never be regained.

BY THE very relaxation of her pose she tried to express her confidence in Ed; but a gnawing fear was in her heart as she watched Ray Mullock. She feared him, feared what this visit meant, what his smilingly expectant suggestion might do to Ed. Ray Mullock had been there before. Two times. Once in the first year they had been in the valley; and again in that hard, starvation winter after inspectors had killed practically all their little herd to prevent Texas fever from spreading on the range. Ed had sent him away both times, angered at his suggestion of easy money to be made by preying on the vast herds of Mark Clayton.

But now things were different; and the big, smiling rustler knew it. Marian could read the knowledge in his bold eyes as he smiled at her husband. Before, Mark Clayton had merely been a neighbor, and Ed had been obeying the Mosaic law: *Thou shalt not steal*. But now that he had felt the harsh, grasping injustice of that neighbor, would his principles be strong enough to hold out in defense of the very man who had destroyed the work of five years of his life?

Ray Mullock spoke. "That water hole has been public property ever since cattle were first brought to this range."

Marian's gaze shifted to her husband. She saw him swallow slowly before speaking. He nodded. "I know it, Mullock. But Clayton come by it in a legal way. It's hard; but he's got a right to it now."

"A right!" Ray Mullock's voice boomed out, full of scorn. "Law or no law, no man has a right to hog water on a desert range an' freeze his neighbors out by keepin their cattle from drinkin'. When you picked your land to homestead, you could've had that water hole yourself. Instead you picked this place, because you figured that no man had a right to hog that water. That's true, ain't it, Brett?"

Ed nodded soberly. "Yes. That's true."

"An' now Clayton runs his fence around that hole; an' you say he has a right!"

MARIAN watched fearfully. Mullock's arguments were true. That was what gave them such dangerous force. Ed's face was clouding, and he did not meet the rustler's eyes.

Mullock said, "You've got a nice snug ranchhouse here, an' a good start on a herd. You worked five years to build up this spread. Then Clayton puts a fence around a water hole, and makes your outfit worthless in a day. Where did that value go? Didn't Clayton rob you of it?"

Mullock was watching Ed closely. Without giving him time to answer, he gestured toward the Christmas tree. He spoke sneeringly. "Hell of a sorry Christmas you folks are due to have, thinkin' about havin' to pull out the next day."

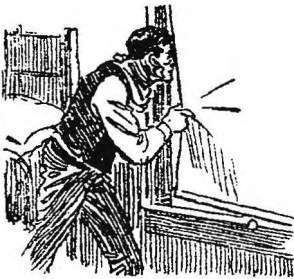
It was the wrong note. You can't argue a man into a crime by reminding him of the birthday of the Savior. Not a man like Ed. The shameful thing which Ray Mullock wanted Ed to do would have to be done on the very eve of the nativity of the Man who preached *Love thine enemies*. That Christmas tree meant even more than that. It meant Marian, and little Billy, and the fine tradition that they and Ed had built up together. With rising hope,

she looked toward him. Once again Ed was looking Mullock straight in the eye.

"You're driving at something, Mullock." His voice was gruff. "Come to the point."

Ray Mullock stepped to the door and threw it open. Damp, chill air swept in, touching the heightened color in Marian's cheeks. Outside, though it was only four o'clock in the afternoon, the dusk of evening was coming on. The sky, completely overcast, was the color of slate, with darker clouds rolling up from the north. Mullock nodded toward them.

"In another hour," he said, "it'll be pitch black an' snowing. I've got men ready to push five hundred head of old Clayton's steers through here to the foothills if you'll say the word. The snow will cover their tracks. You'll get a five dollar cut on each steer, an' don't have to lift a hand. All you've got to do is deny that any cattle came across your land; an' the unbroken snow will back up your statement. Think of it, Brett—twenty-five hundred dollars! By rights, Clayton owes you that much, because it's Clayton who made your whole spread worthless. It's only fair you shouldn't go away empty-handed."



Marian held her breath. That was the argument she had feared, the one she had known was sure to come. Making it look as though Ed had a right to get back at Mark Clayton for what he had done. Making it look as though stealing wouldn't be stealing. Her eyes were on the rustler. She wanted to turn back toward her husband, but quelled the impulse. He would read the fear in her glance; she could not conceal it now. So she remained quite

still. It seemed an age before Ed spoke. When he did, his voice was strained and harsh.

"Mullock, you've opened the door. Now go on through it. Get out!"

WATCHING, Marian saw Ray Mullock's eyes widen suddenly, then narrow. "Brett," he said, "you're a fool. I've got all the plans laid for this drive just before the first snow, an' it's too good a chance to pass up."

There was iron in Ed's tone now. "You'll have to pass it up, Mullock. I've told you before, an' I tell you again—you'll drive no rustled cattle across my land!"

Mullock snarled. "It won't be your land much longer. Don't forget that."

Ed did not answer. He merely gestured with his thumb, and Mullock went out through the doorway. Ed closed the door, stood for a moment listening until hoofbeats told that the rustler was gone, then turned to Marian.

"Shall we get Billy up from his nap now?" he inquired mildly. "Or maybe w'd better finish decorating the tree first?"

Marian wanted to fling herself into his arms, to release the flood of proud tears against the warm roughness of his shoulder. But that, too, would betray the fact that she had had doubts. Ed must never know that she had doubted him. Moving slowly, so as to keep her face averted from him for a time, she leaned over and lifted the strings of popcorn from the floor. When she spoke, her voice matched Ed's in casualness.

"We'll finish the tree," she said, "and light it. That way we'll see the full wonder in his eyes when he first comes out."

Ed's face lighted up at that, and the hardness about his jaw relaxed. But there was a turmoil within him that he could not long suppress. Marian noted it, and unobtrusively kept supplying him with things to do—handing him ornaments to hang on the tree, getting him to fasten the base

more securely. She recalled a phrase her grandfather used to quote: *The devil finds many things for idle hands to do*. But what about an idle mind—a mind harassed with conflicting thoughts and conflicting emotions? She began to talk. Of their marriage five years ago. Of how they came out here together in their big wagon containing all their worldly goods, and took up this land and filed on it at the county seat. Of her discovery that little Billy was coming, and how they hurried in the building of their house, Marian helping as much as she could.

From time to time Ed looked at her strangely; and she knew that he was wondering at her flow of words. She wasn't a hand to do much talking generally. But she avoided his eyes and chattered on, knowing that she was failing. It wasn't much of a surprise, then, when Ed finally laid down the fluff cotton he held in his hands and turned toward the door. He seemed almost shamefaced when he spoke; but there was a compulsion within him that he could not resist.

"You finish the tree," he said gruffly. He picked up his sheepskin coat and hat and put them on. Then he lighted a lantern. "I'm going out to the shed for a while. Got to sort out the things we'll be needing to pack in the wagon."

SHE watched him as he went out, noting the broad spread of his shoulders. Her hands made futile little gestures underneath her apron. Perhaps it was best. Ed needed to be alone. Perhaps, out there by himself, he would manage to wrestle through and gain some peace of mind. It was hard, bitter hard; and Ed was never a man to share his troubles. There was an aching tension in her throat as she turned back to the tree and began throwing on the little puffs of cotton.

Marian was right. Ed needed to be alone. He had left the house for that purpose and no other. He needed time and solitude to quell the savage rage which

burned within him, the resentment against Mark Clayton, and against the civilized inhibitions in himself which kept him from doing what Ray Mullock had suggested.

The excuse he had given Marian—that he intended to sort out the things they needed to pack in the wagon—had been a weak one. That could be done tomorrow, or even on the morning of the following day. No need to take just those exact minutes out of the year when his son would see the Christmas tree and his eyes would light up with the wonder of it. The truth was that Ed could not bear to see it. Not this year. So he made the flimsy excuse and left. But since he had given it as an excuse, he mechanically set about sorting the collection of tools and gear which cluttered the shed.

HE SET the lantern down on the carpentry bench and commenced taking tools down from their hooks on the wall and packing them in their box. The cold steel chilled his fingers, and he held them above the lantern to warm them. As he worked, his mind went over all that had happened; and finally he managed to reach a sort of calm. He could not, he concluded, take property which belonged to another man. No matter how much that man had wronged him. Stealing is stealing. Those steers belonged to Mark Clayton, and if he helped in their theft, he would be a thief. If he took the twenty-five hundred dollars Ray Mullock had offered, he would be stealing it from Mark Clayton, regardless of what Mark Clayton had done to him.

"No," he muttered, and shook his head in emphasis, "I couldn't do it. It wouldn't be right."

He felt better when the point was settled. But resentment against Mark Clayton was still hot within him. No matter how he figured it, he could find no right and no justice in Mark Clayton's owning that water hole. Finished with the tool box, he started working on the big clutter-

box on the floor, taking things out and sorting them in piles. And as he worked, before his eyes was a clear picture of the big water hole.

The water hole was in the point of the big valley where Mark Clayton ranged his herds. Foothills pinched in beyond it, then opened out into the smaller valley where Ed Brett had taken up his claim. The whole itself was of volcanic origin. A low upthrust of granite in the midst of thirsty sand, it formed a huge cup fed by cold springs rising from deep within the bowels of the earth. Always the water flowed; always the cup was full; the longest drought had no effect on it.

HE GROWLED to himself, "It ain't right." And his brows drew together in a frown. It wasn't right. That water hole supplied a vast area of semi-arid range. Deprived of its use, no rancher could raise cattle on that sandy range. Mark Clayton had come by its ownership legally enough. But in doing so he had ruined Ed and forced him to sell his cattle and move away from the range.

Ed was satisfied that he couldn't steal from Mark Clayton to make up for his loss. He would pull out with his wife and child and household goods and make no trouble. But he resented leaving that water hole for Mark Clayton's enrichment.

And at that moment, Ed Brett found the stick of dynamite!

It lay at the bottom of the clutter-box, left over from the half dozen sticks he had bought to blast down an overhanging cliff which threatened to cave in on his cattle when they were grazing. That had been last spring. Ed had blasted that cliff after the winter snows had melted into the cracks and weakened it further. And the one stick had been left over. He had forgotten all about it.

His knees were suddenly shaky. Holding the dynamite in his hand, he sat down on the stool and stared at it. It had even been prepared with a piece of fuse. In a

far corner of his mind, Ed rebuked himself for his carelessness in not removing the fuse before laying the stick away. But the rest of his mind was seething in a reddish, whirling haze.

Dynamite. There is a suggestion about a stick of dynamite that is held by no other invention of man. Power. Explosive, destructive power. Power to rend and shatter. Power to destroy. Ed's hand shook as he had held the stick; and again before his eyes came the clear vision of that big granite pool of cold water. Of water which alone made useful a vast area of dry range for Mark Clayton's herds.

It came to him that without that water hole, Mark Clayton could use only half of his range, would have to sell off much of his herd and run a smaller spread.

There was a kind of poetic justice in the thought. Ed could not steal from Mark Clayton. He would go away empty handed and start anew somewhere else. But Mark Clayton had no right to hog that water hole. He had no right to the profit to be had from its ownership.

Ed knew what dynamite could do. He had seen its effective destruction of the overhanging cliff. This one stick of dynamite, if properly placed in one of the small crevices in the granite cup, would blast that cup. It would make deep, wide fissures through which the priceless water would seep into the sands far beneath the surface of the ground.

For minutes Ed sat motionless, staring at that powerful force of destruction in his hand. Then, his jaw set, he rose shakily, fumbled in a pocket to make sure he had matches, and blew out the lantern.

It was full dark when he came out of the shed and trudged with determined slowness in the direction of the narrows leading into the larger valley. The first flakes of the coming snow storm flurried into his face, melting on his hot cheeks. They reminded him of Ray Mullock. He wondered idly whether the big rustler would dare to try to bring cattle through

that narrows before he pulled out of the valley, and decided that he would not.

A LONG about dusk, old Mark Clayton came to the conclusion that it would be a good idea to spend the night in the line cabin next to the water hole. That damned nester would be pulling out in a day or two. No telling what sort of devilment he might hatch up before he left.

For all of the five years that Ed Brett had been in the valley, Mark Clayton had referred to him as "that damned nester." Not from any personal spite against Ed Brett himself, but simply because he had homesteaded in the valley. In old Mark's opinion, any man who homesteaded a claim next to a big spread was, *ipso facto*, feathering his nest and increasing his herds at the expense of his rich neighbor. Whenever a handful of steers was driven off—and small bunches of steers are constantly being rustled from any really big spread—Mark Clayton cursed Ed Brett and declared that he was in cahoots with that Mullock jasper up in the hills. Consequently he felt no twinge of conscience at getting legal possession of the big water hole and freezing the nester out.

The fact that it was Christmas Eve made no difference to old Mark Clayton. He'd just as soon spend that night in a line cabin as any other night. Since that time many years ago when Mark Clayton's wife and infant daughter had died suddenly of malignant diptheria, all days had been

alike to him. The big ranchhouse had become a desolate and gloomy place, increasing in its dustiness and gloom as Mark's hair and beard grew gray and his temper crusty. All that Christmas Eve meant to him now was that most of the cowhands would be in Burford, getting tight in the Cattlemen's Saloon, and the spread would be short-handed for a couple of days.

So Mark Clayton strapped on his gun-belt, went to the corral and saddled a horse and struck out across the range in the deeping gloom toward the peak of the valley. A chill, damp wind whipped slantwise across his shoulders, causing him to turn up his collar and pull the muffler tighter around his neck. There was snow on the back of that wind, snow in the surrounding grayness that was gradually darkening into black. He touched spurs to his horse, urging the animal into a fast, mile-eating lope.

At the water hole, he had to get down and open a gate before he could reach the cabin, because he had had the whole thing enclosed in barbed wire to keep Ed Brett's cattle out. His numbed fingers fumbled at the loop of wire which held the gate. Once inside, he stabled the horse in the lean-to, fed him, and entered the cabin. He lighted a candle which stood on a table and looked about, his mind checking off the items that should appear. Canned goods and cooking utensils on the shelves over by the stove. Wood in the wood box. But not much wood. He made mental note



that the last cowboy who had used this cabin was due for a bawling out. And another that if he was to have a hot breakfast, he must go easy on the wood and go to bed early. Couldn't do much watching while he was in bed though. Well, anyway this was probably just a wild goose chase. The damned nester probably didn't have guts enough to start any trouble. If there was going to be trouble, it would have started when he put the wire up around the hole.

While he was kindling the fire in the stove, the increasing wind outside brought a familiar sound to his range-wise old ears. He sat up and listened, then reached over and brought a leathery palm down on the candle flame. There was no mistaking the message of the wind. Horses were approaching, several of them; and back of the clop of their hooves came the low rumble which meant cattle on the move.

Old Mark moved over to the door and opened it. Snow was falling now, and darkness had come. Using an old plainsman's trick, he stepped outside and leveled himself on the ground, thus bringing the moving objects into relief with a background of dark gray sky. Three horsemen were approaching in a group, their course aimed so as to pass close to the water hole on the cabin side. Some distance behind them, he made out the dark blur of a slowly moving herd. He could hear the shouts of flank riders as they kept the animals in a compact file.

Anger rose hotly in old Mark's brain. Rustlers. And by the sounds he judged that they were pushing a hefty cut of steers. He strained his eyes in an effort to identify the three approaching riders, finally picked out something vaguely familiar in the shape of the leading man. Rising, he stepped back into the entrance of the cabin and stood there. His gun was in his hand when the riders came abreast of the cabin.

"Mullock!" The challenge of the old

warrior resounded sharply through the dark. "I've known all along you were a rustler; but this time, by Godfrey, I've caught you red-handed! Get your hands up high. I've got you covered."

Mullock's answer was to leap sideways off his horse, keeping the animal between him and the rancher; and the other two men shouted and jumped also. Answering shouts came from along the edges of the herd.

"What's the matter up there?"

"Trouble!" Mullock shouted. "Stop the drive till we clear it up!"

In the doorway of the cabin, old Mark saw the three men disappear into the blur of darkness and falling snow. He grunted, and cursed himself a little. Caught by that moss-bearded old trick! He should have stayed low on the ground, so as to keep those men silhouetted against the sky.

But there was nothing to do for it now. A gun boomed, a streak of red bloomed suddenly in the darkness, and a bullet sang by old Mark's ear and broke some crockery at the other end of the room. He let fly at the streak, then stepped back suddenly and slammed the door. From without came Ray Mullock's bellowing voice, issuing orders.

"Rifles, you fools! Get your rifles and get back out of six-gun range. Then drill that cabin until we get him! He saw us and recognized us. We've got to get him now, or we're through in this valley."

CROUCHED down at one corner of the window, old Mark growled into his whitening beard. All of a sudden he realized that he was in a tight fix. A damned tight fix. Mullock had guessed correctly that he did not have a rifle. Now they would edge back beyond six-gun range, surround the cabin, and wipe him out. He had no illusions about the wiping out part. Ray Mullock meant what he said. It had been a mistake to call the man by name; but he had been too angry to think of that at the time. He whipped up his gun and

fired in the general direction of Mullock's voice, then flattened down to the floor as two answering bullets winged their way through the window.

There was silence for a time. Then the deep boom of forty-fives was replaced by the flat whine of high-power rifle shots. Bullets jerked their way through the flimsy wooden walls, zoomed across the room, and jerked their way through the opposite walls. Old Mark felt a cold lump at the pit of his stomach. This cabin was not a shelter, it was a trap. Those men outside could rake it from any angle. Coolly he estimated that it was just a matter of minutes before he would be joining the Hallelujah Chorus with his spurs on. Well, he had always wanted to go out like that. No long years of rheumatism and gradual disintegration, and of increasingly bitter loneliness.

He reared up on one knee and flung three shots in quick succession at the flash of a rifle in a clump of trees darkly visible against the sky.

He tilted his gun ever so slightly to try to make the distance. Then he scrambled quickly to one side just before three holes bloomed at once in the wall beneath the window.

After a few moments of caution, he crawled back and peered out. Breath gasped into his lungs in a sudden startled inhalation, and his jaw sagged. "My God!" he whispered. "Dynamite!"

A FAIRLY short distance from the cabin, over by the water hole, a man was standing, a lighted match in his hand. He stood there coolly, within easy range of old Mark's gun, touching the match to the fuse of a stick of dynamite. As old Mark watched, the fuse began to sputter, and the man slowly raised the stick over his shoulder for a throw.

Old Mark's jaws ached with tension as he grimly lined up his gun and fired. As the match flickered out, he could see the man jerk and swing half around. But the dynamite had left his hand first. Old Mark blinked, and in that instant saw his wife, and child, and all the events of his past life in a quick photographic moment of memory. He tensed his muscles, waiting for the blast that would demolish the cabin.

The blast came, deafeningly; and the cabin leaned away from the force of the explosion; but it did not collapse. Old Mark picked himself up from the floor where he had been thrown. Wonderingly he peered out of the shattered window. The bunch of trees that had been outlined against the sky was gone. Completely gone. And it had been from those trees that the rifle fire had come. The ringing was going out of his ears; but there still remained the sound of distant thunder. Mark identified it as the rumble of stampeding cattle—stampeded back onto the range from which they had been driven.



A ghastly thought came to him. He stumbled to the door, threw it open, and staggered out toward the water hole. As he stumbled along, a mutter of words came from him.

"He wa'n't aimin' at the cabin! He threw that stick at the rustlers! An' me, I shot the man who was pitchin' in to save me!"

MARIAN stood in the center of the room, pondering what to do. It was five o'clock, and little Billy should have been waked from his nap at four. The tree was ready except for the lighting of the candles.

She went to the window and looked out. For the short distance that the light from the room penetrated outward, she could see slanting lines and whirls of snow. Beyond was blackness. She strained her eyes toward the shed, but caught no gleam from Ed's lantern. A little premonition of fear developed inside her. She brushed away the thought which had come into her head, assuring herself that it was the falling snow which kept her from seeing the light. But by the time she had got into her coat and pulled a shawl over her head, her heart was beating rapidly; and when she stepped out of the house and closed the door, she ran in stumbling, awkward steps through the gathering drifts toward the shed.

She found it dark, and remembered that she had brought no matches. There were some in the shed, though; Ed always kept matches, and lighted one. The lantern stood on the bench. She lighted it and looked around.

As she walked back toward the house, she carried the lantern and walked slowly, striving to gain control of the panicky fear which welled within her. One thing she knew. Whatever had happened, whatever the reason why Ed had gone away without telling her first, the Christmas tree could be delayed no longer. She would be slow about dressing Billy, hoping that Ed might

show up in time; but Billy must be waked. And she must control herself so that Billy should not sense her excitement and fear. Ed would be coming in after a while, she told herself. Soon. He would not like it if her groundless fears had been allowed to spoil Billy's Christmas Eve.



While she was dressing Billy, the wind brought the muffled booming of distant guns. Marian heard, and tried to believe that she did not. But when the dynamite went off, scarcely half a mile to the northward, that sound was unmistakable. It seemed to her that her heart stopped; and when she was finally breathing again, she felt weak and sick.

Again she thought, "What must it be like to go through life scorning your husband?" And, darkly following, came that other fear: "Or am I even now a widow?"

To cover her inner turmoil, she left Billy in the bedroom and went in to light the candles on the tree. That finished, she sat down in a chair and called him. He came, stopping in the open doorway, his little face shining with the glory of the sight. Marian held out her arms; and Billy crossed the room and climbed into her lap.

"Song," he demanded.

SHE knew what that meant. For more than a week she had been singing to him the old, familiar Christmas hymns and carols. She raised her sweetly tremulous voice in "Silent Night."

Billy demanded another, and another.

She was still singing when she heard the impatient stamp of a horse just outside the door. Rising, she put Billy down in the chair, then crossed the room and opened the door. Billy followed, staring out into the rectangle of light.

"Daddy!" he exclaimed.

Marian lifted a hand to her tightening throat. Mark Clayton was helping Ed to dismount from the horse. The sleeve of Ed's coat had been cut away; and there was a bandage around his left arm, up near the shoulder. Ed's face was white and drawn. He motioned with his right hand for Mark Clayton to go in ahead of him, and Marian stepped aside as Clayton entered. She noticed, strangely, that the old man stopped in the doorway just as little Billy had done, his leathery face softening at sight of the Christmas tree.

"Ed!" she said as her husband entered.

"Er, what—what has happened?"

Mark Clayton was standing with his back to the fireplace, his feet braced apart, staring at the lighted tree. "I'll tell you." His voice was gruff. "That jasper Mullock was running off a big slice of my herd. They had me holed up in the line cabin, and were sniping for me with rifles. Ed, here, he saved my life. Then he—he got shot."

Marian's face lighted, and a load seemed to lift from her heart. She turned toward Ed. But he looked away.

Ed's smile was an unhappy grimace; and his voice was harsh. "Sounds swell, when you put it that way. But there's no use coverin' up. You know damn' well I didn't fetch that stick of dynamite to your water hole intendin' to fight Ray Mullock with it."

"Our water hole," old Mark corrected, sitting down in a chair. "I'll have my men take down that wire tomorrow; an' you can buy back your cattle at the same price I took 'em off of you."

Ed wasn't listening. He was staring straight into Marian's eyes; and she saw pain, and shame, and a great longing. She reached both hands out to his arms, touching the wounded one with special gentleness.

"Ed," she said, and had to swallow before she could go on. "Husband, it's not what a man starts out to do that counts. It's what he finally ends up doing."

Ed made a kind of choking sound in his throat. Marian stepped in close, and felt Ed's good arm tighten about her.

Over in his chair, old Mark Clayton produced a bandanna and blew his nose loudly. "A pair of damn' good neighbors," he muttered. "Three," he amended, and held out his hand to Billy.

Billy moved confidently across the room and climbed up into his lap, snuggling back against the graying beard.

"Song," he demanded.

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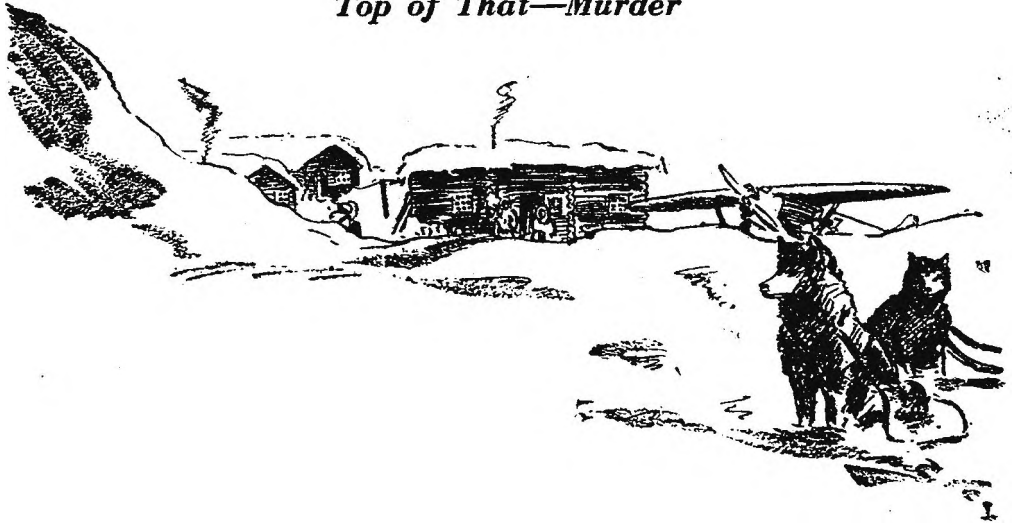


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Top of That—Murder*



DEAD MAN'S HAND

By H. S. M. KEMP

Author of "Police Call from Grassy Portage," "Northern Frame-up," etc.

THE crime had been simple, well-planned, and carried through without a hitch. Two men aboard a high-powered plane, armed with a letter of authority from Winnipeg, had made the rounds of five Hudson's Bay posts between the Churchill and the Barrens and had, in one day, vanished completely with fifty thousand dollars worth of fur. The audacity of the thing proved its success. That, and the plausibility of the letter.

The letter was on official stationery. It merely stated that for business reasons the work of bringing out the mid-winter fur had, this year, been entrusted to the A.A.I. Airlines; and the manager of the individual post would be good enough to cooperate to the best of his ability. The managers cooperated; so that now the Company was short the fifty thousand dollars and the Mounted Police were left holding the bag.

All the crimes were perpetrated within

three hundred miles of Spear Lake. When Corporal Lew Harlan heard of it—and he heard of it the very next morning from Pilot Shorty McCall — he piled into Shorty's plane and made a round of the raided posts. But he found out little. The plane bore the registration of CF-AOT, which was doubtless fictitious, the men aboard her answered to a description that could have fitted a hundred other men; and from the last post called at, Lew learned that the raider had struck out in a southeasterly direction. With this to go on, Lew came into Headquarters without delay.

Meanwhile, wires were burned up as telegrams hummed over them, landing-fields were contacted and oil-companies notified. But two days passed, and Superintendent O'Shea shook his grizzled head.

"We might as well give up right now," was his verdict. "If it was a man afoot, we'd get him. But a plane making two hundred miles an hour—why, those black-

guards are probably in the States by this time with the fur all peddled off!"

So there was nothing left but to trust to luck, hope for a break, and tell Lew Harlan to get back on the job again.

But Lew Harlan had not seen town for two years; and Lew decided that a lay-over was coming to him. So he pleaded that his teeth needed attention, received scant sympathy from an O.C. who had heard the yarn before, and was given forty-eight hours in which to get them fixed.

Lew Harlan sought out Pilot Art Nichols and told him his troubles.

"Art," he said; "I'm booked to fly in next trip with you. You're going out now, but if you *should* run into tough weather, bust a landing-strut, or by any other means be forced to show up a couple days late, I won't grieve."

Art Nichols, tall, leathery, and wise, gave a grin. "Okay, fella. We'll see what can be done."

So when Art failed to show up on the day appointed, Lew didn't worry. Nor did he worry when Art was another day overdue. But the Airways did. Shorty McCall bumped into Lew on the street that afternoon and told him things.

"I'm pulling north tomorrow, and you're coming alone. Aw, we don't care if you never get back," he told him. "We're wondering what's the matter with Art."

"The matter with Art?" echoed Lew. "He's probably hit dirty weather some place and is sitting down till it blows over. But anyway," getting onto a more personal note, "who says I'm going back with you?"

"Your boss. Major O'Shea. He said that seeing I was going in, it'd be a swell chance for you to hit north, too. So, big boy, your stay in the bright lights is over."

Lew growled, got Headquarters on the phone, and received confirmation.

"Yeah," the orderly-room sergeant agreed. "You're going back, all right. Eight bells in the a.m."

So at eight the following day, Lew Harlan took a seat beside Shorty Mc-

Call in a roaring Fairchild and watched civilization drop astern. Shorty said little at first, then he turned on to the subject of his trip.

"Me," he said, "all I'm going in for is to find out what's happened Art. He's got no radio; so he can be anywhere and we wouldn't know a thing about it."

"Where was this flight supposed to have taken him?" asked Lew.

"Vermilion River," answered Shorty. "A hundred and ninety miles north-east of your hangout. But this wouldn't take him four days."

No, agreed Lew; it wouldn't. Nor, somehow, could he think that Art was lying over just so that Lew himself could have a longer stay in civilization. And for the first time Lew began to wonder if Art had run into trouble after all.

IN THE silence that followed, Shorty began to lift the nose of his ship. They climbed to three thousand feet; to four thousand, and Shorty held her there. The patchwork panorama of frozen river, lake and muskeg reeled away beneath them. They cut the windings of the Green River, droned across the Eagle Hills, came out again over the level country surrounding Eagle Lake. Shorty thrust out his chin in the general direction of the north.

"One hunk of country I never did fancy—this piece ahead. Seventy miles of a dry-hop. Now if there was only a couple of lakes—" and his words trailed off into silence.

For he was still in his seat, staring ahead.

Suddenly he thrust out a finger. "What's that? Over there!"

Lew Harlan had seen it also—a splash of red against a spruce-covered hill.

"Looks like—looks like—" and Lew left the sentence unfinished.

Grim-faced, Shorty went into a dive; rolled the ship onto one wing. They touched the frozen surface of Eagle Lake, swung shoreward and came to a stop a few

feet out. Shorty McCall, face set and hard, nodded to Lew Harlan.

"O. K. Let's go."

"In the timber, the snow was knee-deep. Grimly, ominous foreboding sealing their lips, they fought their way for half a mile. When they stopped for a breather, Lew Harlan climbed the lower branches of a spruce tree.

"Straight ahead!" he called down to Shorty McCall. "Two hundred yards."

More wallowing through the snow; and in a few minutes they came onto a tiny clearing and what was left of Art Nichols' red-and-black plane.

They pulled up short, numbed by what greeted them. Wreckage was scattered for two hundred yards in every direction. Wings, landing-gear and tail-assembly were telescoped into unrecognizable junk.

Lew Harlan moved forward and began to tear with his mittened hands at the debris. Shorty McCall was with him. Lew looked into the pilot's round, cherubic features and found them gray and lined.

"You needn't bother, Corp," said Shorty metallically. "Art didn't walk out of a mess like this!" But he lent a hand, ripping at a twisted, battered door.

The plane was empty, indication that Art Nichols had been homeward bound when the crash occurred; and in what was left of the pilot's seat they found what was left of Art Nichols.

Lew Harlan, at twenty-eight years of age and with seven years in the Mounted, was not yet inured to stuff like this. An involuntary shiver went over him. For the crumpled body in parka and pilot's cap was less like a man than anything else.

"By gad, he *must* have hit!" he managed to say.

"Yeah," agreed Shorty bleakly. "That's the way they generally hit. The way I'll hit, too."

Lew shot him a swift look. "How can we carry him out?"

"Better not try it. The Aviation Inspector'll have to come in and check things

over. There'll be more of us then, and we can fetch a stretcher along."

"Then there's nothing to be done just now?"

"All that's needed," answered Shorty McCall, "has been done already."

THEY tramped back to the ship, climbed in. With the starting of the motor, Lew Harlan felt a certain qualm. He had done about as much flying as the next man, but the remembrance of what he had seen back there in the bush rode with him now. Perhaps Shorty McCall was remembering also.

The pilot's face was grim, and crow's-feet wrinkles bunched around his eyes. But his hands were steady on the controls, and there was no hesitation in the way he lifted the ship into the air.

Once there, he held straight on; and a couple of hours slipped by. Civilization rushed toward them; and Shorty McCall was banking sharply over the city. Coolly, perfectly, he came to a landing down on the river-ice.

A crowd had formed in anticipation of what the news might be. In the foreground was Peterson, local manager of the Airways. He was alongside the ship before it came to a stop. As Shorty McCall slid his window down, Peterson was looking questioningly up at him. Shorty nodded.

"Total loss. A mile this side of Eagle Narrows and half a mile in the bush."

Lew Harlan heard Peterson's sharp intake of breath. "And Nichols?"

"Total loss, too. Better not ask too much."

Shorty McCall dropped to the ground. Lew followed him. Peterson spoke.

"I'll have to wire Regina. The Department'll need a check-up."

"As though," said Shorty bitterly, "that could do any good!"

The crowd of gathered onlookers opened to allow the three men to pass; and when the top of the river-bank was gained, Lew Harlan spoke to the others.

"You boys go ahead. I'll be up at the barracks if you want me."

There he reported to his commanding officer. Superintendent O'Shea heard him through. "And what d'you think happened?"

Lew shrugged. "Engine failure, I guess. Funny thing. Shorty was just mentioning that dry-hop between Eagle Lake and Sled River. Said he didn't like it at all. It looked as though Art was nursing a faulty motor all the way across it, but failed to reach safety by half a mile."

The O.C. shook his head. "They didn't come any better than Art Nichols."



"No better at all. And Art was a pretty close friend of mine."

After a moment, O'Shea said, "There'll be an investigation?"

"The Airways have wired the Department already. An inspector will probably be in."

Lew Harlan was correct in his supposition. In less than two hours an inspector landed from his own light ship. Almost at once another start for Eagle Lake was made, the Inspector in his own ship and Superintendent O'Shea, Lew Harlan and Shorty McCall in the other.

"And what can I tell from this?" asked the Inspector as they stood at the wreck of Nichols' plane. "Anything could have happened—anything you like."

Shorty McCall gave a cold, cynical grin. "Then give 'em the usual blah—pilot's error. Let it go at that."

They loaded Nichols onto a stretcher brought along for the purpose and blundered back to Shorty's ship. But ready

to start south again, the Superintendent offered a suggestion.

"You might as well get north, Corporal. You can do no good in town. There's just the chance you'll run onto some sort of a lead regarding that fur theft. Although"—wearily—"the Lord alone knows where it'll come from." He turned to Shorty McCall. "What d'you say?"

The pilot was agreeable. "No trouble to take him there. What'll it be—a hundred and fifty miles? About an hour's run."

SHORTY'S estimate was correct. In slightly less than the hour they circled above the trading posts, Indian shacks and snow-banked teepees that represented the settlement of Spear Lake. The Airways maintained a base at this point, with Red Morgan as the mechanic in charge. As Lew Harlan stepped from the plane, Shorty had a word for him.

"You can tell Red about Art. If I go over there, it'll mean stopping. And time's getting along."

Lew nodded, watched Shorty streak away for the south, then turned toward his detachment. But he found the place cheerless and cold; so after starting a fire in the heater, Lew pushed over to see Red Morgan.

Morgan was sandy-haired and twenty-six, humorous-mouthed and a wizard with an airplane engine. He was tinkering with a burned-out magneto, and watching him was Matt Sewell. Sewell was black haired and bearded, the successful operator of a string of commercial fish camps and a caterpillar freighting outfit. As Lew stepped in, Sewell looked up from the barrel on which he sat.

"Hyah, Lew! Was it you came in with Shorty?"

Red Morgan turned. "And why couldn't Shorty stop? I gave that lug a couple of dollars to bring me in some smoking."

Lew closed the workshop door and warmed his hands over the heater.

"Shorty," he said, "was in a hurry. He had a dead man on board."

The two stared at him. "Dead man?" echoed Sewell.

"You didn't hear about Art. He crashed just this side of Eagle Lake." There was a fractional pause, and Lew added, "We've just come from the wreck."

Red Morgan was breathing hard. He began to shoot Lew a string of questions. "When did it happen? How? Who was with him—?"

"Art was on his way home from Vermillion River. Last Wednesday—"

"Last Wednesday?" exclaimed Matt Sewell. "Why, he stopped off here on his way down. Sure, Wednesday."

"But what went wrong?" demanded Red Morgan. "Motor failure?"

Lew shrugged. "If you could see the wreck, you wouldn't bother asking."

"There wasn't much the matter with Art's ship," stated Red Morgan flatly. "I've serviced it too often. And Art wasn't the sort to take unnecessary chances."

"Ain't that the way it generally is?" asked Matt Sewell. "Always a good plane and always a good pilot that piles up?"

Lew agreed; and just then the jangle of dog-bells was heard coming down the trail. Lew turned to the window behind him and saw an Indian and a four-dog string making for the shack. The outfit stopped, and the man got out of the sleigh.

He came in as Lew held the door open for him, and began to speak in Cree.

"There has been an accident. A plane crashed near Eagle Lake. My father-in-law saw the accident, and here is his writing to tell you about it."

The Indian extended a note to any of the three, but Lew took it from him. Holding it so that the light fell full, Lew began to spell out the pothook syllabics. "*O-ma ka musse-na-he-ka-yan*—this that I am writing is to tell you of a plane that I saw crash near Eagle Lake—"

"When was this written?" Lew asked the man.

"Three days ago. It took me three days to make the trip."

"I see. Art Nichols' plane. We know all about it." He read on then, and as he did so he began to frown. At the conclusion of his reading he looked up at Sewell and Red Morgan. "That's funny. The letter says the plane hit ground with the motor full on. What d'you make of that?"

"Yeah; funny," agreed Matt Sewell. Red Morgan frowned thoughtfully. "It rules out any chance that Art's motor failed him. Knowing that motor like I did, I couldn't feature that happening."

"But there's another angle to it," stressed Lew. "If something had gone wrong—say a control wire snapped or something of that sort—Art would have cut his motor. Wouldn't he?" he asked Red Morgan.

"I'd figure so," agreed the mechanic.

Lew turned to the Indian. "Your father-in-law says the motor was going full blast when the plane hit, but he doesn't tell me *how* it hit? Do you know? Was the pilot skimming the trees, out of control—?"

"No," said the Indian quickly. "The old man said that he watched the plane for some little time. It was going fast and quite high; then suddenly it went into a dive. The pilot leveled off again at about the height a man could shoot; but the nose went down sharply and the plane began to spin. It was still spinning when it struck."

Lew grunted. Red Morgan could speak no Cree, so Lew interpreted the Indian's remarks. "Now what?" he added. "I'm no flyer, but this chap's version of the accident makes me think. It seems to me that if the motor was going full-on at the time it hit the ground, Art couldn't have been himself. He may have fainted or something."

Red Morgan nodded. "If he slumped forward, he'd shove the stick forward too. That'd push the nose down."

"And if he went forward like that and to one side," suggested Matt Sewell, "he'd give her rudder enough to start the spin."

"But what would make Art faint?" asked Lew. "He wasn't the fainting sort."

"He wasn't," agreed Sewell. "Only now you mention it, Art was sort of under the weather when he was here. Touch of the grippe—the shiverin' kind."

Lew's brows went up. "That so? And what was he taking for it? Not liquor?"

"No. Aspirin."

"Aspirin?" repeated Lew. "And where would he get that?"

"From Sam Cox, over at the Hudson's Bay. Matter of fact," exclaimed Matt Sewell, "that's what made Art land. He came up to my place askin' if I had any rum; and when I said I hadn't, he said he'd walk over to the Bay and see what he could get from Sam Cox. All he got was the aspirin."

Lew was frowning, chewing on his lip. Watching him, Red Morgan asked, "Would aspirin knock a man out?"

"They might—if he took enough of them." Lew folded the letter he had received from the Indian, opened his parka-front and slipped it into his tunic pocket. "Maybe nothing to all this," he stated. "But I'll pass it along."

BUT after his solitary supper that night, Lew decided to go over to the Hudson's Bay post and have a talk with Sam Cox. Sam Cox was by nature gruff and surly; and since locking horns with him once or twice over infringements of the Game Act, Lew had left him severely alone. But Lew wanted more satisfaction over Art Nichols' death than Red Morgan or Matt Sewell had been able to supply.

He found Cox at home, reading a magazine in a chair. The post bookkeeper and the storeman were playing a game of cards, and Cox's Indian wife was making moccasins in the kitchen.

Without being invited, Lew walked in and said he wanted ten minutes of Sam Cox's time.

"And what about?" growled Cox. "That fur we lost?"

"We lost?" grinned Lew. "You didn't lose any, did you?"

"No. Mebbe I was lucky."

"Maybe you were," agreed Lew. "This was the only post they missed."

"Yeah?" Sam Cox's lips drew into an unpleasant grin. "But this was the only place that had a policeman on the job. Mebbe that explains it."

"And that," smiled Lew, "never occurred to me!" But then suddenly his manner changed. "No; I'm after something else. Art Nichols crashed just north of Eagle Lake a day or so ago, and I'm trying to find out why."

Sam Cox's heavy brows drew together. "Crashed? Anybody—hurt?"

"Art was killed."

There came the scrape of a chair at the table. The bookkeeper spun around.

"Art's killed? Why—good lord! Art killed?"

Lew nodded. "The day he left here. Coming back from a trip to Vermilion River."

The store-man, a half-breed, was staring. "Art was over here that day. Wasn't he, Sam?"

Sam Cox nodded. The trader was bald-headed, with a broken nose, sagging mustache and a hard chin. "He was over; sure. And now he'd dead."

"And now he's dead," repeated Lew. He waited a moment, then asked, "He got some aspirin from you for his cold, didn't he?"

Sam Cox scowled. "Believe he did. Yeah. Jerry give him some that day."

"And what sort were they? Or," suggested Lew, "how'd you like to show me some of the same kind?"

Sam Cox's scowl deepened. "What's aspirin to do with what happened to Art?"

"Possibly nothing," Lew told him. "On the other hand, Art was either unconscious or the victim of some sort of a stroke just before the accident happened—so I'm passing up no bets."

Sam Cox nodded at last. "All right, Jerry. Get some for the feller."

The half-breed went out; but in a few minutes he returned with a small metal package. Lew took it, and found the contents to be aspirin of a nationally advertised brand.

"That the kind you gave to Art?"

"Sure," said the half-breed. "And I told him—like I tell 'em all—not to take more'n a couple at a time."

Lew dug into his breeches' pocket and threw fifty cents on the table. "I'm buying these," he stated. "I'm apt to get a cold myself."

Back at the detachment, he typed out all the new angles on the plane crash he had been able to discover. Then he made up his blankets and went to bed. But at eleven of the next morning he heard and saw Shorty McCall's plane come in and land in front of the Airways' workshop. He put on his outer clothing, intending to catch Shorty before he left; then he saw the plane turn and come taxiing in his direction.

He waited, and soon Shorty came up to the house.

HE HAD a bundle of letters for Lew, but Lew ignored these to give Shorty the gist of what he had typed out the previous night.

"Red agreed with me that the fact that Art's motor was full-on when he hit seems to indicate that Art was not—well, not in full possession of all his faculties at the time. What I mean, no pilot would see the ground coming up at him at three hundred miles an hour and keep his motor full-on to hit it."

"I'll say he wouldn't!" said Shorty grimly. "But Red was telling me—he got to thinking about the crash last night. Seems like the pin that holds the pilot chair down solid in them old Veedees sometimes works loose. Art's did, once; but Red figured he'd got it fixed. If Art's chair broke away, he wouldn't have no grip, no

purchase to handle either stick or rudder-bar."

Lew nodded. "That's worth remembering, all right. And here's something worth remembering too. Art was groggy with the flu the day he was killed; and he was dopping himself with aspirin."

But Shorty was unimpressed. "Art took aspirin all the time. Took it for headache, toothache and everything that ailed him. I've seen him down five tablets and never turn a hair. If he took enough to knock him pie-eyed, he must have taken a whole box at once."

"He wouldn't be fool enough to do that," decided Lew. Then he asked, "What brought you up here to-day?"

Shorty frowned. "What's that to do with Art Nichols?"

"Nothing, perhaps. I'm just asking."

"Got me a load for some prospectors near Cree Lake," said Shorty. "And this is only the first load of three or four."

"I'll tell you why I'm asking you," explained Lew. "It may only be a case of bats in the belfry, but I'd like to go down to the crash and poke around again."

"Smart cop, eh?" grinned Shorty. "Figure you'll find some of them aspirins?"

"I might," admitted Lew. "It'll be quite a job. But while that storeman of Sam's says he gave Art one kind of aspirin, he may have given him another."

Shorty shrugged. "You saw the wreck. Think you'll have any luck?"

"Might. There's a side-pocket in the door of Art's plane like there is in the old-type cars. He just might have kept the box of tablets in there where they'd be handy to get at."

"Well," said Shorty after a while; "there ain't nothing to stop you. I figure on passing here again about two-thirty this afternoon and making town by dark."

So when Shorty came south again later, Lew climbed aboard. The hour's run—shortened by a tail-wind—brought them to Eagle Lake, where they landed.

"I'll like this dry-hop worse than I ever

did," was Shorty's glum comment. "Art pretty near made it—but not quite."

"If it wasn't for the fact of that straight-down power-dive," said Lew, "I'd say he was trying to make the lake when he crashed. Maybe he felt this spell coming on, and was trying to make the lake before he passed out."

ONCE again they tramped their way to the scene of the crash. There, Shorty gave a grin. "All right, smart cop. Start hunting!"

It looked hopeless; and after ten minutes of prying into the wreckage, it proved as hopeless as it had looked. For the side-pocket was empty, save for a folded air-map and the protruding neck of a thermos bottle. Finally Lew gave up.

"And now—?" asked Shorty. "Coming to town? I guess you'll have to."

But he had to speak twice before Lew heard him. "Y'know," said Lew; "I've still got it in my mind that Art wasn't conscious when he crashed."

"Well?" asked Shorty. "I don't think so, either. But what about it?"

"And," continued Lew, "although this tragedy has shoved everything else into the background, don't forget that a couple of other flyers walked off with fifty thousand dollars worth of Hudson's Bay fur. When you get two happenings like that together, you wonder if they're connected. What I mean, did Art accidentally dope himself, or was he doped for a reason?"

Shorty McCall, standing there in the chill afternoon wind, became restive.

"Art doped? With them aspirins?"

"Know what I'm going to do?" suddenly asked Lew, hard-jawed. "I'm going to order an autopsy. I want to know what Art had in him."

"I'll tell you what Art had in him," said the practical Shorty McCall. "Coffee. See that vacuum flask?"

"And what about the vacuum?"

"Nothing particular. Only Art guzzled coffee all the time. Said it pepped him up

and kept out the cold. And if he was feelin' punk with the flu—"

Lew nodded, and crawled into the wreck again.

The vacuum flask was of the nickel-plated type; and while its glass interior was hopelessly shattered, the shell was whole. Lew ripped away the side-pocket and removed the thermos in his mittened fingers.

Shorty took another glance at it. "That ain't Art's," he said. "His was corrugated; this one's smooth."

"And it came out of Sam Cox's store," added Lew. He turned the bottle end-up and displayed certain scrawly markings. "Out of Sam's store," he repeated. "These hen-tracks are his cost-price and the dollar is his selling price. I've worked that code of his out. The bottle set him back just twenty-eight cents."



"A neat profit," grinned Shorty. "And now you've got the bottle, what're you going to do with it?"

Lew shook the thing; and above the rattle of broken glass he detected the gurgle of liquid.

"I'll get the contents analyzed," he said promptly. "And if they aren't as healthy as they should be, the fingerprint branch gets a job."

A slow grin spread over Shorty's face. "I'm glad I haven't got your suspicious mind. With all the enemies I got, I'd be scared to eat!"

They went back to the plane; and a few minutes later were in the air with the Eagle Hills due ahead. But for all his confidence, Lew Harlan felt a bit less sure when he faced his O.C.

"I'll admit I haven't much to go on," he told him. "But this letter, the Indian's story, and Art's taking of aspirin, all seemed to warrant a closer look." He produced the thermos and set it on the O.C.'s desk. "Shorty McCall tells me Art was an inveterate coffee drinker. It might not be a bad idea to have the contents of this thing analyzed; and if they turn out bad, have an autopsy performed on Art and get the bottle itself checked for fingerprints."

The O.C. squinted at the bottle, then up at Lew.

"And if they do turn out bad, whom do you suspect?"

Lew hesitated. "I can't say that I suspect anybody. It's altogether too early for that. But there's one thing I think is significant. Five posts yielded fifty thousand dollars worth of fur—say, ten thousand dollars apiece.

Spear Lake, however, the biggest post in the district, could have contributed eighteen thousand. And Spear Lake was not visited at all."

O'Shea's eyes drilled Lew Harlan steadily. "I follow you, Corporal. I also know this man Cox who runs Spear Lake. The autopsy will be made and the contents of the thermos analyzed. I don't know how long a job that'll be, but if McCall is going back north to-morrow, you'd better go along. I'll push the findings through to you as soon as I get them."

But Lew Harlan, still hankering for that spell in town, cast out a feeler.

"You think I should get back?"

"Certainly. Work from that end. And keep an eye on Sam Cox."

So north again went Lew. But he could have been given one day in town without much damage; for on Shorty McCall's second trip in he brought a bulky letter from Superintendent O'Shea.

Lew got it in the detachment, while Shorty hung around to see if he might glean a little information for himself. And Lew's features hardened as he read.

He gave a low whistle, backtracked to

read a line or so again; looked up at last into Shorty's inquiring face.

"Well," he said grimly. "I was right. Three-quarters of a grain of strychnine was found in Art's stomach; and another full grain in the thermos bottle."

"What?" croaked Shorty.

Lew repeated himself. "And that's not all. The bottle held fingerprints. The report says they were blurred and partially overlapped, but they showed three distinct sets. One was of a woman; one were Art's own. And one more," said Lew with the ghost of a smile, "belonged to a man who has been dead for twenty-two years."

Shorty, already shocked by the news Lew had given him earlier, blinked twice before he spoke. "Dead?" he repeated. "Dead for twenty-two years?"

Lew nodded. "In other words, they belonged to Joe Mason—a man who was murdered by his partner down on the Mackenzie in nineteen-sixteen."

SLOWLY, Shorty McCall drew a package of cigarettes from his pocket. He took one out, tapped it absently on a thumb-nail; then, remembering, dug out the package again and handed it to Lew. At last he said, "Anything else you'd like to spring on me now you're at it?"

Lew shrugged. "I'm only telling you what's in this letter."

"That Art was poisoned, and that a dead man's come to life!"

"Don't know anything about a dead man coming to life," demurred Lew. "But somebody seems to have resurrected the prints of a dead man's hand." He suddenly asked, "Ever heard of Joe Mason?"

"Never did—till now."

Lew grunted, and referred again to the letter. "The O.C. gives an outline of him here, but I read the case myself in one of our old blue books. Joe Mason, it seems, trapped near the Arctic Circle with a duck named Noyes. Nobody saw much of him as he stayed on his trap-line pretty well. But one day he barged into a trading post

at Arctic Red River, held it up and backed out with all the fur he could grab. He left his fingerprints, however, on the window in the door which he shoved against, and the police got a clear copy of them. But later, when the boys did locate him, he had been dead in his cabin for over three months. This was in the early summer; and as no fur was found in the place, it was concluded that his partner—Noyes—had killed him and pulled on."

Shorty scowled. "Then if he was beefed by this Noyes guy, how could he leave his fingerprints on Art's thermos?"

"Don't you see?" demanded Lew. "Mason must never have been killed at all. What happened was that *he* killed *Noyes* and dressed the dead man in his own clothing. If three months went by before the body was found—and remember it was in the summer—it was easy to see how the police made a mistake. I mean, a mistake in the identity of the dead man."

For a moment or so Shorty chewed on what Lew had told him. "So Mason's alive today," was his grim comment. "And somewhere around here. That's worth knowing."

"And when I catch up with him," promised Lew, "he'll have to give an explanation of not only what happened to Mister Noyes, but how his own fingerprints come to be on a thermos bottle containing strychnine."

"Any idea who this Joe Mason is?" asked Shorty.

Lew's answer was noncommittal. "Maybe. But before we discuss that, we've a bigger problem. The problem is to decide why it was so necessary to murder Art."

Lew took a cigarette then from Shorty's package. Shorty himself dropped into a vacant chair.

"Art seems to have been murdered, all right," admitted Shorty. "Though I don't know who'd want to murder a decent feller like him."

Lew shrugged. "I've been doing a bit of guesswork—just in case. And my guess-

ing tells me that Art was murdered because he knew too much."

"You mean that Art was mixed up in the theft?"

"Good Lord, no!" retorted Lew. "I mean he was murdered because—well, because perhaps he blundered on to something. Look at things this way; Art flew around here for a couple of days after the hold-up, dropped off here four or five times and nobody bothered him. Why? Because there was nothing to bother him about. But he takes a trip into a different locality, and right away he gets killed."

Shorty's eyes narrowed. He nodded slowly. "You figure, then, that Art ran into something between here and Vermillion River?"

"Well; it seems plausible enough." Then Lew said, "The last post to be raided that day was Long Portage; and the boys at the Portage told us that once she was loaded up the ship struck off in a southeasterly direction. Now; come over here."

Lew crossed to a large-scale map hanging on the detachment wall and, with his thumb-nail, drew on it two bisecting lines. One line ran from Spear Lake to Vermillion River; the other ran southeasterly from Long Portage. "Supposing that Art *did* bump into anything, it would be somewhere around where these two lines cross. One line will be his route to and from Vermillion River. The other is the line of flight of that raiding plane hitting home."

Shorty scrubbed his chin. "May be something in what you say. And I suppose you're going to suggest we breeze up there and see what we can see for ourselves?"

"I was hoping you'd say that, Shorty," smiled Lew. "I can't go chartering planes."

"I can't charter 'em either. But if it means doing something for Art Nichols, the Airways'll stand the cost."

BUT Shorty was loaded for Cree Lake. He said he would pull over to the Base and unload there. It took Lew just five

minutes to get his grub-box, bedding and rifle together, then he taxied across to Red Morgan's.

The mechanic came out of the workshop as the plane swung in. He grinned up at Lew.

"You've sure got the flyin' bug. Where away this time?"

"North," answered Lew. "Trying to find a reason for killing a man."

He dropped to the ground, swore Red Morgan to secrecy, and gave him a guarded statement regarding the death of Art Nichols. "And you can help, Red," he told the man, "just by answering a few questions. And here's the first—when Art stopped off here on that last flight of his, did he mention seeing anything out of the way? I mean between here and Vermilion River?"

Red frowned, and said he couldn't recall Art mentioning anything except how tough he felt.

"And you're sure of that?" pressed Lew.

"Pretty sure," agreed Red. "Why?"

"Because we think Art ran into something, mentioned it, and got murdered for not keeping the information to himself."

Red pondered the statement. "Likely enough," he agreed. "But who would he mention it to? Not to me or to Matt; and we were the only two he saw."

"Were you?" suggested Lew.

Now Red was frowning. Suddenly he looked up. "You mean, Sam Cox?"

But Lew didn't answer, for Shorty was becoming impatient. "We're going north, Red, to look around. I'm dumping the freight here and picking it up on the way back."

With the freight dumped into the warehouse, Shorty gassed up and demanded the five gallons of oil he had left with Red a week previously. Red merely grinned at him.

"You're out of luck for the oil. Some rat pinched it."

"Pinched it?" echoed Shorty. "Out of the workshop?"

Red admitted that it had been left outside. "Matt told me I should stow it away; but I figured it would be all right where it was."

Shorty wiped his gasoline-soaked hands on his parka. "One swell dish! Two hundred-odd miles staring me in the face, a leaky motor, and no spare oil! Who," he demanded, "pinched it?"

Red looked his penitence. "Search me. But if you've got to have oil, I can get some light tractor oil from Matt. He and the crew are away to the fish camps, but I can chisel some from his housekeeper."

"Tractor oil in an airplane! Boy, do I love the idea!" Then, "Well, all right," Shorty sighed. "It won't be any worse than fish oil—and I've run on that in a pinch."

But when Red returned with the substitute oil, Shorty scowled down at him.

"That may do it. And if it don't," he predicted, "you'll be on hand to tell me why. Meaning, you're coming aboard as a greaseball—with a chance of earning your pay!"

So, a few minutes later, Shorty, with Lew Harlan and Red Morgan along, swung his ship and went roaring off northeast. He climbed steadily, till his altimeter showed six thousand feet, then held on.

He turned to Lew Harlan beside him. "Those two lines you drew crossed somewhere around Indian Lake. A hundred and twenty miles out. Guess we don't get excited till we're there."

But he and Lew and Red Morgan scanned the country closely. Twice Shorty swung off his course on a trip of investigation, only to come back to it again. Then Indian Lake, raggedly round, its spruce islands showing as tiny smudges, showed up.

THERE was a head wind that cut down their speed, but in a few more minutes they were over the lake. They saw bald, rocky points, deep bays, the mouth of the Indian River against the far shore and,

finally, the river itself. It wound northward into the Barrens, crooked, serpentine. Shorty turned to Lew.

"Don't see anything here."

Lew agreed. Red Morgan said that somewhere, somebody had slipped in their reckoning.

"Looks like it," grunted Shorty. "Still, I'll try her a few more miles."

Holding the same altitude, they swept on. There was the lake and the river and the islands, but nothing else to arouse suspicion. Another mile or so and they would pass the spot where Lew's lines had crossed each other. From there on search would be useless, and Lew's fine theory would be all washed up.

But Lew was staring at something that appeared right in the frozen mouth of the Indian River. He squinted at it a long time before he nudged Shorty.

"There in the mouth," he mentioned. "What d'you make of it?"

Shorty squinted too. "Island. Why?"

"That's no island," said Lew. Then he suddenly stiffened. A pigmy figure was running from there to shore.

Shorty was on the point of nosing down. "Hold her up!" ordered Lew. "Let on you haven't seen. We'll get a better look as we go by!"

Shorty held his ship on a level keel, and in a few moments they were over the mouth. All three saw it then, and recognized it for what it was—an airplane, camouflaged with spruce-boughs.

"By the gods!" gritted Lew. "A plane!"

"And something else!" cried Shorty. "A train of dogs near shore!"

Other details now came clearly. There was a low fire burning in the bush opposite the plane and white blobs that might be covers or blankets. But apart from that one figure, there was no sign of human life.

"They're somewhere around," said Lew. "But keep right on. They'll never know we've seen them."

So they went by, and kept going till

ten miles down the river. Then Shorty spoke.

"Now, you fellers; I'll start back and hit the river on a flat glide."

"Without them hearing us," stipulated Lew.

"Sure. I'll cut the motor and land well this side of them. Then we can sneak up through the bush and see what it's all about."

Shorty began to bank, lost altitude; and midway of where they had seen the plane and where he now was, cut the motor. There was the faint whine of the prop, the rush of air past the cabin; and the river and the bush began to slide up at them. A mile from the mouth, or as nearly as Lew could judge, the skis touched gently on the snow.

Lew was the first man out. He opened the cabin door rifle in hand, and stepped down. Shorty was following him—when Lew heard a *thud* and a bubbling grunt. He wheeled in time to see Shorty sinking to his knees and Red Morgan swinging a length of aluminum pipe.

Lew was numbed for the moment; and the consequent hesitation almost proved his undoing. For Red Morgan jumped from the plane full at him.

But Lew managed to throw himself sideways, and Red Morgan's charge carried him by. Then he turned, grabbed Morgan by the throat as he struggled to get up and smashed him heavily in the jaw.

It was a blow that would have knocked most men cold; but Morgan merely grunted, dropped the pipe and flung his arms around Lew's neck. For some seconds they heaved and struggled. Snow got into their ears; into their eyes, and half-blinded them. But Lew hung on—till Morgan lifted his heel and drove it down smashingly over Lew's kidneys.

It was a paralyzing blow. Lew went down on his face, groaning in agony. He felt more than saw Red Morgan spring up, and he waited for another smash over the head from that piece of pipe.

But the blow never came. Instead, he heard the motor of Shorty's ship turning over. A second or so later, with Red Morgan at the controls, the machine was taxiing full throttle up the river.

Lew waited for another minute or two, then gritting his teeth he managed to crawl up. The pain in his back was still severe, but the slumped-over figure of Shorty McCall lying off to one side demanded action.

He moved over to him. Shorty was motionless, with a stream of blood coursing down his forehead. Lew removed the pilot's cap and found a jagged scalp wound just above the ear. He dug out his handkerchief and bound it as best he could; then after replacing the cap he grabbed Shorty beneath the armpits.

Shorty was a tough haul at any time; but now, limply unconscious and with Lew handicapped by the blow that Morgan had given him, it was a colossal task getting him up to the bush. But scarcely were they there than Shorty opened his eyes.

HE BLINKED up at Lew, looked around him, then heaved himself to an elbow. He was frowning, like a man waking from a nightmare. "Hey, what—what happened?"

Lew told him. "And all that saved you was that heavy cap."

"But why Red Morgan?" insisted Shorty. "Where does he fit in?"

Lew ground his teeth. "I'll tell you where he fits in. He's one of the mugs behind this racket. And I'm the mug who couldn't see it! Right now he's off with your plane."

Shorty sat up, though the effort made him wince.

"Away with it. Why—he can't fly!"

"But he's gone. Up the river. Taxiing."

Shorty understood then. "He can do that much. And he'll meet those other fellers." He suddenly came to his feet. "Then what are we waiting for?"

Lew recovered his rifle and shook it

clear of snow. "Chances are we'll be too late. But it's worth the try."

They took to the bush, where their movements would be hidden. Lew was in poor shape for the heavy travel and Shorty,



slugging along behind, grunted and groaned. But Shorty made one observation.

"Remember, Lew, Red tellin' us he had a brother down in the States in the rum-running business? Owned a plane? Well, now the rum-running ain't so hot, what d'you want to bet he ain't mixed up in this?"

"I don't bet," said Lew. "Not on a sure thing."

The snow was deep in the bush but they made fair progress. But when they had covered the better part of half a mile, the sudden blast of an airplane engine stopped them in their tracks. They listened tensely and the roar came again.

"That ain't my ship," stated Shorty. "It's the other one. Warming up!"

Lew gritted his teeth. If the roar of the motor were any indication, they could not be more than a few hundred yards away. But they might as well be miles away once the other ship began to pull out.

They quickened their pace; but in a minute or so the roar of the plane came again. And this time the roar continued.

Shorty read its meaning. "They're leavin' us, Lew. Pullin' out. We're licked, and we might's well admit it."

"I'm admitting nothing!" snarled Lew. "This rifle'll carry up to seven hundred yards, and I've a belt full of shells!"

They made one more effort, but the

sound of the motor was fading to a steady hum. And when finally they broke through the bush, the plane was but a faint speck far out on Indian Lake.

Shorty, face streaming with perspiration, glowered at it. "Seven hundred yards! Well, seven hundred yards is no good here."

Baffled, Lew looked around him. They were on the left bank of the river, right at the mouth. Shorty's deserted plane was there, undamaged as Lew had expected to find it.

Beyond the plane was the string of dogs. They were still harnessed, still hitched to the toboggan; left stranded to fend for themselves. As Lew looked at them, his lips twisted grimly.

HE SAID nothing to Shorty at the moment, but he had recognized the dogs.

They were Matt Sewell's.

But Shorty had noticed something—something that lay on its side out in mid-river. It was partly covered with the spruce-boughs that had camouflaged the plane.

"See that oil-can?" growled Shorty. "That's the one I left with Red Morgan." His jaw toughened. "And I know what it all means now. That plane came down because she lost her oil. Mebbe a break in the line. The two fellers aboard her knew they were stuck, so they took a chance and hit across country. Compass reckoning."

"And Matt Sewell obligingly brought 'em back with the oil," added Lew. "They are his dogs over there."

Out on Indian Lake something flashed. It was the sun, catching on the hull of the plane.

"Look!" almost yelled Shorty. "They're turning around!"

Lew tried to read the meaning of the move. Shorty explained it.

"See? With their load and the tail-wind, they can't rise. Watch 'em!"

Lew did, and found that Shorty's words

were no mere guesswork. The plane swung again, due into the wind.

Faintly they heard the crescendo of the motor. Billows of snow went up. With an increasing throb of sound the plane came racing toward them.

Lew dropped to a knee. "Down, Shorty! Here's our chance!"

He opened the breech of his rifle, blew the loose snow from it and pumped in a shell. With one eye fixed on the plane, he brought the gun to his shoulder.

The plane he estimated to be a good mile away. Heavily loaded as she was, it would take that much of a run to get her up. And as Lew watched and the seconds ticked by, he wondered if she would make it at all.

But at five hundred yards he saw daylight beneath her skis. She wobbled uncertainly for a moment, dipped; then began rapidly to climb.

And climbing, she gained speed. She came rushing toward where Lew and Shorty were crouched in the dead grass at river's edge. Lew judged her height now to be five hundred feet; and when she was half that distance away, Lew set himself.

He aimed deliberately at the windows of the pilot's compartment. *Spang!* The crack of the .303 brought immediate results.

The ship reeled, zoomed suddenly upward. Motor wide open and propeller whistling, she fought to get out of range. She was almost due above them now; and Lew fired again twice in quick succession. And again he got a hit.

For the ear-splitting drone of the motor turned to a shrill, high-strung whine; and Shorty began to yell.

"The prop! You got her prop! Look—she's going to pieces!"

The high-pitched whine had changed to a metallic clattering. Chunks of the motor flew off. The big ship seemed to tremble.

Lew held his fire, for the plane was swinging in a crazy bank. She began to keel over, to slip away from the river and

toward a grove of heavy timber on the far shore. Lew heard the rush of the wind through her struts, saw her roll till her belly was toward them. Downward she sliced, gathering speed as she went—till with a ripping, tearing crash she went out of sight in the timber.

FOR a moment neither man spoke. The silence seemed terrific, uncanny. Across the river the tips of the trees were still waving. The cloud of snow that went up seemed to hang in the cold air. Then Lew clambered to his feet and started off on the run.

There was always the danger of fire following a crash; and he wanted to be there in case this happened.

But there was no fire. He and Shorty broke into a small clearing to find the ship on its side. One wing, as well as the landing gear, was completely crumpled. The other wing was spiked on a stripped, naked tree.

Lew, finger hooked about the trigger of his rifle, led a cautious advance.

"I don't trust these babies—even though I don't see anything of 'em."

He and Shorty made halfway across the clearing when Lew detected a movement beneath the crumpled wing. He pulled up short, then in one swift second he had dived for cover, taking the surprised pilot with him.

A machine-gun started its savage chatter. Bullets plowed into the spot that the two had vacated, and Lew shoved Shorty down on his face.

"I saw him," gritted Lew. "And just in time."

He raised his head at last. Through the scrub he could see a man at the plane. It was Red Morgan, and Red had a sub-machine gun at his shoulder.

There came another burst of fire. Red was searching the two men out, and Lew knew they were in a bad predicament. Around them the undergrowth was fairly heavy, but not heavy enough to hold out

machine-gun bullets. If Red lowered his sights a bit or caught a glimpse of them, the jig would be up.

Then a third burst came, and Lew watched the stream of lead mow a pattern immediately in front of his nose. This was dangerous in the extreme, and something had to be done.

But this time the firing was cut short. Lew risked it and looked up. Red had the gun in his hands, banging at the ammunition drum. Something seemed to have gone amiss with the mechanism and the gun was temporarily out of operation. It was Lew's chance—if he cared to take it. And he did.

He got up, grabbed the rifle and began to streak across the clearing. Red Morgan saw him coming and tried his own gun again. Lew's heart skipped. He could almost feel those bullets smashing through his body. The fear lent him greater speed. He ran on, yelled to Red to surrender; and when he came to within a dozen feet of the man he threw his rifle smash in his face.

It was a vicious blow, one that knocked Red Morgan out completely. But Lew didn't know this until he had the man pinned down, knees driven in his chest. It was Shorty himself who pointed out the obvious fact.

Lew nodded, and from his pocket pulled out a pair of handcuffs. With these on, he said, "Let's see to the rest of 'em."

Inside the cabin of the plane they found three more men. One, at the controls, was dead, his neck twisted grotesquely. The second man, unconscious from a blow in the temple but definitely alive, was Matt Sewell. The third, heavy built, with a thin mustache and treacherous black eyes, was nursing a broken leg.

"All accounted for," said Lew.

INSIDE the plane he saw something else—bales of fur piled in orderly array. But these would have to wait until the men had been attended to.

The dead man was red-headed. This Lew saw as he and Shorty laid him on the ground. There was also a striking resemblance between the man and Red Morgan.

"Your guess, Shorty," said Lew, "was all to the good."

Matt Sewell, still inert, they dragged to one side and as a precautionary measure roped his hands. Then Lew turned to the man with the broken leg.

The fellow looked up at him, coldly vicious. His hand strayed toward a hip-pocket.

"Try it!" snarled Lew. "I'll bust your jaw!"

He frisked the man and found a snub-nosed automatic on him.

"Pretty toy," he added. "I'd better keep it myself."

More tenderly than the thug deserved, Lew and Shorty set his leg for him. When it was done, Lew decided he needed a smoke. "And you and I, Shorty, will have one as well."

Lew lit the thug's cigarette and shoved it between his teeth. With his own burning, he summed things up.

"Seems like I've got to rearrange my lineup. Looks as though Sam Cox goes into the clear. Red and Matt Sewell prob-

ably organized this thing—both the hold-up and the murder of Art." He turned to the other man for confirmation. "Is that the way of it?"

But the fellow grinned crookedly. "I ain't talkin', see. What you want to know you can find out."

"O. K.," said Lew with a smile. "And I guess I will. I'll probably find out Red and Matt *were* back of this thing. I'll figure that Art saw this plane on his trip to Vermilion and really did mention it to one or both of them. And I think I will be able to prove that while Art bought the thermos bottle from Sam Cox, he got it filled at Mat Sewell's house."

Shorty broke in. "How?"

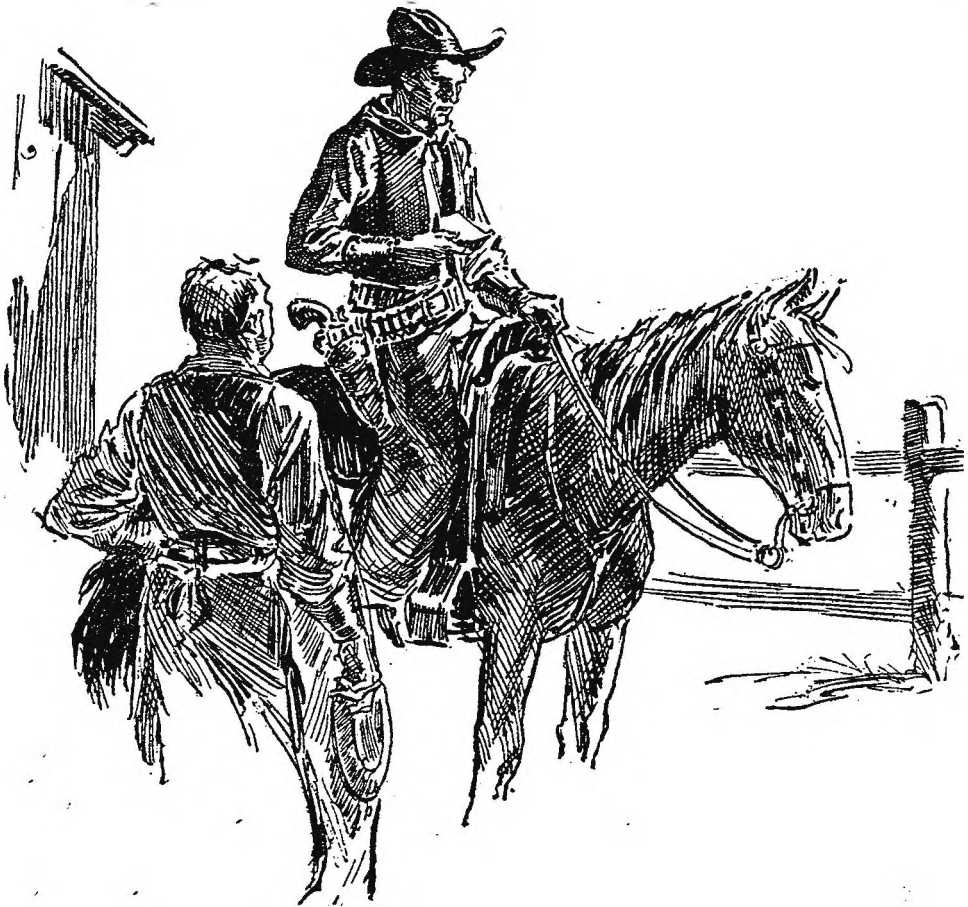
"Fingerprints. The prints of Joe Mason will probably dovetail nicely with Matt Sewell's, and the woman's prints will be those of the gal who keeps house for him."

Shorty smiled. "You're pretty smart, Lew. And there'll be another stripe in this for your good right arm. You catchum stolen fur, lots of murderers, everything else. Yeah; pretty smart."

But Lew only grinned. "Smart? After all the fool mistakes I made? Never mind talking about another stripe. If the Old Man knew the sort of a mug I was, he'd take down the two I've got!"



*And Hashknife's Partner Was a Fella Who Had Never Even
Been on a Horse!*



HASHKNIFE'S PARTNER

By W. C. TUTTLE

Whose Last Hashknife Story was "The Doublecrossers of Ghost Tree"

"I'M GOING to be a towboy, too." Hashknife Hartley's spurs rasped musically as he halted his six feet-three inches of whipcord frame and looked down into the dimly-lighted features of a little youngster, sitting on a rough bench in front of the stage station at Cottonwood. There was a woman seated beside the little boy, her features shaded by a wide hat.

"That's shore goin' to be fine, pardner," replied Hashknife, a chuckle in his voice. "Goin' to ride bad broncs, rope cows and go to town on Saturday night, I suppose."

"Sure," replied the boy stoutly.

"Good for you. Just remember to never tie yore rope. Take a dally, and yuh can always unhook from a bad actor. Save yore saddle, too. Know what I mean?"

"Sure," nodded the youngster.

"And," continued Hashknife soberly, "when yuh feel yourself partin' company with yore saddle, try and relax."

"Yeah—you bet," agreed the little boy.

"Well, good luck," said Hashknife. "Tell the foreman that yo're a friend of Hashknife Hartley, will yuh?"

"Sure."

Chuckling to himself, Hashknife turned and went across the street. It was nearly time for the stage to leave for El Conejo, down in the Crow River Valley, forty miles away. It was still too hot for daylight travel, and even at this time in the evening the thermometer stood at 100 degrees in the moonlight.

Hashknife met his partner, Sleepy Stevens, in front of the Maverick Saloon. Sleepy was shorter than Hashknife, but broad of shoulder, his legs slightly bowed from years spent in the saddle.

"I was talkin' to the stage clerk about Crow River Valley," said Hashknife. "There's several small spreads, but there's one big one, the JF. The owner was a feller named John Forrest, who lived in Chicago. He left everythin' to his son. The driver says it's a fine spread, with plenty good cows and fancy horses. He said that Forrest was busy raisin' fine stock, while his son was busy raisin' hell."

"Is that all yuh learned?" asked Sleepy.

"Yeah—why?"

"I got mine from a bartender," said Sleepy. "There was a killin' down there some time ago, but they caught the killer—and his name was Len Ellers."

"Len Ellers? So they got him at last. Ex-actor, gambler, horse thief, smuggler—and they got him for murder. Plenty smart, Sleepy—that Len Ellers."

"Yeah, I reckon he was. The last stage brought the word that the jury had found him guilty of murder in the first degree—and he's to be sentenced tomorrow."

"And that," said Hashknife, "will likely be the end of Ellers."

"Do we go down into Crow River Valley?" asked Sleepy.

"Oh, I dunno—I s'pose we might as well, Sleepy."

Sleepy shifted his position and let the lamplight fall on Hashknife's long, lean face.

"Didja find any mail here for us, Hashknife?" he asked.

"Oh, just a small letter. Nothin' of importance."

"From Bob Marsh, eh?"

"Aw, shucks, he wouldn't write us—not after the letter you wrote him."

"What did he say?"

"Aw, he just said that—who you talkin' about, Sleepy?"

"Bob Marsh, secretary of the Cattle-men's Association."

"Oh, him! Oh, yeah—well, who said I heard from him?"

"What did he say, Hashknife?"

"Well, he just said he was glad to know where to get in touch with us. He said he knew John Forrest very well, and was sorry he died. He said he was sorry you felt like yuh do about him."

THAT big liar! Bob Marsh has just one idea and that is to offer us up as a burnt offerin' on the altar of the Cattle Association. Ever since they went half-witted and elected him secretary, he's—"

"He's paid us well," interrupted Hashknife. "Even if we sometimes do find that things ain't exactly as he said they'd be—"

"Which makes him out a liar," declared Sleepy. "And in that letter he's askin' us to go to Crow River Valley, eh?"

"No-o-o, he didn't—not exactly. He said he knew John Forrest, and before Forrest died he wrote Bob several times. Some-thing' about losin' cattle."

"And he feels that Tom Forrest needs help, eh?"

"He don't even know Tom Forrest, but he said that Tom was sort of a wild-oat, and might welcome our help in gettin' things straightened out. He said he had

written Tom Forrest about us, and he also said that Tom Forrest had never been in Crow River Valley, and didn't know a damn thing about cows."

"Just a small letter," jeered Sleepy. "Nothin' of importance, eh?"

"No," replied Hashknife quietly. "Bob ain't much of a hand to write."

The night stage swung around in the dusty street, straightened out and rattled past them, disappearing in a great cloud of dust.

"Well," said Sleepy, "I reckon we better get somethin' to eat, before we tackle that long ride. No use spendin' another night and day in Cottonwood."

"Well, we don't *have* to go down there, Sleepy. After all, we're our own boss. I'm not crazy to go down there. Prob'ly a gone-to-seed cowtown, hotter than the hubs of hell—and too quiet for anythin'."

"Well, we can talk it over, while we're eatin'," said Sleepy.

During the meal Hashknife told Sleepy about the little boy, who was going to be a cowboy.

"Was the woman pretty?" asked Sleepy.

"I couldn't see her face," replied Hashknife. "The lighted window was behind her, and she had on a wide hat. That kid was as cute's a bug's ear."

"Did they go out on the stage?"

"I dunno. The stage driver was talkin' to 'em before I came out. Well, what do yuh say about Crow River Valley?"

"I wish Bob Marsh hadn't mentioned it."

"He did—casually, Sleepy."

"Casually, eh? Then it's worse than I thought. But I suppose we'll go. Bob Marsh would speak casually of the Custer Massacree—and you know what happened to Custer."

"I'd call it the Custer Battle, Sleepy. If they'd wiped out the Injuns, it would always be known as a battle."

"What's that got to do with Crow River Valley?"

"You started the war—I didn't," grinned

Hashknife, as he leaned back to allow the waitress to place the food in front of him.

AFTER a hearty meal they went to the feed corral, where they paid their bill and saddled their horses. As they led the animals outside, they saw the stage go past, the four horses at a fast trot, while behind them came a man on horseback. The feed corral man said:

"That's funny—bringin' the stage back here."

The stage drew up at the stage station where a crowd quickly gathered. Hashknife and Sleepy rode over there and saw them taking a body out of the stage.

"Me and Ed found the stage cramped around in the road," the rider was saying, "the driver down in the dust, loaded with lead; so we chucked him into the stage and brought it back here."

The clerk at the stage depot said, "The lock-box is gone, too, but I don't think there was much of anythin' in it."

"No passengers tonight, Frank?" asked one of the crowd.

"Not that I know about," replied the clerk.

Hashknife dismounted, handed his reins to Sleepy and went into the depot. The excited clerk met him, and Hashknife said:

"Wasn't there a woman and kid on that stage?"

"A woman and kid? I dunno. I don't think so."

"I seen a woman and little boy, sittin' outside there just a few minutes before the stage was due to pull out."

"Yuh did? Huh! I never noticed."

"Don't yuh sell tickets on yore stage?"

"Nope. Folks pay cash to the driver—mostly. Oh, that's right, you were in here, askin' about Crow River Valley."

"And," said Hashknife, "I looked through the window over there and the driver was talkin' to the woman."

"Uh-huh. But I didn't notice her. Maybe it was somebody down here to see him. 'Course, they could have got on the stage

and I didn't see 'em. But if they did—where are they?"

"I guess maybe they didn't," said Hashknife. "Was the driver married?"



"No, he wasn't—and that's lucky, 'cause he's as dead as a door-knob."

Hashknife nodded and went outside, where he inquired more about the woman and youngster. One man said:

"Say, I seen a woman and a kid comin' from toward the depot this evenin'. It wasn't long after a train came in from the east. But I didn't pay any attention. The woman had a big valise."

The baggage was still strapped on the stage, but there was no large valise. Hashknife examined the rope lashing, scratched his chin thoughtfully and went back to his horse, where he mounted.

"Find out anythin'?" queried Sleepy.

"Not much. Nobody seems to know what became of the woman and kid, except that one man thinks he saw them comin' from the depot this evenin', and the woman was luggin' a big valise. That valise ain't on the stage, but there's one thing that don't look right."

"What's that?" asked Sleepy curiously.

"The rope lashin' on the baggage is tied off in a hard-knot."

"That's nothin'," laughed Sleepy. "Maybe the driver was a hard-knot man."

"Mebbe," agreed Hashknife. "We'll hope he was."

THEY were only about a mile out of Cottonwood, when a galloping rider caught up with them.

"A feller at the feed corral said you was headin' for El Conejo," the man explained, "so I high-tailed it out to join yuh. I'm Benson, deputy sheriff—Skinny Benson—and I don't like long rides alone."

"Glad to have yuh along, Benson," said Hashknife pleasantly. "We're strangers in this part of the country."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'm not. Borne and raised around here. Popular choice for sheriff three, four years ago—but a lot of folks didn't bother to vote."

"The county seat is at El Conejo, ain't it?" asked Hashknife.

"That's right. Why—I dunno. Cottonwood's the better town. I came up last night, tryin' to serve some papers in a civil suit."

"Duke LeRoy, foreman of the JF spread, wanted an attachment on two horses from a feller named Weldon, who was supposed to be in Cottonwood. Weldon's been gone almost a year. If I was sheriff, I'd shore find out somethin' before I sent my deputy all that distance. But that's like Pecos Miller—leaps before he looks—the danged idjit."

"Pecos Miller is the sheriff, eh?" said Sleepy.

"Uh-huh. Good 'n, too, if yuh believe *him*."

"I heard," remarked Hashknife, "that you've got a prisoner down in yore jail—headin' for a rope and plenty foot-room."

"That's right. Feller named Len Ellers. Killed Hank Drew in a poker game. I reckon he'll hang. Awful nice feller, too. Re-fined—brushes his teeth."

"No-o-o-o!" exclaimed Sleepy.

"Well, he shore does—I seen him at it."

"Looks like a waste of time," said Sleepy. "Tryin' to save his teeth, when the law's goin' to kill off the rest of him."

"That's the way I look at it," agreed the deputy heartily. "They're bettin' on whether he gets the rope or a life sentence, and then they're bettin' that if he gets a life sentence, he won't live to serve it."

"Hank Drew was well liked, eh?" said Hashknife.

"Not while he was alive. After a man's dead, some folks shore dig up a lot of virtues to pin onto him."

"How far is El Conejo from the Border?" asked Hashknife.

"Oh, 'bout eight, nine miles. Two miles below the Border to Agua Rojo. It ain't much of a town, this Agua Rojo, but she's right smart of a hangout for revolutionists and *contrabandista*, not to mention plain and fancy horse-thieves, et cettery."

"I heard that the JF spread was a good one," remarked Hashknife.

"Yeah, that's right," agreed the deputy. "Best in Crow River Valley. Old Man Forrest cultivated good horses and cows, and they say he's got a rich gold mine on there. Yuh hear lots of things, yuh know. Me, I don't believe half what I hear—even if I tell it myself. Old Man Forrest died back in Chicago quite a while ago. Just a while ago they stopped lawin' over the will, and the ranch went to Tom Forrest, the son. No good hombre, they tell me."

"Is Tom Forrest in the valley?" asked Hashknife.

"Just about. I heard that Duke LeRoy came in to take him out to the ranch, last night, I think. I ain't never seen the young man.

"Mack Riggs, the lawyer, has been kinda runnin' things, until the feller gets here. Mack handled all the lawin' for the JF spread. I don't like him, but I don't reckon that keeps him awake nights."

"Yuh never can tell about mental telepathy," remarked Sleepy.

"Well, I ain't never heard of that," said the deputy, "but that's nothin', 'cause ever little while I run onto somethin' I never heard about. You two ain't comin' down here to look for jobs, are yuh?"

"Meanin' that there ain't any?" queried Sleepy.

"There ain't been a loose job in Crow River Valley since Old Settin' Bull started to set down. 'Course, with a new owner

on the JF, yuh can't tell. He might fire Duke LeRoy and all the crew."

"Is Duke LeRoy a good man?" asked Sleepy.

"Physically—yeah. Mentally and morally—well, I'd kinda hesitate. They say he's a heller with the Mexican gals down at Agua Rojo. Me, I dunno much about that, 'cause Agua Rojo is no place for an Arizona officer to go snoopin'."

"Well," said Hashknife, "we'll take a look at El Conejo, anyway."

IT WAS about four o'clock in the morning, when they rode down the main street of El Conejo and found a crowd of men in front of the sheriff's office, several of them carrying lighted lanterns. Except for the windows of the Cactus Patch Saloon, it was the only lighted spot in the town.

"Lovely dove, what's happened?" exclaimed Skinny Benson, the deputy. "Gosh, I wonder if they've lynched Len Ellers!"

They spurred their tired horses down to the jail. One man lifted a lantern and identified Skinny Benson, who said:

"What's goin' on around here?"

"Somebody shot Ellers through the bars of his winder," replied the man. "Hit him in the head with both barrels of a shotgun. The sheriff and coroner are in there now. The judge sentenced Ellers to a life imprisonment, and somebody likely thought it wasn't enough—so they added a few ounces of shot."

They dismounted quickly and the deputy piloted them into the office. Pecos Miller, the sheriff, and Doctor Jim Adams, the coroner, were just coming from the cell. They looked sharply at Hashknife and Sleepy. The sheriff said:

"Well, they got him, Skinny. Blowed his head almost off, too. I was afraid of somethin' like that, when the judge sentenced him to life."

"Was you here, Pecos?" asked the deputy.

"Hell, no! I was home and in bed.

Somebody heard the shot fired, and figured it was around here. They couldn't get any answer from Ellers through his window; so they came down and got me. It ain't any wonder he didn't answer."

The deputy turned to Hashknife. "Want to take a look at him?" he asked.

"Sure," replied Hashknife, and before the sheriff or coroner could voice any objection, the three men went quickly down the corridor. The deputy picked up a lighted lantern just outside the cell door, and they entered.

Evidently the man had not been moved. He was on his back near the middle of the small cell. The body was clad in a gray suit, wrinkled badly, a soft, white silk shirt, and slippers. It was the same suit he had worn all during the trial. There were a few shot-marks on the wall opposite the window, but practically all the lead had smashed into the man's head and face at very close range, obliterating every feature.

Skinny Benson had no desire to examine the body closely, but Hashknife got down on one knee and looked the man over carefully.

"Somebody," remarked the deputy, "must have called him to the window, and socked him with the whole load."

Hashknife nodded slowly, his gray eyes thoughtful in the lantern-light.

"Kinda looks like he had been double-crossed," he said.

"How do yuh figure that?" asked the deputy.

"Look what time it is," replied Hashknife. "This man was *dressed*."

"Yeah, I—by gosh, that's right! Expectin' to go somewhere, eh?"

"Kinda shapes up thataway," replied Hashknife, as he got to his feet. The sheriff came back to the cell doorway.

"We're goin' to have the boys move the body down to Doc's place," he said.

Hashknife and Sleepy stabled their horses, took their war-sacks and went to the El Conejo Hotel, where a sleepy-eyed man showed them to a room.

"So they downed that feller, eh?" he said. "All that noise waked me up. Well, I don't reckon that the judge's sentence was heavy enough to suit some folks."

"Hank Drew was well liked, eh?" queried Hashknife for the second time that night.

"Liked? No, I don't reckon so. But we don't like murderers down here."

"Particular, eh?" queried Sleepy.

"Well, yeah, we're kinda finicky about some things, Mister. Well, here's yore room. If there ain't no water in that pitcher yuh can go down the back steps and git some at the pump. Most folks use the wash-bench, outside the kitchen door. If yuh hanker for a bath yuh can git one at Misery Miller's barber shop, down the street a ways. Most everyone does—at times. 'Course, yuh can't git one at this time o' night—but who the hell wants one at this time o' night? You jist rode in with Skinny Benson, didn't yuh? I thought I seen yuh. I was down at the jail. Well, I hope yuh rest well. *Adios, amigos*. I should have said '*Bucnos noches, amigos*,' but there ain't much night left. I forgot to tell yuh, yuh might have to prime the pump. Well, so long."

"Just like a danged phonograph record," declared Sleepy, after the man had clumped down the hallway. "How he hates to talk!"

HASHKNIFE chuckled and began drawing off his boots. "I'd shore like to see that bathtub in Misery Miller's barber shop," he said, "but I reckon we'll have to wait until tomorrow—or rather, daylight today."

"Yeah!" muttered Sleepy, yawning widely. "Man, they shore messed up poor Len Ellers, Hashknife."

"Didn't they! I wonder who blasted him."

"That," replied Sleepy, "isn't worth findin' out. He deserved hangin' — so what's the difference?"

"Mebbe yo're right," nodded Hashknife soberly. "Yeah, yuh may be right. But

why was he dressed—at that time in the mornin'? Mebbe that's how they got him to the bars. Somebody was pretendin' to help him escape—mebbe. They got him up to the bars, expectin' a saw—mebbe—and look what he got! It had to be somethin' like that, Sleepy. The shooter must have stood on a box—or somethin'. That window is too high for him to shoot from the ground. He had to have the confidence of his victim. Yeah, it looks like they double-crossed the man."

Sleepy looked curiously at his tall, lean-faced partner.

"You ain't diggin' in this deal, are yuh?" he asked. "Len Ellers got what was comin' to him. What do we care *how* he got it?"

Hashknife stared thoughtfully at one of his boots, as though he had not heard what Sleepy said. Suddenly he sat up, grinned at Sleepy and said:

"That's right—sure. Nothin' to dig into. Well, let's hit the hay—it's almost daylight—and we don't do much sleepin' after the sun hits this place."

Sleepy smiled wryly, as he stretched out on one side of the bed.

"Nothin' to dig into," he muttered. "I don't like the way yuh said that. When yuh talked about it, yuh used too many 'mebbes.' Mebbe this and mebbe that. I can read you like a book, Tall Feller."

"Too much ridin' in the moonlight—mebbe," said Hashknife soberly. "You don't feel bad in any one place, do yuh, Sleepy?"

"C'mon to bed—that sun is almost due."

They were a queer pair, these wandering cowboys, whom Sleepy had dubbed, "Cowpunchers of Disaster." Always going somewhere, but never finding a permanent destination; always wondering what might be on the other side of the hill, and never satisfied, until they had found out—and saw another hill ahead.

Hashknife, christened Henry, came from the Milk River range of Montana. Son of a range minister, born with a wanderlust,

he drifted into the Southwest, finally reaching the ranch which gave him his nickname. Here he met Sleepy Stevens, who could barely remember that his correct name was David. Sleepy was also of the race which won't stay still, having wandered down from the ranges of Idaho; and from the day he and Hashknife started out together, they had never been apart, except for a day at a time. Money meant nothing to them, except for necessities. They would only work long enough to get a few dollars, when the lure of a distant hill would cause them to pack up their war-bags and wander on.

To the keen minded Hashknife any sort of a mystery was a challenge. When range detectives failed, Hashknife succeeded, until his services were in demand by the Cattle Associations and private interests. But Hashknife did not want to work for money. The life they led had made them fatalists. Death had struck at them so many times—and missed—that they knew they would not die until their number was up.

Hot lead had grazed them from beside the trails. It had smashed through windows at them at night, and time after time they had backed out of saloon or gambling palace, guns hot in their hands, the crashing of .45s in their ears—unhurt. They pretended to each other that they were looking for a peaceful place to buy a ranch and settle down; but they both knew that they would keep going as long as they could see a strange hill ahead, or a mystery to be solved. Sleepy did not analyze anything. He was content to let Hashknife unravel the mystery, while he trailed behind, his gun handy, waiting for the end of the trail. He feigned a dislike for dangerous jobs, and complained often, but down in his heart he was as eager as Hashknife.

PECOS MILLER, the sheriff, had left early in the morning for Cottonwood to investigate the stage holdup and the killing of the driver. Skinny Benson, the

deputy, was eating breakfast in the hotel dining room, when Hashknife and Sleepy came down.

"Quite a night," he observed, as they sat down with him. "Most excitement we've had in a dog's age. Did you sleep good?"

"What there was of it," replied Sleepy. "How hot does it get here?"

"What's the hottest place you've ever been in?" countered the deputy.

"Death Valley in July."

"Shucks, that place is frigid beside Crow River Valley."

"Is there a Crow River?" asked Hashknife, stretching his long legs under the oilcloth covered table.

"After a cloud-burst. I've seen it three times in my life. If yuh like aigs for breakfast, I'd advise yuh to take the hot-cakes."

"That's right," grinned the slatternly waitress. "The last case hatched before we served half of 'em. Cutest little things you ever seen."

"Bring us the hot-cakes," said Hashknife.

AFTER breakfast they went down to the jail with Skinny Benson, and Hashknife looked over the murder cell again. Skinny watched him curiously, as he studied the bars and sill of the barred window, and squatted on his heels to examine the floor closely.

"Readin' sign, eh?" he remarked. "I heard of it bein' done. Me, I can jist about tell the difference between a boot-track and a horse-track in the mud. A cow-track don't puzzle me so awful much either. But I shore don't go in for pickin' up threads off a floor."

Sleepy grinned slowly, as Hashknife straightened up.

"Discover anythin'?" he asked.

"The man," replied Hashknife soberly, "was shot in the head with a shotgun."

"My Gawd!" breathed Skinny Benson. "I don't see how he does it!"

"It's like teachin' a cow how to fly," said Sleepy. "It takes patience."



They went out and examined the window from the outside. The bottom of the window was over six feet from the ground level, making it necessary for the killer to have stood on something. Hashknife examined the ground carefully, before they went back to the street, where they met Mack Riggs, the lawyer, who was coming down to the sheriff's office.

The lawyer was tall and gaunt, with a bony face, pouched eyes. He wore rusty-black, a collarless shirt, and a broad-brimmed black hat.

"Oh, yes; Hartley and Stevens," he said, when Skinny introduced them. "Marsh wrote me about you gentlemen. Said you might come down here. I understand you were in Cottonwood last night, when they brought the stage-driver back."

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Hashknife. "And we got here just after they found your client had been killed."

"A dastardly thing, too," declared Riggs hotly. "No doubt Ellers was guilty, but the sentence of the court was adequate. I detest people who take the law into their own hands. Did Pecos go to Cottonwood, Skinny?"

"Yeah, he left early. A lot of good it'll do for him to go up there, too."

"This country," said the lawyer, "needs a grand clean-up."

"We were thinkin' of strikin' the JF outfit for a job," said Hashknife.

"Well, I don't know," said the lawyer. "Tom Forrest will probably be in today from the ranch. I haven't any idea what

changes he will make. He is a new man in this country. I'll ask him about it."

"That's fine," said Sleepy, but added, "If he don't happen to have any jobs open, it'll suit me just as well. If the hubs of hell are any hotter than this valley, I dunno how they keep on operatin.' I never did like to herd roast beef."

"We're used to it," laughed the lawyer. "There's worse places than Crow River Valley, my friend."

"I've heard preachers speak of 'em," said Sleepy soberly, "and they shore belittled the place and population."

"I can't talk much about climate," said Skinny Benson, "'cause I don't believe I've ever been less'n ninety in the shade."

AFTER the lawyer left them, Hashknife suggested going down to the doctor's place and looking at the corpse in daylight.

"I'll go with yuh, but I won't look," said Skinny Benson. "When they've got their heads blowed off, I kinda lose all interest."

Old Doctor Adams greeted them very warmly, and was perfectly willing to let Hashknife examine the remains of Len Ellers.

He watched curiously while the tall, gray-eyed cowboy scrutinized the body. Hashknife seemed particularly interested in examining the victim's coat, especially under the arms.

"By any chance," asked the doctor, "are you a detective?"

"Not by any chance," smiled Hashknife. "I'm just a curious person, Doc."

"I realized that," said the doctor dryly.

"I wonder what became of Len Ellers' ring," said Hashknife.

"Ring?" queried the doctor. "He had no ring—as far as I know."

"Notice the light colored band on his third finger of his left hand, Doc? A ring usually makes that mark, don't it?"

"Why, I hadn't noticed," muttered the doctor, looking closely. "Hm-m-m. It does appear of a lighter color."

"Slip yore own ring loose and look at the skin, Doc."

"Well, I—you are right, sir. It is decidedly lighter."

"What kind of a ring did he wear, Skinny?" asked Sleepy.

"Well, yuh can search me," declared the deputy. "I don't remember anythin' about it. Mebbe he wore one—I dunno. Pecos Miller might remember."

"Thanks a lot, Doc," said Hashknife. "Sorry to trouble yuh."

"It has been a pleasure, sir," replied the old doctor. "Glad to have you come down any time."

"I suppose I shall have to go to Cottonwood to conduct an inquest, and hurry back to conduct one here. Merely a matter of law, of course. Well, good day, gentlemen."

They met Mack Riggs, the lawyer, who was on his way down to see the doctor. Skinny Benson asked the lawyer if he knew anything about Len Ellers' ring, but the lawyer did not remember anything about him having a ring. However, the lawyer asked the doctor about it.

"Hartley, the tall cowboy, mentioned it to me," said the doctor. "He seems a very observant person. In fact, he spent some time in examining the body."

"What for?" asked the lawyer curiously.

"I'm sure I do not know, Riggs. Do you know anything about Hartley?"

"What do you mean—anything, Doc?"

"Oh, I just wondered, because he seemed rather interested in the remains of Len Ellers. That isn't exactly a cowboy trait, you know."

"No, it isn't," agreed Riggs seriously. "I got a letter from Tom Marsh, secretary of the Cattle Association—hm-m-m-m-m. Well, I'm sure it was merely a—"

Mack Riggs had a habit of breaking his sentences, when thinking swiftly.

"No, I know nothing about him, Doc," he said finally. "When do we have the inquest?"

"I am waiting until the sheriff gets back."

We may have to hold one in Cottonwood and one here. Hot, isn't it?"

"Oh, about a hundred and fifteen in the shade, Doc. I'll see you later."

IT WAS late in the afternoon, when Tom Forrest, the new owner of the JF, Duke LeRoy, the good looking foreman, and one of the cowboys came to town. Sleepy was in the office with Skinny Benson, and Hashknife was over in the Cactus Patch Saloon, leaning on the bar and talking with "Topaz" Blair, the owner and boss gambler. Blair was a medium height person, addicted to topaz jewelry, fine clothes and perfume. They were discussing the shooting of Len Ellers, when the three men from the JF spread dismounted in front of the saloon and came inside.

As they came toward the bar Blair called a greeting to Duke LeRoy. But the third man in the party stopped short, staring toward the bar, his back to the light. Then he whirled and went swiftly toward the doorway. Duke LeRoy turned his head, also stopping.

Sleepy and the deputy were crossing the street, but halted as the man from the saloon fairly leaped into his saddle. He whirled his horse around, and the light glinted on the gun in his right hand. The next moment he fired point-blank at Sleepy Stevens. The frightened horse whirled around, but the man shoved the gun past his own body and fired again.

Skinny Benson had sprung aside, reaching for his gun, but Sleepy's .45 jumped twice from the heavy recoils, and the man plunged out of his saddle, crashing down on the edge of the saloon porch, while the horse whirled and went buck-jumping across the street.

Hashknife led the rush from the saloon. Someone ran for the doctor, and people came hurrying from every direction.

"Why, the son of a gun, tried to kill us!" panted Skinny Benson. "Must have gone crazy. Shot twice, before Sleepy got

him. Man, I couldn't even draw, before he was goin' off that saddle, his feet wavin' like a couple of flags."

"Well, he's plenty dead now," said Hashknife, after a quick examination.

"What the hell got into him?" wondered Duke LeRoy. "He was all right, until we got into the saloon. He whirled and—" Duke LeRoy shoved back his hat and then rubbed his forehead, looking around as though seeking an answer to the riddle.

"His name's Dell Morgan," said Skinny, as though making a disclosure.

Duke LeRoy nodded slowly. "Been with us over a year."

The doctor came and his examination corroborated Hashknife's statement.

"They say they run in threes," he remarked. "The stage driver, Len Ellers and this one. I hope this is the last one. I—I suppose we may as well move him down to my place. Rather cramped for room, but—will someone find a blanket, please? The sun is very hot today."

"Maybe that was it—the sun," suggested Tom Forrest. Hashknife looked keenly at the new owner of the JF. Tom Forrest was of medium height and weight, rather handsome, but showing decided marks of dissipation. He was wearing a good quality suit of brown, with sombrero and high-heel boots.

"Yeah, it could be a touch of the sun," said Topaz Blair.

AFTER they took the body away Hashknife and Sleepy went over to the shaded porch of the hotel.

"That was close," remarked Hashknife quietly. "His back was to the light and I didn't recognize him, but I guess he recognized me. Then when he saw you, he thought he was trapped, Sleepy."

"I didn't recognize him either, until he was down," said Sleepy. "Delbert Hogue, goin' by the name of Morgan. He must still be dodgin' that murder charge in Wyomin'."

"He was," reminded Hashknife. "Lost

his head and started shootin'. It's a wonder he didn't gun down both of us, before we realized who he was."

"Could have—easy. But I reckon our luck still holds, pardner."

Tom Forrest and Duke LeRoy had joined Mack Riggs, the lawyer, and the three of them walked up to Riggs' office.

"Might be an openin' at the JF," said Sleepy.

"I prefer to work in a cooler climate," replied Hashknife. "Anyway, it's a good alibi for Hogue's actions. As long as they don't know the truth, it will be better for us."

The sheriff came home late that night, got Doctor Adams and went back to Cottonwood for an inquest. When that was finished, there would be two more to hold in El Conejo. Mack Riggs came to Hashknife and Sleepy in the hotel, and told them that there was no chance for jobs at the JF. Tom Forrest had decided to go along with his former outfit, minus one man.

There was little comment over the shooting of the man they had known as Dell Morgan. Everyone seemed to take it for granted that the man had suddenly gone insane and tried to kill Sleepy and the deputy sheriff. Every action pointed to such a thing; so Hashknife and Sleepy accepted their theory, and let it go at that.

Skinny Benson said, "The shootin' was justified, and everybody knows it, but I'd keep an eye on Clay West. He was Morgan's bunkie out at the JF, and if he ain't a bad boy, I've never seen one. He ain't had no trouble that I know about, but he don't pack a gun in a short holster, and tie it down for looks. And he's awful narrer between the eyes and his ears ain't no bigger'n a good-sized walnut."

THINGS were uneventful around El Conejo, until the sheriff and coroner finished at Cottonwood and came back to hold a double inquest in El Conejo. The inquest over the body of Len Ellers was

merely a matter of form, as there were no witnesses. Not so in the matter of Dell Morgan. They put Clay West, Morgan's bunkie, on the stand, and he testified that Morgan was normal when he left the JF Ranch. West was all that Skinny Benson had said, and he rarely took his eyes off Hashknife and Sleepy.

Tom Forrest did not come to the inquest. Duke LeRoy testified that he did not notice anything peculiar about Morgan, until the cowboy deliberately left him and Forrest in the Cactus Patch Saloon, turned and went outside, where he mounted and shot at Sleepy and Skinny. Of course, Sleepy and Skinny testified to what they knew; and Doctor Adams said that, in his opinion, Morgan was temporarily insane when he fired the shots.

Sleepy was exonerated by the coroner's jury, and the inquest was closed. But evidently it was not to end peaceably. Clay West drank heavily and alone. Finally he took his horse from the hitch-rack, left it in front of the Cactus Patch Saloon, reins dragging, and came back in for another drink. Hashknife had been watching Clay West closely, and had noted that West placed his horse for a quick getaway, before coming back into the saloon.

Hashknife was at the bar, facing the room, one heel hooked over the rail, his elbows on the counter. There were several men at the bar beyond him. Sleepy was watching the play at a roulette wheel, but keeping an eye on West who came back into the saloon, staggering just a little. But he came on toward the bar, apparently paying no attention to Hashknife, as if intending to go past him. But he swayed a little, his left foot coming down squarely on Hashknife's instep. It was a very painful thing, but Hashknife's left hand flashed out, his fingers looping into West's neckerchief. With a jerk of his arm, he whirled West's back against the bar, with force enough to knock over several drinks.

"Why don'tcha rattle before yuh strike?" rasped Hashknife.

West, dazed and uncertain, reached for his gun, but Hashknife was twisting swiftly, and his right fist thudded under West's chin, before the turkey-necked cowboy could lift the gun from its holster.

West's head snapped back, and he crashed down on the bar rail, from where he bounced onto the floor, knocked cold.

"Well," remarked Sleepy, "the bad-man took a holiday!"

Nothing more was said for the moment, but all eyes were on Hashknife, who seemed unconcerned and entirely relaxed. He lifted his right foot and looked at the scraped instep on his boot.

"What did he do?" asked Duke LeRoy

Hashknife looked at LeRoy and replied quietly, "It wasn't what he did, it was the way he did it. He was lookin' for real trouble, LeRoy. He staked his horse out there, fixin' for a getaway. Prob'ly thinks he's a fast gunman, and he's achin' over the fact that his bunkie was killed by my pardner."

"Did he step on yuh on purpose, Hashknife?" asked Skinny Benson.

"Keep yore bill out of this," growled the sheriff, as he came over and looked at the fallen West. Then he looked at Hashknife and said, "Yuh must have hit him hard—he's still out."

"His kind don't need to be hit hard," replied Hashknife.

Clay West groaned and tried to sit up. Hashknife plucked the gun from West's holster and tossed it to the sheriff.

"Yuh never can tell which way a dill pickle is liable to squirt," he said.

WEST got to his feet, clinging to the bar with both hands, until he got his balance, when he used one hand to explore his chin. Hashknife watched him curiously as understanding gradually returned. He felt his empty holster, decided he did not want a gun, anyway, and asked the bartender for a drink. His voice was hoarse and indicated a painful jaw.

"It's all right, Pecos," remarked Skinny,

"but I still retain the right to speak and ask questions; and there ain't nobody got a right to tell me to keep my bill out of things."

The sheriff glared at Skinny, seemed about to speak, but changed his mind.

"If you've had enough to drink, we'll be goin' back, Clay," said LeRoy.

Clay West nodded painfully and followed LeRoy outside, not even bothering to get his gun from the sheriff.

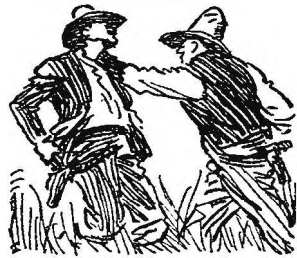
"It seems funny," remarked the sheriff, looking at Hashknife, "but we never had any trouble around here until the last couple days. A killin' in Cottonwood, two killin's here, and now—this."

Hashknife looked down at his scraped instep, flexed his toes and looked at the sheriff.

"Are you a friend of Clay West?" he asked curiously.

"No, I—why do yuh ask that, Hartley?"

"Well, yuh seem to be kinda complainin' beause I slapped him down."



Pecos Miller flushed slightly and seemed confused for the moment, but said, "Well, it—it could have been an accident, yuh know. He was drinkin'."

"Suppose," suggested Hashknife coldly, "that we figure it *wasn't* any accident—and let it go as it lays, Miller."

"Sure," agreed the sheriff. "Sure, that's all right."

"Clay West just picked the wrong rooster," said Skinny Benson, "and I'll bet he won't eat corn off the cob for a long time."

Hashknife and Sleepy went back to the hotel, where Skinny Benson joined them a little later.

"Unless all signs fail," said Skinny, "I'm liable to trade my hundred-dollar job as a deputy for a chance to hunt a forty-a-month job punchin' cows. Pecos Miller don't like the way I spoke to him, when he told me to keep my bill out of things. Me and him had a few words at the office."

"All this trouble is likely puttin' him on edge," said Sleepy.

"It shore is," agreed Skinny. "He's ready to snap at anythin'."

"Did you know Jim Forrest?" asked Hashknife.

"Oh, yeah, I know him pretty good. He was all right for a city man."

"Tom Forrest never came here, while his father was alive, eh?"

"No, he didn't. This is the first time he ever was here. I reckon it's the first time he ever was on a ranch. Don't know a cow from a horse, they tell me."

"Only child, I suppose," remarked Hashknife.

"No, there was a boy and a girl," said Skinny. "I understand that she up and married a feller that her father didn't like a-tall. I heard the readin' of the will, and all she got was one dollar. I 'member her name in the will—it was Alice Benton. That's all it said—one dollar to my daughter Alice Benton. I dunno if she ever got it or not."

"Riggs handled all that, eh?" queried Hashknife.

"Yeah. I s'pose he sent her that dollar—I dunno."

"What about this village of Agua Rojo, Skimpy?" asked Hashknife.

"Aw, that ain't much of a place. One good sized cantina and a bunch of adobes. They tell me that Slim Kelly moved in a while ago and is helpin' Tony Rodriguez handle the amusements of Agua Rojo."

"Who is Slim Kelly?" asked Sleepy.

"Slim Kelly," replied Skinny, "is the leadin' suspect along this part of the Border."

"Suspected of what?"

"Everythin'. Slim weighs close to three

hundred on the hoof, half Mexican, half Irish, and for a feller of his size he can shore squeeze through a mighty small hole. The Border Patrol watch him like a hawk."

"What about Tony Rodriguez?"

"Tony is a half-pint-sized part Mexican, part Yaqui Indian and part rattlesnake; and I reckon the rattlesnake predominates. He wears fine clothes, and carries a throw-in-knife in every seam. They're a fine pair, Slim and Tony. I don't want anythin' to do with either of them."

"I have a feelin' that I'd like to meet those two," said Hashknife.

"If yuh do—keep yore guns out of sight," advised Skinny. "They've got an old jail down there, with walls three feet thick. They tell me that Slim Kelly is *jefe policia* and *magistrado*. If yuh ask me, it's a hell of a good place for an *Americano* to keep out of."

"Anyway," remarked Sleepy, "we ain't got any business down there."

"I'm just wonderin'," said Hashknife thoughtfully. Sleepy sighed and looked at Skinny.

"We'll prob'ly go down there," he said dryly.

A GUA ROJO was just about as Skinny Benson had described it. Hashknife and Sleepy, with their guns hidden inside the waistband of their pants, tied their horses in front of the Pasatiempo Cantina early in the evening, and entered the big two-story adobe.

There were few people there, and none of the gambling games were operating. No one seemed to pay any attention to the two strange cowboys.

There was a balcony around one side and both ends of the largest room, and a stairway led up from about the center of the side. Opposite this stairway was the long bar, reaching nearly the full length of the room. There was nothing ornate about the place. The walls were of plaster on adobe, discolored, cracked and chipped. A few bull-fight posters decorated the

walls, and a faded Mexican flag hung upside down at one end of the room.

Hashknife and Sleepy had a drink, wandered around the room, and finally walked back to the front of the house, where Hashknife was nearly impaled on a bayonet as he stepped outside. Here were four nondescript, half-soldier, half-police, rifles pointed at the midribs of the two cowboys.

"You are a preesoner," declared the one with the longest mustache.

"Lovely dove!" gasped Sleepy. "Look at the scarecrows, Hashknife."

Hold off the hands," ordered one of them, and proceeded to find Hashknife's Colt. Then he removed one from Sleepy's person.

Then they prodded their bayonets at Hashknife and Sleepy and forced them to walk about a block down the street, where one of them opened the door of an adobe house, and motioned them inside. Slim Kelly was sitting at a battered desk, a bottle of tequila at his elbow, his shirt hanging over the back of his chair.

Kelly would easily weigh three hundred pounds, and was about six feet four inches in height. He had an Irish nose, a Mexican mustache, and the biggest face either of the cowboys had ever seen. He tugged at his mustache and questioned his men. One of them placed the two six-shooters on the desk.

"What you doin' down here?" growled Kelly. "Packin' guns! Who the hell do you think you are? What's your name? Where you from?"

"Not guilty," replied Hashknife soberly.

"Oh!" grunted Kelly, scratching his right cheek. "Like hell!"

"We was behavin' ourselves," explained Sleepy. "Why don't yuh teach yore policemen better manners? Pokin' American citizens with a bayonet. We'll have the American soldiers down here and—"

"Bull!" snorted Kelly.

"Yeah—more or less," agreed Sleepy.

Kelly took a drink from his bottle.

"Charged with packin' concealed weapons, eh?" he grunted.

"Sure," agreed the mustached policeman.

"I theenk they are *mucho malo hombres*."

"How much money yuh got?" asked Kelly.

"I'll buy yuh a drink," offered Sleepy quickly.

"Search them," ordered Kelly.

"But," protested Sleepy, "we're American citizens."

"In Mexico," reminded Kelly.

THE searchers placed two pocket-knives, several extra revolver cartridges and two dollars in money on the desk-top.

Kelly snorted disgustedly. "Put 'em in the jail," he ordered. "One man go on guard."

"For how long?" queried Hashknife.

"What difference does that make?" countered Kelly, uncorking his bottle again. "Maybe I'll let you out some day—American citizens!"

They were prodded outside and taken to an adobe jail, which had walls three feet thick, barred windows so small that nothing much larger than a humming-bird could pass through, and an oak door that was at least six-inches thick. The floor was of adobe, hard as concrete, and there was not a stick of furniture nor a blanket in the place.

"Well," remarked Sleepy, as he peered at the stars through the tiny window, "you wanted to meet Mr. Kelly. I hope you're satisfied, Hashknife."

"He's rather a quaint character," said Hashknife.

"To hell with his character—I want out of here."

"So do I, but I don't see how it is going to be done. Those windows are impossible, and—well, you saw the thickness of that door. I wish we had something to sit on, except on the floor. There's one thing—we're not a bit cramped for space."

"I've still got my tobacco and papers,"

said Sleepy, turning away from his contemplation of the stars. "We might burn down that door."

"Yeah, we might—in six, eight months. If we only had a—sh-h-h-h!"

There were voices outside, speaking in Mexican, rather loud, at first, but diminishing in volume to ordinary conversation. Then came a half-yelp of surprise, a thud, a subdued chuckle. A voice called:

"Hashknife! Sleepy!"

Both men answered quickly.

"This is Skinny Benson," said the man. "That fool guard let me walk right up to him, because I spoke Mexican as good as he did. How in hell am-I goin' to get yuh out, I wonder?"

"How did yuh know we were in here, Skinny?" asked Sleepy.

"Oh, I followed yuh down here, and I seen 'em jail yuh. Me and Pecos Miller had a fight after you two left and I busted him in the nose. Say I believe I can shoot this lock loose. It's pretty big, but I don't reckon it's awful husky. I been searchin' this guard, but he ain't got the key. Kelly don't take any chances on the guard bein' bribed. All right, I'm goin' to blow hell out of this lock; and you come runnin', 'cause they'll hear the shot all over town."

A moment later Skinny's .45 smashed the big padlock, and he flung the door wide open for them. He had an extra six-shooter and the guard's rifle, which he handed them, as they ran toward the shelter of some old adobe ruins, fifty yards away.

"Skinny, yo're a jewel," declared Hashknife.

"That ain't what Pecos Miller called me," panted Skinny. "He's mad."

"Unless I'm mistaken, he'll be madder than that before he goes through life."

Sleepy peered around a corner of the wrecked adobe.

"We've got 'em interested," he reported. "There they go headin' for the jail. Where do we go now? We've got to find our horses."

"They're still tied near the cantina," said Skinny. "I seen 'em a little while ago. Kinda risky—goin' up there."

"Personally," said Hashknife, "I am not through with Mr. Kelly; and up around the cantina is the last place they'd ever expect us to be. They'll feel sure that we've headed for the Border."

WITH Skinny Benson leading the way, they circled the rear of the buildings, until they came to the rear of the cantina. The windows were covered, so that only a little light came through.

They crouched among some old barrels and boxes in the dark, and wondered what to do next.

There was a slanting shed, built against a part of the rear, and at the upper end of the shed roof was a window.

"I hope it ain't nailed down," said Hashknife.

"We ain't goin' up there, are we?" queried Sleepy.

"If it's all right, you can come on up," replied Hashknife, climbing up on the barrels to the eaves of the shed.

"Of all the fools!" groaned Sleepy. "They'll shoot us next time."

"What's he lookin' for?" whispered Skinny.

"A quick finish—I reckon," complained Sleepy.

"C'mon up—it's loose!" Hashknife whispered. "Look out for nails."

"Look out for bullets, yuh mean," said Sleepy. "C'mon, Skinny, we might as well *all* be crazy."

Hashknife had opened the window, which led into a hallway. About thirty feet away was a lighted spot at the top of the stairs. They could hear the buzz of conversation, the clink of glasses and the rattle of poker-chips in the cantina.

They crawled through the window. A few feet to their right was a partly opened door, leading to one of the sleeping rooms. There was a sound of voices in the adjoining room; so Hashknife carefully

shoved the door wide and they moved quietly into the vacant room.

They could distinguish Slim Kelly's heavy voice, and then another, higher pitched in anger.

"Yeah, yuh had 'em cold, and yuh let 'em get away."

"I know," rumbled Kelly. "Somebody shot the lock off. Can I help that? The guard has a busted head, and don't know anythin.' The boys are lookin' for 'em."

"Lookin' for 'em! Hell, they're back in Arizona by this time—and you won't never get that chance again. Know who they are?"

"No."

"Well, they're Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens."

"*Madre de Dios!*" gasped Kelly, lapsing into Spanish. I know men who would pay—"

"Yo're damn right they'd pay—and pay big money."

"All right," said Kelly, "we won't talk about it any more. I sent for you, because I'm not doin' a credit business. I want that five hundred dollars."

"I never made the deal with yuh."

"Yo're part of the deal, my friend. I made the deal with Riggs, and you will tell him to send me the five hundred by mornin'."

"Oh, he'll send it to yuh, Kelly."



"Yo're damn right, he'll send it. But I want it tomorrow mornin', and you can pack that message to Riggs. Tomorrow mornin'—not any later."

"All right, I'll tell him. Riggs is on the square, Kelly."

"So is Slim Kelly. Only Kelly is blamed for everythin'. If I was as crooked as Mack Riggs, I'd have been hung long ago. That money better be here before noon tomorrow."

"I'll tell him. *Buenas noches.*"

KELLY grunted a reply. Hashknife peered around the doorway and saw a cowboy turn and go down the stairs into the cantina. He only had a fleeting glimpse of the man, and could not be exactly sure of his identity. They listened for a while. Finally they heard a slapping sound in the room, the splashing of water. Hashknife stepped into the hallway, with the two men behind him, shoved Kelly's door open and stepped inside.

The big man had stropped his razor and was just starting to lather his huge face, when he jerked around, looking into the muzzle of two guns. Hashknife and Sleepy's six-shooters were lying on a little table near the bed. Kelly was in his undershirt, his pants sagging low on his hips, but not much lower than his lower jaw, when he looked at the three men.

"What the hell!" he grunted through the lather.

Sleepy picked up the two guns, looked to see that they were loaded, and tossed one to Hashknife. Kelly did not seem a bit amused. In fact, he seemed to shrink a little.

"Set down, you fat porcupine," ordered Hashknife quietly. Kelly slumped into a big chair, his huge hands flat on the arms.

"Do you know who I am?" asked Hashknife.

"No," lied Kelly.

"That's fine," smiled Hashknife. "You'll never know who killed you."

"Killed me?" gasped Kelly. "Why, all I done was put yuh in jail and—"

Hashknife laughed, and Kelly broke off his alibi.

"I can see now why Riggs offered us

two hundred and fifty to kill yuh, Kelly," romanced Hashknife. "He didn't want to pay you that five hundred."

"He offered you two hundred and fifty dollars to—" Kelly fairly shook with indignation. "You let me go! You let me get a hand on Riggs. I break every damn bone in his body. I won't hurt you. What the hell I care about you? I want Riggs."

"Keep yore voice down," warned Hashknife. "If somebody comes up here, we'll *have* to kill you. Now, take it easy. Riggs is double-crossin' yuh. He will never pay you that five hundred dollars. But just between you and me, I'd like to double-cross Riggs."

"Let me go. When you do that, you double-cross Riggs."

"No, no, Kelly. Yore hash is on the fire."

"You can't kill me, Hartley."

"No, you don't know me. I suppose you *guessed* my name."

KELLY subsided, an expression of fear in his eyes. He did not like the glint in Hashknife's gray eyes, nor the set expressions on the faces of Sleepy and Skinny, who were both wondering what this was all about. Even Hashknife was doing a lot of wondering, as he sparred for an opening.

Hashknife went on. "Kelly, do you own this place?"

"I own half."

"Who do yuh want to will it to?"

"Will?"

"Yeah. You won't need it much longer."

Kelly licked his thick lips. This was getting serious. From down in the cantina came the strains of a Mexican orchestra. Kelly drew a deep breath and shook his head.

"I never think you murder a man," he said.

"Execute," corrected Hashknife. "Yore sins have found you out, Kelly."

"What can I do?" whispered Kelly. "I don't want to die."

"There's one thing you can do to save your life, Kelly."

Kelly's eyes snapped wide and he leaned forward.

"What is that?" he blurted out anxiously.

"Tell me where you are holdin' that woman and little boy."

Kelly blinked rapidly. "I swear to you, I—"

"Don't do it, Kelly," warned Hashknife. "One minute and you'll be dead."

"*Madre de Dios*, I—"

"Sleepy," said Hashknife coldly, "take yore watch and call off every fifteen seconds. At sixty seconds, I'll shoot him."

Sleepy drew out his watch, looked at the second hand, and whispered:

"Go!"

Kelly's eyes shifted around the room, came back to Hashknife's gun muzzle. The hammer looked like the head of a striking snake, and he could see that muscular forefinger hooked around the trigger.

"Fifteen seconds," whispered Sleepy.

Kelly drew a deep breath and twisted in his chair. His big hands gripped the arms of his chair, as though trying to draw his huge body erect.

"Thirty seconds," said Sleepy coldly.

Kelly slumped back, his mouth opened a trifle, and his breathing was audible in the room, as the watch ticked off his remaining few moments of life.

"Forty-five seconds," said Sleepy. "Fifteen left, Kelly."

"I'll talk!" gasped Kelly. "To hell with everythin'! They're at the Rancho Lugo."

"I know the place," said Skinny, vastly relieved. He believed that Hashknife would really shoot Kelly.

"Kelly, I'm givin' you the benefit of the doubt," said Hashknife. "If you lied, I'll come back and load yore carcass with lead."

"I do not lie—I swear," said Kelly.

"Look out!" snapped Sleepy. The footsteps of several men could be heard, coming up the hallway.

The three men whirled toward the door, ignoring the huge Kelly for a moment. He came to his feet like a cat, swung around and flung that heavy chair into the three men, who were so close together that it fairly swept them against the wall. Almost at the same moment Kelly dived like a blocking fullback, crashing his huge bulk against the flimsy door, and taking it right along with him into the hallway, where he swept into his own men, bowling them over like ten-pins.

Kelly went down with them, but managed to get to his feet and went diving for the stairway. There came the sound of splintering railing, a yell from the cantina, and a heavy crash, as the big man landed full in the center of an ecarte game.

Hashknife, Sleepy and Skinny stumbled into the hallway, where Sleepy kicked the rifle out of a policeman's hands. Another was flat on his back, trying to pump air into his tortured lungs. There was no time to waste now. With Skinny Benson setting the pace, the three men went out through that open window, ran down the sloping roof of the shed and sprang far out into space, avoiding the piled boxes and barrels.

All were badly shaken from landing on high-heels in the hard dirt, but no ankles were twisted. The town was aroused now. People were running about the narrow street, and someone, likely one of the policemen, fired his rifle in the air several times.

"Can't get the horses at the hitch-rack!" panted Skinny.

"We can, if we've got shells enough!" snapped Hashknife. "C'mon!"

They raced around the shed and ran for the hitch-rack. A knot of men near the rack disintegrated, when Hashknife sent a bullet over their heads. The light was bad and they had little time to select their own horses. Someone started shooting from the doorway of the cantina, and one of the saddled horses at the hitch-rack went down in a kicking, squealing heap.

IT SEEMED ages to them, before all three men were mounted. Hashknife sent two shots toward the doorway, as they galloped away, with Skinny Benson in the lead and Sleepy far behind. A quarter of a mile out of town, Hashknife and Skinny waited for Sleepy to join them.

"I got me a damn mule!" yelled Sleepy in the darkness. "Didn't yuh hear him hee-hawin'? My gosh, I thought I'd never get him into a run! Nobody got hit, did they?"

"All intact," replied Hashknife. "Man, that was a close call! Skinny, where is that Lugo Ranch?"

"Back the other way," replied Skinny. "It's south of Agua Rojo."

"And yuh let us go the wrong way?" queried Sleepy.

"Let yuh? Hell, I led yuh!" snorted Skinny.

"Wait a minute, Hashknife," said Sleepy. "Didja ever stop to consider that me and Skinny don't know what this is all about? You threatenin' to shoot Kelly, unless he told yuh where he was holdin' the woman and kid—it don't make sense."

"Remember the woman and kid at the stage depot, the night we left Cottonwood, Sleepy?" asked Hashknife.

"Yeah, I—sure, I remember you tellin' about them. But how on earth did Kelly—I mean, how did you know that Kelly—"

"I didn't. But Riggs owed Kelly five hundred. Sleepy, I shot at the moon—and hit it. Don't ask me any more. The answer is at the Lugo Ranch—and we've got to get there."

"But why would anybody steal that woman and kid?" persisted Sleepy. "Who are they—and why would Riggs—"

"Skinny," interrupted Hashknife, "is there any way to reach that Lugo Ranch without goin' through Agua Rojo?"

"I don't reckon so, Hashknife. Mebbe we can find our way through the hills, but it'll be slow goin'."

"All right, we'll try it. They know we went north, and they might figure we've

gone across the Border. That might be to our advantage. But we've got to get to that Lugo Ranch before Kelly's gang gets there—or we won't find anybody."

"We'll head south and swing a little to the left," said Skinny. "We should pick up the road from Agua Rojo in a few miles—if Sleepy's saddle mule don't tire out."

"Don't worry about this mule playin' out," retorted Sleepy. "His only trouble is that he runs too danged long in one spot. You lead the way, and this canary won't be far behind yuh."

Skinny spurred off the road, and they headed south through the brush. There was enough starlight to enable them to see a little. There were no fences, no habitation; so they did not have to be careful. They were quite a way to the east of Agua Rojo, when Skinny began bearing to the west a little.

"You prob'ly won't have any job when yuh get back to El Conejo," remarked Sleepy, as they drew abreast in a cleared spot.

"Hell, I didn't have none, when I left," laughed Skinny. "Didn't yuh hear me say I poked Pecos Miller in the nose? I forgot to tell yuh that I hit him in the belly and on the jaw, too. But the nose counted most, 'cause it swelled up somethin' beautiful."

"Don't worry about the job, Skinny," said Hashknife.

"Oh, I ain't worryin' about it. Anyway, I ain't the worryin' kind."

"That's good," said Sleepy. "I'll do the worryin' for all of us."

"Worryin' about what?" queried Hashknife.

"Kelly. He's the big King Buzzard down here, and we're headin' right into his nest. Don'tcha know he'll be waitin' for us? Next time we won't be locked in no jail. You scared him white, Hashknife—but you ain't got no gun on him now."

"Was you really goin' to shoot him?" asked Skinny.

"Kelly didn't know I wouldn't," replied Hashknife. "That watch trick shore makes 'em cave in complete. Countin' the seconds thataway."

"Good thing he couldn't see that watch," chuckled Sleepy. "It ain't been runnin' for two months."

SKINNY chuckled quietly and began removing cartridges from his belt.

"You fellers both shoot forty-fives, don'tcha? Better take a few extra shells along. We might have to burn a little powder down here. I was so mad when I left town that I forgot to take off my belt."

They reached the old road, which was little used for vehicle travel, but did not follow it. Hashknife and Sleepy were too versed in the ways of desperate men to take a chance of ambush. It was a simple matter to parallel the road and ride carefully. Skinny warned them when they were nearing the old Lugo Ranch buildings, and swung wide, approaching the place from the rear.

Suddenly they ran into a bunch of saddle-horses, tied out there in the brush. Hashknife dismounted and examined them quickly. They were sweaty, and still heaving from a long run. Hashknife quickly untied them, linked all four together and led them away, while Sleepy led his saddle-horse. They circled around to the opposite side and dismounted behind some old adobe sheds.

"Somebody is goin' to be sore as thunder," remarked Hashknife, as they squatted at the fringe of brush, looking toward the house, where not even a sliver of light was showing. It was a large ranchhouse, looming black against the brushy skyline.

"It looks deserted," remarked Sleepy, "but those tired broncs show that somebody is in there. Kelly's gang beat us down here, that's a cinch."

"That big, jug-headed roan is Kelly's own horse," said Skinny. "Take a look at the tree of that saddle, will yuh? I felt it over. Why, two of us could ride it at

the same time. If it was daylight, I'll betcha yuh could see that roan's bow-legged from packin' that Slim Kelly."

"A ten mile walk ought to take some weight off him," said Sleepy.

"He'd die first," chuckled Skinny.

"I'm afraid so," said Hashknife. "If I ever—sh-h-h-h-h!"

Not over fifty feet away, his head and shoulders silhouetted against the light of the sky, was a man. He had walked slowly into view, where he stopped.

"A guard," whispered Hashknife. "He's got a rifle over his shoulder."

Finally the man sauntered back out of view again. The three men watched and listened closely. Then, through the tangle of foliage they saw him light a match. Judging from the height of the light, the man was sitting down.

"All right," whispered Hashknife. "Stay right here, unless somethin' happens. We've got to get him out of the game."

"If yuh have to shoot him—don't hesitate," warned Sleepy.

Hashknife slipped off his spurs and boots, dropped his hat beside them and started away.

"Can he make it?" whispered Skinny. "Hell, it's so quiet yuh could hear a grasshopper swaller."

"Make it? 'Course he can make it—I hope. If he can't make it one way, he'll make it another—and when it comes to goin' places without makin' any noise, he can shame an Apache."

It seemed ages to the two waiting men, straining their ears for some sound—but no sound came. Sleepy was about to complain about the length of time he was taking, when they heard the swish of mesquite branches against cloth, and Hashknife came, lugging the unconscious guard with one arm, while in the other hand he trailed an old Mauser rifle.

"He was hard of hearin', I reckon," panted Hashknife. "He let me snake right in on him and pop him over the head. There's another one down on the other

side of the house. I seen him light a smoke. It's shore a wonder he didn't spot us comin' in. Sleepy, this is the mustached one, who locked us in jail. I shore bounced my gun off his cabeza."



"Good! I hope he wakes up, so I can bounce him another. What's the next move?"

"Give 'em a good scare," chuckled Hashknife. "Skinny you take this rifle and go out there where yuh have a good view of the front. Give me and Sleepy time to get back to the rear where we can block anybody from the back of the house. Then you start shootin' that rifle. If that other guard comes runnin' whistle a few past his ear. Here's some more shells. Maybe you better duck under cover—and kinda let yore judgment rule yuh."

"Swell business!" chuckled Skinny. "You go ahead. If yuh need me—yelp my name."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy circled around to the rear of the darkened house, crouching in the deep shadow of an old shed. They had been there about a minute when the silence was broken by the whip-like report of that old Mauser. Again and again it shattered the air.

There was an answering shot from the other guard who started to run toward the front of the house yelling:

"Cuidado! Cuidado!"

Skinny's rifle cracked again, and the guard yelped like a bee-stung pup.

From a window of the house came a call:

"Tony! Pete! What is it?"

"*Americanos vaqueros ciento!*" shrieked Skinny's voice.

"A hundred American cowboys!" exclaimed Hashknife. "Good work, Skinny!"

The window banged shut, and the only sound was the wailing of the wounded guard, who was appealing in broken English for somebody to, "Come queek and feex your damn leg. Get the doctor biffore he dies!"

"Skinny must have popped him," remarked Sleepy.

"Skinny," said Hashknife, "is worth takin' along. I hope he gets a good job out of this."

"I—I hate to say anythin' right at this time, Hashknife—but are you feelin' all right?"

"You haven't heard me complain, have yuh?"

"No, but when you speak of a feller gettin' a good job out of *this*—"

"Mebbe I dreamed it, Sleepy. Say, I can hear some noise in that house. It's barely possible that they're excited. Listen! Sounds like a window bein' opened. Watch 'em, cowboy."

IT WAS impossible to see anyone climbing through a window, but the sound was unmistakable. Suddenly a man darted away from the shadow of the house and ran swiftly toward where they had removed the horses. Sleepy swung up his gun, but Hashknife stopped him.

"Light is too bad for runnin' shots," he said. "I figure that hombre was takin' a chance in order to get a horse and go for help. He won't go far on the horse he'll find."

They heard the man crashing through the brush, and then everything was silent again. There was no sound from Skinny.

"He's watchin' the front," said Hashknife.

As Hashknife spoke, a revolver shot barked out and they saw the flash near where the man had entered the brush.

Again they saw the flash. Then that whip-like crack of the Mauser sounded again, echoed by a yelp of pain. A moment later the man broke from the brush, running like a rabbit, heading back for the shelter of the house, while back in the brush that old Mauser flashed and banged, the bullets striking solidly into the adobe walls of the house.

"Shoot at me, will yuh!" roared Skinny indignantly.

"Did he hit yuh?" called Sleepy.

"Oh, yo're over there, eh? Nope, he didn't hit me. But I've got his gun. I shot from the hip, and I blasted his gun out of his hand, I reckon. Not that I was tryin' to be fancy. How'r yuh comin', boys?"

"We're fine," laughed Sleepy. "Didja hear what he said, when he didn't find a horse?"

"Yea-a-a-h. He used a couple nasty words, and I had to laugh. That's how we got started together. Didja hear me lay that guard low? Yeah? Man, this old hunk of iron shore kicks. I'm scared she might bust, but she shore sounds sweet. I'll have me a black and blue shoulder tomorrow, and one finger is bleedin' already. I'll take a lever-action for mine. This thing is like openin' the barn door. Clickety, clack, cluck!"

"I'll bet you drilled holes plumb through the adobe walls," said Sleepy.

"Well, if kickin' is any proof, it went through both walls and landed on that high hill north of El Conejo. How about startin' more trouble, Hashknife?"

"Bloodthirsty, eh?" queried Sleepy.

"We ain't killed nobody—yet."

Whap! A bullet drilled into the wall above Hashknife's head, causing them to scuttle around to the other side of the shed.

"I seen that one," declared Skinny. "Some rooster shootin' from a dark window. How about me drillin' a couple through there? I got that Mexican's belt, and there's plenty shells."

"Take it easy," advised Hashknife. "We might hit the wrong person."

"Aw, the right person ought to keep their head down, in a case like this."

"I tell yuh, he's bloodthirsty," declared Sleepy, sprawled flat at the corner of the shed, watching the house. "A reg'lar gore-hunter. I've seen 'em like that. In fact, I knowed two of 'em, and they came to no good end."

"What happened to 'em?" asked Skinny.

"Well, one of 'em became a school-teacher, and the other one has to work as president of a bank. Serves 'em darned well right, says I."

POSSIBLY they were talking too loud, because a fusillade of shots came from two of the rear windows, smashing into the old shed. Sleepy rolled around the corner, but Hashknife was on his feet, swinging wide around the big adobe. He had smelled out Kelly's strategy.

Three indistinct figures were already a hundred feet from the front of the house, hurrying for the heavy brush. Hashknife raced for them, swinging his gun in one hand. The sound of his pounding feet caused one of them to whirl around. Another went flat on the ground, as flame spurted from the man's six-shooter. He was shooting swiftly, desperately, as Hashknife leaped from side to side, coming swiftly.

Then Hashknife jerked to a stop, not over twenty feet away from the man, and fired twice. The man went down, without a sound, and Hashknife raced forward. A little voice was calling fearfully:

"Mommy! Mommy!"

"Hold fast, pardner," said Hashknife. "Yo're all right."

The figure on the ground was a woman, and the third was the little boy. The woman's hands were tied together and she had been effectively gagged. Apparently she had fallen in the sand when the man turned to shoot—or he had shoved her down to keep her from running away.

Hashknife quickly untied her and removed the gag.

"Don't be scared, Ma'am," he told her. "We're friends."

Then he knelt beside the man and carefully shielded the light of a match, as he looked him over. The little boy, frightened, choking a little, saw Hashknife's lean face in the match-light.

"Mommy! It's my towboy!" he called.

Hashknife shoved the match into the sand.

"That's right, pardner—I'm yore cow-boy. Ma'am, are yuh all right?"

"I—I guess I'm all right," she whispered. "Are you all right, Jimmy?"

"Sure," piped the youngster. "Lotsa shootin' goin' on."

Hashknife took Jimmy by the hand and they circled around to where they had left the horses.

"Yo're Mrs. Benton, ain't yuh, Ma'am?" asked Hashknife.

"Yes. But I don't understand—"

"No time to explain anythin' now," interrupted Hashknife. He raised his voice, calling to Sleepy and Skinny, who answered quickly, and in a few moments they came through the brush.

"What happened?" asked Sleepy.

"A smart gent tried to get this lady and the boy away from the house and hide 'em in the brush," replied Hashknife. "The gent is still short of the brush—and he won't never make it now. All that shoot-in' back there from the windows was to keep us busy, while they made a getaway."

Hashknife turned to the woman. "Ma'am, did yuh ever ride a horse?" he asked.

"No, I never have."

"I can," piped the youngster. "I'll betcha I can."

"Most all cowboys can ride horses," said Hashknife. "Sleepy, you take him on yore horse. I'll let the lady ride in front of me. Let's go."

"What about these other horses?" asked Skinny.

"Leave 'em there. If anybody leaves here, they'll be behind us, anyway."

A GUA ROJO was dark, as they rode through, guns ready. Even the Pasatiempo Cantina was dark, and there was no one on the street. Straight for the Border they rode, and with a sigh of satisfaction they heard the soil of Arizona under the hoofs of their mounts.

"How are yuh makin' it, pardner?" said Hashknife.

"Fine," replied the youngster. "Sleepy let me hold the guiding straps."

"That's great. You'll have yore own horse soon."

"Guidin' straps," chuckled Sleepy. "That's shore a new one."

"I don't know what to say—" remarked the woman quietly.

"Nothin'," said Hashknife. "Yo're all right, and that's the main thing."

"Yes, I am all right—thanks to you men; but I still do not know what it is all about."

"Few people do," replied Hashknife. "Yuh see—"

A horse and rider, traveling at top speed, running in the soft sand, which muffled the horse's hoofs, was into them, before they realized it. Past them he swept, and was gone in the darkness, before anyone could make a move. They only had a flash of the horse and rider in the darkness.

"Paul Revere?" gasped Sleepy, trying to control his frightened horse.

"I don't know who it was," said Skinny, "but he was shore movin'."

"Yeah, and we're movin', too," said Hashknife. "Shake 'em up, boys."

Business was very good at the Cactus Patch Saloon that night. Tom Forrest had paid off his boys at the JF Ranch, and some of the other ranches had enjoyed a payday. Pecos Miller, his nose swollen, one eye discolored, stood moodily at the bar and watched the men milling around the games.

Topaz Blair came over and bought the sheriff a drink. Mack Riggs, the lawyer, joined them and accepted a drink.

"What became of Skinny Benson after the fight?" asked Topaz.

"I dunno, and I don't give a damn!" snorted the sheriff. "Just as soon as I can get that badge back from him—he's finished."

"What became of Hartley and Stevens?" asked the lawyer. "Skinny must have joined them. But they'd been gone quite a while when he rode away. Somebody said they was headin' for Mexico."

"Who said they was headin' for Mexico?" asked the sheriff.

"The kid at the stable."

"He did, eh? What in hell did they expect to do in Mexico?"

"They didn't tell him that."

"What could they do in Mexico?" queried Topaz. "Probably have a run-in with Slim Kelly. He'll take care of 'em—don't worry about that."

"Well," yawned Riggs, "I think I'll go to bed; it's midnight."

"Aw, have another drink," laughed Topaz. "You can't go to bed yet."

"Well, just one more."

AS THEY were filling their glasses Tom Forrest and Duke LeRoy came in. They stopped just inside the doorway, quickly scanning the crowd, before coming up to the bar.

LeRoy's face was dirt-streaked and he was covered with dust. Tom Forrest seemed to have dressed in a hurry.

"What's all this?" muttered the sheriff. "What's wrong?"

The two men came slowly toward the bar, their eyes anxious. Neither spoke for the moment, as they came in against the bar. Duke LeRoy looked around slowly, as he said quietly:

"Look out, boys."

"Huh?" grunted the sheriff. "What'd yuh say, Duke?"

"I said to look out," whispered Duke

LeRoy. "If yuh see Hartley, Stevens or Skinny—start shootin'."

Mack Riggs licked his lips, his eyes strained, hands tensed.

"Wh—what went wrong?" he asked nervously. "Can't you talk, Duke?"

"This is no place to talk. Take my word for it, you fool."

"Where are they?" asked the sheriff anxiously.

"I passed them between here and the Border," replied Duke. "Then I went to the ranch and picked up Tom. Where they are now—I don't know. But you can be damn certain they're not far away. Now shut up and keep yore eyes open; it's our only chance."

"But—but what do they know?" faltered Riggs.

"They know too damn much. Stop askin' questions."

"Why don't we high-tail it out of here?" asked Forrest. "No use waitin' for hell to bust loose. As far as I'm concerned, my skin is worth—"

Forrest stopped short. About a dozen feet away, and toward the rear of the saloon, stood Skinny Benson, minus a hat, his right sleeve slashed from mesquite thorns. But Skinny was smiling a dusty smile. He had a gun in his holster, another shoved inside the waist-band of his pants.

ALL five men were looking at him. Several other people were looking curiously at the five men at the bar, glowering at Skinny. No one said anything, and Skinny only smiled with his lips, his eyes alert and serious. Then the sheriff surged away from the bar.

"Give me back that star," he demanded. "Yo're fired, damn yuh! Give me back that star, before I—I—"

"You ain't figurin' on hitchin' yore wagon to a star, are yuh, Pecos?" drawled Hashknife's voice. When Skinny attracted their attention, Hashknife and Sleepy had moved in from the front doorway. The five men turned their heads.

"Why, you—you—it's none of your damned business, Hartley!" declared the sheriff nervously. "If I want to fire—"

"I wouldn't fire him, Pecos. They'll need a new sheriff in this county, and it's best to have an experienced man, yuh know."

"Wh-what do yuh mean?"

Their voices had attracted everyone in the place. All games ceased, and not even a poker chip rattled now. Men got to their feet, looking toward the bar.

"Gentlemen," said Hashknife, addressing the crowd, but not looking at them, "these coyotes pulled the worst job ever attempted—and they almost got away with it. Forrest, what's yore right name—it ain't Forrest."

The man they knew as Tom Forrest shut his lips tightly, and his eyes narrowed.

Hashknife laughed. "They said that Tom Forrest never was on a ranch, never rode a horse. I saw you pick up yore reins and step on a horse, just as good as any cow-waddie on earth. Have yuh learned in a couple days how to saw off the top of yore holster and tie it down to yore leg. Pardner, yo're a damn poor actor."

Tom Forrest said nothing, but the lines of his face deepened. The rest of them looked blankly at Hashknife. Riggs tried to laugh, but it ended in a nervous cough.

"Why, of all fool things!" he exclaimed huskily. "Not Tom Forrest? You must be crazy. I know Tom Forrest."

"You mean—you *did* know Tom Forrest, Riggs."

"Gawd!" muttered Pecos Miller.

"Some of you folks behind me helped bury Len Ellers," said Hashknife. "Well, you didn't bury Len Ellers—you buried Tom Forrest."

"It's a lie!" husked the sheriff. "Len Ellers is dead and—"

"He's dead now," said Hashknife. "I killed him tonight at the Lugo Ranch, down in Mexico. He was tryin' to get away with Mrs. Benton and her little boy, when we had 'em penned up in the old adobe."

"But—but," protested. Riggs, "we

haven't anything to do with Slim Kelly and his gang."

"Who mentioned Slim Kelly?" queried Hashknife. "The original Tom Forrest invited Mrs. Benton, his sister, to live at the JF Ranch. Riggs knew it; so he had her and the kid stolen in Cottonwood, after they killed the driver. They killed him, because he knew her—and he knew Tom Forrest. She told me the whole story."

"She lies," whined Riggs. "We can prove—"

"Kelly talked, Riggs," said Skinny. "He talked, because a gun was held against his belly. Pecos, you had to be in on it, because you had to let Len Ellers loose, and shoot the face off Tom Forrest. If you want that star, you dirty killer—come and take it off me!"

It was as though Skinny's words had touched an electric button. Pecos Miller had not been elected sheriff because he was slow on the draw. Duke LeRoy was as fast as the best of them—and the man they called Forrest was no laggard in getting a gun.

BUT Skinny had the gun in his hand, concealed by his leg; and Pecos Miller died on his feet, his gun barely out of his holster. Hashknife and Sleepy's guns were shaking the windows, as they blasted hot lead into Duke LeRoy and the pseudo Forrest. Riggs tried to draw a gun from a shoulder holster, got his arm smashed, and threw up the other hand. Topaz Blair was backing along the bar, both hands flung in the air. He had no gun.

It was over in a matter of seconds. Forrest was down on his hands and knees, while Duke LeRoy was pitched forward on his face, both hands under him. Hashknife waved the powder-smoke away from his nostrils, stepped in and kicked a gun away from Forrest.

Skinny Benson, efficient even under strain, yanked a pair of handcuffs from the sheriff's hip-pocket and linked Topaz Blair and Mack Riggs together. Neither

man protested, merely looking dazedly at Skinny.

"Well," said Skinny calmly, "that's the whole works, Hashknife."

Someone ran to get Doctor Adams, while the rest crowded in to find out what it was all about, although most of it had been told, before the shooting. Hashknife turned to Mack Riggs.

"Who shot that stage driver?" he asked.

"Duke LeRoy handled that," whispered Riggs.

"Lay it on a dead man, of course. I suppose Duke shot Tom Forrest, too."

"That's right. Pecos let Len Ellers go—and Ellers helped Duke. Duke doped Forrest with some knock-out drops. How—how did you ever figure it out, Hartley?"

"The hands on the corpse, you poor fool. I knew Ellers' hands. Ellers was in jail here for weeks, and he never was much of a dude. Tom Forrest never done any work—and his fingernails had been manicured lately. You dumb fools—to not see that. Who got the diamond ring off Forrest's left hand?"

"Topaz," said Riggs huskily.

"I bought it from Pecos Miller," whispered Topaz. "I paid him a hundred."

Hashknife laughed. "I didn't know it was a diamond, but I made a good guess. The mark of the ring was plain on the dead man's finger. Forrest had never been here—and nobody knew him. They wanted Ellers out of jail; so it was a good chance to dress the doped Forrest in Ellers' clothes, shoot his face off, and let someone of their own gang inherit the JF. What was to be the split, Riggs?"

"That don't make any difference—now," sighed the lawyer.

"Well, I've got me a good start," remarked Skinny. "C'mon, you two survivors—I'll put yuh to bed. Hyah, Doc—business is good."

DOCTOR ADAMS looked curiously at Skinny and his prisoners, but went on to make his examination. Someone called

the prosecuting attorney, who came, half-dressed. He had an outline of the affair, before he got there. He was a tall, gray-haired serious man, who rarely smiled. He listened to Hashknife's indictment of the five men, and then they went across the street to the hotel, where they found Mrs. Benton and little Jimmy, who had been told the outcome of the fight in the Cactus Patch.

"I wish to congratulate you, Mrs. Benton," the lawyer said gravely. "You have had a terrible experience. Except for the valor of Mr.—"

"Hartley," said Hashknife. "And there wasn't any valor connected with it."

"We have our own ideas of things, Mr. Hartley."

"We certainly have," added Mrs. Benton. "They told me that as soon as the ranch was turned over to certain parties, they would take us back to Cottonwood. But I never believed that part of it."

"Not that bunch of coyotes," said Hashknife. "But how about that JF spread? Won't Mrs. Benton get that?"

"Not a doubt in the world," assured the lawyer. "She is the daughter of Jim Forrest. I'll see that she does get it, Mr. Hartley."

Hashknife turned to little Jimmy, who was listening, wide-eyed.

"Well, pardner, you'll have a fine chance to be a cowboy. You'll have a lot of fine horses and fine cows. Mebbe some day I'll come along and say howdy pardner, and you'll say, 'Step down and rest yore saddle, while Ma stirs up a mess of biscuits.' And then we'll talk about the time you came up out of Mexico, and bullets was as thick as fleas on a dog."

"And I held the guidin' straps?" queried Jimmy wide-eyed.

"That's right, Jimmy."

Hashknife held out his hand and they shook solemnly.

"You are not going away, are you?" asked Mrs. Benton anxiously.

HASHKNIFE looked at her and wondered if he had ever seen a sweeter face in his life.

He looked at the big-eyed Jimmy, and smiled slowly as he replied:

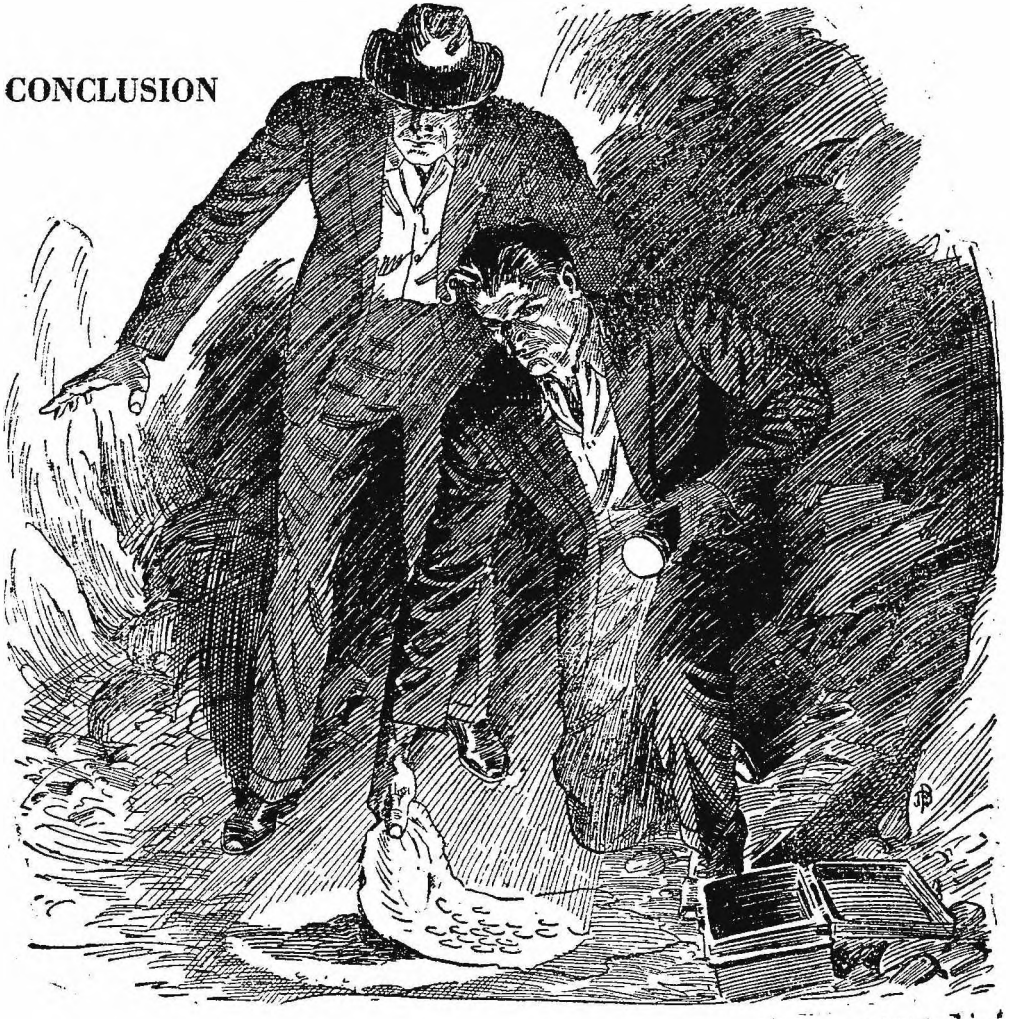
"Yes'm, it's—it's kinda important. Yuh see, I've got to talk with a man about a hill."

And he went striding wearily out of the little lobby, his spurs making musical jingles on the rough planks of the sidewalk. Sleepy was waiting at the hitch-rack, with their war-bags, and they rode out of El Conejo, knee-to-knee, each one talking to another man about a hill.



*The Full Savor of a Salted Mine in Nevada Comes Out in
New York's Theatrical District*

CONCLUSION



THE FRENCH KEY

By FRANK GRUBER

XVI

IT WAS mid-afternoon when the big cabin plane took off from the Newark Airport. Shortly, after dark, it settled down near the city of Chicago. "We'll be here only fifteen minutes," the hostess told Fletcher and Cragg.

They were in Kansas City at midnight and Denver of dawn. And late in the afternoon they left the plane for good. At Los Vegas, Nevada, a little city sprawled out in the center of a flat, arid stretch of desert; a surprising little city, green and tree-shaded.

They checked in at the El Mirador Hotel, washed and shaved and then went

out to see the town. "Tomorrow," Fletcher said as they walked along the street, "we become prospectors. Desert rats. We'd better get our outfits now."

"You mean those little donkeys they always show in the movies?"

"Yeah—burros. Only ours'll be streamlined. There's a place right there where we can get one."

Cragg followed Fletcher's gesture. "Huh! That's a used car lot."

"Right. That's the kind of burro the modern prospector uses. A little old-fashioned Ford, high axled and light enough so it won't get stuck in the sand."

"I thought we were going to rough it."

"Sure. But we'll do it in comfort. I'm a little too old to start with a burro."

They went into the used car lot and Fletcher picked out the best car in the place. "How much you want for that?" he asked the salesman.

"Finest car in the city," the salesman declared. "That's a last year's model, traded in by one of our bankers on a new car. He drove it only five thousand miles. See—the speedometer?"

"I see it. How much is the car?"

The salesman coughed. "We've got it priced at eight seventy-five, but look—the boss isn't around just now. I'll let you have it for eight and a quarter. And that, Mister, is a real bargain."

Sam Cragg began to mutter, but Fletcher ignored him. "I'm not kicking about the price, but look—we haven't got a trade-in. I understand you fellows usually expect to lose about a hundred dollars on a trade-in. Couldn't you knock off another fifty for a clean sale?"

"No, sir, Mister. That trade-in gag has whiskers."

"Has it? Why, a friend of mine in Los Angeles pulled it only last month. He didn't have a car to trade in so he went out and bought a pile of junk—paid twenty-five dollars for it, drove it to a lot and got a hundred and a quarter on it toward a new car."

"That was in Los Angeles, Mister. We don't do business like that around here."

FLETCHER pointed to a weather-beaten flivver in the corner of the yard. "Well, look, suppose I bought that heap and drove it around the block and brought it in here to trade in on that Buick—how much would you allow me on it?"

"Exactly what you'd pay for it—thirty dollars!"

"All right, I'll take it."

The salesman made strange noises in his throat. Finally he forced out, "You're kidding?"

"No, not at all. You priced the car at thirty dollars. I'll buy it."

"But what about this Buick?"

Fletcher shrugged. "I'll take a chance. I'll drive this flivver away and *if* I come back, I'll see what sort of deal you'll make."

The used car salesman was red in the face by this time. He made a few very pointed remarks, but Fletcher merely pursed his lips and held out three ten dollar bills. A few minutes later they drove the flivver out of the lot.

Then Cragg let go. He laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

Fletcher chuckled. "If I'd gone right up and priced this jalopy I'd have discovered it was an heirloom, driven only six thousand miles by an old maid who liked the style of the car and kept it all these years for that reason. He'd have soaked me a hundred dollars for it."

He drove to a hardware store and bought several ten gallon tins, as well as two gallon thermos jugs. The tins he took to a filling station and had filled with gasoline. "Maybe there are filling stations where we're going," he said to Cragg, "but I don't want to take any chances."

"How far is this Bad Axe from here?"

"Oh, about a hundred miles. Probably pretty rough country around there. Usually is where mines are."

They pulled out of the filling station and

Sam Cragg grabbed Fletcher's arm. "Johnny, does that mean what I think it means?"

"What?"

"That sign over there. Oasis Casino. 'Dine, Dance, Romance'. And underneath, 'Craps, Roulette'."

"You can read, can't you?"

"Yeah, but whoever heard of a place advertising such stuff."

"This is Nevada, Sam. They do it here."

"Umm," mused Sam wistfully.

Fletcher sighed. "You won seven dollars playing Kelly the other day. All right, if you must—you can lose the seven."

"Now, Johnny?"

"Why not? We've got to get an early start in the morning. So let's get it over with."

THEY parked the car nearby and then walked to the Casino. There were two large rooms on the main floor. In one a Hawaiian orchestra played haunting music. The lights were dim and a few couples danced slowly on the little dance floor. More couples were in the booths surrounding the room, in which the lights were negligible.

Fletcher and Cragg walked through this room to the gambling room beyond. Here the air was thick with smoke. There was action and noise. Crap tables, 21 layouts, roulette games, were well patronized. There were workmen from Boulder Dam, twenty miles away, ranchers from the desert, men and women in evening dress from Hollywood, three hundred miles distant. There was even a desert rat or two, picturesque in alkali-stained clothing, worn, scuffed boots and whiskers.

"All right," said Fletcher, "what'll it be?"

Sam Cragg glanced at the roulette table, passed it by. He lingered at the crap game, sighed and started for the blackjack game. "I can beat this," he said. "Watch my system."

A laconic, slick-haired man with a cigarette drooping from his lips, was dealing. "Place your bets," he droned. "I'm dealing."

Cragg put down seven dollars. Fletcher beside him snickered. "So you're going to lose it quick?"

"You'll see," said Cragg.

The dealer dealt two cards, face down to each of the players. He gave himself two, but turned the second one up. It was a four.

"He's got a tough one to hit," Cragg observed. He raised the edges of his own cards and revealed to Fletcher a nine and a three. "But mine is worse."

"Hitting," the dealer announced in a bored voice.

The first player hit with a four, hesitated and hit again. He got a jack and threw in his cards and wager.

The next man studied his two cards and finally said, "I'll play these."

A middle-aged woman who would have been more at home in an Iowa Tuesday Ladies' Bridge, had twenty dollars on her cards. "I'm fine," she said.

Cragg was next. He grinned. "I'm sitting tight!"

The player after Cragg took a hit, got a deuce, hit again and broke. Another player decided to play his cards. The last one hit a nine and stuck.

The dealer looked around the board. He was counting up the amount of the best, estimating his losses if he hit his apparent fourteen and broke. He decided to hit. He got an eight.

"I'm paying," he said and turned up twenty-two.

He gathered in the cards, flipping over Cragg's and noting his thirteen. He added seven dollars to Cragg's money.

"I'll play it," Cragg announced.

Swiftly the dealer dealt again. The three players preceding Cragg all hit this time and all broke. The dealer scooped in their money. Cragg studied his cards thoughtfully. He had a queen and eight.

"Hitting," the dealer reminded.

"I think I'll play these," Cragg said, in a regretful note in his voice.

The dealer had a six spot turned up.

He went around to the other players, broke one. Besides Sam's fourteen dollars



there was only six dollars facing him. He said, "I'll pay eighteen."

"Pay me," said Cragg.

He got a sharp look this time with his fourteen dollars.

"Better pull down," Fletcher advised.

"Uh-huh, I'm letting it ride."

THE dealer turned up a king for his town card this time. Cragg drew an eight and a seven and when it came his turn hit without hesitation. He got a six.

"Lucky stiff!" Fletcher hissed in his ear.

The dealer had twenty and was compelled to pay Cragg twenty-eight dollars.

"I'll play it," the latter announced.

The middle-aged woman next to Sam, who had lost the last two times, said in a wheezing voice, "Do you play a system, Mister?"

"Yes, the Cragg system."

"How does it go?"

"You let the money ride."

"But how long? You can't win forever, you know."

"That's it, I don't."

The woman didn't know how to take that.

But her cards came along and she studied them. Cragg looked at his own cards.

"What do you play on blackjack?" he asked.

"Double," the dealer replied, "turn them over."

"Oh, I haven't got blackjack. I was just asking, that's all."

The dealer's lips moved, although no words came out. He dealt to the players and when it came Cragg's turn he said in a tone no longer suave, "Well?"

"I've got twenty," Cragg said, "which is good enough for me."

The dealer wound up with eighteen. When he saw that Cragg really had twenty he counted out fifty-six dollars and practically threw it across the table.

"Still letting it ride, wise guy?"

"Uh-uh," said Cragg. "I've got your goat now."

He got a ten and a one, made a big fuss about hitting and finally passed it up. Sam Cragg's bet was larger than all the others combined. The dealer had a five showing up. He looked across the table at Sam's stack of bills, hit with an ace. His lips twisted. Apparently he had a very small card in the hole, either an ace or a deuce, probably an ace. He hit and got a six, said something under his breath and hit again. A king.

He swore audibly.

"I'm still letting it ride," Cragg said cheerfully.

"Limit's two hundred," the dealer snapped.

"Oh, is it? Why didn't you tell me at the beginning?"

"You didn't ask."

"In that case," said Cragg truculently, "deal me out!"

The dealer made a quick signal and a heavy-set man came over. "What is it?" he asked.

"This—gentleman—wants to play over two hundred dollars," the dealer explained.

"How much over?"

"Twelve dollars."

"All right, let him play it."

"I changed my mind," said Cragg. "I want to play only a dollar."

The dealer threw down his pack of cards so they scattered across the table. Calmly Sam Cragg folded his winnings and

stowed them away in his pocket. After that he said, "I don't like this joint!"

"Cut it out, Sam," said Fletcher. "You're going to get us into trouble."

"Better not," said a voice behind Fletcher. "This isn't New York, you know."

Fletcher whirled. Horatio Vedder, the rare coin dealer from New York, was smiling at him.

"Mr. Vedder!" said Fletcher.

Sam Cragg was blinking. "Say—" He shot a swift look at Johnny Fletcher.

Fletcher said, "We were just leaving, Mr. Vedder. Going our way?"

"I believe I am. You're staying overnight at a hotel?"

"Yes."

The manager and the blackjack dealer relaxed. The house could afford a loss of two hundred dollars. It was better than creating a scene and scaring away other customers.

THE trio from New York left the Casino. "Rather a coincidence meeting you here, isn't it?" Horatio Vedder remarked.

"I was thinking of that," Fletcher replied. "You're going to Bad Axe?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

"I see. You think perhaps Billy Tamm might have had another 1822 gold piece?"

Vedder smiled. "You took my assistant to lunch, I understand."

"Yes. Charming girl. You must have flown out?"

"Yes. I arrived this morning."

"Oh, then you didn't know about Mr. Winslow until you'd left New York."

"I didn't leave until ten in the morning. Yes, I knew. Why?"

"No reason."

Horatio Vedder looked thoughtfully at Fletcher, then said, "You haven't changed your mind about that piece, have you?"

"I have. But I no longer possess it. I—I lost it. It turned up in Mr. Winslow's pocket."

"Ah!"

Cragg said truculently, "You didn't know about that?"

"I didn't. I had the idea that you had sold it privately to George Polson. It didn't worry me greatly, but rare coins are my business. Inasmuch as the particular coin in question was a mint coin—never in circulation—I thought, well—there might be another one where that one came from. I took a chance and came out here."

They had reached Fletcher's newly purchased flivver by this time. Fletcher said, "We've got a little caravan of one car to drive out to Bad Axe. If you haven't made arrangements, why not go out with us tomorrow?"

"Why," said Horatio, "I'd made tentative arrangements with a guide to drive me out. But—I'd be glad to go with you. I'll cancel the other. And split expenses with you."

"It's a deal. How about five o'clock? An early start."

"Splendid. I'll be ready."

The coin dealer left them at the flivver. Fletcher and Cragg got in to drive to the hotel, only a half block away. Cragg said out of the side of his mouth. "I don't believe it!"

"What? That he came out here just on the hope of finding another coin? Why not, Sam?"

"Because it's screwy. Remember, he claimed he didn't even know this Tamm."

"Oh, that! Well, he did know him. I pumped his secretary. I'm not at all surprised to run into him out here. I rather expected it, in fact."

Cragg shook his head in resignation. "It's too much for me, Johnny."

Their double bed at the hotel was an excellent inducement for early rising. It had lumps in it. And the springs creaked dismally.

XVII

THEY were up at four-thirty. At ten minutes to five they left their room—and found Horatio Vedder already await-

ing them in the lobby. He had a suitcase, a basket hamper and wore riding breeches and shiny, new boots.

"All set? I've got some food. We can eat after we get started. Know which way to go?"

"I've got a map," said Fletcher. "We head east, then north."

They got the car. With Vedder's gear the rear of the flivver was pretty well filled. The three of them had to ride in the front seat, a rather tight fit.

The road east of town was a smooth, broad macadam stretch. "I hope this keeps up for awhile," Fletcher remarked, after they had left the town behind.

A range of mountains loomed dimly against the far horizon. Before them the desert stretched out straight and flat. Fletcher knew something about distances in flat country and guessed the mountains were farther than he expected.

The flivver, aside from a few rattles, ran surprisingly well. Up to thirty-eight miles an hour. Above that the motor vibrated noisily.

The macadam road held out. In fact, they never left it. After two hours of driving, their map indicated that they were to turn north. They did—on a road a little narrower than the first, but still good pavement.

There was no traffic this early, but they passed several weather-beaten filling stations.

Vedder opened his lunch hamper about eight o'clock and brought out sandwiches and a thermos bottle of coffee. They ate without stopping.

After awhile they came to a dirt side road. Burnt into a post was the notice, "Bad Axe, 6 miles." An arrow pointed to the right.

"Paved road to within six miles," Fletcher remarked, "and you wanted to get a burro, Sam."

The road consisted of two wide ruts, surprisingly hard. The car ate it up. But a mile after leaving the pavement, the

road began to twist, as it climbed a steep grade. The grade continued for three miles or so, then they crested a rough hilltop and looked down a long sloping hillside, beyond which was a broad stretch of desert.

"There she is!" exclaimed Cragg, pointing.

At the edge of the desert was a huddle of buildings. Black smoke poured out of a chimney. "It's more than six miles," said Fletcher. "We've come four and that's five more."

"What?" exclaimed Cragg. "It don't look more'n a mile or two."

"Distances are deceiving out here," Horatio Vedder said.

"Well, if that isn't Bad Axe, where is it?"

Fletcher took one hand from the wheel and pointed to the left. "Over there, Sam."

Cragg searched the hillside to the left. "There isn't any town over there."

"Look again."

Cragg craned his neck to look past Fletcher. After a moment he exclaimed, "You mean those couple of old broken down shacks?"

"Bad Axe is a ghost town. It was deserted in 1864. It's surprising there are any buildings standing at all."

"But what's that place down there—where the buildings are and the smoke is coming out of a chimney?"

"My guess is that it's the Sunset Mining Company. An outfit—oh oh!" He stepped suddenly on the brakes and the car skidded to a stop, raising a cloud of dust. He reversed and backed up.

"What's the matter?" Cragg exclaimed.

"We're here," said Fletcher. He indicated a small, flat stake at the right side of the road. Years ago someone had carved on it, running from top to bottom, "Three Bear Mine."

"Where is the mine?" asked Horatio Vedder. "I see only one old shack."

The shack he referred to was about a quarter of a mile to the right, in the lee of an overhanging ledge. There was no

road leading to it, only a trail through the chaparral; a trail zig-zagging in and out.

Fletcher shut off the ignition. "Not being used to this sand, I think we'd better



walk the rest of the way. The car might get stuck."

HORATIO VEDDER climbed down and lifted out his wicker hamper. "It doesn't look very cheerful, does it?"

"It's been shut down for twenty-five years, you know," Fletcher explained.

"And Billy Tamm's been living here alone all these years?"

"I don't imagine he minded. Some miners aren't comfortable if there're more than two people around. They like solitude. I've heard of prospectors in Death Valley, over in California, living in the desert for a year at a stretch without seeing a single other human."

Sam Cragg frowned at the chaparral. "You don't suppose there're rattlesnakes here, do you, Johnny?"

"There might be, Sam. Keep your ears cocked. A rattler is a gentleman. He always gives warning before he strikes." He winked at Horatio Vedder. "He makes a whirling sound."

They started toward the weather-beaten shack. It turned out to be closer to a half mile than a quarter. Before they reached the shack they came upon a tremendous heap of old tin cans. "Twenty-five years of eating out of cans," Fletcher remarked.

It wasn't until they were right up to the cabin that they saw the mouth of the mine. It was surprisingly unexciting. Merely a hole about five feet tall in the

side of the mountain. There was an old broken sign over the hole on which was the faded legend: "Three Bears Mine." W. C. Winslow, Proprietor.

The door of the cabin was standing open. They went inside.

Horatio Vedder whistled. "Twenty-five years in this!"

The furniture consisted of an old wooden table, the top of which was badly cracked, two three-legged stools, a rusty sheet iron stove and a cheap iron bedstead, on which were spread dusty blankets. A packing case stood near the stove. A piece of burlap hung in front of it.

A row of nails behind the stove held pots and pans and a shelf above the nails contained a large number of bright labeled cans. Fletcher stepped over and looked at the labels.

"Beans—salmon—corned beef—and *caviar!*"

He chuckled, "A desert rat eating caviar!"

"Maybe he liked it," said Cragg. "What else would he do with his wages out here?"

Horatio Vedder dropped to his knees beside the burlap-covered packing case. He tossed the burlap over the top of the case. "Ah!" he said.

Fletcher and Cragg went over. Vedder took a large card from the case. There were holes in the card with a narrow strip of pasteboard running down the center of each hole; the strips held in place old U. S. pennies.

"Indian head pennies!" exclaimed Horatio Vedder. "Worth—in a child's collection—as much as two dollars!"

He brought out a half dozen well thumbed dealer's coin catalogues, a dog-eared cloth-bound book, entitled: "Numismatism, Every Man's Hobby."

THERE was a battered pasteboard shoe box in the case. Vedder opened it and exposed several hundred letters. He looked at Fletcher. The latter took one of the letters. He unfolded it and read:

Dear Mr. Tamm:

Your letter thrilled me no end. I am a lonely widow of 36—"

He folded the letter and looked at another.

"Lonely Hearts letters," he said. "Evidently Tamm belonged to a matrimonial club. He seems to have received letters from a good many lonely women—wealthy widows and otherwise."

"I guess it was about all the enjoyment he got out of life," said Horatio Vedder. "That and collecting these few cheap coins."

"Any other letters?" asked Fletcher. "Aside from the Lonely Hearts?"

"I don't see any, which is strange."

"Why?"

Vedder bit his lip. "Well, I wrote him myself. You see, he corresponded with me about that coin before he came to New York."

"Oh, then you did know that he was bringing an 1822 half eagle with him?"

Vedder hesitated a moment. Then he said, "Yes. I—I didn't want to admit it because the New York police would then have insisted that I, well, that I'd killed him for the coin."

"Perhaps you're right. But look, as long as we're telling everything now, tell me, did you *see* Tamm in New York? While he was alive, I mean."

Vedder shook his head. "No, I didn't. But I'll admit something else. Tamm didn't exactly say so in his letters, but he intimated that he had more than one 1822 half eagle. He wrote a bit incoherently about a wonderful discovery of coins."

"Coins? How many—did he say?"

"No, he just used the plural. It could have meant two, three or even more. Perhaps—it was merely an error in writing. He was rather illiterate. But studying his letters after his death I couldn't resist running out here. If there is another coin—I'll be repaid."

"Haven't you forgotten something, Mr.

Vedder?" Fletcher asked. "That, although Billy Tamm has no relatives, anything found on this property will be considered the property of Walter Winslow—or his estate?"

"I thought of that," said Vedder a bit stiffly. "But I'm still willing to take a chance. I know at least three collectors who'll pay me more than they would anyone else for one of those coins. I can persuade the Winslow estate to deal through me."

Fletcher nodded. "Well, I hope then that we find another one of those half eagles. But it doesn't look like it. Someone's been here before us."

Vedder was startled. "Why do you say that?"

"Why, you said so yourself. The letters you wrote to him aren't here. Nor are any others, aside from those Lonely Heart letters which mean nothing. Certainly, Winslow, or someone in the Winslow firm wrote Tamm from time to time, if for no other reason than to mail him his salary checks."

"He might not have considered it worth while to save those envelopes. After all, a man with a complex of writing to lonely widows might save such letters for salacious re-reading."

Fletcher nodded slowly. He strolled to the door of the cabin, then stepped through. He went leisurely to the rear and began poking with his foot at some charred embers where Tamm—or someone—had evidently built a fire.

Suddenly he stooped and picked up a half-burned board. He rubbed ashes and dirt from it.

Sam Cragg and Vedder came out of the cabin. "Find something?" Vedder asked.

"Just a piece of wood from a packing case," Fletcher replied. "It has Winslow's return address on it." Carelessly he threw it away.

But a bell was ringing inside of him. The board came from a packing case, apparently sent by Winslow—but the address

was neither Winslow's Wall Street number or his Westchester home. It was an address on upper Fifth Avenue.

He looked thoughtfully at the Sunset Mines. "I think I'll run down there and say hello," he remarked. "You fellows want to come along?"

Vedder turned from staring into the black mouth of the mine. He was frowning. "I'd rather like to look in there, but—I don't know if it would be safe. Don't these mines cave in?"

"They do if the shoring rots away. But if you'll wait here until we run down there, we'll go in with you."

SOMEWHAT reluctantly Horatio Vedder followed them to the car. It was only a few minutes' ride down the mountain to the Sunset property. They didn't quite approach it, for when they were still a hundred yards away a man came out of one of the buildings. He had something in his hands. A rifle.

"What d'ya want?" he called.

Fletcher stopped the car and climbed out. "Wait here, fellows," he said to Cragg and Vedder in a low tone. He started toward the man with the rifle.

The latter let him come about halfway, then gestured with his rifle. "That's far enough. What d'ya want?"

"I'm from New York," Fletcher said. "I came up here about Billy Tamm."

"Yeah, so what?"

"He's dead, you know. Or didn't you know?"

"We knew. We read about it in the papers. What's that got to do with us?"

"Perhaps nothing, perhaps a great deal. You see, I've been employed by Walter Winslow—"

"Who's Winslow?"

"You never heard of him? Why—he's the original owner of the Three Bear Mine."

"Oh, him! Well, what about him?"

"Why, he's dead, too. Didn't you know?"

"Naw, but what's the difference? We all gotta shove off sometime."

"Well," said Fletcher, "I thought it might make a difference. You see, I know about the iron bears."

The effect of that remark was surprising. The man's rifle swung up suddenly and covered Fletcher. The passive truculence became active.

"Get the hell outta here!" the man snarled. "And be damned quick about it."

Fletcher backed away. "That won't do any good," he said. "You see, I'm representing Miss Winslow."

"Yeah, well she don't own the Sunset Mine. And neither did Winslow. Get the hell out of sight and don't come back if you know what's good for you."

Another man came out of the shack. He carried a long-barreled Colt in his right hand. "What's the trouble, Deke," he snapped.

The rifleman shook his head. "Just a lousy buttinsky, that's all. I'm running him off."

"I can come back," said Fletcher.

The rifleman's reply to that was a bullet that kicked up sand six feet to the right of Fletcher. "Bring an army!" the rifleman yelled.

Fletcher turned and walked deliberately back to the car. He found Horatio Vedder white-faced and Sam Cragg seething with rage.

"I wish the hell I had a gun!" Cragg raged. "I'd show them something."

"We're trespassing on their property," Fletcher said. "They've a right to keep us off. Let's go back."

He got into the flivver, turned it around and drove back up the steep road in second gear. He stopped opposite the Three Bear Mine. "I think you'd better stay with the car and watch, Sam. Mr. Vedder and I'll have a look into the mine."

Horatio Vedder again took the wicker hamper. "I've got a couple of flashlights," he said. "And some rope in case we need it."

They climbed to the mouth of the Three Bear Mine. Vedder took a couple of high-powered flashlights out of his hamper and handed one to Fletcher.



Fletcher flicked it on and entered the mine. Before he had gone a dozen feet he said, "I don't think we'll have any trouble," he said. "Tamm seems to have kept it in good condition."

Which was true. The timbers that braced the walls and ceiling were firmly in place, reinforced here and there. The tunnel was about five feet tall and Fletcher had to proceed in a stooping position.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE shaft ran straight for about fifty feet, then veered off to the right and sloped upward. "They had to do this to follow the vein," Fletcher explained to Vedder coming right behind him.

They went on another sixty or seventy feet when the tunnel took a very sharp drop. And then suddenly it ended. Broken timbers and broken rock and earth choked the tunnel to within a few inches of the roof.

"That's all," Fletcher said. "There's been a cave-in and it isn't recent. See anything that looked interesting, Vedder?"

The coin dealer was crestfallen. "Not a thing. You could see he kept the place cleared out. I can't understand—"

"Neither can I," Fletcher said. He threw the rays of his flashlight to the top of the little landslide. Then he inhaled softly and, leaning forward on his hands

and knees, began edging himself up the dirt heap.

"See anything?" Vedder asked eagerly.

"Just the dirt," Fletcher replied, "but it's smooth here. Tamm's been climbing it a lot."

He was at the top of the heap now, his head touching the roof of the tunnel. He stuck the flashlight ahead of him, over the space between the top of the heap and the roof.

He strained himself and looked beyond the cave-in into the continuation of the tunnel.

And then he saw something else, right under his flashlight. A small sheet-iron box. He took hold of it with his left hand, dragged it back with him.

"What's that?" cried Horatio Vedder.

"A box."

"What's in it?"

Fletcher brushed dirt from his trousers. Then he opened the little box. It contained a wad of something like a dirty dishrag. It was the worn hide of an animal.

Fletcher took it out and knew the moment he felt its weight that it contained something important. With Vedder standing over him, breathing hoarsely, he deliberately unwrapped the skin.

"Good God!" gasped Horatio Vedder. "Five dollar gold pieces—and everyone an 1822!"

"Yes," said Fletcher soberly.

Vedder poked the little heap of coins, began counting them. After a moment he said in a tone of awe, "Nineteen—Lord!"

"There were twenty," Fletcher said. "Tamm took one to New York with him."

Horatio Vedder let the coins slink back into Fletcher's hand. He stepped away. "I wonder—if they're genuine. I'll—see!" He turned and stooped to the hamper he had carried with him all this way. He opened the basket cover, reached in with his hand.

Fletcher took a quick step forward and kicked viciously at Horatio Vedder's wrist. The coin dealer yelped in surprise and pain

—and an automatic pictol flew from his hand and clattered several feet away.

Horatio Vedder howled and plunged after the gun. He never had a chance. Fletcher caught him six feet from the gun, smashed him a savage blow on the side of the head, then, as the coin dealer fell, stepped over him and retrieved the gun, an excellent .32 automatic. He stuck it in his pocket.

"You were awfully stupid with that hamper, Vedder," he said crisply.

Vedder was on his knees, holding the side of his head. "They're mine," he said fiercely. "I knew they were here and I came all the way out here for them."

"Did you, now? And why do you suppose I came?"

"I don't know and I don't give a damn, but those coins are mine. I'll go to court—"

"Think you'll have a chance? They were found on Winslow's property. They belong to his estate."

"They do not! The coins were Tamm's. He didn't get them from Winslow, or anywhere around here."

"You can prove that?"

"Of course I can. I have a letter from Tamm, in which he tells of his discovery of these pieces."

"Where did he find them?"

"He didn't say exactly. He merely wrote that on a prospecting trip—"

"How come he went prospecting? Winslow paid him to watch this place."

"Yes, but there was no reason for him to be here constantly. Tamm knew as well as Winslow that the mine was worked out and that he was being kept on merely because he once saved Winslow's life. As I said, he went on occasional prospecting trips. On the last one he found this box. It was in an old cave, beside a skeleton."

"A skeleton?"

Horatio Vedder scowled. "I'm merely repeating what he told me. Naturally, he didn't know who the dead man was. It was a very old skeleton."

"It must have been."

Vedder exclaimed impatiently. "That's not as improbable as you might believe. If you'll remember your history, you'll know that the Lewis and Clark Expedition, in 1823, passed somewhere around here. Isn't it conceivable that the skeleton was, at that time, a member of the expedition, that he might have been wounded and crawled into a cave where he died?"

"It's conceivable," said Fletcher, "but hardly possible. I've read the journal of Clark himself, covering that expedition. I recall no member of the party missing while they were in this vicinity."

"Nevertheless," said Vedder firmly, "I'm convinced that's what happened. For how else would twenty 1822 half eagles remain hidden for 116 years—in mint condition?"

"That's the part of the story that I'm inclined to believe. The coins must certainly have been out of circulation, and they are genuine 1822 half eagles. Let's say for the sake of argument that that's what happened and that Billy Tamm unearthed these gold coins—somewhere away from Mr. Winslow's property. By what right then do you claim them?"

"By right of discovery. I found them."

"I found them," Fletcher corrected.

"You wouldn't have looked in this tunnel if I hadn't told you I was searching for something."

"On the contrary, I would have. Because, I, too, was searching for something. And the something also happened to be gold coins."

HORATIO VEDDER blinked rapidly. "Rare coins?"

"Rather rare—since the government has called them in."

"1822 half eagles?"

"Well, no." Fletcher coughed gently.

"For the sake of argument, let's say you knew all about these coins, their hiding place. Do you realize, Mr. Vedder, that *that* makes you the logical murderer of Billy Tamm?"

"It does not. You'll still the candidate for that."

"Oh, no. The District Attorney has discovered that I couldn't possibly have killed him. But *you* could. You had the motive, you were present and you had the opportunity. And you have no alibi."

"Let them try to pin it on me. I'm willing to take my chances."

"Good, then let's go back to New York." Fletcher took out the automatic and made a gesture with it. "You can take your hamper, now, if you like."

BUT Vedder disdained it. He walked, bent at the waist, out of the tunnel. When they reached the open air Sam Cragg was approaching.

"Say, what took you so long? Oh-oh!" He saw the gun in Fletcher's hand. "So it's him, huh? I was wondering about that."

"It isn't me," Vedder said, defiantly. "And you two haven't heard the last of this."

"Of course," said Fletcher, "if you want to walk back to Las Vegas—"

Horatio Vedder didn't. He climbed sullenly into the flivver.

Fletcher gave Vedder the opportunity of going his own way, in Las Vegas, but the coin dealer elected to remain with Fletcher and Cragg—and the nineteen half eagles.

He got on the eastbound airplane and traveled with them all the way to Newark, where they arrived the next day. There, Vedder left them. But before he went, he said to Fletcher:

"You haven't heard the last of this."

"I'm afraid you haven't either," Fletcher retorted.

When Fletcher and Cragg were in a taxi rolling over the Pulaski Skiway, Fletcher said, "We're not out of the woods yet, Sam."

"Why not? It was him all along, wasn't it? You should have wired ahead for the cops to meet the airplane and grab him."

"I did send a wire in Las Vegas. But not for the purpose of arresting Vedder. He won't run away as long as I have my hands on the gold coins."

"What're you going to do with them?"

"I found them in a mine that belonged to the heir of Walter Winslow. I maintain they belong to her and that's who I'm going to turn them over to."

"You couldn't give her, say, eighteen, could you? You *might* have lost one. Or counted wrong, huh?"

"What do you think?"

"No, I guess not."

The taxi entered the Holland Tunnel and swished through the two miles under the Hudson River. When the car made the turn into Canal Street, in Manhattan, Cragg said:

"You know, Johnny, there's something been bothering me ever since those birds ran us away from the Sunset Mine. What'd they think we were, hijackers?"

"You'll hear the answer to that in a few minutes. We're almost to the District Attorney's office."

WHEN Fletcher sent their names in to the District Attorney, Murdock had them come in immediately. He shook hands warmly.

"I had a telephone call from Garlow, the Treasury man, three hours ago. He got them—and the evidence!"

"Including the iron bears?"

"Only the second one."

A peculiar expression spread across Sam Cragg's face. "What bears you talking about?"

"The ones you couldn't lift the other day."

"But I did lift them. The little ones, anyway. I can prove—"

"That you lifted them *once*. The second time you tried. But remember, the first time we were out there you tried to lift one of them and couldn't."

Cragg rubbed his nose furiously. "I wasn't really trying to lift it, that time."

Anyway, it was stuck in the ground or something."

"No, it wasn't. It was a different bear. A heavier bear."

"I don't get it, Johnny," Sam Cragg protested. "How could it be heavier? The second one was solid iron, too. It weighed around 250 pounds. I can lift that much easy."



"So can I—just about. But I couldn't lift the first bear, because it weighed over six hundred pounds."

Cragg gasped. "Huh? How could it weigh that much? It wasn't any bigger than the others. And there's nothin' heavier'n solid iron."

"Oh, but there is, Sam. Gold is much heavier."

"Gold!"

"Yes, gold. I first guessed Winslow was a gold hoarder when I stumbled across that little bear on the lawn and realized its tremendous weight."

"A lot of people wouldn't have thought anything wrong about that. They'd have just guessed that a solid iron bear that size weighed that much."

"Not if they'd looked up weights and measures in an almanac or encyclopedia. Gold is one of the three heaviest metals known, the only two heavier being osmium and platinum. Iron is comparatively light compared to gold. For example, a cubic foot of it weighs 490 pounds, whereas a cubic foot of gold weighs 1,194 pounds."

"It could have been lead," suggested Cragg.

"Lead is considerably lighter than gold. It weighs 686 pounds per cubic foot. Any-

way, thinking of lead threw me off the first time. It wasn't until the little bear was stolen and Winslow hired me to try to find it that I tumbled to its importance."

"He used the bears as a cache for his hoard of gold," the District Attorney said. "An excellent hiding place, too. Out in the open where no one would think of looking. And he'd built up the legend of the three bears extremely well."

Sam Cragg was nodding thoughtfully. His face was screwed up. But suddenly it broke and he exclaimed, "But, Johnny, you forgot something. That iron worker down on the Bowery—Tim Coveney—remember? He told me it was Walter Winslow himself who bought that duplicate bear and it was solid."

"Right you are, Sam—and that's when I first knew who it was who killed Billy Tamm—and afterward, Walter Winslow."

The telephone on the district attorney's desk rang very shrilly. He glanced in annoyance at it and leaned toward Fletcher.

"Who was it?"

The phone rang again. Exclaiming impatiently, the D. A. scooped it up. "Hello!" he barked. Then his eyes widened. "What—he's been murdered? Yes, I'll be right there" He slammed the receiver on the hook and looked at Fletcher, astonishment on his face.

"That coin dealer—Horatio Vedder—he's just been murdered!"

CHAPTER XIX

JOHNNY FLETCHER cried out in horror. "Godalmighty! Didn't you get Holterman?"

The D. A. winced. "I've been meaning to tell you. Haven't had time. When you wired yesterday we went after him. He'd flown the coop. Gussed you'd find something when you left for Nevada."

Fletcher groaned. "And I let Vedder walk right into it!"

Sam Cragg threw up his hands. "But

I thought it was Vedder who was doing the killing all the time!"

"Of course it wasn't, Sam! It was Holterman. I knew it was him all the time. I went out to Nevada just to get the evidence against him."

"Let's get the details about Vedder's death," suggested the District Attorney.

The police siren, worked efficiently by a uniformed man, cleared the traffic for the District Attorney's car. They roared up Broadway faster than Fletcher had ever traveled up that thoroughfare before. In a surprisingly few minutes they were charging into Horatio Vedder's coin shop in the Shortrod Building.

Detective Fox was at the door, Lieutenant Madigan inside. The only other occupant—live occupant—was Martha Hanson, Vedder's assistant.

The body of Horatio Vedder lay on the floor, behind a counter.

"Who found him?" the D. A. asked crisply.

Lieutenant Madigan nodded at the girl. "She called Headquarters."

Martha Hanson was even paler than usual and her sharp white teeth were gnawing at her lower lip.

"Martha," Fletcher said, "were you here when Mr. Vedder returned?"

"Oh, yes, but he was terribly excited. Told me to take a walk around the block. He got right on the telephone. I heard him asking for a—a Mr. Holterman as I was going out the door."

"But you don't know if he got him on the phone?"

She shook her head. "No. But when I came back to the office, ten minutes later, he was—like that!"

Fletcher said bitterly, "I could have prevented this."

"How?" Murdock snapped.

"By foreseeing it. Vedder was in Nevada, I told you that. Well, he saw what I saw there and could guess the answer as well as myself. I—I should have known that he would try to cut in on Holterman."

Murdock's nostrils flared. "Cut in on what? If you don't mind, let me in on some of these things. As yet we've only your word Holterman was the man who killed Winslow and that he's the one was selling his gold. Just because he was a relative—"

Fletcher said, "He was a relative only by marriage. But he was also a business associate of Winslow's. The combination of the two gave him the opportunity of learning Winslow's secret—the gold hoard. The moment Garlow, the Treasury man, verified the existence of that hoard, I was pretty sure it was Holterman."

"Why? All Garlow said was that Winslow was smelting down his gold—"

"He didn't say *that*. Not exactly. He said bullion was being sold by the Sunset Mine, in Nevada, which happens to be just a couple of miles from the Three Bear Mine. Garlow said he suspected the Sunset Mine as being owned by Winslow. Well, perhaps it is, but nevertheless, Winslow was not the one who was having the gold smelted down. Holterman was the man."

MURDOCK threw up his hands. "Now wait a minute. How could he do that without Winslow's knowing it?"

"He was the only man aside from Winslow himself who could do it. He had access to everything. He knew that Winslow had kept Billy Tamm at the Three Bear Mine all these years because Tamm had once saved him life. He knew, too, that Tamm would do anything in the world for Winslow.

"Well, Holterman wrote to Tamm—using Winslow's personal letterhead and forging Winslow's signature. Tamm wasn't literate enough to distinguish between a forgery and a genuine signature. Holterman, masquerading as Winslow, told Tamm that he had suffered reverses, that the only way he could recoup was to dispose of the gold currency he had accumulated years ago. He persuaded Tamm

to employ two or three trusted men, open up the Sunset Mine and smelter and then melt down the currency which he—Holterman posing as Winslow—shipped.”

A glint came into the D.A.’s eyes. “That story almost—almost sounds plausible.”

“Listen some more then. Holterman had a substitute bear made, stole the one loaded with gold and shipped it to Nevada. Tamm had it smelted down, sold the bullion to the government and remitted to Winslow, or Holterman.”

“How could he do that? Didn’t Winslow see the remittance?”

Fletcher shook his head. “That’s the evidence I found in Nevada. Holterman, posing as Winslow, impressed upon Tamm the importance for the utmost secrecy. He took a mailing address on Fifth Avenue and instructed Tamm to write him at that address on any matter pertaining to the gold and never under any circumstances to mention it when writing to the Wall Street address. Tamm knew the illegality of his act and complied.”

The district attorney drew a deep breath. “Then why did Tamm come to New York—and how did he obtain that rare 1822 gold piece?”

Fletcher turned to Martha Hanson. “Martha, tell us the truth. Did Horatio Vedder learn from Tamm how the latter obtained possession of those 1822 half eagles?”

“No,” replied Martha Hanson, “he merely wrote that he’d found some rare gold coins—”

“Some? He didn’t say how many?”

She shook her head. “Nor how he had obtained them. But I told you about that rare half dollar he sold us some years ago.”

“Yes. Then Vedder lied to me. He didn’t know how many coins there were until I found them out there. Well, Mr. Murdock, I’m afraid the answer to that secret died with Walter Winslow. My guess is that he got the gold coins along with others when he went out and bought

whatever gold he could some years ago. It’s possible that he bought the money from someone who had inherited it from a relative, who had died without revealing the value of the 1822 pieces—or perhaps had hoarded that gold for many years without knowing the rarity of those specific pieces.”

“It doesn’t really matter,” said Murdock. “The important thing is that we want a clear-cut case against Holterman. If we can pin this murder on him, we can pin the others, also.”

“If you catch him,” Fletcher said.

“Oh, we’ll catch him all right. No question of that. There’ll be a nation-wide alarm out for him inside of two hours. He isn’t a professional criminal, with underworld contacts.”

“But he’s got plenty of money. The proceeds from the first bear.”

“Money won’t help him any. We’ll get him. And it won’t take long.”

“I hope not. Well—you won’t be needing me any more then.”

“No, I guess not. The rest of it’s routine now. The police are very efficient at those things.”

Lieutenant Madigan stepped up to the district attorney and whispered into his ear.

Fletcher started for the door, but the D.A. called to him.

“Just a minute, Fletcher. Lieutenant Madigan mentioned something. You made out a strong case against Holterman. But one or two points are not clear. I refer to the murder of this Billy Tamm. Just how did he commit that?”

FLETCHER frowned at Lieutenant Madigan. “I’ve reconstructed a plausible method, that’s all. In view of the fact that Holterman hasn’t made a confession, it’ll have to suffice.

“Let’s say, Tamm personally examined all the gold coins before turning them over to the Sunset crowd to smelt. He discovered these 1822 pieces and, having a

numismatist catalog handy, knew their value. He wrote to Vedder—"

"Why? If he was such a trusted employee, had such a fine regard for his employer, Mr. Winslow, why didn't he write to Winslow? Was he going to hold out on him?"

"My guess is no. Holterman, posing as Winslow, probably laid it on pretty thick,



that his fortune was gone, that all that stood between him and the poorhouse were these two or three hundred thousand dollars' worth of gold coins. So Tamm decided to surprise his employer. He came to New York, intending to verify the value of the 1822 pieces — with twenty such pieces he couldn't be sure about the exact value of the lot—and then go to Winslow, with the glad news. He wrote ahead, merely saying he was coming to town, which started the panic. Holterman could pose as Winslow by mail, but not in person. He had to meet Tamm at the train."

"Yes," cut in Lieutenant Madigan, "so then he told him a bedtime story and Tamm went to the Forty-fifth Street Hotel, to *your* room and let Holterman cut his throat."

Fletcher scowled at Madigan, but ignored his words. "He did meet Tamm at the train, introduced himself as Winslow's brother-in-law. Probably told him Winslow'd see him the next day. So Tamm said fine, meanwhile he had to run over to the Forty-fifth Street Hotel to meet a man—Vedder—on some personal business.

"Holterman tagged along. In the hotel he threw a gun on Tamm, forced him into Room 819, through the window and into Room 821, where he killed him."

"I still can't understand," said the D.A.,

shaking his head, "why, with 250 rooms in the hotel, he should pick *your* room?"

"Because mine had the lock plugged with a French key. Holterman figured that it wouldn't be opened for several days, by which time he could steal the second bear—and perhaps clear out."

Lieutenant Madigan said sarcastically, "Swell! So Holterman dragged Tamm from room to room, floor to floor, examining all the locks until he found one that was plugged."

Fletcher gritted his teeth. "No. Let's say Tamm told him he had a friend in Room 821—the room Vedder was occupying. Holterman said he'd ride up with him. On the elevator he got Tamm confused and they stepped off on the eighth floor instead of the ninth. Eight-twenty-one is right in front of the elevator, as is nine-twenty-one one floor above. Holterman saw right away that the door lock was plugged and the rest of it popped into his mind."

"The story still smells," said Lieutenant Madigan.

"You tell a better one," Fletcher retorted.

"Let it pass," said Murdock. "We'll get the real story after we get Holterman."

"I'll go on record right now," declared Fletcher, "and state that his will be ninety percent like the one I just told you."

"You ought to be on the force," sneered Madigan.

Fifteen minutes later Fletcher led Sam Cragg into Mickey Ryan's Bar & Grill on 44th Street. He ordered beers for the two of them.

"Why so glum?" Cragg asked, after he had quaffed half of his glass of beer in one gulp.

"Just thinking about the case."

"What for? It's over. You ought to start thinking about us now. In case you don't know it, it's just a week now that we've had that fine suite at the Barbizon-Waldorf."

"Damn you and your realities, Sam,"

snapped Fletcher, making a wry face. "Well, let's get it over with. I've still got enough left from what Betty Winslow advanced. I'll pay the hotel bill out of that, then settle up with her. I should see her, anyway."

XX

BETTY WINSLOW greeted Fletcher and Cragg warmly. She was looking more like her old self again. She ordered drinks. Fletcher gave her an account then, of the Nevada expedition, handing her at the conclusion, the nineteen 1822 half eagles.

She stared in bewilderment at the coins. "You mean these are actually worth two hundred thousand dollars?"

"Oh no. Theoretically, any one of them is worth ten thousand dollars. But that price is based upon the coin being *rare*. If it's known there are twenty of them in circulation the price will drop—sharply. Probably down to one or two thousand dollars.

"My advice is to contact a dealer, sell them to him outright and he can feed them judiciously into the market. Handled in such a manner, I believe you can realize in the neighborhood of a hundred thousand dollars for the lot."

"Why, that's splendid!" Betty Winslow exclaimed. "I—you see, Mr. Garlow of the Treasury Department was here before he flew to Nevada. He told me about father's—gold. I understand the government will levy a fine on the estate, so this will help out. Of course, we're going to sell the place."

"We?"

Her eyes dropped for a moment, then came up again. "Tod Taylor and myself, I mean. We're going to be married."

"Congratulations!" murmured Fletcher.

"Thank you. And now, Mr. Fletcher, we owe you a great deal; naturally, you're entitled to a substantial reward."

"Naturally. I've been to considerable expense."

"Of course. What—how much do you think would be fair. Twenty-five percent—thirty?"

Fletcher sighed. "I've figured it out. You advanced me a thousand dollars of which there remained on my return, five hundred and twenty-two dollars. But in the meantime I ran up a hotel bill—with extras—of five hundred and seven dollars. I'm afraid I'll have to charge this up to you, because if I didn't I'd be frightfully embarrassed. So, I still have fifteen dollars. Here it is."

Betty Winslow gasped. "You're joking!"

"Oh no, I'm only charging the hotel bill. I—might not have stayed there if I hadn't been involved in this."

"Of course. But—but what about the reward. Surely, you're entitled to much more than just having your hotel bill paid."

"Why? Then I'd be in the same class as Jefferson Todd, the detective."

The butler entered the room and said in a hollow voice, "Mr. Jefferson Todd is calling."

Sam Cragg exclaimed and for a moment, even Fletcher was surprised. Then he chuckled. "Miss Winslow, this Todd is representing George Polson the coin collector. Polson would give his eye-teeth for one of these 1822 half eagles. Sell him one—and hold out for fifteen thousand!"

Jefferson Todd came into the room. "Fletcher!"

Fletcher turned. "Why, Jefferson, fancy meeting you here."

Todd sniffed. "I thought you'd run out of town."

"I'm thinking of doing that very thing," Fletcher replied. "New York's getting too crowded."

Todd turned to Betty Winslow. "Miss Winslow, I wonder if I could speak to you a moment—privately?"

"We were just leaving," Fletcher said. "Come on, Sam."

Betty Winslow sprang to her feet. "Oh, not yet. Can't you wait?"

"No, I just remembered something im-

portant I must take care of in town. Good-by, Miss Winslow."

Her eyes were shining as she held out her hand. "Good-by, Mr. Fletcher—" There was regret in her tone.

WHEN Fletcher asked for his key at the Barbizon-Waldorf, the clerk handed him a telephone slip. He looked at it and exclaimed to Sam Cragg, "Janet Speece telephoned!"

Cragg groaned. "So—"

Fletcher grinned. "That's what I call a coincidence, Sam. She's the important business I mentioned to Miss Winslow. Have you forgotten? Her show opens tonight. Certainly, you want to see it."

"Well, I guess she wasn't so bad, after all. And you know I like musical comedies."

"Swell, we'll go then. And what's more, I promise beginning tomorrow, to get down to earth. Back in the old groove. I'll brace Mort Murray for a stack of books—"

"You won't have to do that, Johnny. We can pay for them. Remember? That two hundred I won in Las Vegas, Nevada?"

"I hadn't forgotten. But, well, I was counting on that money for something else. Hand it over."

"Hey—" protested Sam Cragg.

"No fooling. I need it. I've got to clean up the last of this other business. Tomorrow, we'll start from scratch."

Sam Cragg's face was twisted in despair. But he handed Johnny Fletcher his money.

LIKE all opening nights in New York, the Plaza Theatre was packed. It was mostly a paper house, of course; critics and newspaper writers, on passes. But there was also a smattering of those hardy souls who simply must appear at each and every opening night and pay \$8.80 for tickets they could get the following night for \$3.30.

Fletcher handed their tickets to the usher and he and Sam Cragg were led

down to the first row. "Not bad, eh, Sam?" Fletcher remarked.

Cragg sneered. "That's where you went this afternoon, to get these front row seats. I'll bet you had to pay plenty extra to get them."

"Right you are, Sammy. We're just in time—there go the lights."

The chatter in the theatre subsided. And after a moment the curtain went up on "The Girls from Galveston."

In his time, Johnny Fletcher had seen many musical comedies. Some had been good, some indifferent and quite a few unspeakably bad. Before "The Girls from Galveston" had been on five minutes, he had a sneaking suspicion that it belonged in the third classification.

As yet, Janet Speece had not made her appearance. The first scene was confined to a ballet which wasn't very good. It gave way to the presentation of the slight plot around which the musical was built. This was given to the audience through a little skit featuring an oily-haired, fat man in frock coat and wing collar and a cute, platinum blonde who scribbled in a book and pretended to be the perfect secretary to the big business man.

Then the fat man left the stage and a rouged, powdered juvenile came on. Before the audience could catch its breath he was kissing the secretary. She retaliated by bursting into song. After a moment she stopped and the juvenile sang. The girl left the stage while he was still singing and then Janet Speece came on.

She wore a trim business suit, a hat that was a creation, instead of merely a hat. Silver fox pelts draped her figure.

The juvenile addressed his song to her. It was a little ditty, entitled, "How Can a Boy from Dallas Love a Girl from Galveston?"

Fletcher looked sidewise at Sam Cragg. Sam had a pained expression on his face.

And then Janet Speece began to sing. She was nervous and her voice rose a note higher than it should have. She made

the mistake of looking at the audience to see how she was going over and the stony faces evidently frightened her a little more.

Her voice quavered, went a couple of notes higher. It sounded almost like the noise a phonograph record makes when the needle slips across a few grooves.

A man sitting in the first row tittered. Another chuckled out loud. Janet Speece seemed to hear and jerked her face frantically away.

Someone laughed boisterously.

"Gawd!" breathed Sam Cragg.



Half the front row burst into unrestrained laughter. It was the nightmare of every actor and actress—laughter in the wrong place!

Janet was too new a trouper to take it. Her voice choked out completely, her face turned white. She tried frantically to make sound come from her throat, then suddenly rushed from the stage!

Another girl came quickly on, took up the song where Janet had left off. The audience was whispering.

Johnny Fletcher got up. "Let's go, Sam."

Sam Cragg was willing enough. As they walked to the rear of the theatre, he whispered, "Poor kid!"

"She got the bird," said Fletcher. "Let's go backstage and talk to her."

They left the theatre and went around to the stage door. A five-dollar bill got them past the doorman. Just as they reached Janet's dressing room the door was jerked open and Janet shot out.

"Janet—" began Fletcher, but she just rushed past him. A moment later he heard the stage door slam.

"You can't really blame her," Sam Cragg

said, "those punks in the first row started laughing. She'd got over it if they hadn't."

"Tough," said Fletcher. He entered the dressing room. Janet's silver fox furs were spilled on the floor. A makeup kit had been smashed against the wall.

Feet pounded outside and a man came hurtling into the dressing room. "Janet!" he cried.

Fletcher's eyes lit up. "Mr. Peabody!"

It was none other than Peabody, the manager of the Forty-fifth Street Hotel, who only a short week ago, had put the French key into the door of Fletcher's room.

He was quite the lad now, hair slicked, form-fitting Tux draped his slender figure. He stared at Fletcher, then at Cragg.

"You!" he said weakly.

"Yep. Remember us?"

Peabody's eyes darted about the room. "Where's Janet?"

"She just ran out. I guess she went home. Too bad about—" He stopped, for Peabody had departed as suddenly as he had come in. The stage door slammed again.

"Well, we might as well go, too, Sam," said Fletcher. "Home; our old home."

"Huh?"

"The Forty-fifth Street Hotel."

Cragg's mouth twisted. "We still owe some money there. Or did you pay up out of my two hundred?"

"No, I used that money for something else. Tell you in a little while. Let's get a cab."

They climbed into a taxi outside, but could have made better time walking to the Forty-fifth Street Hotel. It was early evening, the streets crowded.

XXI

EDDIE MILLER, the bell captain was standing near the elevators, when Fletcher and Sam Cragg entered the hotel. His mouth fell open when he saw them.

"Uh, hello!"

"Hi, Eddie, where's the boss?"

Eddie Miller frowned. "I don't know. He busted in a minute ago and went upstairs. You come to pay up your back rent?"

"Probably, Eddie, probably. I think I know where Peabody is. I'll just run up and see."

He stepped into a waiting elevator. Sam Cragg followed.

"Eight," Fletcher said to the elevator boy.

Sam Cragg's eyes jerked to Fletcher's. The latter grinned.

They got off at the eighth floor and Fletcher started toward the door of Room 819. Cragg muttered, "You won't find her here."

Fletcher put a finger to his mouth. "Shh!" He reached the door, pointed silently to a white metal key in the lock. He drew away and put his mouth close to Cragg's. "That's the pointed, hard metal key with which they pull out the French key."

He took hold of the doorknob suddenly and, pushing open the door, stepped into the room.

"Hello!" he said.

The scene he saw was an astonishing one. Peabody was at the far end of the room, his back against the wall, his hands held over his head, an expression of—horror—on his face. Standing sideways, halfway between Peabody and the door, was Janet Speece.

There was an automatic pistol in her hand.

"Close that door behind you," she commanded Fletcher. "Quick!" There was deadly menace in her tone.

"Close it, Sam," Fletcher ordered.

Cragg closed the door.

"You fool!" said Janet Speece, "why'd you have to come here?"

"For the last act," Fletcher replied calmly.

The theatrical term caused Janet to

flinch. She laughed hysterically. "You came to laugh at me? Because I flopped. All right, I'm a failure. I can't sing."

"And your acting is worse," Fletcher said.

Her eyes blazed. "I can't act? The devil I can't. I've acted better than any actress you ever saw. This past week I played a part that Katherine Cornell couldn't have played. I fooled everyone."

"No, you didn't," Fletcher said. "I knew right along."

"You did not!" Janet's voice rose shrilly. "I fooled you as well as the others."

"Not even the first night," said Fletcher.

"I knew you were lying even then. You were out with Holterman that evening. He picked you up and took you out. He needed you. While you were out with him, he swiped your hotel key from your purse—he told you he had to see a man. In an hour or so he came back, put your key back in your purse. He made a little mistake and for that mistake he paid. You shook him down the next day for enough to buy your part in Denton Freeman's show."

Janet's eyes blazed. "You didn't know, you fool, you couldn't have known!" she cried, shaking in fury.

"But I did know," insisted Fletcher. "You were a lousy actress. The only one you ever fooled in your life was Peabody there. You twisted him about your finger and you thought you could fool everyone. Holterman killed Tamm, then Walter Winslow and finally Horatio Vedder."

Janet made a desperate effort to regain her composure. She didn't quite succeed. "And Holterman made a fool out of all of you. He got away—"

"Did he? Then, why, yesterday, did you persuade Peabody to turn this room over to you again?"

Peabody stammered. "Su-superstition. Actor's luck—"

"Oh, was that the line? She got her break while living here, so she didn't want the room rented to anyone else."

"You wouldn't understand," Janet Speece said. "Neither did Peobody," said Fletcher. "He didn't know that you wanted this room so you could have Holterman come to you here—and you could kill him."

Janet Speece gasped. Fletcher, watching closely, despite his apparent carelessness, saw the fingers of the hand which held the gun whiten.

HE WENT on quickly. "You couldn't have his body found until after you'd made your great success. So you killed him here and got Peobody to seal up the room."

Peobody's horror-stricken eyes were staring at the closed bathroom door. Behind him, Fletcher heard Sam Cragg inhale sharply.

The gun was no longer pointing at Peobody. It was full on Fletcher now. "All right," Janet said, "you've had your turn. Now——"

"I've beaten you all along!" Fletcher cried. "You flopped tonight. The audience gave you the bird. Because I bought them."

Her nostrils were flaring. In a moment she would shoot.

Fletcher went on, remorselessly. "You didn't sing badly at all, Janet. You were a little nervous, but no more so than anyone else. It was the tittering and the laughing that broke you up. Ten men in the front row. They did it—because I paid them ten dollars apiece to give you the bird!"

And then Fletcher sidestepped swiftly, ducked and lashed out with his competent left hand.

The automatic thundered and was punctuated by Janet Speece's shriek of awful hate.

"You fiend! You beast! You did that to me!"

He slapped the automatic from her hand, but she clawed at him. Her long nails raked his face. She was a pantheress. He wrapped his arms about her, held tight.

And then suddenly she went limp in his arms, her head lolled and fell against his shoulder. Her body sagged.

He picked her up, carried her to the bed. "She's fainted," he announced.

"Gawd!" said Sam Cragg thickly.

Peobody, his teeth chattering, came away from the wall and advanced slowly toward the bathroom.

"Open it," said Fletcher. "You'll find John Holterman in there. He came to her to hide and she killed him. He was too hot and she would have been implicated. She did it—just so she could have the one big thing, the acclaim of the first night audience. Her entire existence was justified if she was a success. And I ruined that for her."

Janet Speece catapulted up from the bed.

Sam Cragg cried out, "Johnny—grab her!"

And then she was gone. Through the window.

There was a thump inside the room. Peobody had fainted.

Sam Cragg said thickly, "Johnny, why didn't you grab her? You could have stopped her."

Johnny Fletcher said, "Why?"

THE END

Beginning in our next issue

RED CLARK FOR LUCK **by Gordon Young**

*When the Marines Oversee an Election, That Election
Is Square, All Right!*



VIVAS AND VOTES

By **FRANK TRACY**

Author of "Thirty-Year Soldier," etc.

I

"SAY, Sarge, this electoral duty ain't bad at all," remarked Private James Lewis, U. S. Marine Corps, as he raised his glass of luke-warm Scotch-and-soda and drained it. "Only trouble is," he added, "they need another ice machine in El Centro. We've been waitin' for that spare part since the machine broke down a week ago."

"Well," chided the tall, sun-bronzed Sergeant Donald Tillman from across the table, "you seem to be doing all right without the ice. That's your fourth drink in

the last half hour. Take it easy, kid, and you'll last longer. They can always make the stuff faster than you can drink it."

"Okay, Sarge," grinned Lewis.

The two marines were on detached duty supervising the national election in the Central American republic of Lanagua. They were stationed in the northernmost district of Serovia province, and from past experience, the United States government knew that most Lanaguan revolutions resulted from unfair elections. To ensure a fair vote, marines were stationed at each polling place to preserve order and enforce the election laws. Tillman and Lewis had been in El Centro, the Serovian metropolis

of some twenty houses, for almost two weeks.

Checking the election rolls and establishing a polling place had been but a few days' work, and the time dragged slowly for the two men as they waited for election day.

"I hope we can make it to the coast by pay day," said Lewis. "I'd like to hit that crap game at the barracks."

Tillman chuckled softly at this.

"I seem to remember hearing those words before," he said. "I also seem to remember lending a certain guy five bucks last pay day so he could buy his cigarettes for the month."

"But that was last time," objected Lewis. "This time I really feel *right*."

The stringed strains of a tango drifted across the smoke-filled *cantina* and the calico curtain covering the doorway near the bar was brushed aside to admit a vivacious, olive-skinned girl. She glided sensuously across the floor to the slow beat of the drum and then, as the tempo increased, she broke into a gyration of whirls accompanied by the frenzied "Vivas" of the audience.

THE music grew still louder and then, suddenly stopped, after several particularly raucous bars of the finale, to which the dancing girl whirled in a last, dizzy spin.

"I still say this electoral duty ain't bad." Lewis had almost to shout his words to make himself heard above the din of the applause.

Sergeant Tillman's bronzed face took on a look of seriousness as he turned to his companion.

"Listen, kid," he said quietly when the applause was over, "you don't know the half of it. The whole thing's got me worried. Here it is, only two days before election and there hasn't been a single political brawl in this *cantina*. It ain't natural."

"Don't worry, Sarge. As long as these

babies behave themselves, we can sit around and take things easy."

"But you don't know these people like I do," objected Tillman. "When you've been here longer, you'll find they really take their politics seriously. A knife or machete settles most of their arguments. But, up to now, things have been too docile to suit me."

The patched screen door swung open and six half-drunken natives sauntered in and pushed up to the bar. Manuel Ortez, local *jefe politico*, followed them in and ordered *aguardiente* all around. When the glasses were filled, Ortez raised his drink and spoke in a loud voice.

"To *el presidente* Miraflores, *el liberador*—*viva el liberador*." His beady black eyes narrowed perceptibly when he saw Sergeant Tillman watching him, but, making no sign of recognition, he tossed off his drink in a single swallow.

The natives answered in a chorus of "Vivas," for, like most Lanaguans, their political convictions could be waived when there were free drinks. They downed theirs and, when Ortez ordered more, their joy was unbounded. They broke into a noisy, good-natured banter and promptly forgot the months of back-breaking labor during which they had invoked the most terrible of curses on the head of Miraflores, the dictator.

ORTEZ put down his drink and walked over to the table where Tillman and Lewis were seated.

"*Bucnas dias, senors*," he greeted them affably as he pulled out a chair. The sweat-beads were heavy on his unshaven face and a long, white knife-scar from his right temple to his chin stood out noticeably from the black stubble that covered his fat jowls.

"It is very hot, senors," he said as he sat down heavily. "But my country, it is always hot." He winked and added, "In more ways than one—eh, senors?"

Tillman nodded in reply to Ortez' greet-

ing. He loathed the condescending air of the half-breed politician. As a boy, in the roaring forties of New York City's west side, he had seen plenty of Ortez' kind in the conventional black derby and loud-striped shirt of the typical ward-heeler. But Tillman swallowed his resentment, for he was determined to carry out orders and see that a fair election was conducted. And a fair election meant that Ortez was to receive as much consideration as the opposition leader.

"A drink, *Sergeanto?*" offered Ortez as he waved to the bartender. "The heat gives one a great thirst—"

He was interrupted by a loud shout from the direction of the bar. One of the natives, a six-foot mulatto, stood leering down at a slight, sallow-faced Indian at the end of the bar. The Indian's drink stood untasted in front of him. He alone, of the crowd at the bar, had refused to drink.

"Drink!" commanded the mulatto in a loud tone as he pointed at the untouched glass. "Drink to the health of *el presidente.*"

The Indian looked steadily up at the big black, his fearless brown eyes flashing with hatred.

"*El presidente,*" he said slowly, "is one big pig."

He snatched up the glass and dashed it



to the floor where it smashed into bits. Then he turned to meet the rush of the mulatto.

The big black charged at the Indian and grabbed him by the neck with one huge, ham-like hand. The Indian's feeble

struggles were of little avail as he choked and gasped for breath. The mulatto held him out at arm's length and, with his free hand, reached down to his belt where a long, keen-edged machete hung suspended from a heavy cord.

Sergeant Tillman leaped to his feet and made for the bar. He struck the flat side of the upraised machete and the weapon, barely missing the Indian's head, hacked deep into his shoulder. The Indian slumped to the floor, the blood gushing from his wound in bright, red spurts.

The black again raised the machete but, before he could strike, Tillman stepped in close and brought up a hard right that landed flush on the mulatto's jaw. The man's eyes went glassy as he went to his knees, shuddered convulsively, and then dropped flat on his face. Tillman quickly stooped down and took the machete from the fallen man's limp fingers. Then he knelt beside the wounded half-breed.

"Get a doctor—quick," he ordered as he ripped the Indian's shirt away from his shoulder.

A doctor materialized from somewhere and had the unconscious Indian removed to the back room. Tillman jerked the still half-stunned mulatto to his feet and marched him out the door to the *calabozo.*

ORTEZ followed behind and, as Tillman and Lewis and their prisoner rounded a curve in the sun-baked road, he came up and plucked at the sergeant's sleeve.

"Please, *senor,* may I speak to you a moment?" he asked.

"Sure." Tillman stopped and faced Ortez while Lewis stepped up and grabbed the prisoner's arm.

"A thousand pardons, *senor,*" murmured Ortez. "May I suggest that your action is perhaps a trifle hurried? After all," here he shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of casual indifference, "this was but a political argument. This man, I am sure, meant no harm."

Tillman peered straight into Ortez' narrow black eyes.

"You mean I should release the prisoner?" he asked crisply.

"I only suggest, senor."

"This man," said the sergeant, "will be held on a charge of assault with a dangerous weapon and, if the victim dies, he will stand trial for murder."

With that he turned on his heel and marched the prisoner to the little concrete hut that served as a jail. Lewis made a hasty inspection of the bars and, when Tillman locked the door, they started back to the *cantina*. Ortez was waiting for the two marines in the middle of the road. When they walked up to him, he stepped forward and offered Tillman his hand.

"I am very sorry, senor," he said as he bowed low. "Perhaps I could have a few words with the *sergente* alone—no?"

"Certainly." Tillman nodded to Lewis and, when Lewis had walked out of earshot, the sergeant turned again to the *jefe* from whom he expected an impassioned plea for the prisoner. But, in this, he was wrong.

"Senor," spoke Ortez, "I shall be blunt. It is a fact that, in a republic, elections are a necessary evil. It is also a fact that Miraflores, *el presidente*, will be re-elected. It is my duty, as a thankful citizen, to present *el presidente* with an overwhelming majority in my district."

"Of course," agreed the sergeant.

"There are some people," continued Ortez, "who are so thankless as to vote against *el liberador*. It would be a simple matter to overcome this small vote. For this, senor, I ask your help. Naturally, you are not a citizen, so you could not be rewarded with political patronage. Your reward would be in the form of dollars—*Estados Unidos dollars*. Shall we say one thousand?"

Tillman had all he could do to keep from striking the man.

"I don't want that kind of money, Ortez," he answered. "And, in spite of your

crooked tactics, I want you to know that you'll get a fair show in this election. But," here the sergeant emphasized each word with a tap of his extended forefinger on Ortez' chest, "but so will the other side. Is that all you want to ask me?"

"Not quite, senor," replied Ortez glibly. "I might add that it is not safe to have enemies in Lanagua. Of course, I would not want to see anything happen to the *sergente*, but—"

"Don't worry," snapped Tillman, his lips twisting into an ironical smile. "I'll bid you good night now, if you don't mind."

He whirled and walked slowly to his quarters. In fifteen minutes, he was fast asleep.

II

A SLIGHT rustling sound at the window screen woke Sergeant Tillman. He looked up at the window, but the night was dark and he could see no one. Lifting his mosquito netting, he quietly got out of bed. He pulled his .45 from the holster that hung at the head of the bed, pulled back the slide, and, holding the tension of the spring with his left hand, let the slide go back slowly and noiselessly. Then, taking his flashlight from the shelf, he slipped out the door.

The sergeant crept silently around the house, his thumb on the flashlight button; but he did not use the light, for the moon had come out from behind the clouds and, filtering through the tall trees at the edge of the small clearing, made light enough for him to see his way. Tillman peered carefully into the dense, dark undergrowth surrounding the clearing, but he could see no sign of the midnight intruder.

Then, as he rounded a corner of the house, the sergeant was startled by a muffled *thud* directly behind him. He turned quickly to see a knife, its handle still quivering, deeply imbedded in the side of the house. He flashed his light in the

direction from which the knife must have come, but all he could see was a slight rustle of leaves which might have been caused by the cool breeze that had sprung up during the night.

Advancing cautiously into the thick bushes, he explored the ground with his light. His search was rewarded when, about ten feet back from the clearing, he found two half-smoked cigarette butts. He stooped down and picked them up. They felt cold. Someone, Tillman reflected, had been waiting in the bushes for quite some time.

The cigarettes were hand-made, and rolled with the light brown paper commonly used in Lanagua. The sergeant tossed the butts aside for, where almost everyone rolled cigarettes from the same brands of tobacco and paper, they were of little value as clues to the smoker's identity.

Tillman went back into the house. When he opened the door, he saw Lewis sitting up in his bunk, his clenched fists rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"What's up?" asked Lewis.

"Nothing much," answered Tillman. "You might as well go back to sleep."

Lewis looked down and saw the pistol in the sergeant's hand.

"Come on, Sarge, let's have it," the private insisted. "You ain't luggin' that forty-five for nothin'."

Tillman told him of the incident outside the house.

"Boy, oh boy!" exclaimed Lewis when he heard about the knife. "Who was it?"

"I don't know. But if it wasn't Ortez, it was one of his men. Anyway, whoever it was, his aim wasn't so hot."

"Well, let's get Ortez," offered Lewis eagerly. "We can't let him get away with that."

"Easy, boy," cautioned Tillman. "We haven't anything on him and an unjustified arrest at election time wouldn't go so good for us when Headquarters heard about it. We'll keep an eye on Ortez and maybe

he'll commit himself. Meanwhile, I'm going to get some sleep."

THE next morning, Tillman and Lewis breakfasted alone in the *cantina* for, in Lanagua, people are not early risers. Their breakfast over, the two marines were sitting over coffee and cigarettes when a small, swarthy native in tattered denim quietly came in the door and walked over to their table. The man's dirty, bare feet made no sound as he moved over the wooden floor. He took off his battered *sombrero* before he spoke.

"I have news, *Sergeanto*," he whispered. His breathing was labored as though he had run a long distance.

"Yes?" questioned Tillman as he ground his cigarette in his saucer. "What is it?"

"Mandino," the native said softly after he had looked around him to make sure he was not overheard.

The mention of Mandino, the Lanaguan bandit chieftain, brought Tillman to his feet.

"What about him?" he demanded.

"He is here, senor," replied the native. "My brother, his name is Juan, has seen Mandino only five miles to the north last night."

"How many men has he?" asked the sergeant.

"That, senor, I do not know. But they were many and well armed. To that, senor, my brother will swear."

Tillman's arm shot out quickly and, grabbing the man's shirt-front, the sergeant pulled him up close.

"Who sent you here?" he demanded.

"Before God, senor," the native whined, "I came to you when I heard from my brother."

"Come on, Lewis," ordered Tillman as he released the man and started out the door. "We've got to telephone the outpost at San Leon. I hope that the wires haven't been cut."

They went straight to the office of the Lanaguan Rubber Company where Till-

man picked up the telephone and put in his call. In a few minutes he was talking to Lieutenant Heffner, the San Leon commander.

"Sergeant Tillman, sir," the non-com reported. "I have just received information that Mandino is five miles north of here. It might be a trick of Ortez' to throw the district into confusion. His party is pretty shaky here and, if he can scare the outlying plantation workers into staying away election day, he still has a chance to win out. I haven't been able to check on my information, but I'm pretty sure that the *mozo* who told me was telling the truth."

"Get what information you can," directed the lieutenant. "I'll send a four squad patrol under Sergeant McCann. As senior sergeant, you will, of course, be in charge of any operations that may be necessary. The patrol will leave immediately. You can ring me as soon as you get any definite information."

"Aye, aye, sir," acknowledged Tillman.

HE HUNG up the phone and thanked the rubber company's clerk whose thin pale face had turned a dull gray when he heard Mandino's name mentioned.

"Do — do you think he'll come here, Sergeant?" the clerk stammered.

"Don't worry," answered Tillman, "Mandino's probably no nearer than fifty miles from here. But don't mention what you've heard to anybody."

"I won't," promised the clerk.

Tillman left the office and, with Lewis at his side, went to his quarters. The two marines filled their canteens, shoved extra ammunition in their belts, and set out on the trail to the north.

Their progress was slow, for the trail was a long, up-hill path that wound crookedly through the jungle from the low central river valley to the distant heights of the border mountain range. Both men perspired profusely and their shirts were soon soggy as they climbed the steep grade.

The heavy, humid air hung oppressively over the jungle and the overhanging foliage, instead of comfortably shading the



trail, only darkened it and shut out the faint breeze that blew through the tree-tops.

"We'll rest here," announced Tillman as they came out on a small plateau where the trail leveled off for a short distance before it rose again to mount the hills beyond.

Lewis handed the sergeant a cigarette from his pack and they sat down to smoke.

"We must have made about three miles," he said as he stretched his legs out in the damp grass that covered the small clearing. "That means that the place should be over that second hill." He pointed toward the north where a series of hills rose, one upon the other, in a solid mass of verdant green.

Ping! The whine of a bullet as it ricocheted from a large rock in the center of the clearing sent both men scurrying for cover. They lay under a clump of tall ferns and Tillman swept the hills with his binoculars for the source of the rifle-fire.

"Can't see a thing," he muttered as he lowered his glasses and wiped the lenses with his handkerchief.

A slight puff of blue smoke from the hilltop followed by the sharp *crack* of a bullet striking a tree-trunk showed from where the attack came.

"Seems as if that must be someone outside the law—one of Mandino's men all right," said Tillman. "He must have spotted us with his glasses. We'd better get out of here."

The two men jumped up and ran back down the trail until they topped a small

rise that was covered with tall, thick-trunked trees.

"You can watch the trail from here," observed Tillman to Lewis. "If you see them coming, get back to the village as soon as you can. I'm going back to phone Lieutenant Heffner."

"Okay, Sarge, so long," said Lewis as he took the sergeant's hand and shook it warmly.

Tillman made the return trip quickly as the trail was down-grade most of the way. When he reached the village, he went straight to the rubber company's office and picked up the phone. But there was only an ominous silence when he put the receiver to his ear. This time, somewhere in the vast jungle expanse between him and San Leon the wires had been cut.

III

SERGEANT TILLMAN went to his quarters and examined the cabinet where the election records were kept. Tomorrow was election day and, Mandino or no Mandino, Tillman was determined that the balloting would be held. He only hoped that the bandit would hold off until McCann's patrol arrived from San Leon.

Satisfied that his records were intact, the sergeant locked the file cabinet and set out for the *cantina*. He saw little sign of life as he walked down the narrow road; for it was the hour of the *siesta*, which nothing less than a major catastrophe could interrupt.

Most of the townspeople were reclining in the confines of their homes but, here and there, Tillman saw a dirty, 'guardiente-soaked *mozo* asleep under a shade tree.

The sergeant entered the *cantina* and, seeing Ortez seated alone at a corner table, he walked over to him.

"Sleep well last night?" Tillman asked as he sat down across the table from the *jefe*.

Ortez did not answer immediately. His

beady black eyes looked questioningly up at the marine. Then his full, sensuous lips parted in a forced smile as the half-breed spoke.

"But of course, senor. Is it not a true saying that only those with guilty consciences are restless in their sleep?"

"I wouldn't know," answered the sergeant. "But my conscience didn't bother me last night." Tillman's eyes bored straight into those of Ortez. The latter, ostensibly interested in his empty whiskey glass, dropped his gaze.

"The heat, senor, is sometimes bad for sleep at this season of the year," he remarked as he picked up his glass and twirled it in his fingers.

"Yes," agreed Tillman. "The heat was on last night, all right."

Ortez ignored the remark and called for another drink. He also ordered one for "His good friend, Senor Tillman.

"Have you heard the news?" the sergeant asked after Pancho, the inn-keeper, had set a bottle on the table and returned to the bar.

"What news, senor?"

Tillman grinned at the half-breed's ineffectual attempt to show curiosity. Then, in mock solemnity, he leaned forward and whispered, "Mandino is here."

"So I have heard," said Ortez as he shrugged his shoulders. "But then, one often hears of Mandino. He is like the will-of-the-wisp, senor, if we are to believe all we hear."

"Yes," agreed Tillman, "if we are to believe all we hear. But I didn't hear—I saw him this morning."

Ortez straightened up in his chair.

"But that is different," he said. "I hope the senor has taken steps for our safety. Perhaps it would be wise to call San Leon for help."

"I tried," said the sergeant. "The wires were cut."

The *jefe's* eyes gleamed craftily. He lit up a hand-rolled cigarette and settled back in his chair.

"The election, of course, will be held as usual?" he asked.

"Of course," answered Tillman as he rose from his seat. "The polls will open at six tomorrow morning. Good afternoon, señor."

The sergeant walked out the door and, when he had rounded a turn in the road, he went off to the side and, doubling back through the bushes, sat down where he could watch the door of the *cantina*. In a few minutes, the door swung open and Ortez, obviously in a hurry, stepped outside. He glanced quickly to right and left and, satisfied that he was not observed, set off down the road to the north.

Tillman waited several minutes. Then, returning to the road, he walked to the corral in rear of his quarters. It was but a few minutes work to saddle the sleek, dappled mare. Tillman swung into the saddle and rode off to the south on the San Leon trail.

MCCANN'S patrol should be fairly near, the sergeant thought, as he rode along the trail. With the rains two weeks away, the ground was hard and dry and the patrol would be making good time. Tillman's horse, fat and sleek with weeks of inactivity, was anxious to step out and he had to slow the animal's pace. The trail, while in good condition, was quite rough and there were many holes in which a horse might step and break a leg.

The sergeant rode along easily for half an hour when, suddenly, he felt the horse start under him. The animal's ears were thrust forward as though straining to catch a sound from ahead.

Tillman quickly dismounted and led the horse into the thick undergrowth where he tied the animal to a tree. Then, selecting a spot where he could observe the trail without being seen, he settled down to wait. Soon he heard voices from up the trail, but they were very faint and he could not tell if they were Spanish or English. McCann should have been about this far

along, but Tillman could take no chances. Perhaps Mandino had split his band in two and planned to hit the town from the north and south at the same time.

Soon, however, a khaki-clad figure came into view from around a turn in the trail. Tillman immediately recognized the man as Corporal Freeman who was the point of McCann's patrol. Emerging from his cover, Tillman ran up to the corporal.

"Hello, Freeman," he greeted the non-com. "Where's McCann?"

"Back about center," answered Freeman when he recognized Tillman. "Is everything clear ahead?"

When Tillman assured him that it was, the corporal sat down to rest. Soon the body of the patrol came around the turn and, when Sergeant McCann came up, Tillman quickly explained the circumstances to him.

"We can go around the town," he said, "and come out on the North Trail. There's a peach of a hill about three miles out where we can take up a position and give Mandino a dose of his own medicine. But we've got to hurry. Lewis is up there watching, and I don't know whether Mandino has started yet. He'll probably wait until dark, but we can't be sure. How about the boys — can they start right away?"

No answer was necessary, for the look of eagerness on the men's faces plainly showed their impatience to be off. Most of them had spent two years or more in Lanagua and there were few among them who had not, at some time or another, helped bury a buddy who had met an evil death at Mandino's hands. Here was the chance they were waiting for—a chance to ambush the outlaw.

The patrol started off on the double, Tillman riding ahead. When they neared the village, the sergeant secured his horse to a sapling and struck off through the jungle, the patrol at his heels. The going was hard, but clinging close to the town's edge and taking advantage of the many

clearings, the patrol made rapid progress.

The village behind them, the marines came back on the trail and marched rapidly to the north. When they had traveled about two miles, the patrol suddenly halted when a burst of machine-gun fire from directly ahead shattered the silence of the jungle. A minute later Private Lewis, sub-Thompson in hand, came running into view from around a bend in the trail.

"They're coming!" he gasped as, panting for breath, he ran up to Sergeant Tillman.

IV

"TAKE cover," ordered Sergeant Tillman as he split the patrol and sent the two groups to either side of the trail. "And don't anybody shoot until you hear my order."

The men dove into the protection of the heavy green vegetation on both sides of the trail. Taking advantage of what natural cover the jungle afforded, each man sought out his own spot and, in less than a minute's time, the patrol was effectually concealed.

It was then that Tillman, rising to his feet to ascertain the position of his men, noticed a bandoleer of ammunition lying in the middle of the trail. One of the patrol, in his hurry to take cover, must have unwittingly dropped the ammunition.

"Pick up that bandoleer, Newman," ordered Tillman as he stuck out his arm and tapped the shoulder of the man next to him. "And make it snappy."

Private Newman leaped to his feet and, stooping low, slashed his way through the heavy growth to the trail. Snatching up the bandoleer, he turned to regain his cover when he froze in his tracks. Not fifty yards away, in the middle of the trail, a swarthy bare-footed native stood watching him.

"*Los marinos!*" the native shouted at the top of his lungs as he turned and fled

in the direction from which he had come. "*Los marinos.*"

Tillman cursed loudly. "If I knew who dropped that bandoleer, I'd break his neck."

Rising to his knees, he crawled over to where McCann lay behind a huge rotten log.

"Too bad," muttered McCann. "But they won't hit us now 'cause they don't



know how strong we are. Chances are they're laying an ambush right now. It might be a good idea to send scouts out on both sides of the trail to see if they can spot 'em."

"Right," agreed Tillman. "Meanwhile, we'd better hold our position here."

Two marines, one on either side of the trail, moved slowly up the sides of the deep ravine through which the trail passed. A slight waving of branches on both the ravine's banks showed that they were moving in the direction from which the bandit had appeared.

Tillman settled down to wait, but not for long. A rifle-shot from the top of the ravine brought him to his feet, his eyes vainly straining through the half-gloom of the jungle. Then he heard the loud crashing sound of someone hurrying through the undergrowth. He raised his pistol and waited.

AS THE crashing grew louder, Tillman could make out the figures of two men coming through the jungle. One of them was a native. Close behind the na-

tive was one of the marine scouts, his rifle leveled at the prisoner ahead.

"Ran into this bird in the bush," explained the scout when he reached Sergeant Tillman. "He took a shot at me, but missed a mile. When I threw down on him, he threw up his hands."

Tillman turned to the bandit who stood sullenly with folded arms, his eyes glued to the ground.

"How many men with Mandino?" the sergeant asked.

The bandit did not look up.

"No savvy *Eeeng!ecse*," he answered.

Sergeant McCann stepped over and placed the muzzle of his pistol against the native's right temple.

"The man asked you how many men Mandino has," McCann said quietly.

The bandit slowly raised his eyes, which now were wide with terror.

"Please, senor," he muttered shakily, "I will talk."

"That's better," said McCann as he lowered his weapon.

"There are sixty men, senor," began the bandit. "They are a small way up the trail."

"Do you know exactly where?" questioned McCann.

"Si, senor." With many gestures of his hands to explain his meaning, the man described Mandino's position, which was at the top of the first hill to the north.

Tillman gave McCann two squads and turning to the native prisoner, said, "You will take the *sergeanto* around in the rear of Mandino's position. And no tricks, savvy?" The non-com patted his pistol meaningly.

"Si, senor, me savvy." The bandit nodded his head vigorously.

The two sergeants set their watches and talked together quietly for several minutes. Then, with the captured bandit in the lead, McCann's patrol started up the side of the ravine.

The thick, green vines entwined in the heavy thicket made it necessary for

the men to hack their way through with machetes. But the top of the ravine, forming a ridge between the hollow from which they had come and a still deeper depression on the other side, was covered with tall, bare-trunked trees through which the patrol could make its way without much difficulty. The ridge shot off in a north-westerly direction and McCann followed it until he was sure he was well past Mandino's ambush. Then, swerving off to the right, he led the patrol downhill toward the trail. The need for silence made it impossible to use machetes and the men crawled most of the way through the thorny undergrowth. Their clothing was tattered and their hands and faces were streaked with blood from the cuts of the merciless black brambles.

McCANN motioned to Corporal Wiley when he reached the bottom of the hill, and the corporal quickly worked his way through the brush to the sergeant.

"Take the prisoner and go ahead," directed McCann. "There'll be a sentry out here somewhere and it's up to you to get him without making any noise. You can take the prisoner with you and, if you're challenged, make him do the talking. Whatever happens, I don't want any shooting."

"Right, Sarge," acknowledged Wiley as, with the prisoner in front of him, he struck off toward the trail.

The two men made their way as silently as possible for about a hundred yards. Suddenly a voice rang out from the jungle. Both men stopped in their tracks.

"*Quien va?*" challenged the voice.

Corporal Wiley nodded to the captured bandit and motioned him forward with a wave of his hand.

"*Amigos*," spoke the captive as he started in the direction of the voice, Wiley following close behind with his rifle cocked.

When the prisoner appeared in the little clearing where the bandit sentry stood with raised rifle, the sentry recognized him and lowered his weapon. Whereupon Wiley

sprang into sight, his rifle on a level with the sentries.

"Quiet," commanded the corporal. "Drop your rifle."

WITHOUT hesitation, the bewildered sentry obeyed, his face a mask of fear as his eyes looked into the muzzle of the marine's rifle.

"Get going," ordered the corporal, pointing in the direction from which he had come.

He marched the prisoners, now numbering two, back to where the patrol was waiting and Sergeant McCann, after detaching one man to guard the two bandits, started the rest of the patrol toward the trail.

With Corporal Wiley leading the way, the patrol soon passed the place where the native sentry had been stationed. McCann deployed the men and, in a long line guiding on their sergeant, the marines crept to a position directly behind the bandits' ambush.

McCann rose to his feet and fired his pistol in the air. Then in a loud voice he demanded that the bandits surrender.

A burst of rifle-fire from ahead made the sergeant dive for cover. The marines opened fire, each man firing only when he could catch a glimpse of one of the bandits through the heavy jungle foliage.

Sergeant Tillman's detail, waiting on the trail below the bandit position, stormed up the hill when the noise of firing broke out above them. The two automatic-riflemen, rounding a twist in the trail, threw themselves to the ground and opened up, full-automatic, on the bandit position.

When the bandits saw they were attacked from two sides, their fire slowed down and then ceased altogether. A dirty, white handkerchief knotted to the end of a rifle-barrel rose up and waved over the bushes. At the sight of the white flag, the marines held their fire.

"Put down your weapons and come out on the trail!" shouted McCann, cupping

his hands to his mouth to make sure he was heard.

The thoroughly-cowed bandits filed out in the open and soon were milling helplessly around on the trail, their hands raised above their heads.

Tillman's men ran up the trail and stopped a few yards away from the surrendered bandits.

"Where's Mandino?" asked Tillman as he looked in vain for the bandit chief.

"There, senor," said one of the captives, pointing into the brush. The speaker's shoes, in contrast to the bare feet of the other bandits, showed that he was one of the leaders.

Tillman plunged into the brush at the spot indicated, his pistol in hand. In a few seconds, he was kneeling beside the fallen bandit chief, who lay moaning with the pain of a bullet in his leg.

The outlaw made no attempt to stop Tillman when the sergeant reached down and grabbed an envelope that was sticking out from the wounded man's shirt-pocket.

Opening the flap of the envelope, Tillman pulled out the paper inside and read:

Senor—It should not be hard. There are but two marines in El Centro and the San Leon wire is cut. You will, of course, be rewarded for your services. (Signed) MANUEL ORTEZ

"We'll hold this letter until after election," observed Tillman to Sergeant McCann, who had come up in the meantime. "Then we'll make it interesting for Mister Ortez."

V

AT SIX O'CLOCK the next morning, Sergeant Tillman opened the polls. Private Lewis was seated behind a long table piled high with books containing election records and laws. Directly in front of him was a deep crockery dish filled with a dark red liquid.

"Dip your right thumb in there," directed Lewis, pointing to indicate the dish to the first voter.

"But, senor," objected the voter, "it is so red." The man looked up and added, "It is red, senor, like blood is red."

Lewis laughed.

"Don't worry," he explained. "It isn't blood—it's mercurochrome. And each man, before he votes, must dip his thumb in the dish."

The voter, without further objection, dipped his thumb in the red liquid and passed on to the voting-booth.

The news of "the bowl of blood" traveled fast.

The natives made a joke of it and one man, a worked from an outlying plantation, raised his thumb, dripping red from the bowl, and explained:

"See, senors—blood. It is the blood of Miraflores, the tyrant."

At this the men in the room looked at one another fearfully for, while most of them were voting against Miraflores, they did not dare to show their feelings. Spies were everywhere and Miraflores dealt harshly with those that opposed him.

Sergeant Tillman was at the entrance of the polls talking with Larry Sullivan, the rumsoaked engineer of the narrow-gauge railroad train which had come in that morning with a load of mining machinery from the coast.

"You should see her," Sullivan was saying. "Soft black eyes that could make a man commit murder—and built like nobody's business. To think she's been on the coast all this time without me knowing it."

Tillman laughed at this. Every time he saw Sullivan, the engineer was in the throes of a fresh romance.

"When you going back?" the sergeant asked.

"Day after tomorrow. And it can't come too quick—I've got a date with Rosita that night." The engineer rose from his seat on the steps and added,

"Come on over and have a drink, Sergeant, I'm kinda thirsty."

"No thanks," said Tillman. "I've got work to do—but I'll take you up on that tomorrow. How's that?"

"Okay, Sarge, but don't forget."

The engineer turned and, thirstily brushing his lips with his hand, hurried off to the cantina.

TILLMAN started into the doorway of the polling place when he felt a tug at his sleeve. A native, resplendent in powder-blue coat and white ducks, was beside him holding up a mercurochrome-stained thumb. The sergeant recognized the man as one of the local *politicos*, a tax-collector who had obtained his job through the patronage of Ortez.

"The stain, senor, it will not come off," the man explained, his thumb held up for the sergeant to see.

"Of course not," said Tillman indifferently as he turned to go.

"But, senor," the *politico* objected as he stepped in the marine's path, "is there no way to remove the stain?"

"Listen," said Tillman sharply, for he had always distrusted this particular native, "that red stain has to wear off. And, just so there's no mistake, I might tell you that nobody votes twice in this election. Every man who votes has the mercurochrome on his thumb and we'll know it if he tries to vote again under another name."

The man looked silently down at his still upraised thumb and then, without a word, he turned and walked up the road.

Soon after the tax-collector had gone, Ortez stalked into the polling place, his face drawn with rage. Tillman, sensing trouble, stepped out from where he was standing near the voting booth and walked over to the enraged half-breed.

"Senor," said Ortez in a loud voice, "I object." Pointing down at the mercurochrome bowl, he continued, "I shall complain of this blood on the hands of the

people. It is, senor, a bad joke—a very bad joke.”

“But it isn’t a joke,” explained Tillman calmly. “I was never more serious in my life. Do you wish to vote now, senor?”

“Yes.” The *jefe* turned indignantly and faced Lewis from across the table. “I shall vote,” he went on, “but I want none of the foolishness in your dish.”

Private Lewis, ignoring the half-breed’s remarks, looked up from the paper he had been perusing and said, “Dip your right thumb in the dish, senor, and give me your name.”

Ortez stared down at the marine, his lips twisted into a sneer. But, before he could speak, Tillman grabbed his arm and swung him around roughly.

“Either do as you’re told or get out!” the sergeant ordered.

Ortez looked up, but he quickly dropped his eyes when he saw the stern set of the sergeant’s jaw. Turning back to the table, he plunged his thumb in the bowl and gave the marine his name. Lewis handed him a ballot which he quickly marked and stuffed in the ballot-box. Then he strode swiftly out of the room.

He went over to the washtub in the corner and pulled three bottles from the cracked ice. Brushing the adhering particles of ice from the wet bottles, he suddenly straightened up and listened.

“Did you hear that?” he asked.

“Hear what?” questioned Lewis.

Sullivan did not answer. He dropped the bottles and ran out the door, the two marines at his heels. They saw a shower of sparks light up the sky as Sullivan’s locomotive, its exhaust barking loudly, raced down the tracks toward the coast.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the engineer muttered. “Who could—?”

“That’s easy,” laughed Sergeant Tillman. “I’ll bet six months’ pay it’s Ortez. He’ll be trying to make the coast before the *San Jacinto* sails for New Orleans tomorrow morning. Guess he’ll make it, all right; but I really feel sorry for him.

Senor Ortez is going to have to work for a living from now on.”

“And me—I miss my date,” grumbled Sullivan as he let out a string of oaths.

Tillman grinned at the irate engineer.

“Well, Rosita’ll wait, won’t she?” the sergeant asked.

The engineer ceased his cursing. His sunburned face wrinkled into a smile.

“Sure she’ll wait,” he said as he turned to enter the door. “Come on, boys, that beer is cold.”

THE next evening Tillman, Lewis, and Larry Sullivan were seated in front of the short-wave radio in the marines’ quarters. Sullivan was busily opening beer bottles, his feet tapping the while to the music being broadcast from the capitol. Suddenly the music stopped and, after a short silence, a voice came out of the speaker.

“The first election returns,” the voice spoke, “are as follows. Six cantons are reported. The vote is—Diaz, four thousand one hundred and ten—Miraflores, four hundred and six.”

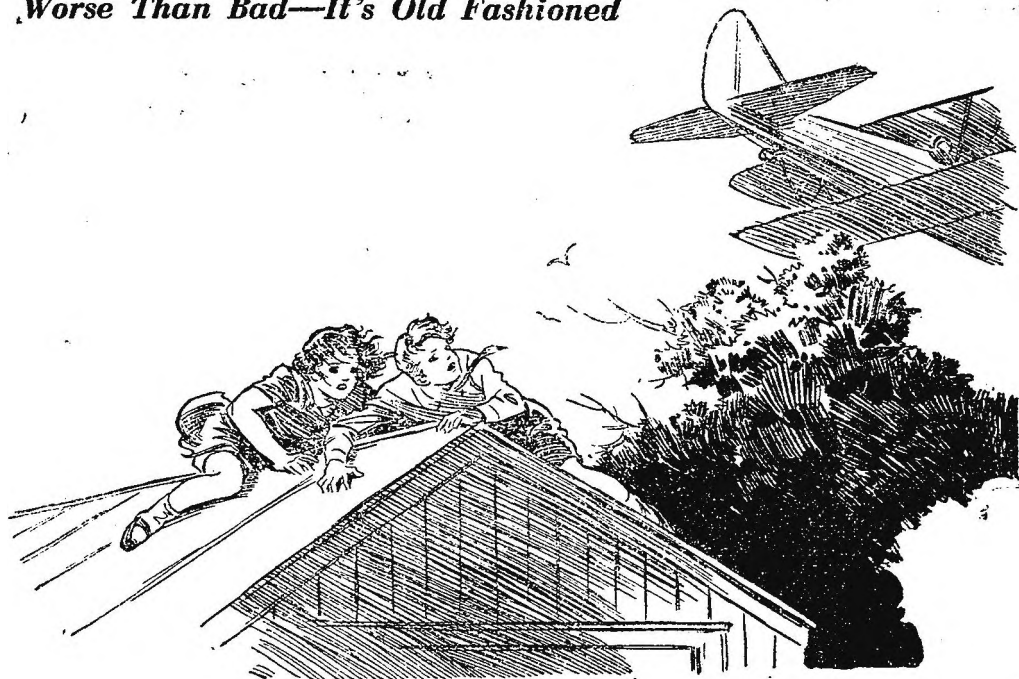
Larry Sullivan slapped his thigh with glee. “Ten to one,” he chuckled. “That means curtains for Miraflores. I wonder what your friend Ortez thinks of it. He was listening for the returns on the radio at the cantina when I left there an hour ago.”

Tillman picked up one of the bottles Sullivan had opened and filled the half-empty glasses. The three men then drank to the health of Fernandez Diaz who, it was hoped, would not follow in the footsteps of his dictatorial predecessor.

“Before I forget it,” said Lewis as he set down his glass and reached for a bottle, “let’s drink a toast to Larry Sullivan. If he hadn’t brought a shipment of ice from the coast, we wouldn’t be drinking this nice cold beer.”

“Right,” agreed the engineer. “It ain’t often I hear a toast proposed to myself. Just to show you my heart’s in the right place, I’ll get some more beer.”

Worse Than Bad—It's Old Fashioned



TEST-FLIGHT OBSERVERS DON'T DIE

By A. A. CAFFREY

Author of "Iron Hand," "No More Crashes," etc.

SMALL Joe Faber finished breakfast and started looking for the danged car keys. "May," he mumbled, "I wish ya'd watch the kids a little closer. When I came home yesterday Sally was walkin' the curb, in and outa the street. And Big Boy was playin' with the lawn-mower. Yeah, turnin' the nice sharp blades with his fingers."

The missis said she'd keep an eye on the kids. She also added, "And see that you take care of you, Joe. Don't take any more chances than you need. Good Lord, why can't you ask for a transfer to some other department? You've been at Federal for sixteen years now. It wasn't so

bad when you were single. Or even just after we were married. But now—well, I'd be in an awful fix if anything should happen to you."

"Happen to me!" Joe Faber said, and he said it with the same disdain used on all such family set-to's. "How many times have I told you that nothin' ever happens to us guys?"

"Nothing but seven trips to the hospital within the past dozen years," the missis reminded him. "And nothing but six dead men from your one small office group. Nothing!" Mrs. Joe almost shrieked.

"Oh, those guys?" Joe said. "Didn't the papers say they were Proving Ground technicians? You mean that Smith guy

who was bumped in the LK-4 strato-bomber, and Miller. And that guy Brown that got it in the flyin'-wing job, eh? Well, shucks, honey, Federal is alive with Smiths, Millers and Browns. Remember there's pretty close to three thousand help out there, all told. Gosh, I wouldn't kid you—I don't ever remember readin' about a flight-test observer gettin' washed out. Remember this—the pilots do the flyin'. All we do is the ridin'. Just sit there, watch instruments, and write it down. Safe as sittin' in an office downtown. Just as safe and twice as good come payday. Forget it, May."

When Joe went out to his garage, Sally and Big Boy, aged seven and five, were riding tricycles on the long, narrow drive. Joe said, "Now you kids get off the drive and sit there on the side steps till I get clear out to the street. And I'll knock ya ears back if you try climbin' on the runningboards while this car is movin'. Go ahead, sit down. No foolin', either. One of these days you kids're gonna break a leg. Always in the way, always on the street, always—Hey, May, keep an eye on these birds!"

The missis stood on the side steps and said, "Go ahead, back up. I'll watch them. And, Joe—don't you forget to give me a ring at noon. I'll be waiting. And I'll be worried sick if I don't hear from you."

Joe slapped the air with his free hand. "Aw, g-nuts, May. Forget it," he growled. "I'll give you a ring. Sure, I'll take half my noon hour, just givin' you a ring. Ya'd think a guy was going to war, all over again. Boy, was war fun!"

THE day's aerial doings were about to start out there on Aviation Section's portion of Federal Proving Ground's boundless acreage. Captain Call, officer in charge of test hangar, and half a dozen of his test pilots were swapping small talk in the flying office. The flying office was in the south end of test hangar's mighty loft. Just behind flying office, also in the

loft, was a sort of tack room occupied by the five test-flight observers then on active duty at Federal. The test pilots were all active Air Corps officers. The observers, like most of Federal's help, were civilians. Which meant that the observers could be tough; and they were. Joe Faber, perhaps, excepted. Somehow or other, little Joe didn't seem to fit into such a thrill group, and this in spite of the fact that little Joe was senior test-flight observer on that highly-important, very-busy post.

All set to fly, personal barograph, altimeter and other instruments in hand, little Joe sort of roamed into Captain's Call's test-pilot-crowded flying office. Captain Call stopped talking to his group and said, "Oh-o, here old slave-driver Faber all set to put us to work. How's everything in the back room, Joe?"

"Kinney and Hale"—two of Joe's fellow observers—"are in there arguin' that a roller-coaster is tops for thrill speed, and Randsbottom and Jock Wheeler"—the other two observers—"are holdin' out for motorbikes," Joe said. "They're all nuts. You give me an express elevator, in a high buildin', when the guy cuts the cables and lets her run. Man, oh, man—there's somethin' that leaves you sittin' on air."

"Speaking of sitting on air—not that I wish to insert the dull subject of aviation—how would you, Joe, and the good Lieutenant Mowat like to take the old P-50 ship and run some very routine fuel test? She'll be as monotonous as the very devil, I grant you, and nothing like riding in roller-coasters, motorbikes or express elevators. The fuel research boys want some more dope on their mystery liquid. You'll take her to as many altitude levels as you care to reach, and cruise at each for as long as you see fit. Watch your exterior atmospheric reading closely at each level, Joe. And you, Mowat old top, see to it that the climbs are crowded at times. Might just as well count on making half a day of this job; and in that way we'll sat-

isfy the fuel lab for some time to come.”

The telephone rang on Captain Call's desk. Call picked up the instrument, saying, “Yes, ma'am, he's right here. For you, Joe.”

“Oh, hello, May. What's eatin' you now?” Joe asked. “Yes. . . . What? . . . No! You have? You? No, hell no. . . . Well, I'll be a—listen, I'll call you at noon. Good-by.”

“Anything wrong at home, Joe?” Captain Call asked; and the rest of the test crew, eyes on Joe, was silent.

“The wife's got herself a premonition,” Joe Faber said.

“It's the sunset influence, Joe,” Lieutenant Murphy said. “My woman gets them regular—these premonitions. Best, Joe, that we move over on Dutch Flats side, where most of the macs live. Their women just get a hunch that the old man is gonna tangle himself in a prop.”

“Hunches or premonitions—what the hell!” said Joe. “Either way it makes a battleground out-a the house.”

“Look, Joe,” Captain Call said; “you promised the missis you'd give her a ring at noon. If old man Mowat, here, makes a full-time run of this fuel test, the P-50 won't be back before two or even later. Why not turn it over to one of the gents in the back room and put an end to that roller-coaster-vs-motorbike argument?”

“I'm on deck, Cap,” Joe said, “and I'll ride 'em as they come.”

THEN the other test-flight observers—Kinney, Hale, Jock Wheeler and Randsbottom—came into flying office, still arguing the thrill-merit ratings of roller-coasters and motorbikes. Hale was saying, “When I was out on the Coast with Lockheed, we used to play the Giant Dipper at Ocean Park. Man, there was a ride. Wish you could see that big dip that sent ya right down over the Pacific. Hell—guys get killed there regular, almost every week.”

“That's one thing about aviation,” Lieu-

tenant Murphy said. “You get killed just once—not regular, not every week.”

“Will you guys get off that roller-coaster and fall in at the right for work assignments,” Captain Call urged. “Let's see, Murph'. You and Jock'll go right ahead with your load-carrying test on that As-



sociated Aircraft troop-transport job, and——”

The day's work was under way. Test pilots began reaching for flying equipment. Motors were barking into loud life down below on the wide concrete apron afront test hangar. And Federal hummed.

When little Joe Faber and Test Pilot Mowat came out to where the P-50 was being serviced for flight, they found half a dozen enthusiastic fuel lab men tanking the ship's main reservoir with the mysterious liquid under test. “Loose Lip” Lock, one of test hangar's best—and absolutely loudest—motor macs was standing by, all set to give the power plant its before-flight run and okay. “Oh-o, here's the victims,” Loose Lip said, as Joe and Mowat came on the scene. “Say, Mowat, why don't you an' Joe, here, go out to the Ordnance range an' sit on a groundmine? Hell, feller, this thing of loadin' a tank with liquid TNT is just a matter of askin' for it the slow way. But, sez the good people when they read about it in the papers, internal-combustion engines can't explode. There must be some mistake about this press account.”

“Will you button that lip!” one of the fuel lab men suggested.

“Oh, sure; you know me,” Loose Lip said. “But I'll pray like hell while I sit

in this cockpit an' give this motor a warm-in' run. An' if I don't come down, men, you'll know I died—"

"—Talking," Joe Faber supplied.

Joe and Mowat stood back and watched Loose Lip start and run the motor to working heat. Watching and waiting, both men realized that Loose Lip was plenty right about what the good people "sez" when they say "But internal-combustion engines can't explode. There must be some mistake about this press account." Yes, Joe Faber new, it was all-same as his line with May—"flight-test observers don't die—their's just technicians that get the bump."

Still and all, somebody's got to run tests on new fuels; and you'd hardly know that any such tests were being made—if it wasn't for the press now and then mentioning that certain airplanes had exploded in midair.

WHEN Loose Lip Lock finally throttled low, climbed down and yelled "Okay for flight," he also added, running away from the immediate vicinity of the P-50, "Take that away. It's gonna go off." Then, while Mowat and Joe were climbing aboard and settling themselves side by side in the P-50's wide, open front cockpit, he strolled back, came in alongside the ship and yelled up, "Boy, oh, boy, does that TNT bring a motor to runnin' heat quick! Notice it took 'bout half the time of regular hi-test gas? Well, take it away. She's all yours. But remember what the pirates said when they tied the guy across the muzzle of the cannon—here's for a hole in one."

The P-50 was sort of an all purpose ship on Federal. It was a somewhat antiquated SCO-2 type biplane, originally built for observation work. The front pit—equipped for side-by-side pilots—was ample, deep and absolutely open to the elements.

No such sissy thing as a sliding-match top. The rear pit—the machine-

gunner's stronghold—was even more open, more ample, and deeper. Between front and rear pit was a narrow, stoop passage. Going from one to the other, you walked atop the in-the-floor fuel tank. Of late the old P-50 had been used for just about everything. They used it for instrument test. For all sorts of motor test. Parachute shop, at times, dated it up for dummy-dropping, and there was a chute cut through the floor of the rear pit for that purpose—for parachute dropping. They even ran paint tests on old P-50's surfaces; and so she looked like some sort of a camouflaged what-is-it now as Test Pilot Mowat took the green signal from the tower and hi-balled down the east-west runway for his take-off.

Going away, Mowat went as usual—low and directly over the nearby government town of Liberty, and even lower when passing above the Sunset, westerly, section. Mowat liked to give his missis a friendly wave in passing. And on this trip out, Joe Faber was hanging half out of that front pit, trying to make a check on those kids of his. "Look at that!" he yelled at Mowat, pointing down and ahead. "See those danged yannigans of mine—on the garage roof again! Damned if they don't drive a guy nuts. Give 'em a jazz, Mowat, and blow 'em to hell an' gone off that roof. It'll serve 'em right."

MOWAT dropped the P-50's nose a bit lower, pushed full throttle to the motor, aimed right at Joe's place of abode; and both flying men looked down the ship's bow, watching Sally and Big Boy standing the garage's ridgepole. Mowat zoomed; and the noise, air-vibration and slipstream-blast of his passing sent both kids to hugging that roof peak. "I'll tan 'em for that," Joe said, now looking back over his shoulder. "Always takin' chances, always shovin' their chins out for it."

The two kids, well satisfied with the adventure, then rolled down some five feet of shingled slope and came to rest on the

flat, tar-papered section of the garage's top.

Mowat lifted his ship into normal climb. Joe Faber put his eyes on the instrument-board and began recording altitudes, thermometer readings, remarks, etc. It was all as simple and non-exciting as sitting in an office back there in small Liberty.

"Old Loose Lip's more than half right about this stuff we're flying on," Joe said just after the P-50 pointed out 5,000 feet on the altimeter. At the same time, Joe put a finger on the motor's thermo reading. "She's plenty hot, eh? Plenty hot, but not turning up as many revs as ordinary gas—you've got her at full-throttle, eh?"

"Full gun," Mowat agreed, removing his good left so's Joe could see that the thing was advanced full sector. "Guess she'll cool down when we get a few thousand more under us. We'll get up around 10,000 feet before levelling off into a cruise. Hell of a smell from this fuel, eh? You don't guess there's something dead in that fuel tank, do you?"

"Something dead in the fuel lab," Joe Faber stated.

SHORTLY after ten o'clock Mrs. Joe Faber gave Federal's flying office a ring. Miss McGregor, one of the file clerks on duty behind the glass partition in Captain Call's office, said, "No, Mrs. Faber, Joe isn't here. There's nobody in test-flight observers' room. They're all in the air. . . . Captain Call? He's in the air, too. . . . What's wrong, Mrs. Faber? Your voice seems worried."

Mrs. Joe sort of mumbled something, thanked Miss McGregor, and hung up. Fifteen minutes passed and Mrs. Joe was on the wire again. Miss McGregor said that flying office's *status quo* was as before; all males absent. And again she asked, "What's wrong, Mrs. Faber? Can I do anything for you?"

"I'm frantic," Mrs. Joe Faber answered. "It's the kiddies. They're miss-

ing, both of them; and I promised Joe I'd keep a closer watch on them. I don't know what to do. I've been all over the neighborhood, clear down to Liberty Park playground, and over as far as Tide Creek. None of the other neighborhood children have even seen them. I'm almost out of my head, Miss McGregor. What would you do?"

"I'd call the police," Miss McGregor suggested.

"But Joe'd be mad if it turned out that there was really no cause for worry. The neighbors want to call the police, too. Oh, I'm half crazy. There's a strange car driving up in front now. I'll go out and see who it is. Please have Joe call me as soon as he lands. Thanks, Miss McGregor. Perhaps I'll call the police before Joe comes."

TEST PILOT MOWAT had brought old P-50 to the 10,000-foot level. Joe said, "It isn't much cooler up here, Mowat. Look at that out-board thermometer—55 degrees, and at 10,000. Guess this is going to be a plenty-hot day, eh? Fifty-five degrees. Hell, man, that's shirt-sleeve weather. And look at that motor reading, see where she is now—180, and goin' up. Are your shutters open? Yeah, dam' right they are. Wide open; and we're headed into the wind, at that. One hundred and eighty-five degrees, and at only 1450 revs. You're not even crowdin' her, eh? Hit it with full gun for a few minutes, Mowat, and see if she threatens to blow the top."

Lieutenant Mowat palmed full throttle to his power unit. Joe watched the air-speed indicator boost old P-50's speed from its cruising 115 miles per hour up to and just past 135. He made his written notes of each change, checking oil pressure at the same time. "Oh-o, is she thinnin' out this oil?" he said. And his finger fell on the oil gauge for Mowat's attention. "Man, a pot's sure boilin'-hot when she begins to lower the oil pressure as soon as this. And now look at that

thermo—190—195—200—and right up into the red! Nice work, mystery fuel, nice work.

"Well, Mowat, that satisfies me, for the time being. Pull her back now, if you want. But hold it. Notice your revs are fallin' off? She's runnin' plenty hot, thinnin' the oil, and losin' power. Say, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if this fine mystery fuel began blowin' the crankshaft and con-rod bearings out through the exhaust stacks any time now. Boy, oh, boy, she's hot enough to do it. M-m-m-m, smell that? Even smells hot. Long time since I rode behind one that smelled hot. That's bad. Hell, it's worse than bad. It's old-fashioned. Aviation was away beyond that—till this fuel came along."

"Say," Mowat said, "maybe it would be a good idea to make old Loose Lip Lock Chief of Air Corps. He calls 'em right, eh?"

"More than I care to admit," said Joe Faber, as he jotted down: 10,000—230 degrees—1650 revs, failing—out-board 55 degrees. Remarks: smells hot.

Mowat said, "I'll take her up a few thousand feet, slow on the climb, Joe, and see if we can't cool down a bit. Guess I'll listen in on the ship-to-ship and see what the radio boys are talking about." And so saying, Test Pilot Mowat slipped the ship-to-ship radio harness over his head and went to his aerial key-hole listening.

The P-50 was well inland, perhaps twenty miles or more from Federal Proving Ground's eastern boundary, which, of course, is the broad Atlantic. Mowat, still headed away from the home field, had started his easy climb. Joe Faber's whole attention was on the instrument-board and the ship's general performance—with special emphasis on that motor thermometer, a thermometer which couldn't have been closer to him had it been tucked under his tongue, and him tucked in between nice white sheets way down there in the post hospital.

All of a sudden Test Pilot Mowat lev-

eled out of that easy climb. Flat in his flight then, and with motor throttled low, the lieutenant was all attention. "Know what I've got, Joe?" he almost yelled.

"Mars," Joe guessed.

"Hell, no—quit your kiddin', feller. The police bureau, the calling-all-cars guys. What's your street number, Joe?"

Joe Faber was getting his headset in place. "342 Elm," he answered. "Why? What t'hell is it, Mowat?"

But by then Joe Faber was in on the police radio call himself. Way down there, some twenty miles back there, a voice in the police bureau was saying: "Calling car No. 2 in Sunset district. Calling car No. 2 in Sunset. . . . Car No. 2, go to 342 Elm. . . . 342 Elm. . . . See the woman. . . . Step on it, No. 2, this looks like a snatch—kid, or kids, missing. That is all."

MOWAT was staring at Joe Faber; and for once the little guy was wordless. Then Mowat dropped P-50's nose, shoved full gun to his motor, flew a tight, diving turn and was headed back toward Federal and Sunset. And still Joe Faber sat there, staring ahead through the whirling prop, all ears for anything new that might come via that police-call radio. Mowat, with his ship in a long glide, full power to the engine, watched his air-speed reading climb. Old P-50 was far from being a speed job, but the dial went to 135—140—150—160—and then failed to best, or quite reach, the 170-mile-per-hour figure. Well, that was crowding the old bus. And the long, steady, back-to-earth dive glide was taking that already overheated power unit into hotter air. Mowat hardly cared to glance at his engine temperature dial, nor at his oil-pressure gauge. Those two instrument-board gadgets could tell such startling news, at such times. But he knew the reading was in the red; and you can't go higher than that. And, yes, the oil-pressure reading—now that he chanced a glance—was fluttering way down around no pressure at all. And

you can't go much lower than that. The slipstream's blast—the typhoon whaled back by that whirling white disc that was a propeller working at full-gun—came into his face hot and smelly. And how a pilot can smell 'em when they're going bad!

Joe Faber yelled. "You'll never make it, Mowat! This dam' thing can't take it. She's gonna blow forty ways from the center, or I miss my guess. Your prop's beginnin' to flutter! She's seizin' up on you. Better ease off while the easin's good; but thanks for the try, guy, thanks for the try."

But Mowat had Federal—and Sunset district—just out front by then, for a ship crowding 170 miles per hour doesn't take long to cut down the has-to-be-flown portion of twenty miles, and after that part of the push is put behind even a ship without a motor can glide in for the last few miles. Perhaps with the long glide in mind, Mowat had managed to retain a good three thousand feet of his original ten-thousand altitude. So Federal was just ahead not more than four-five miles, and Sunset spread itself away to the west.

"You can shoot a landin' on the old balloon field, Mowat," Joe yelled—"if we last that long." The old balloon field crowded Sunset's northern limits; and such a landing would put them within two blocks of Joe's house.

"That's what I had in mind," Mowat answered; "and we'll make it or bust. Yes, sir, there's hell to pay down in your neighborhood. See the crowd near your house?"

"I see 'em," Joe answered. "And there comes the police car. See it comin' up Washington Street? And, eh—Mowat, this dam' thing's gonna let go on us! Man, kill your motor and slide into Federal! That cowlin's red-hot, Mowat. We've got fire under that cowl! Yes, and there's fire"—Joe Faber was stooped way under the instrument-board now—"up front here, all in around the fire-wall. And it's seepin' back through all openin's. Get

t'hell gone, Mowat, get gone while ya've got the chance."

TEST PILOT MOWAT cut his switch. He reached over and turned the fuel valve to "off." He dropped the ship's nose just slightly, began to look for an empty piece of territory below, found one off to the west of Federal, and headed old P-50 for that spot.

Three thousand feet on the altimeter! He couldn't hope to fly 'er down. Too much fire now. Fire right in the pit—all the way behind the metal fire-wall—and lapping at his feet. So he pulled up his feet, flew just with one hand, began feeling his parachute harness—making sure it was correct—and yelled to Joe. "You make your dive, Joe. I'll hold her up while you get away."

"The hell you say!" yelled Joe Faber, right back at him. "Let 'er go. Come on! She'll ride flat for a while. We'll do a safe drop through the dummy chute."

Test Pilot Mowat, knowing that Joe Faber would wait to argue, put the ship in an almost-flat glide—still headed for the empty piece of territory below—and followed Joe back through the narrow passage that led to the rear pit, where was that chute through the floor—the chute down which the parachute-testing crew usually slid Old John Dummy. Joe Faber threw back the hatch that covered the man-size opening. "I'm goin' to make it head-first, Mowat," he yelled. "I'll show ya the way. And if—"

Joe Faber was halfway down when it happened. And when it happened, it happened so suddenly, so completely, that Joe didn't have to slide the full length of that short chute. It wasn't necessary to thus slide free of the ship simply because the ship—or the main fuel tank—let go and blew the whole ship free of Joe. All but the chute. And when small Joe Faber began to realize what had happened, he was falling, tumbling, falling—and all the time wearing that metal dummy chute like

a suit of armor. Joe Faber started fighting. Perhaps Joe Faber knew some real fear as he fought. To begin with, Joe knew that he had only 3,000 feet—to begin with. And a man really feels safest when he feels sure that he's got a few thousand feet for safe parachute opening. Well, Joe made the good fight, and when he couldn't get away from the suit of armor—by clawing and hauling—he yanked his ring. The silk snapped. Joe Faber came out of that chute.

Mowat? Where was Mowat? He, Joe recalled, was still in the ship when the works went off. Mowat, perhaps—Joe's gaze went groundward. His heart missed a few beats. There was a black speck, way down there—it must be Mowat, or what was left of Mowat. And if Mowat was out cold, or if he'd been killed where he stood, there in the cabin, well— Joe Faber saw the black speck turn to white. Mowat's chute had opened within a few hundred feet of the ground.

Joe Faber had a sailing job to do. Joe had seen the white flower bloom above him twice before, so he knew all about chute-jumping. And Joe was still hurrying home—and in a great worry about getting there. So he worked certain shroud-lines and pulled more sail surface into the path of a helping breeze. He had very little altitude left, so he must make the best of it. Now he could see the great crowd before his home. He could even see the open mouths of that crowd as they gazed up and watched him floating home. What's more to the point, Joe Faber was looking for other things. And, just as he expected, he spotted what he was looking for. "Well, I'll be damned!" Joe Faber said to himself, or, perhaps, he said it aloud. Very loud. For Joe had been sad, and now he was mad. But it was high time for Joe to become very busy. It was just about time to land that parachute; and that's no small job, even under the best of field conditions. Joe was going up against very bad conditions. He was going into the high elms of

Elm Street, and only half a block from home. And, finally, Joe went into one of the highest of those high elms. It broke his fall—and then it let him fall. He hit a branch, then another; and the chute's silk was failing to tangle and check the fall. People were yelling, and running—and yelling some more. Then things got all mixed up for Joe Faber.

Anyway, one of the neighbors said, "Why, it's Mr. Faber. Here, carry him into his drive. Put him down here, right here."

Then one of the radio-car cops, breaking out his first-aid kit, put something mighty-sharp-sniffing under Joe's nose; and the other radio-car cop forced a jolt of what's-good-for-him between Joe's lips. And when Joe began to come to, one of the cops was saying, "Take it easy. You've got a broken leg—and maybe a few cracked ribs. They're calling the ambulance; and we'll get you right out to the post hospital."

Then May was crying all over Joe. And Joe was saying, "Lay off that stuff, May. Look—stand back, let me get a slant down the drive." The crowd fell back; and all looked rearward along Joe's drive. "Hey you, Sally! Big Boy, you heller you!" Joe yelled, as loud, at least, as an all-in fellow could yell. "Show up!"

Two small heads popped up above the ridgepole of the garage. Big Boy yelled, "Hoho, mom couldn't find us, mom couldn't—"

Just about cried-out on one issue, and hardly able to face this new cause for grief, Mrs. Joe sobbed, "The hospital again, Joe! Test-flight observing! Ships exploding! Parachutes, parachutes, parachutes! They'll kill you yet! Oh, what a job."

"The job, be damned!" wailed Joe Faber. "The job's safe as a shovel on PWA. It's the danged kids done this. They washed out that ship! They put me under a chute! They— Officer, where t'hell's that ambulance?"

*Sayin' Never Got Nobody Nowheres Unless There Was Some
Doin' Along with It*



DEAD SURE HUNCH

By

S. OMAR BARKER

*Author of "Black Cat Luck,"
"Hogback Hunch," etc.*

SHERIFF "HUNCH" McELROY heard the creak and thump of numerous footsteps coming up the rickety plank stairs to his office, but he did not let it disturb him nor interrupt his occupation of the moment. During his many years as chief law officer of Pintada County plenty of indignant citizens' committees had come tromping up those same squeaky steps to lodge excited and sometimes bitter protests against the way this little old sheriff who looked like a dried apple with crooked sticks for legs, performed the duties of his office.

One more raking over the coals was nothing to get excited about.

The banty sheriff had a pretty good hunch who would come stomping in at the head of the committee this time. For some months now, Hackberry Smith had

made no secret of his ambition to succeed to the sheriffship of Pintada County at the next election—or even sooner if he could get old Hunch sufficiently discredited that the District Court would be obliged to remove him. It was beginning to look as if this Hixenbaugh murder case might give Hack his chance.

Seated comfortably in the battered wreck of a wicker rocker, his sock-feet cocked up on the sill of a window overlooking most of the main street of Vega-verde, old Hunch did not even turn his head as the committee's more than a dozen men came storming in with big, triangle-faced Hackberry Smith in the lead. Only a faint twitch of the banty sheriff's drooping gray hoss-tail mustache even indicated that he was aware of their presence. His faded blue eyes, as they had been for hours, remained glued to the little end of

a long brass telescope pointing out the window.

"Y'see, feller citizens!" Hackberry Smith pointed dramatically, a distinct tone of triumph in his voice. "Your county sheriff settin' by the window peepin' through a play-purty, while if it wasn't for the efforts of a few of us honest citizens, bandits and murderers would walk our streets unmolested!"

"I reckon hell's hinges wouldn't even squeak if it wasn't for you, Heck," drawled Sheriff McElroy in his dry, twangy voice. "I notice ol' man Saxon has been shavin' with a dull razor again an' cut his wart. This here peep stick sure brings 'em right up to you."

"Neffar mind Mizder Saxon's wart!" Still without turning to look at the committee, Hunch recognized the guttural voice of Abe Jacoby, Vegaverde's leading merchant who was also a respected citizen and heretofore one of Hunch's staunchest friends. "Vile you sit peeping by the window out like an old lunumtic vith number two childhood, comes valking into my store a couple murderers vich vould valk right out again and ride away, vat else, vass is not for the wigilance of Hackberry Smith to grab them right avay quvick under arrest. Vat ve are coming to, such a business, eh?"

"Them's the facks, Hunch," said the voice of his deputy called Bug-Eye when the old sheriff still paid them no attention. "One of these fellers drug out his money to pay fer the smokin' they bought, an' ol' Abe recognized ol' Luce Hixenbaugh's wallet. Bein' alone in the store, ol' Abe didn't have nobody handy to send for an officer, so he jest stepped to the door an' let out a squall, an' Hackberry Smith heard him over at the livery stable an' come a-runnin'. Me, too, but by the time I got there Hack done had 'em nabbed—an' here they are, the murderers of ol' Luce Hixenbaugh!"

Abruptly Sheriff McElroy lowered the brass telescope and for a brief

moment turned the glance of his weather-faded blue eyes on the scared boyish faces of the committee's two prisoners. Then with a shrug of bony shoulders he raised the telescope again, squinting as he trained it on the entrance to the Gray Mare Saloon far down the street.

"Nick work, Hack," he said. "Only I got a hunch you've nabbed the wrong hombres. Turn 'em a-loose."

"Turn 'em loose hell!" snorted Hackberry Smith. He turned to the men now jamming the little office. "Feller citizens, are you goin' to stand for the liberatin' of a pair of murderers jest because this swivelled, flea-bit old pack-rat that calls hisself your sheriff says he's got a hunch?"

"Not by a damn sight, we ain't!" growled a burly red-nosed man named Jack Neff. "If the law ain't in shape to look after the necessary hangin's around here, there's others that is."

"Vait, chentlemen!" Abe Jacoby raised a pudgy hand. "By Sheriff McElvoy a hunch iss a hunch!" He waddled around to stand accusingly in front of the little sheriff, blocking the telescope from its view of the street. "Look, vunce, Hunch," he begged, "for vat you say, maybe you got a reason, eh?"

Before answering, old Hunch calmly shifted the telescope so that the end of it rested on the short, fat merchant's shoulder.

"Jest stand steady, Abe," he twanged. "Looks like a hoss trade developin' down yonder an' I'd enjoy to observe the outcome. Yep, sure I got a reason—ain't I told you I've got a hunch these boys ain't the ones that shot Hixenbaugh?"

"Himmel!" Abe Jacoby looked distressed beyond endurance. "For vy I effer sell you this telescope, don't ask me in the first place! Ve bring you a couple murderers and you chust sit vatching by a hoss trade in front frum a saloom! You are the sheriff—vy don't you do somethings?"

"Done did," said Hunch, without taking his eye from the telescope. "Told you to

turn 'em a-loose, didn't I? What evidence you got against these boys, anyways?"

"Plenty," said Hackberry Smith importantly. "Possession of the murdered man's wallet, for one thing, an'—"

"I tell you we found that, layin' in the road," broke in one of the prisoners. "It was empty, an' bein' such a battered looking old purse, we figgered somebody had simply throwed it away. But it looked usable, an' I jest picked it up. Y'see—"

"You're damn right we see," broke in Hack Smith again. You shot Hixenbaugh, robbed him, an'—"

"Bird seed," interrupted old Hunch. "I've knowed ol' Luce Hixenbaugh ever since the rabbits wore long tails, an' if he ever carried over forty cents and a button in his wallet at one time it's news to me.

"If you're tryin' to set up robbery as a murder motive against these boys, Mister Smith, you ain't got twice as much sense as I think you have."

"For your information, McElroy," said Hack Smith with cold disdain, "I ain't settin' up robbery as the main motive. As is well knowed to all, these here prisoners, Tack Hurley an' Buck McDowell by name, they're a couple of brass-bound buttons with the rodeo bug. They admit they'd been practicin' bulldoggin' an' ropin' on Hixenbaugh's steers, an' he'd warned 'em not to do it no more or he'd yamp 'em for it. What happened, Hixenbaugh ketched 'em at it, jumped 'em, an' they shot him—it figgers out plumb simple."

"You claimed there was two No. 1 hoss tracks leadin' away from where you find the body yourownself, Hunch," offered Bug-Eye. "These fellers are ridin' ponies with No. 1 shoes—ain't that plenty evidence—along with the rest?"

"Nope," sighed old Hunch. "I got a hunch it ain't. There's as many cow-hosses around here wearin' No. 1 shoes as there is jackasses wearin' pants. An' besides, these here boys didn't do it."

"Then maybe you can tell us who did?" sneered Hack Smith.

"Well, sir, I've got a hunch I kin," drawled the banty sheriff, "as soon as I ketch him."

"Then you refuse to throw these prisoners in jail for a fair trial an' hangin' like they deserve?" Hack Smith spoke arrogantly.

"That there's the nail an' you whammed it on the head," said the sheriff. "My orders is to turn 'em a-loose."

"Come on, boys, growled Jack Neff, as he and another of Hackberry's henchmen seized the two frightened boys and started roughly to hustle them out. "Let's git a rope!"

INSTANTLY all the little sheriff's air of lazy nonchalance vanished. He came out of his chair as nimbly as a cat out of a box. One hand still held the brass telescope, but in the other there blossomed a huge, leather-polished six-shooter. With something like a snarl, Hackberry Smith whirled, his own gun drawn. For an instant the sheriff and the would-be sheriff faced each other over the steely snouts of their pistols. Jack Neff and two others, with hands on their guns stood ready to back Hackberry Smith's play, but the scrawny little man in his sock feet stood alone.

"There won't be no lynchin' around here while I'm the sheriff, boys!" Old Hunch's voice was as dry as cracklin's. "There's lead in this gun, Hack—I'd hate to have to push it!"

"You've got your choice, McElroy," said Hack Smith. "Lock up these murderers for the legal trial an' hangin' that's comin' to 'em, or else!"

Hunch's pale eyes flicked from one face to another. Some of these men, like Abe Jacoby, were his friends—had been his friends, at least—but now their eyes were hostile.

And no wonder. Three days had passed since he himself had brought in

the body of a respected ranchman, shot down, apparently without even being given a chance to defend himself, and so far as anybody could see he had done nothing toward catching the murderer. There had been tracks, but he had not even tried to follow them. When various citizens had urged him to form a posse and return to take up the trail, he had refused, giving no other reason than that he "had a hunch" the tracks had been rained out. Then, instead of scouring the country for the murderer or murderers, old Hunch had sat daily, from dawn to dusk, at the window of his office, peering through a long brass telescope, absorbed in the hum-drum goings and comings of Pintada County citizens on the main street of Vegaverde, as enthralled as a child over the magic of magnifying lenses that could bring distant things so near, the grim fact of an unsolved murder in his bailiwick seemingly forgotten.

Ever since old Abe Jacoby had sold him this "spy-glass," a month before, people had been saying that with the acquisition of his new toy, old Hunch had slipped hopelessly into second childhood; for he carried it everywhere he went—even rode down main street a time or two with it glued to his eye, spying, the talk was, on things that were none of his damn business, neglecting his duties.

Now Hackberry Smith, with his aroused committee of citizens, had him where the hair was short. It was either lock up these two boys whom he considered innocent or else risk unnecessary bloodshed to prevent a lynching.

Hunch heaved a windy sigh that was half snort.

"All right, Bug-Eye," he addressed his homely deputy. "Mister Smith seems to be givin' the powders around here. Lock 'em up—for the time bein', anyways."

Without waiting for his visitors to depart, Hunch eased himself quickly into the rocker again, hoisted his feet to the window sill and focussed his spy-glass

once more on the entrance to the Gray Mare Saloon.

Until dark, and again all the next day he sat there. When Bug-Eye brought the prisoners' supper that second evening he also brought news of the talk going around town.

"They're sayin' you're plumb off your nut, Hunch. They're sayin' it ain't safe to leave murderers in charge of a crazy man, not even in jail. They're sayin'—"

"Who's sayin' all this?" inquired Hunch dryly. "Hackberry Smith?"

"It ain't only Hack, now," grumbled Bug-Eye. "It's dang near ever'body. They're sayin' that if Luce Hixenbaugh's murderers is goin' to be brung to justice, they better tend to it their ownelves before you take another crazy notion and turn 'em out."

"Fixin' to storm the jail, you figger?"

"Well, you cain't exactly blame 'em, can yuh? What with their sheriff settin' around peepin' through a spy-glass instid of seein' that charges is entered? They're sayin'—"

"They're thumbin' their noses at me, too," drawled Hunch, "ever' time either ol' Hack or one of his friends goes in or out of the Gray Mare down yonder, they pause to give me the thumb an' finger salute. This here glass brings it up jest as plain as if they was right here in the room."

"They're sayin'—"

"An' I'm sayin'," broke in Hunch, "that sayin' never got nobody nowheres unless there was some doin' along with it. Git out an' quit pesterin' me."

THE next citizens' committee that waited on Sheriff McElroy numbered nearly thirty men, and there was blood in their eye this time, sure enough. Even old Hunch felt a little uneasy when he saw them coming up the street, several of them carrying ropes, others crowbars, and one a sledge hammer.

"That there's got the ear-marks of a

mob," he told himself, "shore as bristles on a hawg."

He even began to wonder if it might not be wiser to come clean about this Hixenbaugh case, but dismissed the idea with a solitary grunt, "You're still sheriff around here, Brother McElroy, an' the county ain't payin' you to discuss official business with ever' Tom, Dick an' Nosey Parker that tries to pry into it."

As before, he was studiously squinting through his telescope when the mob leaders came busting into the office, nor did he put it down to greet them.

"McElroy," Hackberry Smith rasped it out harshly, "we've come to git them murderers. You goin' to hand 'em over peaceable or have we got to bust down jail an' take 'em?"

For answer Hunch calmly hauled a bunch of keys out of his pocket and tossed them on the table.

"Help yourselves, boys," he twanged. "I'm kinder busy."

With a grin of triumph, Hack Smith seized the keys. With drawn guns he and three others went out through the gallery to the stone wing of the building used for a jail. In a very few minutes they came stomping back, but they brought no prisoners.

"Feller citizens!" shouted Hackberry who could never resist a chance to make a speech. "The ends of justice has been canoodled by this swivel-brained ol' pack-rat that calls hisself your sheriff! The prisoners is gone!"

"Must of escaped," commented Hunch dryly.

"Escaped hell! You turned 'em out! You—"

"Well, they claimed they was due at a rodeo," Hunch spoke mildly. "What's the harm, long as they was innocent?"

"How the hell you know they was?" growled Jack Neff.

Hackberry Smith raised his hand solemnly to quiet the growing murmur of wrath among his followers.

The tired, slack lines of old Hunch's jaw suddenly tightened. He took the telescope from his eye, hastily wiped the glass and replaced it.

"Feller citizens!" proclaimed Hackberry Smith, his eyes a-glitter with a sudden inspiration. "There ain't but one conclusion to be drawn from the actions of this here runt that calls hisself a officer of the law! Either he's plumb loco, or else he had a hand in the murder hisownself! As citizens it's our duty to—"

WITH a suddenness and agility of a cat leaping at a chipmunk, old Hunch leaped from his chair, straddled the sill of the open window and vanished. By the time the astonished Hack Smith and several of his henchmen got to the window, the banty sheriff had already picked himself up from his twelve foot drop and was scurrying like a scared rabbit straight down the street.

Two bullets sputtered dust three yards behind him, but before either Hack or Jack Neff could fire again, a tubby chunk of fat man-meat shoved itself in front of them, two pudgy hands seized their guns.

"Qvit it, you tam foolishers!" Old Abe Jacoby's voice was shrill and quivering with wrath, and when they tried to shove him away, Deputy Bug-Eye barged up swiftly behind them. He shoved the snout of his gun suggestively into Hack Smith's ribs while his other big, bony hand grabbed Jack Neff by the shirttail and yanked him back to sprawl on the floor.

"Ol' Hunch may be an idjit an' a lunatic," he snorted, "but he ain't no murderer, an' you damn well know it!"

"Then what'd he take out so quick for when I accused him? By Godfrey, I tell you, feller citizens, he's a—"

Hack Smith broke off suddenly as the muffled sound of a shot boomed up the street from the Gray Mare Saloon.

"That'll be ol' Hunch, shore as hell!" bellowed Bug-Eye. "Lemme through! I'm a-goin' down there!"

Already the gang of men crowded in the hall and on the stairway outside were surging out into the street heading for the Gray Mare. They came surging into the saloon, Bug-Eye in the lead, to find old Hunch bandaging the arm of a surly-looking cowboy.

"Well, feller citizens," twanged the banty sheriff, in droll imitation of Hack Smith's oratory, "he drawed when I jumped him, but here he is."

"Hell," said somebody in the crowd, "ain't this the stranger that's been wild horse huntin' back in the Blue Rocks?"

"Maybe not only wild 'uns," said Hunch. "I got a hunch he's been stealin' a few, too. In fack, I figger he was leadin' off one of Hixenbaugh's when Luce come onto him, an' this feller shot him rather'n git caught. That's why there was two hoss tracks. I figger—"

"You're so damn good at figgerin'—" it was Hack Smith again—"how you figger about that there wallet them fellers claimed they picked up in the road?"

"Plumb simple," grinned Hunch. "It dropped outa Luce's pocket when I was packin' him in, an' them boys *did* find it, jest like they claimed."

"What the hell you talkin' about?" The wounded man shrugged. "Had somebody been killed around here?"

"Y'see!" Hack Smith crowed. "Now me, if I'd been sheriff I'd of follered them tracks an' ketched the right parties, right while they was fresh."

"You wouldn't be sheriff for long, Hack," drawled Hunch, "if you went around follerin' murderin' hoss-thieves to git yourself dry-gulched when waitin' would do jest as well. Y'see I'd looked over this feller's camp one day when he wasn't around an' noted a heap of empty whiskey bottles, includin' only one full one, all the same brand. So I jest had a hunch that without nobody pointin' suspicion his way, he'd be driftin' in one of

these days to buy some more, an' if he was the murderer, I'd jest nab him."

"Hell, you won't prove nothin' on me," grunted the prisoner.

ONCE more the light of inspiration glittered in Hack Smith's eye.

"Maybe you'll tell us how come you knowed this feller was the one, Mister Sheriff?" he inquired importantly. "I ain't heard you mention no evidence!"

"I cain't see that it's any of your put-in, Mister Smith," twanged old Hunch, "but the facks is, I got a hunch somebody seen him do it!"

"Hunch hell! Feller citizens, this county has done been run, too long on hunches! If somebody seen this crime committed why ain't he spoke up?"

"Because," said Sheriff McElroy, a twinkle in his pale eyes, "I'm the feller that seen it, an' still bein' the sheriff around here, I jest had a hunch it wasn't nobody else's business."

"Vat you mean, Hunch? You mean—" Abe Jacoby's fat face broke into a puzzled grin.

"I mean I was settin' up on the rimrock that day, practicin' with my new spy-glass. 'Course by the time I found a way to git down there, he'd done got away. Ol' Luce still had a speck of life left in him, which I was obliged to stay an' nurse till it was plumb too late to foller. But bein' as I'd seen this feller, plain as puddin', when he fired the shot, though he hadn't seen me, an' I knowed I'd recognize him again easy enough, I jest had a hunch there wasn't no hurry about it— and as it turned out there wasn't."

"But—but supposin' he hadn't never showed up?" Hackberry Smith still stuck stubbornly to his purpose of discrediting the old sheriff. "Supposin'—"

"Supposin' you do the supposin', Hack," observed Hunch dryly. "Me an' my hunches, we'll do the sheriffin'!"

*There Were Several Seekers for the Bad Spider
in the Jungle Fastnesses*



WHITE MADNESS

By EATON K. GOLDTHWAITE

Author of "St. Peter's Pup," "Inca Interlude," etc.

OVERHEAD a dazzling macaw wheeled in surprise from lazy flight and shattered the stillness with a vituperative, spine-tingling cackle. From the sun-drenched thicket of the nearby shore a monkey's shrill cry took up the warning and a chorus of howling screams ensued. The crashing sound of a tapir, aroused from midday siesta, followed the river and presently was lost in the distance. Abruptly the saucy chattering of things unseen behind the dense growth was stilled; hot

wind rustled the jungle, and once more the slow, gurgling hiss of water was the sole disturber of wilderness quiet.

On the river's sparkling surface a darker blot assumed proportion and moved slowly downstream. Like a log it was, the trunk of a great tree torn from the river bank by the restless fury of torrential rains, toppled by undermining currents and borne onward by the yellow flood. Above and about it gnarled branches stretched, brushing the surface of the water; broken and twisted roots, still clay-covered, pawed at the air

with ineffectual fingers. A fallen tree it might have been, had its course been less steady. Doggedly to the center of the current it held, swerving neither to right nor left.

From the bank of the jungle extended a piled-up mass of debris, a snarl of sticks, roots and tough *bejuco* vines. Directly in the path of the floating object, dipping in the tugging, eddying current like a well-planned natural ambush it stood. But the log avoided it; swerved gracefully aside and continued its steady course. On to a bend where a clean sand *playa* showed white against the encroaching green the river-wise driftwood moved and there, gently, ran aground.

Silence endured. The inquisitive macaw wheeled closer, blinked bright eyes and moved lazily away. On the scaly trunk of an old *huito* a wizened black *maquisapa* monkey stared at the grounded log, and suddenly sleepy, hung by his tail.

The heat of midafternoon drifted down. From a great distance a bird called and received answer. Suddenly, without so much warning as the scraping sound of a paddle, a cedar *piragua* rounded the bend and shot downstream. Its occupants were three; two white men and an Indian. Foremost rode a rifleman, a slovenly, pinched-faced *cauchero* whose small black eyes rolled inquisitively at the grounded log, and then threw baleful stares at the awakened *maquisapa* who was rending the air with arrogant cries. Angrily he raised his rifle.

"Fool!"

The white man at the stern voiced the harsh warning. His face was dark with the burn of many suns and ugly in anger, and against the mahogany of his skin a livid scar extended his mouth to a vicious leer.

Reluctantly, the rifle came down. Paddling fast, the canoe swept beyond the bend and was lost to sight.

TO THE grounded log, strange things began to happen. Scrawny roots heaved upwards and branches moved aside. Cau-

tiously, a lean browned face pushed up a sunhelmet covered with palm leaves. Keen, widedset blue eyes blinked at the brilliance of the light and steadied as they swept the surface of the water. Wide shoulders were raised and more palm leaves slid off into the river. From the depths of the log a Winchester rifle came up and the tall, wide man stumbled uncertainly ashore.

"It's okay, Masi." The lean-faced man pushed back his sunhelmet and wiped sweat from the roots of his flaming curls. Flexing his leg muscles he moved crampedly about as his companion, short and stolid and brown, rose up from the cover of roots and leaves and stepped to the *playa*.

Masi, the Indian whose expressionless face was as wrinkled and worn as the cast-off clothing upon his short body, turned a small bright eye to the puffy clouds passing before the moulten face of the sun.

"Rain, maybe," Masi grunted as he bent down to the charcoal burner and pulled a pot within reach.

"Maybe," the big redhead rubbed the back of his neck and stared reflectively at the heavy leather boots on his sizeable feet. "But my corn don't say so."

Masi grinned. "Good," he said. "Boss Kelly corn never lie, eh boss?"

The man called Kelly grinned also and stretched himself out on the sand. Almost at once the grin passed from his face and a ferocious scowl started from his sunburned forehead, wrinkled his prominent nose and spread to envelop his large, close-set ears. His face was a screwed-up mass of concentration as his keen eyes looked beyond the disguised cedar dugout at the slow moving river.

"I don't get it, Masi," Kelly growled. "It doesn't add up. Not even as good as the Brooklyn Dodgers' battin' averages. Yesterday we saw a plane, an amphibian, with no license numbers, no marks. From the West, flyin' low it was, right over our heads. Must've seen us. We heard it, and then we didn't hear it."

Masi fanned the flames and stirred com-

placently at the pot. "Ah-plane," he grunted, and shrugged his sagging shoulders. There were plenty of airplanes flying around Barranca. Lots of them came over the Andes from the west. More of them came upriver from Iquitos and Manaos. Great birds, carrying white men. Sometimes they fell in the jungle or crashed into mountain tops, bursting into terrific and frightening noise and consuming flame. Faster than the river, but not so safe. Nothing to get excited about, not any more.

KELLY, occupied with a problem, squinted his eyes and continued to think aloud. "Then we heard it again. It passed over us, higher this time, headed west. We heard the sound until it faded into the distance. And then, shortly after, things began to happen to us."

It was Masi's turn this time to scowl, a trick he had learned from long association with the expressive Boss William Kelly. Kelly was his God and Master. Who attacked the gaunt, quick-tempered Irishman attacked Masi also, and whosoever attempted pranks, practical jokes or outright assault on the inoffensive Ecuador Indian found himself the unfortunate object of Kelly's wrath. Unfortunate, because Kelly was a man not to be reckoned with lightly. When somebody, be it plain, cantankerous rum-filled river-town *cauchero* or a whole tribe of blood-thirsty Jivaros, started something against either of them, he or they had taken on a large assignment. And such was now the case. For yesterday—

"From the brush up this river," Kelly was talking again, rolling a loose, damp cigarette in his huge hands, "some skunk fired a rifle at us. So we backed water and did a little thinkin'. Not knowin' what we were gettin' into, we waited a respectable length of time and we became a log floatin' down river. So here we are."

Masi removed the pot from the smokeless flame. "Here-we-are," he repeated monotonously.

Kelly resurrected a spoon from his pocket and dipped into the stew. "Then," he resumed, "three people come by us in a boat. One of them has a rifle which he raises to shoot at a *maquisapa* and the other one stops him. We were shot at by a rifle. That much adds up."

"Ah-plane," Masi reminded him stonically.

Kelly frowned. "Yep, darn it. Airplane, you old hunk of dried monkey meat. You know who was in that boat?"

Masi stirred. His eyes rolled quickly. "Mygale," he muttered.

"Yep. Mygale. The Bad Spider," Kelly's jaw was thrust out and his eyes were hard points of intensity. "Roger Mygale and a couple of friends. I didn't know he was gunnin' for me."

"Mygale bad man," Masi mumbled. His eyes were downcast and his hands fluttered about the pot. "He have the eye of Supai, the Evil One. Indians I know who work for him go mad."

"Indians ain't the only ones," Kelly's face was morose. "I got friendly once with a white lad, an American, that used to hang around Iquitos. Came in as supercargo. Had a lot of dreams like they all do. Wanted to make some money so he could go back home and get married." Kelly



stabbed absently at the sand with his spoon. "Mygale picked him up. The kid changed. He got jumpy, didn't want to talk with me any more. Then I didn't see him for a long time. And when I did, I wished that I hadn't."

"He mad," Masi whispered. "All Mygale men mad, crazy like bit by bushmaster."

"Or a spider," Kelly added harshly. "I didn't really have a good reason to look for Mygale before, but I got one now. We'll catch 'em, and then we'll see who's got the Evil Eye in this crowd. Mygale's got one weakness, women. He spends a lot of money on the river sluts and then beats 'em up to show how tough he is. Well, we'll see."

IT WAS late afternoon. Too late, now, to look for a campsite. Twice Masi had turned a questioning glance around, fleetingly to survey the mask-like face of his Boss. But Kelly had given him no sign. Deep and rhythmic was the continued beat of his paddle. Mile after mile of palm-studded banks drifted by. No incident marred their progress; even animal cries and the warning call of birds had been stilled. Jungle night was approaching; the lesser beings were hiding themselves against the prowling *tigres* and other beasts of prey that would soon appear. The jungle was settling down. Soon would come the clear call of the *ambusha*, the night-singing bird, and answering, distantly, would be the chatter of the *tuta-cuchillo*, the venturesome band of monkeys whose sun was the moon.

The dugout moved swiftly. Abandoned now was the protecting cover of roots and branches, for Kelly, moving into trouble, had no desire to be encumbered. At his side lay the Winchester, a fresh cartridge filling its chamber, and in the center of the boat a machete's naked blade threw off gleaming reflections. Masi, too, was armed with his beloved *escopeta*, an old shotgun whose barrels had been shortened twice before he learned that mud in the muzzle was bad business. Ready for action they were, scanning the shore with eyes whose scrutiny no telltale movement, no out-of-place leaf or branch could escape.

The river was wider. Not far, now, to

the junction of the Maranon, the broad flowing road leading straight to the Amazon. Soon the danger would increase and vigilance must be doubled, for at various points smaller streams converged; beyond great limestone boulders lay natural hiding places for an ambush, and Kelly was too river-wise to be caught off guard.

"Dead ahead is the Naturi," Kelly muttered. "Mygale might be campin' there. Get the old blunderbuss ready; we're goin' to investigate."

Masi nodded silently and put his paddle behind him. Taking up the shotgun, he rested it on the bow and hunched forward. Kelly dipped deep into the swirling water and steered as a bend revealed the flecked-green whiteness of a towering rock at the river's edge. Straight to the bubbling water at its base they moved, and in the outcurrent paused to drift as Kelly's Winchester rested across his knees.

Beyond the broken stretch of the Naturi was a *playa*-bordered tree-shaded island. It was of good size, and the thicket in its center was dense. Piercingly, searching for signs of ambush, the two men watched, and suddenly stiffened. The leafy bank flashed a minute, tell-tale movement of leaves.

Masi's *escopeta* was to his shoulder and the tense brown finger was tightening on the trigger when Kelly gasped.

"Don't shoot!" The terse order came through Kelly's drawn lips, and viciously he backed water with the paddle.

The leaves parted and a slim white hand, then an arm emerged. From the thicket, on to the sandy beach, stepped a young woman.

IN THE tropic half-light she stood and calmly surveyed the occupants of the approaching canoe. Tall and slim she was, and poised with imperious ease. From beneath her immaculate sunhelmet a cloud of dark hair brushed her shoulders and framed the ivory oval of her face. Her plum-colored blouse was open at the neck and neatly

pressed brown riding breeches met the polished boots that accentuated her height. About her waist was strapped an automatic pistol and her tapering hands, resting on arms folded across her breast, were immobile. Unemotionally, from beneath heavy lashes, her oblong luminous eyes dismissed Masi with a brief glance and dwelt studiously on William Kelly.

Kelly flushed angrily under the inspection. "You near got yourself shot, lady," he announced coldly. "We're lookin' for somebody, and we thought——" He did not finish the sentence, watching the young woman with growing amazement. It was not an unusual thing to stumble on native women, half-dressed, putty-faced, sloe-eyed Jivaros, fishing or gathering wood in the jungles. But a white woman! And a stunner at that, dressed like a movie queen on holiday, standing on an uninhabited island in the midst of a million square miles of steaming, vermin-filled treacherous tropic waste, acting as though she owned the place, for all the world like a Long Island debutante about to order obnoxious picnickers from her father's estate.

Her luminous eyes lost their indifference and smoldered under Kelly's personal gaze. Some of the palidity passed from her face and her full rounded lips twitched as she spoke.

"Who are you?" she commanded in a voice that was huskily low and clearly distinct. Only her "who" was pronounced "hoe" or nearly that, and her "r" rolled musically. A Peruvian, Kelly decided at once, and in the same instant was convinced that she had been set down by the mysterious airplane he had seen the previous day. But why? And what did she have to do with the shooting, and with Roger Mygale? And if she was one of the Bad Spider's crew, where was he? What——?

"Who are you?" she repeated, her eyes flashing and the arms upon her breasts separating so that her slender hand was nearer the holstered automatic in her belt.

Kelly shrugged. The nose of the *piragua*

was nudging the sand, and Masi still sat with the shotgun threateningly raised.

"Okay, Masi," Kelly ordered. "Put the gun down. It'll be dark in a minute. Looks like we're stuck." Unhurriedly he moved the length of the canoe and stepped ashore, openly contemptuous of the threat of the girl's automatic, leaving the Winchester lying in full view.

"I'm William Kelly," he said stiffly, starting down at the girl. Unexpectedly, he dropped English and launched into Portuguese. "I am a gold hunter and my home is in Iquitos, although I have recently come from Barranca. Masi, my Indian friend, and I have been testing alluvial deposits in the interior. We are now returning to the Maranon. And who, may I ask, are you?"

AS HE talked, Kelly studied the girl and the jungle behind her. Apparently, she was alone. If Mygale had been hidden in that thicket, Kelly's act of standing unarmed and seemingly unwary would have been enough to bring him out. But only silence pervaded the island. Strain as he would, he could hear no sounds, could detect no evidence of an habitation there, and his wonder grew.

The girl's eyes flashed at the change in tongue and she laughed harshly. She was, Kelly could see now, clearly a beautiful woman, and an unusual one. The mind that dwelt behind those luminous eyes was as devoid of fear as her features were devoid of artificiality. She was not accustomed to the days of the jungle; her very costume told that, but she was supremely confident and evidently capable. No simpering doll, this; as though Kelly and Masi were errand boys she received them and maintained psychological mastery of the situation.

"You should continue to speak Ingleesh," she said in an amused tone. "Your Ingleesh is much superior. But you say you are gold hunters? And where is your equipment? Men do not hunt the surface gold with rifles and machetes alone, Senhor Kelly."

Kelly squirmed under the mockery in her tone. "Listen, sister," he growled. "I don't know who you are, and what's more I don't care. How I hunt gold is my business. It will be night soon, and whether you like it or not, we'll camp on this beach. Masi," he returned preemptorily "build an *armariari*. It might decide to rain."

Masi grinned. White man, white woman, jungle, rain. Maybe build two *armariaris*, yes? But maybe not. This woman look like she know what she do, and Boss Kelly not so sure of himself right now. Stoically, he lifted the machete and moved toward the brush.

SOMEHOW, the natural barometer that rested beneath the tough leather of Kelly's boot seemed to have failed, for the night was clear and there were stars. Near the glowing charcoal fire he sat, glumly silent, occupied with his thoughts. Across from him, as naturally as though she had been a member of the party for weeks, the girl perched on a rock and eyed the embers. Her face was slightly flushed and her open lips revealed the whiteness of her teeth. Masi, cherishing thoughts of his own that occasionally gave vent in smothered giggles, had been exiled to the shack which he had built.

"You say you hunt gold," the girl said softly as she watched the fire. "Well, how do you find the hunting?"

"Satisfactory," was Kelly's terse reply. She had told him that her name was Nita, and that was all. Why she was there, who had brought her, what her business was, how she expected to get away, all remained mysteries as unfathomable as the close night around them. And Kelly, not exactly immune to feminine charms, cloaked himself in a mask of indifference. Stubborn he was, and blunt, and he had just enough pride to resent her prying questions issued without equitable replies to his own. Certainly he had a right, after what had transpired, to at least know why she was there. Or did he? Perhaps she had not

come from the airplane; perhaps she knew as little as he about the rifle shot upriver that had caused such a change in his plans. The mystery of her presence grew, and Kelly's reasoning floundered deeper in a morass of unanswered questions.

Nita kicked at the sand with a gleaming boot. "Why did you seek to shoot me when you came here?" she asked in a lazy, incurious voice. "Or did you think me someone else, perhaps?"

More questions. Kelly grunted and reached for makings. She was a cool one. If this be one of Mygale's women, the Bad Spider was rapidly climbing the social ladder. Well, if you can't break 'em down one way, Kelly thought, try another. Maybe Mygale had planted her here to foil pursuit.

"Well, Nita old girl," Kelly's manner changed to seeming affability and he stretched himself comfortably, "I can't abide silence. Since you won't talk about you, I'm goin' to talk about me. It's modest that I am, but a pretty face turns my head. Want to listen?"

THERE was no revealing change in her expression. From the plum-colored blouse came a package of American cigarettes and she selected one. "If you must talk—" she sighed, and Kelly's pulses quickened in grudging admiration. She was cool.

"Yesterday," Kelly said, smiling widely and playing up to his new role of fatuousness, "Masi and me were comin' down from our diggings above here. I got a good claim, Nita. It's rich—well, we'd got out a nice pile of nuggets and we wanted to go spend 'em. We were headin' downstream, goin' for the bright lights and music and the poppin' of corks, when we heard something." His eyes narrowed and he watched the girl covertly for a sign. "It was a plane, comin' from the west. We heard it, and then we didn't. A while later it showed up again, wingin' west, and this time it kept on goin'."

There was a flicker of interest in the girl's eyes now. Imperceptible and quickly covered. Casually she raised her cigarette. "There are many planes flying the route to Barranca," she said.

"Yeah. Lots of 'em. But this one didn't fly to Barranca. It sat down some place for about ten minutes. Some place not far from here. Maybe here, for all I know."

The girl shook her head. "Not here, Senhor. I have been here. There have been no planes." And then, swiftly, her face was a studious mass of interest. Like the removal of a screen it came, revealing an intelligent countenance in which there was more than a trace of harried worry. "A plane," she pondered aloud. "Could there be an airport in the jungle?"

"It was an amphibian," Kelly rejoined casually. "An old Sikorsky."

Abruptly the girl drew herself in. "Sportsmen, perhaps," she said indifferently. "Hunters. The rich spoilers who fly down, shoot a frightened *tigre* and bring the carcass home to display to their stupid friends."

"Could have been," Kelly murmured, "only for two things. There were no marks or license numbers on the plane, and the only shooting done was at us."

"At you?" the girl laughed. "You would not look well stuffed!"

Abruptly Kelly tossed his burned-out cigarette into the fire. Crossing to where the girl sat, his eyes blazed down. "All right, Nita," he said in a steel-edged voice. "I'm tired of this game. Roger Mygale, known in these parts as the Bad Spider, has a few things to answer to me. Heard of him, haven't you?" he grunted, triumphant at the swift panic in her eyes. "All right. Where is he?"

The girl shrank away from Kelly's threatening advance. "Stop!" she ordered huskily, and her hand fumbled with the flap of the holster.

Kelly uttered a low growl and wrenched the pistol from her nerveless fingers. "This

is it, Nita," he said calmly. "Where's Mygale? Don't try——"

From behind, in the darkness at the far edge of the *playa*, came stealthy sounds. Too late Kelly heard it and turned his head.

"Put up your hands, Senhor!"

Two men stood in the flickering circle of firelight, and the leveled rifles in their hands were trained steadily at Kelly's back. Short men, stocky; where they had come from he did not know, but his swift glance told him that neither was Roger Mygale or his *cauchero* companion of the canoe.

"So!" William Kelly roared in wrath, conscious of the man searching his *piragua*, glaring at the other who was holding the rifle at his middle. "So I run into a holdup gang in the middle of the jungle! And one with a fancy female decoy besides! So this is how Roger Mygale gets the money he throws away in river-town! Why, you low-down, yellow-bellied——"

"Shut up!" The stocky, flat-faced man with the rifle showed sparks from his oblong eyes and his teeth champed angrily. He didn't look like a holdup man, Kelly was forced to admit; there was no sodden viciousness in his face, no loose muscles about his mouth; his eyes, too, weren't mean or shifty. He looked angry and upset. Something about the straightness of his back and the squareness of his shoulders bespoke a warning; the way that he handled the rifle was significantly reminiscent.

"I won't shut up!" Kelly retorted obstinately. "You can go back to Roger Mygale and tell him I'll tear his greasy hairs out one at a time. You tell him Kelly said that, and if you want to save yourself a beatin', pull the trigger now and get it over with!"

THE stocky man scowled. "You give me an idea, Senhor," he grunted. "So this Mygale you do not like, eh?"

"Like him?" Kelly yelled. "After takin' a pot shot at me and then havin' me held up? Like him!"

The one who had been searching the canoe came back. He was short and square and tapered like a wedge. His face was puzzled, and he saluted briskly. A keen, snappy salute it was, not the kind one thug might hand out to another. "Nothing, Lu-



ciano," he said. "Food, a bag of gold, clothing, utensils, shotgun, machete, rifle; the usual things."

The girl Nita did not turn her head from her careful guard of Masi. "Perhaps you should search him," she suggested.

Kelly howled. "Just try it!" through clenched teeth and with balled fists. "Just lay one hand on me and see what happens!"

Luciano blinked his oblong eyes indifferently. Stolidly he moved forward, poking the rifle into Kelly's ribs.

Kelly's face went suddenly white. Twisting at the waist in a lithe movement he slid past the gun muzzle and sent a pile-driving fist into Luciano's face. The rifle roared harmlessly and a bullet whined through the darkness as Kelly connected solidly with Luciano's jaw. Kelly's battering fists sought Luciano's wedge-shaped companion as Kelly's brain went blindly berserk, and then he sagged in his tracks.

Calmly, the girl had stepped up to bring the butt of her pistol down on William Kelly's head.

The coarse sand barbed Kelly with a million rasping needles as slow consciousness returned to his aching body. Weakly he tried and then decided not to sit up. He groaned as he moved his head and opened bleary unfocussed eyes. Gradually the outer world took form and he saw the stars. He turned his eyes a little and beheld, in the

fireglow, Nita, Luciano and the other fellow. Luciano seemed to be having trouble with his jaw and he was holding some kind of compress, wagging his head and looking more ludicrous than angry. The other fellow was talking and Nita was at attention, listening to every word.

"—not a trace. Could he have missed connections, or could we be wrong?"

Nita's eyes flashed. "Wrong, Manuel? Did not the red-haired one tell me he was looking for Mygale? Did he not raise his gun at sight of me? I tell you—"

"But Nita," Manuel said gently. "I searched every pocket; the boat, and even the ground to see if it had been concealed. And the Indian, Masi—"

"Where is the Indian?" Luciano mumbled, holding fast to his jaw.

Manuel shrugged. "Where would you expect? Vanished, of course. But this island is small. He cannot go far."

Nita stormed, "Fool! What of the launch? Masi will take it and summon other creatures to this one's aid!"

"My dear," Manuel waved his hands. "The launch is securely hidden. And it is powered with a Diesel engine. What Indian could operate such a baffling creation? No. He is crouching nearby, resigning himself to death. I know the race."

Nita leaped to her feet. "The rifle! It is gone—the one in the *piragua*."

MANUEL arose and walked swiftly to the canoe. He bent his back in muttering search. Presently he returned. His bland face was devoid of emotion. "Both the rifle and shotgun," he admitted, "are gone. But it is nothing to be alarmed over. Were the Indian to have used them, he would have done so. No, he is hiding, waiting for us to go away."

"Nothing?" Nita's face was a mixture of fury and concern. "I suggest you look to Senhor Kelly before he too disappears. Stupid fools!"

William Kelly pushed at the sand and sat up, lolling his head painfully. "I'm still

here," he muttered in a dry, croaking voice. "Not that it's my idea." He ran his tongue around his dry lips and tenderly touched his scalp. "Ouch, you dirty, thievin' scoundrels!"

Nita's shiny boots clicked to his side. Dark rage was in her face. "I will thank you to be more careful of your language, Senhor. You are not in an enviable position," she said angrily.

Kelly grinned weakly. "Nor are you, if I know Masi. One word from me and he'll blow your whole tribe into the Naturi."

Manuel spread his hands. "Nita!" he called in a softly-sharp voice, and reluctantly the girl stood aside. "Senhor Kelly," he continued smoothly, "I regret that your actions made it necessary for us to adopt stern measures. You left us no choice. However, our investigation has convinced us that you do not carry that which we seek. Now, let me point out that you struck our Luciano, our Nita struck you. Thus far the score is even. No need for further animosities. Let us rather sit as gentlemen and discuss that which troubles us."

Kelly experimented with his legs and discovered he could stand. "I'd be willin'," he growled, "except that this thing has got beyond the friendly point. When I wanted to talk, you wanted to start something. Now that Masi has the artillery, you're all for sittin' down and makin' a deal. I don't get it."

Manuel smiled blandly. "You forget we still have two rifles and a pistol, Senhor. The matter is not so one-sided. And where you stand you make an excellent target, one that neither I nor your Indian friend could very well avoid. No, I think it better we talk."

William Kelly's skull didn't ache so much that he couldn't get the idea. Masi couldn't use the *escopeta* with his boss sticking up there like a sore thumb. Masi couldn't hit the inside of a barn with a rifle. It was stalemate, or worse, for now the girl Nita held the automatic in her

hand and this time she was neither frightened nor unsteady. Physically, Kelly was coming around. What to do now? Charge in with swinging fists and take his chances? Or sit down and muddle and match wits, try to find what it was all about? If this gang was a bunch of highwaymen, they'd have been on their way with Kelly's gold and Kelly's canoe long before this. No. Something deep here; Kelly's clearing brain sensed bigger game. Wanted to play, did they? Kelly had bluffed his way into more than one pot on a four-card flush.

"Okay," Kelly mumbled, wary now, waiting his chances. "Somebody give me a cigarette and let me sit down. I hear bells ringin'—"

Manuel was a study of politeness. Carefully he guided the Irishman to a rock and sat him down. Especially careful he was to select one which placed Kelly's back to the thicket and made of him a prominent target. Cigarettes came out of the plum-colored blouse, and the girl, too, was careful not to get behind him or near enough to be held as a screen. Kelly wrinkled his nose and sat placidly, waiting for the next move.

"You were looking for something," Kelly suggested carelessly.

MANUEL'S face was a study in thoughtfulness. "Senhor Kelly," he replied, "you claim to be a prospector, and the bag of nuggets in your *piragua* either substantiates your claim, or——" He shrugged.

"Or what?" Kelly demanded.

"Many things," Manuel said coolly. "The nuggets might be there to allay suspicion; or perhaps to purchase something, possibly from someone with whom you missed connections."

"What the devil are you driving at?" Kelly demanded.

"Senhor, your name is not totally unknown to me. I have heard of you from sources which I do not care to reveal. My information tells me that you are an ad-

venturer, that you gamble at cards, that you frequent questionable places."

"I live my life," Kelly growled. His anger was rising and his hands itched to be at the smug Manuel's throat. "Who are you? What's this all about?"

Manuel avoided the questions. "You came here seeking Roger Mygale," he said quietly. "What your purpose was, I do not know. But we also seek the Bad Spider. We would like to enlist your aid."

Kelly stared. The fellow Manuel was calmly intense; Luciano had stopped stroking his jaw and was looking from hard, unfathomable eyes. Nita, hunched by the fire, watched his face intently.

"Well I'll be damned," Kelly said softly, and then, "I don't believe you."

"Your belief or disbelief does not alter the truth, Senhor." Manuel spread his hands. "We know that Mygale is up this river. Until you appeared, we thought that he and his man Concho were the only white men in the vicinity. We were waiting for Mygale when you showed up."

Again Kelly stared. "Mygale—Mygale has gone. He's in the Maranon by this time. If it hadn't been for you I'd have caught him."

Luciano opened his swollen mouth. "You are mistaken, Senhor. Mygale has not passed here. No one has passed, today or yesterday."

Kelly's eyes widened, and abruptly became dull. His face was immobile, but his brain raced madly. They must be mistaken; it was impossible that Mygale could have eluded him! no sign had existed on those upstream banks. Mygale was below the Naturi, in the Maranon, chuckling to himself as he put miles behind his boat. Or was this a trap? Did Manuel know that Mygale was safely away? Was he purposely holding back, blocking pursuit, and if so, what was the end?

"Mister Manuel," Kelly said, "I don't know what your game is, and when I don't know, I travel by myself. You want Mygale. All right, you catch him. Or you

can turn me loose and what I do is my business. Take your choice."

Manuel shook his head. "There is no choice, Senhor. I still do not trust you overmuch. If you will not work with us, you will not work alone."

Kelly moved his wide shoulders. "You named the rules," he said. Stretching out in the sand he pillowed his head in his arms and went to sleep.

THE feeling of a new and very near danger roused Kelly from his slumber. He lay quiet and from habit born of long training kept his eyes closed as he continued his regular, deep-drawn breathing. More than a premonition warned him that the scheme of things had taken a new tangent and circumstances existing during the night had been altered. Nita and her friends must still be in the *playa*, else Masi would have come out from the brush to awaken him. And now, senses fully aware, he heard noises; the swift rush of feet across the sand, a choking grunt; a muttered, gasping oath; the scrape of boots against a rock. Cautiously he raised his lids a fractional space and peered. It was morning and the light fogged his eyes, but he saw enough. And even as his lids snapped shut again he knew that the situation had indeed changed, and that further feigned sleep was senseless. For, seated on a rock, leering at him with crafty eyes, was the bearded, booted and slender figure of Roger Mygale.

At no time was Mygale a pleasing picture; the livid scar across his cheek continually imparted a sneer to his loose mouth, and now his face was dark with contorted rage and the scar glowed like a tiny, phosphorescent adder. His lips were open and moving loosely and his crazy-man's eyes lost not a movement of any nerve or muscle in Kelly's body. Suddenly the Bad Spider burst into uproarious laughter and his face became yet more hideous in its vapidty.

"Ho, see who is now with us!" Mygale

roared. "The famous fox who walks like a man! He who never sleeps! As I live, the great Senhor Kelly! Ho, ho! Pardon if I laugh, Senhor, but you look so funny!"

Kelly squirmed in anger as he sat up. To be caught flatfooted like a damned greenhorn, unarmed and sound asleep; out of the fry pan and right into the embers. Swiftly his eyes covered the *playa*. Manuel was rigid, his hands and feet bound with tough vine, a gag in his mouth; Luciano was on his side, trussed up like a zoological specimen; Nita lay slumped against a bag of duffel, her oval face bone white in the sun. And Masi, as usual, was elsewhere, in the brush, either sound asleep or else hanging on to the blessed guns and wondering what to do now.

Mygale's eyes followed Kelly's and the Bad Spider laughed as he watched. "Your friends, no? Or perhaps you hit yourself over the head. But you need have no fear now. See, they are harmless. Look how docile this one is!" and he contemptuously kicked Manuel with his heavy boot.

KELLY'S teeth bared in a snarl. "Feel pretty good, don't you, you dirty dock rat?"

Mygale chuckled and his chest inflated with conceit. "Sure, why not? And I would suggest that you stay where you are, making no attempt to move. My friends, for whom your eyes search, are directly behind you. Each is armed. Each, my friend, is very, very good shot with the rifle, and like me they are a little mad, eh? So, be still like the lovely flower who rests against your baggage, and I will be kind to you also."

"What have you done to her?" Kelly asked hoarsely.

"Done?" Mygale's eyes danced and he licked his lips. He rubbed his hands together and the adder on his cheek wriggled as he smiled. "Ah, Senhor, I scarcely know the lady. We have not met. I was hoping you would introduce us." Tauntingly he

leaned forward and his hand caressed the girl's dark hair and lingeringly touched her cheek.

She did not move. In a stupor she seemed to be, breathing imperceptibly, sprawled nerveless in the sand. The sleeve of her plum-colored blouse was ripped at the shoulder and creamy flesh showed through. On her wrists were bruises, and it was evident that she had not subsided without struggle.

Mygale moved reluctantly away. At Kelly's wrathful face he shot a leering glance. "No introduction, my friend? Hee, hee! Perhaps you take offense. Perhaps you would like the lady yourself, no?"

Kelly lumped his fists. "Touch her again, you rotten louse, and you'll——" He stopped. Against the back of his neck a rifle muzzle felt cold and imperative.

Mygale swelled gleefully. "You don't like me?" he said in feigned reproach. "Yesterday I saved your life from Concho, and today you do not like me. Perhaps you want to fight, no? Why do you not attack me? You know I am never armed. Not afraid of me, yes?"

Kelly felt the cold steel boring into the back of his neck and squirmed in helpless rage. Never in his life had he been so completely powerless. Mygale was before him, taunting, insulting, provocatively free. His designs were mirrored in his mad eyes and in the twitching of his hands. When Nita recovered—— Kelly's brain churned feverishly and his heart hammered against his ribs. Stuck, crippled, weak as a penned-up child, mired in the quicksand of his own stupid stubbornness. And he had thought to capture the Bad Spider with only Masi's help. Masi! There was still a chance——

"Masi!" Kelly roared. "Masi!" he cried again in a screaming voice that carried across the Naturi and echoed back from the limestone boulders.

Instantly Mygale's manner changed from leering insult to complacent satisfaction. "Thank you, Senhor," he said briskly, rubbing his hands. "I thought I counted two

of you. Now I am sure. You, Pepe, search the island. Find the cringing dog of your race. Bring him to me."

The cold steel was removed from Kelly's neck and the brush crackled. Recklessly, the Irishman scrambled to his feet and



twisted his head. There, calmly covering him with a rifle, was Concho, Mygale's white companion, a pinched-faced derelict whose cheeks were flushed and whose eyes were as insane as Mygale's own.

"You see, my friend," Mygale drawled, "just how it is. Now, since you do not introduce me to the lady, and since you do not fight for her, I assume that she means nothing to you. Thus I shall take her in my arms and bring her to happy wakefulness. I shall open her eyes with my kiss."

Mygale was bending over. His arms were encircling Nita. His eyes, small and brilliant as a snake's, were watching Kelly with open contempt.

And then, with a startling roar, the silence was shattered. From the trees behind the *playa* came the heavy boom of a shotgun and the simultaneous sharp report of a rifle. Scant inches above Kelly's head whining pellets seared the air and gouged splinters from the cedar *piragua*. From the brush came the rending sound of breaking branches, a chorus of yells, and another, duller rifle sound. One shrill scream terminated in a gasp and a crashing thud.

WILLIAM KELLY lost no time. His fist crashed into the startled Concho's face and his foot kicked at the rifle. My-

gale's hireling staggered back, struggling to bring the rifle about, and Kelly charged.

With arched backs and bulging muscles the two struggled wordlessly for possession of the weapon. Kelly's powerful left hand was on the barrel and his right was at the *cauchero's* throat as they braced in contact. Swiftly, Kelly swung his man around, protecting himself from Mygale, bringing his right hand now to the rifle, and with a savage wrench he tossed it away.

Mygale's man was tough; unsuspected strength coursed through the wiry body beneath his pinched, flushed face. Toe to toe he slugged back; blow after blow bounced from his chin and he fought with the clawing fury of madness. His teeth sank into Kelly's arm and his fingernails scratched ribbons of flesh from Kelly's face.

Kelly jerked away from the savage teeth and smothered the flailing arms. In close, he delivered an uppercut that lifted Concho from his feet. But the man held doggedly, fighting back, clawing, biting and tearing, and Kelly quickly realized that he could not knock him out.

Feinting, he ducked under the wildly swinging arms and seized Concho by neck and belt. Teeth were in his shoulder again and fingernails were clawing at his eyes, but he held fiercely. Now the madman's feet were clear of the sand, and Kelly's steel-like arms stiffened. With gathering speed he swung around, and Concho's fight was done. Screaming, Mygale's man sailed through the air to land with sickening force headlong against a rock where he shuddered once, and lay still.

Not too soon. Mygale was creeping cat-like along the sand, a long-bladed knife gleaming in his fist. The Bad Spider's mouth was a loosely moving line and the livid scar on his cheek jerked convulsively. His pin-point eyes were fixed with an unwavering gleam on Kelly's throat. Slowly he came, coiling himself for a leap as he moved across the coarse white sand.

Kelly's charge was off-balance and ill-

planned, but stop he could not. Roaring, he threw himself into a sliding, feet-first lunge. His heavy boots flailed the air, inches short, and Mygale grinned savagely. Stepping neatly aside he flashed in to the attack.

Kelly was on the defensive now, a lashing, kicking welter of hands and feet. Swiftly he rolled in, hooking a foot behind Mygale's ankle, jabbing a heel into his shin. Mygale went down, sideways, and as he fell the long knife descended.

Searing pain burned through Kelly's left leg and he pulled away. Blood dripped from the blade, and snarling the Bad Spider lunged.

Desperately, Kelly jerked aside as Mygale fell. Blindly he grappled and his left hand, slippery with his own blood, closed over Mygale's wrist.

Kelly was flat on his back, his doubled right arm useless beneath him. Mygale's free hand lashed at his face, and the knife neared. Now the Bad Spider's face was over him, the wriggling scar white against his purple skin. Froth flecked his lips, and his insane eyes fixed Kelly's own with hypnotic steadiness. Wild, small-pointed dark glints from which shone a power in which all reason had fled; steady, absorbing eyes, numbing the brain cells one by one, pencils of light that deadened the nerve centers and robbed twitching muscles of their strength, mirages of madness that mirrored a hellish soul.

With consuming desperation Kelly fought against gripping lethargy. Close his eyes he could not; Mygale had robbed his nerves of the power to act. Coursing, red-tinged lights flashed through his brain, and a red haze choked his nostrils. The knife was nearer now, an inch from the side of his throat, and in weary anticipation Kelly could feel the pain of the blade and the heat of his own blood rising in his mouth. Like a stuck pig he would writhe and gasp, and then soon it would be over. His tortured body would become cool and he would rest.

Convulsively, the Irishman bent his neck and raised his head. The frontal bone of his cranium crashed against Mygale's unprotected face and without a sound the Bad Spider went limp.

KELLY pushed Mygale away, wiped the sweat and saliva from his eyes, and climbed unsteadily to his feet. Over by the rock, Concho was unnaturally still. Near the canoe, Nita was standing with a slim hand at her throat and inexpressible horror in her eyes.

"You—you——" Kelly primed the dryness of his throat and separated his swollen tongue from his palate. "Help your friends," he said thickly. "Help—they—I'll—find—Masi."

Stumbling, lurching against the uselessness of his left leg he staggered into the brush.

Concho's rifle lay in his path and blindly he tripped over it. Sprawling, face-first into a bed of ferns whose leaves held dew. The drops felt cool against his face and hungrily he licked at them.

Steady now. This isn't over yet. Pick up the rifle. Masi's in here, in bad trouble with a crazy Indian. Pull yourself together. Why are they so damned quiet? Easy, now. Lean on the rifle and steady that damned leg.

Less than a hundred feet from the *playa* Kelly found them. Masi was seated calmly, grinning, his faithful *escopeta* against the chest of a sheepish looking blood brother propped against a tree.

"I got," Masi opened his mouth and there was blood and an empty space where two teeth had been before. "I not feel so good, but this one I got."

Kelly's brain cleared. The muscles in his neck bulged. "What the hell have you been up to?" he roared. "Where you been all night? What's been goin' on? How did these guys get here in the first place?"

Masi cautiously lowered the shotgun and winced as he moved his shoulders. "I hurt," he grunted sourly. "Want to leave

this one and help boss, but gun is empty. So, sit here and wait."

Kelly gasped. "Empty? Where's the rifle?"

"He sit on," Masi grinned. "I in tree. He come, I pull both trigger. Boom! I fall out of tree, lose rifle, fall on this one. Boom! This one shoot ground. So, sit here and wait."

It was Kelly's turn to grin. Chuckling, he prodded Mygale's Indian. "No wonder you hurt, both barrels at once. Damn near blew me off the map. Where'd they come from?"

"Downriver. I hear them under this tree. I want to shout but words not come out. You I think dead, so still in sand."

MANUEL and Luciano were on their feet now, scowling, rubbing cramped arms, pausing to glare at Roger Mygale and Concho.

Things were different now; the bonds were on the right men, and gratitude was in their eyes as Kelly limped to the *playa*.

"You fought magnificently, Senhor," Manuel said humbly. "I shall never forgive myself for misjudging you. Without your aid we should all of us be dead, of starvation or worse. But you are hurt, my friend. Come——"

"Just a scratch," Kelly mumbled. "Can't understand how they put up such a fight. They're nothin' but little fellows."

Nita moved from the water's edge. A cloth bandage was in her hands, and her eyes were shining. No longer was she proud, or haughty, or coolly aloof. Her hand trembled and the fullness of her lips quivered as she said softly, "It was not they who fought, Senhor Kelly. It was the madness that was in them, the white madness of cocaine."

"Happy dust?" Kelly gasped, and then swiftly many things were revealed. Like turning over a flat rock in the sun to reveal crawling, unclean things; the madness of Mygale and his men; the destruction of a

fine, strong American youth back in Iquitos."

"Cocaine," Manuel said gravely. "Both Captain Strella and myself were commissioned by our government to trace the flow of contraband being diverted from our country. From time immemorial the Indians have chewed the leaves of the *coca* for added strength and endurance. But cocaine——" He waved his hands sadly. "This Mygale was reported to us by the officials of Brazil. Outgoing ships from Manaus were smuggling great quantities of the white powder, and the governments of the United States of America and Great Britain appealed to us to stop the influx at its source. We were unable to understand how the smugglers obtained their supply. Impossible to conceive that they could cross through the jungles; airplanes were searched without result. But yesterday you gave us the clue. An unlicensed plane, flying to this remote spot, brought the contraband and Mygale relayed it by canoe."

Kelly turned the information over in his mind, digesting it. "So you're a cop," he finally said to the slim, lovely young woman who was making such a neat job of bandaging his leg.

"Not exactly," Captain Strella scowled. "The young lady is the daughter of an old friend, Colonel Morales of the Brazilian government. We were acting on the information that Roger Mygale could not resist a pretty face, and she courageously volunteered her services. If it is any satisfaction to you, Mygale did pass this island yesterday before your arrival. Just how he eluded us, I cannot explain. But he saw Nita, and having seen her, returned. Otherwise we would have lost him."

"Can't blame Mygale," Kelly said.

COMFORTABLE again, a bandage on his leg and a cigarette in his mouth, he leaned back and contorted his scratched face into a grin. His confidence was again restored. Mygale hadn't foxed him. His

being asleep had been bad, but the pride of the Peruvian army being caught flat-footed by a mere bandit and then being saved by a low-down adventurer was one for the book.

Luciano Strella saw the grin and scowled further as he felt his jaw. "You have assisted us, and for that I can forgive you some things. But let me tell you, striking an officer is a grave offense."

Kelly laughed. "You're a Peruvian, I'm an American, and this is Ecuador. Want to make an International Incident of it, or do you want to turn your back while I spank this young lady for socking me on the head?"

The man named Manuel seized Captain Strella by the arm.

"Captain," he coughed hurriedly. "Hum!

Er—don't you think we should search Mygale's canoe? We must still locate the contraband, you know."

Nita Morales showed a scarlet face and stamped her foot angrily, but she did not run away. "You will not touch me!" she tossed her head. "You will not so much as——"

Masi, methodically trying his remaining teeth on a piece of jerked meat discovered in his pocket, made strange giggling noises in his throat. This time Boss Kelly pretty sure of himself, and he look very big standing beside white girl. But Boss Kelly not mad; and you can't spank lady with your arms around her. Can do other things; maybe kiss her.

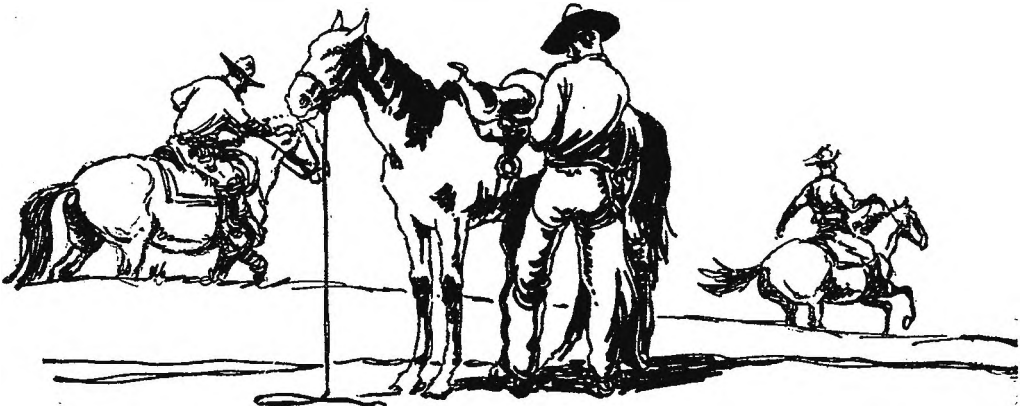
Which is just what William Kelly was thinking.

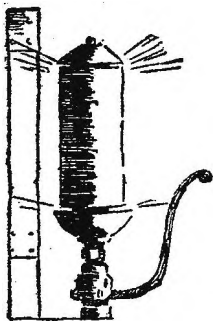
One of the favorite characters in all the fiction of the West rides hell bent into our next issue. Red Clark of Tulluco shows 'em a thing or two when it comes to trying to pin anything like murder onto him. Part I in the next SHORT STORIES

RED CLARK FOR LUCK

by

Gordon Young





Adventurers All

Casing Head

DO YOU know what casing-head gas is? It is the very first vapor that comes off in the distillation of petroleum and the stuff is so volatile that a glass full of it tossed into the air will evaporate so fast that not a drop of it will reach the ground. It is used in the blending of the gasoline that goes into your motor car, and acts as the fuse of the mixture. Only a small quantity of it is used to give the fuel quick firing. Cracked-gas and the lower distillate give the power for the explosion and slow burning qualities, but the casing-head gives it quick-firing ability. Casing-head is very difficult to ship and on ships that carry it regularly—to the large refineries up north—special equipment is used. Most of them have spray pipes all over the deck which will shoot sprays of water about twenty feet in the air. A few years ago I worked as radio operator for a small company that only had four oil-tankers and none of them was equipped to carry casing-head. Nevertheless, the company contracted to carry a load of it in the ship I was on, at the time.

I didn't realize the extreme danger of this cargo until we left Houston and started down the ship channel. The captain gave out orders that no one was to do any smoking on the trip north. Indeed, I had noticed in Houston while we were loading, that all fires in the boiler room were out and no cooking was done in the galley; also that the tanks from which we were taking the stuff were cov-

ered with tarpaulins with water running over them to prevent evaporation as much as possible. Still, the explosive possibilities of the stuff didn't fully dawn on me until after we had sailed. When we got down the channel to Baytown it was beginning to get late in the afternoon and rather than take a chance on any possible collision in the channel—for just a spark might send us all to kingdom come—the captain decided to tie the ship up at the Humble docks until the next morning.

Needless to say, by that time I had the jitters, and went aft to the crew's mess-room and talked to some of the men to see what they thought of things. The consensus of opinion was that a person who is in the habit of smoking will take chances even with a cargo of casing-head gas, and that if the captain would designate a room back aft—such as the crew's mess-room—where all could go to smoke, then it would be much safer than to have some men sneaking off in corners and smoking on the sly.

The crew delegated me to go speak to the captain about this and a number of us had said we were going to pack up and get off then and there if he would not agree to it. The captain was very considerate about it and agreed with me that it was the proper thing to do, which eased the tension somewhat when I reported to the crew.

Forty-five thousand barrels of liquid dynamite. Well, maybe not dynamite but more explosive and almost as powerful. Sitting in the radio room I could see the

vapor coming out of the tank vents like smoke after we hit the warm temperature of the Gulf Stream. The radio room was on the amidship boat deck and the door faced aft. My sleeping room was next to it and its door also faced aft. When I would awaken in the mornings I would be in a stupor from breathing the fumes of the gas all night long, and while standing my watches in the radio room strong fumes were ever present. I didn't even dare start the radio transmitter or use it for fear that a tiny spark might blow us all up. We had to sit in our rooms and swelter, for we dared use no electric fans on account of the tiny brush sparks on the commutators. When I tell you that in seven days we lost four thousand barrels in evaporation out of the forty-five thousand barrels you can realize how volatile the stuff was.

ON THE morning we passed Hatteras I was awakened at 4 A. M. by someone shouting "Fire!" It was the second mate just coming off watch and passing my door. I sprang out of the bunk and looked out the screen door to the deck. Amidships in about the exact center of the ship I could see sparks flying as from a giant roman-candle. A pretty good wind was blowing and it carried the sparks over the port side of the vessel, many falling into the water before they went out. Live sparks fell on deck and simmered. Then it dawned on me what was wrong. The electric cables on the flying bridge were arcing to the iron-work and causing the danger.

I heard someone shout, "Get a bucket of

water and pour on it." I knew that would only make matters worse and realized that the only thing to do was call the engine room and tell them to pull the switches on the generator. I rushed into the lower wheel house and in the dark was able to find the telephone. I was frantically trying to get the engine room when I heard the chief mate in the dark say, "I have already called the engine room, Sparks."

I came back out on deck then and I thought they would never get those switches pulled, as I watched the molten metal fly. What were only minutes seemed like hours. Then the arcing stopped, but there still was a large red hot place on the iron about a foot in diameter. One of the mates called to a sailor to get a bucket of water, and the spot was still red after the time it took to bring a bucket from the boat deck and pour on it.

Only then was I conscious that I was standing out on deck barefooted in short underwear in freezing weather. I went back to bed but there was little sleep for me after all that excitement.

That morning at the breakfast table the mates were telling the captain—who had slept through it all—about it; also the rest of the engineers, and mate.

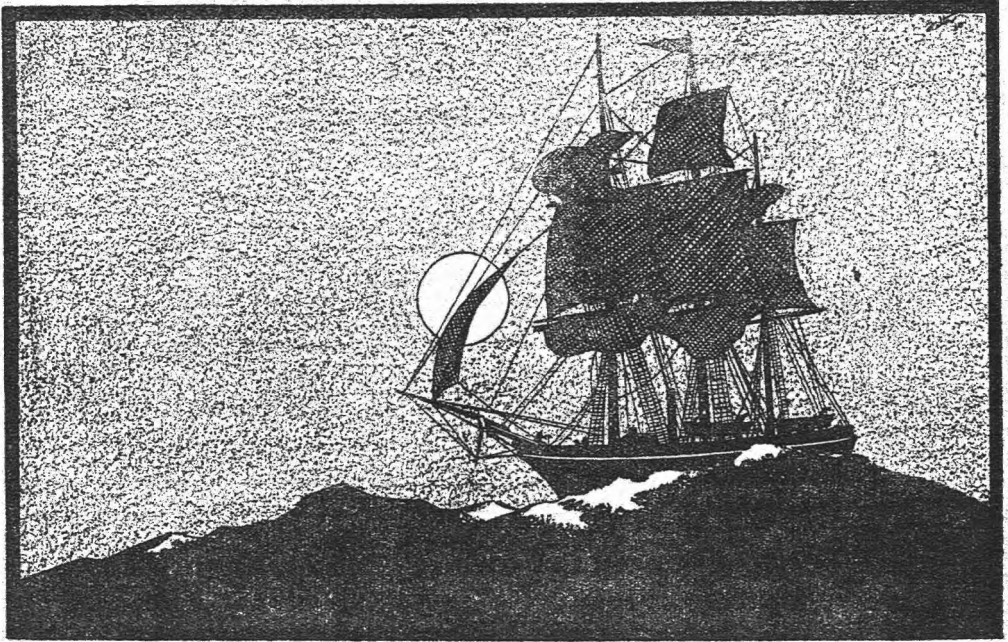
The second mate interrupted the chief mate with, "Who in hell was that run out on deck barefooted in his short underwear?"

"That was Sparks," replied the chief mate with a laugh and all the rest had a big haw-haw at my expense until I replied, "Well, what difference would it make? I would as soon go to hell that way as in a full dress Tuxedo. *Edwin D. Aber*

\$15 For True Adventures

UNDER the heading *Adventurers All*, the editors of *SHORT STORIES* will print a new true adventure in every issue of the magazine. Some of them will be written by well known authors, and others by authors for the first time. Any reader of the magazine, any where, may submit one of these true adventures, and for every one accepted the author will be paid \$15. It must be written in the first person, must be true, and must be exciting. Do not write more than 1000 words; be sure to type your manuscript on one side of the page only; and address it to: "Adventurers All," Care of Editors of Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N.Y. Manuscripts which are not accepted will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for that purpose.

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE



Master Mariners

IN William Chamberlain's long story in this issue there is a warning that if the reader wants a soft tale, he must look elsewhere—and indeed the pearling and trading gentlemen of Chamberlain's exciting stories were anything but soft. Tales of their predecessors in the South Seas show the background of adventurers such as Chamberlain writes of. The Australian gold rush of 1851, for instance, as well as in subsequent years finds its effect in seamen's experiences of that time. By 1852 competition was keen to get out there. Clipper-owners found all the passengers they could accommodate, and new ships were launched to meet the demand. But besides those who paid their passage money, there were others who endeavored to reach Australia by different means. Many would sign on as crew, and desert as soon as the ship got out there; but steps were soon taken to prevent this happening, and, just as in the case of the California gold rush, all sorts and conditions of ships were hurriedly fitted out to sail, so there

was more than one type of vessel that tried to reach Australia.

The Manx schooner *Vixen*, of about a hundred tons, is an example. Soon thirty-seven of the inhabitants of the Isle of Man set out in her from Peel for Melbourne on January 26, 1853, and on the same day the three-masted schooner *Uncle Tom* left Douglas for the same Australian port. Now the men in the *Vixen* had not exactly wasted money on superfluous articles, and they found they had started the voyage without spoons, so they carved them out of old bones. On February 23 they crossed the equator, and on March 5 they spoke to the American ship *Almeida*, bound from Monte Video to New York, so six of the Manxmen lowered a boat and rowed off to her with letters to send home. But it is one more instance of the suspicious craft lurking the seas at the time that the Yankee captain at first refused to have anything to do with them. He could not understand what all the thirty-odd men were needed for in such a small ship, and was convinced the *Vixen* was a pirate. It was only after

In our next issue

SHORT STORIES for January 10th

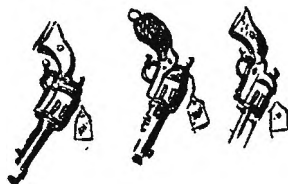
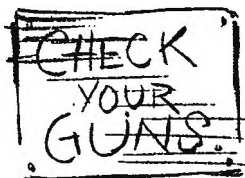
Luck—Red Clark made a hell of a ruckus bringing it, but bring it he did! Part I of

Red Clark for Luck

a new and exciting novel of the redheaded ridin' fool from Tulluco

by

GORDON YOUNG



H. BEDFORD-JONES

The first test pilot of history produces a very early submarine

“The First Test Pilot”

ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN

Dynamite doesn't make a big package either

“The Small Man”

R. V. GERY

The sea pirate heritage of the wife of Kappie De Vries could be made to tell

“The Dutchman's Holiday”

ANDREW A. CAFFREY

A knife with a motor was what Loose Lip Lock called the Pacific Ray

“Man Failure”

HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Safe in a wild and lawless country

“Raw Land”

And other favorites in our next issue

a good deal of entreaty that he accepted the missives.

The *Vixen* then reached Melbourne in ninety-two days from the Isle of Man, the *Uncle Tom* arriving later. Of course, such a career as the *Vixen's* was bound to be eventful, and a mutiny occurred, but those who rebelled were put into a boat, and they reached land, married and forgot the wives they had left in the Irish Sea. The others laid up the schooner in charge of one of their own number. After vainly digging for gold, they gave up the original idea, went back to the *Vixen* and ran her as a mail-boat between Melbourne and Sydney, after which she was used as a lighter. That, however, by no means ended her experiences, for ten years later she sailed back over the ocean with twenty-seven of her original crew. She then became a fishing craft, but on Good Friday in 1864, whilst the crew were in the local Peel hotel, a gale was blowing. The skipper, however, was not going to be put off by such a trifling thing as this, and remarked that he did not care an adjective if they all landed in hell, so out to sea he went, and that was her last trip of all; for she foundered with the loss of every hand near the Calf of Man.

We'll Never Be Any Younger

EXCEPT in spirit—we hope that we will go on growing younger with the years. As we have told you in the Circle, next year **SHORT STORIES** is going to celebrate its fiftieth birthday—gold cover, good wishes, some reminiscence, a lot of looking forward and a special issue that we want your cooperation on. What do you think it should contain—whose stories, whose memories, what characters? There was a lot of philosophy in the old **SHORT STORIES** we find in looking through the old issues, and not so much of the adventurous spirit we have today in our pages. Well, we hasten to say that we are not going to reproduce any of this meandering old fiction; it just doesn't seem interesting. But

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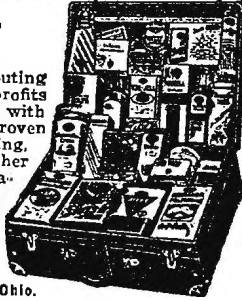
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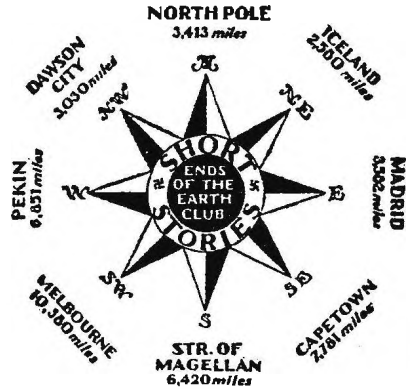
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Write quick for FREE SALES EQUIPMENT NIMROD COMPANY, 4922-N Lincoln Ave., Chicago, Ill.



we do propose to tell you something of this old magazine—the people who wrote for it, the men who edited it, and maybe some of the vicissitudes of its early years. It makes rather good reading, and we want to pass some of it on. And what else; we are asking you?

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



To All Members:

I wish to take this opportunity to thank all members who during the past year have sent to me personally, stamps and other articles. I also wish to thank all those who have written me personal letters. Since we have close to eleven thousand members, I hope you will bear with me if you have had to wait an unusually long time for an answer to your letters. I do enjoy hearing from you.

And now last but not least—I sincerely hope each and every one of you have the nicest Christmas ever, and that the year to come will bring you health, happiness and prosperity.

JAMES HANOVER,
Secretary.

Come, come, members—we don't like reports like this. How about dropping this chap a line?

Dear Secretary:

I have written letters to several of your members in various parts of the world, but so far have only managed to contact a young lady in Puerto Rico, whom I unfortunately addressed as "Sir" in my first letter. Now I cannot understand why the other correspondents do not reply. I think it may probably be due to these troubled times or that they are so busy corresponding with others that my letters are forgotten.

I am, therefore, writing to you to have my name put on the list, as I may strike better luck that way. I promise to answer every letter that I receive, and will be very pleased to exchange stamps, coins or postcards.

Yours sincerely,
A. Carlson

807 Shaw St., Toronto, Ont., Canada

We know of no postcard clubs. Sorry.

Dear Secretary:

Just a few lines to let you know that I am still reading **SHORT STORIES** and enjoying them as much as ever.

I have been unemployed ever since I left the 3 C's. From that you can imagine how much spare time I have.

Will you please try and locate someone who wants to exchange postcards. That is my favorite hobby. Have you ever heard of any clubs that exchange only postcards?

I have written quite a few members in foreign countries but have never had any replies. Most of my pen pals are very faithful and if I could just get in touch with some card collectors I would be all set.

Yours truly,
Wm. F. Howitt

964 Third Street,
Beaver, Penna.

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BALLOON TIRES				REGULAR CORD TIRES					
Size	Rim	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
28x4.40-21	2.15	1.00	1.00	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x4.50-20	2.25	1.00	1.00	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x4.50-21	2.40	1.10	1.10	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x4.75-19	2.40	1.20	1.20	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x4.75-20	2.50	1.20	1.20	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x5.00-19	2.85	1.20	1.20	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x5.00-20	2.85	1.20	1.20	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x5.25-17	2.90	1.30	1.30	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.30	1.30	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x5.25-19	2.95	1.30	1.30	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x5.25-20	2.95	1.30	1.30	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x5.25-21	3.25	1.30	1.30	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x5.50-17	3.25	1.40	1.40	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x5.50-18	3.25	1.40	1.40	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x5.50-19	3.35	1.40	1.40	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x5.50-20	3.35	1.40	1.40	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
28x5.50-21	3.45	1.40	1.40	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
32x6.00-16	3.75	1.75	1.75	31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
31x2.75	1.25	1.25	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
32x4.40	3.45	3.45	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
32x4.40	3.45	3.45	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
32x4.40	3.45	3.45	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
32x4.40	3.45	3.45	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
32x4.40	3.45	3.45	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
32x4.40	3.45	3.45	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
32x4.40	3.45	3.45	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
32x4.40	3.45	3.45	32x4.40	3.45	3.45
32x4.40	3.45	3.45	32x4.40	3.45	3.45

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
31x6.00-19	4.00	4.00	31x6.00-20	4.45	4.45
31x6.00-20	4.45	4.45	31x6.00-21	4.90	4.90
31x6.00-21	4.90	4.90	31x6.00-22	5.35	5.35
31x6.00-22	5.35	5.35	31x6.00-23	5.80	5.80
31x6.00-23	5.80	5.80	31x6.00-24	6.25	6.25
31x6.00-24	6.25	6.25	31x6.00-25	6.70	6.70
31x6.00-25	6.70	6.70	31x6.00-26	7.15	7.15
31x6.00-26	7.15	7.15	31x6.00-27	7.60	7.60
31x6.00-27	7.60	7.60	31x6.00-28	8.05	8.05
31x6.00-28	8.05	8.05	31x6.00-29	8.50	8.50
31x6.00-29	8.50	8.50	31x6.00-30	8.95	8.95
31x6.00-30	8.95	8.95	31x6.00-31	9.40	9.40
31x6.00-31	9.40	9.40	31x6.00-32	9.85	9.85
31x6.00-32	9.85	9.85	31x6.00-33	10.30	10.30
31x6.00-33	10.30	10.30	31x6.00-34	10.75	10.75
31x6.00-34	10.75	10.75	31x6.00-35	11.20	11.20
31x6.00-35	11.20	11.20	31x6.00-36	11.65	11.65
31x6.00-36	11.65	11.65	31x6.00-37	12.10	12.10
31x6.00-37	12.10	12.10	31x6.00-38	12.55	12.55
31x6.00-38	12.55	12.55	31x6.00-39	13.00	13.00
31x6.00-39	13.00	13.00	31x6.00-40	13.45	13.45
31x6.00-40	13.45	13.45	31x6.00-41	13.90	13.90
31x6.00-41	13.90	13.90	31x6.00-42	14.35	14.35
31x6.00-42	14.35	14.35	31x6.00-43	14.80	14.80
31x6.00-43	14.80	14.80	31x6.00-44	15.25	15.25
31x6.00-44	15.25	15.25	31x6.00-45	15.70	15.70
31x6.00-45	15.70	15.70	31x6.00-46	16.15	16.15
31x6.00-46	16.15	16.15	31x6.00-47	16.60	16.60
31x6.00-47	16.60	16.60	31x6.00-48	17.05	17.05
31x6.00-48	17.05	17.05	31x6.00-49	17.50	17.50
31x6.00-49	17.50	17.50	31x6.00-50	17.95	17.95
31x6.00-50	17.95	17.95	31x6.00-51	18.40	18.40
31x6.00-51	18.40	18.40	31x6.00-52	18.85	18.85
31x6.00-52	18.85	18.85	31x6.00-53	19.30	19.30
31x6.00-53	19.30	19.30	31x6.00-54	19.75	19.75
31x6.00-54	19.75	19.75	31x6.00-55	20.20	20.20
31x6.00-55	20.20	20.20	31x6.00-56	20.65	20.65
31x6.00-56	20.65	20.65	31x6.00-57	21.10	21.10
31x6.00-57	21.10	21.10	31x6.00-58	21.55	21.55
31x6.00-58	21.55	21.55	31x6.00-59	22.00	22.00
31x6.00-59	22.00	22.00	31x6.00-60	22.45	22.45
31x6.00-60	22.45	22.45	31x6.00-61	22.90	22.90
31x6.00-61	22.90	22.90	31x6.00-62	23.35	23.35
31x6.00-62	23.35	23.35	31x6.00-63	23.80	23.80
31x6.00-63	23.80	23.80	31x6.00-64	24.25	24.25
31x6.00-64	24.25	24.25	31x6.00-65	24.70	24.70
31x6.00-65	24.70	24.70	31x6.00-66	25.15	25.15
31x6.00-66	25.15	25.15	31x6.00-67	25.60	25.60
31x6.00-67	25.60	25.60	31x6.00-68	26.05	26.05
31x6.00-68	26.05	26.05	31x6.00-69	26.50	26.50
31x6.00-69	26.50	26.50	31x6.00-70	26.95	26.95
31x6.00-70	26.95	26.95	31x6.00-71	27.40	27.40
31x6.00-71	27.40	27.40	31x6.00-72	27.85	27.85
31x6.00-72	27.85	27.85	31x6.00-73	28.30	28.30
31x6.00-73	28.30	28.30	31x6.00-74	28.75	28.75
31x6.00-74	28.75	28.75	31x6.00-75	29.20	29.20
31x6.00-75	29.20	29.20	31x6.00-76	29.65	29.65
31x6.00-76	29.65	29.65	31x6.00-77	30.10	30.10
31x6.00-77	30.10	30.10	31x6.00-78	30.55	30.55
31x6.00-78	30.55	30.55	31x6.00-79	31.00	31.00
31x6.00-79	31.00	31.00	31x6.00-80	31.45	31.45
31x6.00-80	31.45	31.45	31x6.00-81	31.90	31.90
31x6.00-81	31.90	31.90	31x6.00-82	32.35	32.35
31x6.00-82	32.35	32.35	31x6.00-83	32.80	32.80
31x6.00-83	32.80	32.80	31x6.00-84	33.25	33.25
31x6.00-84	33.25	33.25	31x6.00-85	33.70	33.70
31x6.00-85	33.70	33.70	31x6.00-86	34.15	34.15
31x6.00-86	34.15	34.15	31x6.00-87	34.60	34.60
31x6.00-87	34.60	34.60	31x6.00-88	35.05	35.05
31x6.00-88	35.05	35.05	31x6.00-89	35.50	35.50
31x6.00-89	35.50	35.50	31x6.00-90	35.95	35.95
31x6.00-90	35.95	35.95	31x6.00-91	36.40	36.40
31x6.00-91	36.40	36.40	31x6.00-92	36.85	36.85
31x6.00-92	36.85	36.85	31x6.00-93	37.30	37.30
31x6.00-93	37.30	37.30	31x6.00-94	37.75	37.75
31x6.00-94	37.75	37.75	31x6.00-95	38.20	38.20
31x6.00-95	38.20	38.20	31x6.00-96	38.65	38.65
31x6.00-96	38.65	38.65	31x6.00-97	39.10	39.10
31x6.00-97	39.10	39.10	31x6.00-98	39.55	39.55
31x6.00-98	39.55	39.55	31x6.00-99	40.00	40.00
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*One of Uncle Sam's men pleading
for pen pals.*

Dear Secretary:

I am a constant reader of **SHORT STORIES** and would like very much to become a member of your Ends of the Earth Club. Would also like some pen pals and promise to answer all letters written me. I am twenty years old, five feet eight inches tall and weigh 140 pounds. My main interest is stamp collecting and travel. I would really be grateful if you would print this request for pen pals all over the world.

Sincerely,

Pvt. Walter L. Haynes

29th Infantry, Service Co.,
Fort Benning, Georgia.

Paging the Gold Coast

Dear Secretary:

I am sixteen years old and I enjoy your magazine very much. I became interested in your club and decided that it was time I joined. Please add my name to the list as soon as possible. I wonder if it would be possible for you to enclose, along with my membership card, a list of the names and addresses of the club members living in the Gold Coast Colony and other places along the West African Coast. I am planning a trip around this part of Africa after my "sentence" at high school ends a year or so from now and would like to make some friends, who, living there, could give me first hand information about the country. My hobbies are geography and stamp collecting. I have been collecting for eight years and I specialize in the stamps of Africa and Oceania. And I might as well add that I've done considerable traveling throughout the United States, Cuba and Panama. Thanking you in advance, I beg to remain,

Yours sincerely,

Robert Hyland

6310 N. Leavitt St.,
Chicago, Illinois.

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E. J. Mills, President, 1516 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, O.



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Name.....

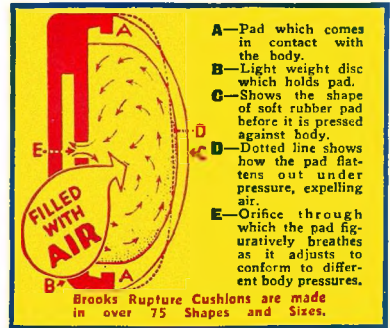
Address.....

(Please print or write plainly)

Stop your Rupture worries and look Younger!

Wouldn't it be a grand and glorious feeling to forget rupture worry completely and let peace of mind and new zest for living make you look younger? But you can't if a gouging, uncomfortable truss nags you constantly, if you never know a moment's security, if you feel your rupture is growing worse all the time, with not even hope of the opening closing up. Worry, worry, worry, day after day, for all your life . . . why, it's bound to make any man or woman look old, haggard, and worn out beyond their years. Don't, don't, don't submit to this terrible, needless tragedy of dragging, ageing worry. At this very moment, as you read these words you can

decide to enter upon a glorious new life. Not by some clap-trap, senseless "magic"; but by the thoroughly effective aid of the world-famous BROOKS Patented AIR-CUSHION Rupture Support—that holds with a velvet touch; yet so securely that you so practically forget rupture, banish worry become normally active and again know the zest and joy of life that *cannot help but make you look younger*. Scores of thousands know this is true. Let the Brooks help you.

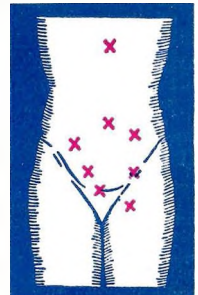


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Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy a BROOKS. But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine BROOKS is never sold in stores or by agents. It is made up, after your order is received, to fit your particular case. The Patented Air-Cushion Support does away completely with hard, gouging, painful pads. There are no stiff, punishing springs. Instead, the yielding, clinging, secure AIR-CUSHION and velvet soft body band. Sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. No metal girdle to rust or corrode. And the Patented Automatic AIR-CUSHION continually works to give Nature a chance to close the opening. What a contrast to ordinary hard-pad uncomfortable trusses!



X—Where is Your Rupture?

Learn How To Look YOUNGER—Send for FREE Rupture Book and TRIAL OFFER

No . . . don't order a BROOKS now . . . FIRST get the complete, revealing explanation. How the BROOKS securely holds reducible rupture is made as clear to you as ABC. Why rupture worry ends is utterly plain. How the Patented AIR-CUSHION Support gives perfect security with *heavenly comfort* is shown at a glance. Learn how you can be fitted individually for any kind of reducible rupture. THEN you'll never rest until you wear a BROOKS, prove its advantages on your own body. And remember, if not satisfied, the TRIAL is at OUR risk, NOT yours. Don't pass up an opportunity like this.

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