Vol. CLXII, No. 2
Whole No. 770

SHORT STORIES

January 25th
1938

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H. S. M. KEMP—JACKSON GREGORY—C. W. TYLER

Short Stories

Twice A Month

January 25th

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Beyond the Khyber Pass!

VALLEY OF THE TIGERS

by

F. V. W. Mason

SHORT STORIES issued semi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, INC., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City, N. Y., and entered as second class matter, November 24, 1937, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE—in the United States, Mexico and American Possessions, $5.00 per year; to Canada, $5.50; and to all other foreign countries in the Postal Union, $6.60; price payable in advance, and including postage. January 25, 1938. Vol. CLXII, No. 2, Whole Number 770.

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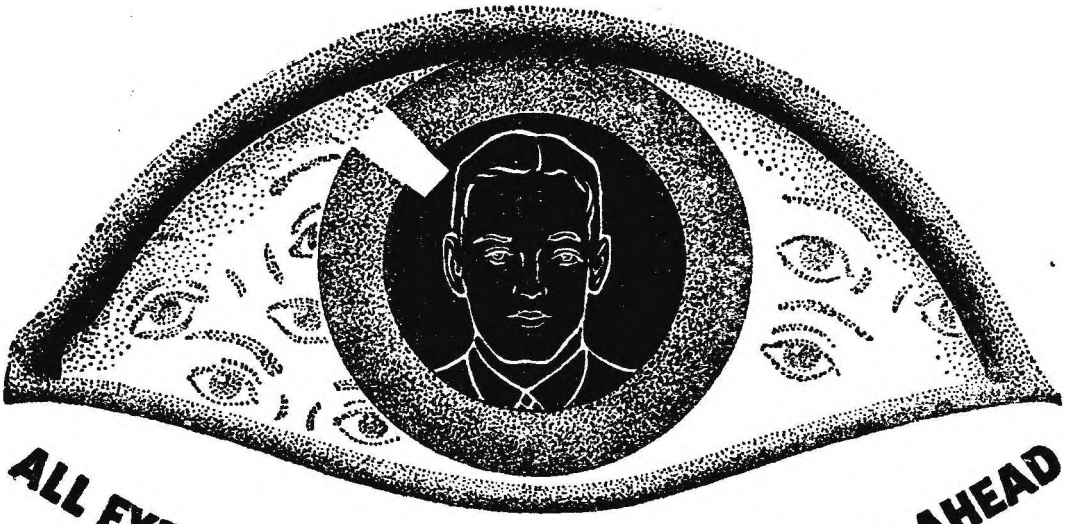

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JANUARY 25th, 1938

VALLEY OF THE TIGERS

By F. V. W. MASON

Author of "Isles of Doom," "Old Dog Head," etc.

THOUGH the M.C.'s white and purple ribbon decorated his tunic, Captain Lawrence Roark, 26th Punjab Lancers, felt an icy trickle of fear trace the length of his spine. Just beyond the transport's wing tip a spur of gray-brown rock had flashed by, all wet with that fog which had risen some ten miles south of Darjeeling.

Settling deeper into his seat the wiry figure in khaki glanced across the aisle at Rissaldar-major Jaffar Kahan—and saw him tugging at his fierce carefully hennaed beard, as he stared into the vapor beating against the window.

Without warning, the transport went into a sickening side-slip and shot through the mist like a pie plate scaled into the air.

As the pilot pulled out of it another brown crag flickered by and when she saw it a rather gaudy young woman diagonally across the aisle screamed:

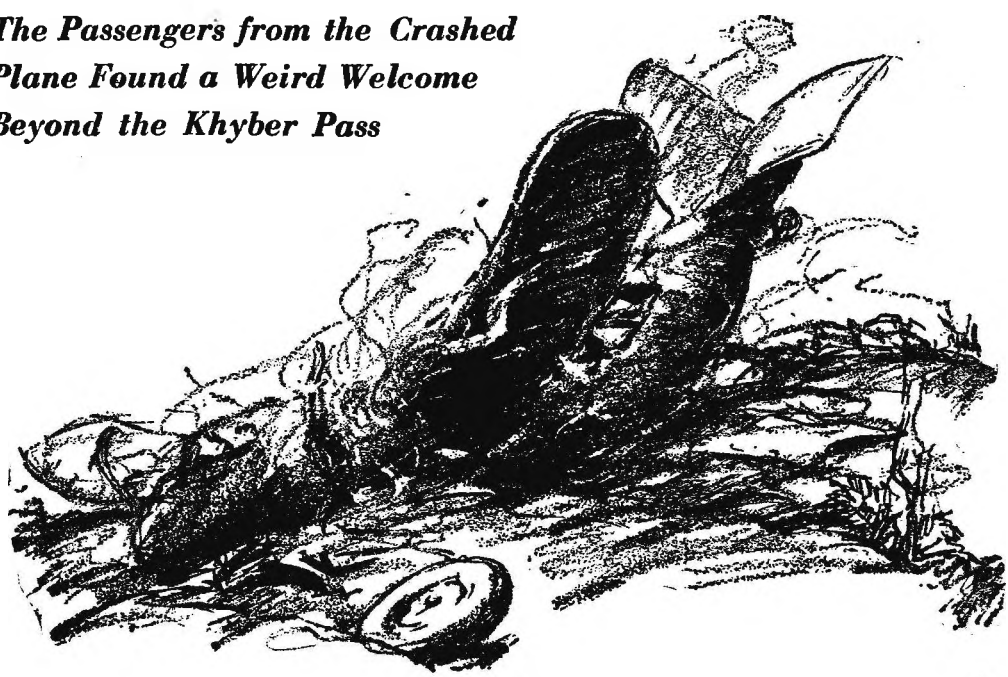
"Ah, *bon Dieu!* The pilot is lost; we shall all be killed!"

An Air Corps Major with a face like an angry tomato unexpectedly trimmed with a small gray mustache had turned to glare in eloquent disapproval when the navigation department's door opened and a chalk faced co-pilot appeared.

"Don't be alarmed; everything is all right, quite all right," he declared with a futile attempt to convey confidence through quivering lips. "Mist's thinning rapidly and very shortly we'll—"

The plane, plowing into some terrific up-current of air, bucked like a broncho outraged by a slashing spur and hurled the co-pilot the length of the passenger compartment. A sickening *crunch* marked the impact of his head against the lavatory door, then he collapsed to lie very

The Passengers from the Crashed Plane Found a Weird Welcome Beyond the Khyber Pass



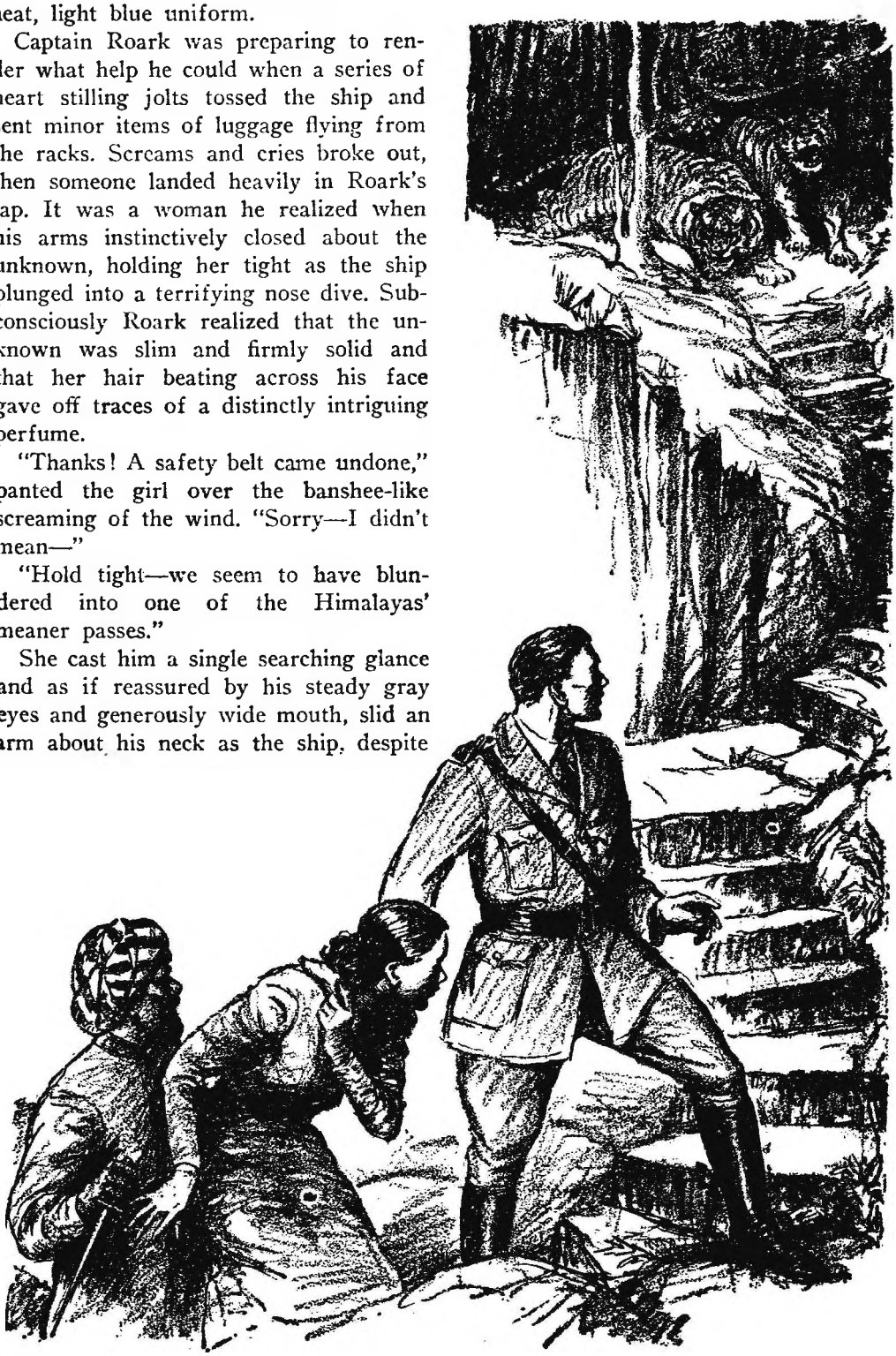
still and white, with blood splattering his neat, light blue uniform.

Captain Roark was preparing to render what help he could when a series of heart stilling jolts tossed the ship and sent minor items of luggage flying from the racks. Screams and cries broke out, then someone landed heavily in Roark's lap. It was a woman he realized when his arms instinctively closed about the unknown, holding her tight as the ship plunged into a terrifying nose dive. Subconsciously Roark realized that the unknown was slim and firmly solid and that her hair beating across his face gave off traces of a distinctly intriguing perfume.

"Thanks! A safety belt came undone," panted the girl over the banshee-like screaming of the wind. "Sorry—I didn't mean—"

"Hold tight—we seem to have blundered into one of the Himalayas' meaner passes."

She cast him a single searching glance and as if reassured by his steady gray eyes and generously wide mouth, slid an arm about his neck as the ship, despite



the pilot's obvious efforts, continued its fearsome plunge.

"What about—co-pilot?"

"Can't do anything," Roark informed her, conscious of her cheek pressed against the triangle of chain mail which served his regiment in lieu of shoulder straps. "His neck's broken. Heard it go, you know."

"How p-perfectly awful," she uttered a little gasp and then clung tighter. "It's pretty bad, isn't it?"

"Could be worse," promptly lied the lancer. "Who are you? You see, I make a point of knowing the name of any girl who sits on my lap."

THEY both braced and she delayed her reply until the staggering transport had all but executed a wing-over.

"Th-this t-time, it's Anita Vance. You'll try to remember it?" and the girl actually managed a breathless little laugh.

"How could I forget it? I'm a Punjab lancer, not a sailor," Roark returned. "Incidentally my enemies call me many things but I'm Larry Roark to my friends."

Miss Anita Vance, he decided, beside being an American was a rather sterling young woman; her lack of hysteria was as rubies and much fine gold. What a shrill nuisance that French woman was making of herself! Jaffar Kahan he saw sitting bolt upright, eyes fixed straight ahead as if on parade, but his dark skin had gone gray, the gay crimson and gold *lungi* of his *kullah* turban emphasized the fact.

The transport ship continued to whirl eastward with the speed of an express elevator gone berserk so Roark queried:

"You got on at Krishnagar?"

The attractively disheveled head lifted to disclose wide gray-green eyes. "No, at Calcutta. Father is American Consul there. The doctors sent him up to Darjeeling for his health and—and—I—I'm of my way to visit—Oh-h!"

The hitherto even hum of the motors died and through the exhausts crackled a series of stuttering, spasmodic reports.

"Miller!" A despairing voice floated back from the pilot's compartment. "For God's sake, Miller, come here! Gas is gone! See if—"

But Miller's body was rolling on the floor, glaring up at the gray faced passengers with blank unseeing eyes.

"Dieu! God have mercy!" shrieked the French woman when the motors died and the plane continued its dizzying fall in comparative silence, broken only by the whine of the over-tried guy wires.

"'Pon my word I shall complain!" Roark heard the Air Corps Major rumble and his neck seemed redder than ever. "What abominable service. Perfectly abominable. The devil take these wretched civilian flyers!"

For the first time a native whom Roark had set down as a Bhuti, roused himself from his huddled position. Jet eyes agleam to either side of a thin, hooked nose he said sharply, "Since we must die, Sahib, shall it not be with dignity and without complaint?"

AFTER staring briefly out upon seething billows of vapor, the girl forced a wan smile and peered up into Roark's face.

"You're so calm you must be used to—to looking death in the face."

"One never gets used to it," he corrected gently and tightened his arm about her. Great God, why *didn't* the crash come? Any second now—

The Vance girl was saying, "But you aren't afraid, are you?"

"Not for myself."

"For your wife?"

"No. But if I die, Geoff Brooke, a fellow officer and one of the best, dies too." The khaki clad officer sighed and the brightly polished regimental badges on his lapels ceased to glint, so deep did the misty murk become.

"One of the best?"

"Yes. He's my cousin, signal officer of my squadron. I'd hoped to save him."

"How awful," the girl cried, then shrugged. "I too have a lot of things left to do—" Anita Vance's voice was brave, but an involuntary quiver of her satin bright lips prompted Larry Roark to suddenly draw her close and kiss her. Startled, the girl's great eyes swept up, then with a little sigh, she relaxed with her head resting against the cold bright buckle of his Sam Browne belt.

Increasing pressure on his eardrums made Roark swallow and look over to Jaffar Kahan who had wound his *lungi* turban's end about his mouth. In order that he might pass into the Beyond with naked steel in his hands—as became a Seyid warrior—he had drawn his *kukri* and was patting its wicked, leaf-shaped blade with his narrow palm.

A wolfish Afghan merchant who had up until now sat perfectly still and silent, suddenly undid his safety belt and courteously addressed the red faced major.

"This contrivance of Shaitan is about to be destroyed?"

In open contempt, the Air Corps Major glanced over his shoulder. "I fancy this bally civilian crate isn't about to win any endurance contests." All at once he leaned over. "I say! Look below! What's that place?"

Roark had time to glimpse through one of those holes which sometimes materialize in the heart of a storm cloud, what appeared to be a sizeable stone city set in a narrow valley.

The spectacled Bhutian uttered a startled gasp.

"The Valley of Tigers! Great Krishna, 'tis—"

Then the blinding fog muffled all the world again.

"Nevertheless we can never land in such a little place and live," the Afghan cried in strong deep tones. *"La-illah-ul-ul-Allahu Akbar!"* he chanted, then into his deep-set eyes flashed a look which Roark immediately understood. Even as the sibilant *zive-e-ep!* of a dagger rushing from its scabbard rose above the tumult, he spilled the girl from his lap and wrenched loose his safety belt's catch.

"Look out!" yelled the Major as he too became aware that the Afghan was preparing to earn easy entrance into that houri haunted paradise reserved for good Moslems who die slaying a hated Christian.

Only the lancer captain's electric quickness prevented the thin lipped merchant's dagger from piercing Anita Vance's breast. Undoubtedly it was the crazed Afghan's intentions to slay first the girl, then Roark, and then as many others as possible before either Jaffar Kahan or the Air Corps Major could interfere.

As it was, Roark managed to flinch aside in time and, bracing himself against the transport's mad plunges, aimed a hard right on that cultured looking merchant's jaw. His blow missed, but he got a grip on the Afghan's dagger wrist.

"Rung-ho!" roared Jaffar Kahan springing up to stand swaying with *kukri* poised, waiting his chance. The Air Corps Major bellowed and fumbled desperately at his holstered pistol.

IMMEDIATELY Roark found himself involved in as bitter a struggle as he had ever faced and all the while the Gods of Chance rattled in their cup the dice of life and death. Locking his teeth

he wrenched at the Afghan's hand, desperately conscious of a razor-edged blade wavering scant inches before his eyes. Twice he almost felt the sting of steel and once he all but had the fanatic's arm in a bone breaking grip, but always the ship's motion thwarted a decision.

Muscles crackling, his ears filled with the whistling roar of wind and the shouts of the other passengers, Roark braced his foot against a seat and tried for a new hold, but he tripped over the fallen co-pilot and his sinewy brown hands slipped on the Afghan's wrist. *He was going to lose!*

"Kelb ibn Kelb!" snarled the Afghan and gathered himself.

Desperately aware of an impending slash, Roark prepared to leap back but rallied as he caught a glimpse of the American girl wrenching off one of her slippers. As the Afghan, hissing furious curses, surged forward, she brought the sharp heel of her curious weapon down hard on the back of the maddened Moslem's head. Startled and obviously hurt, the fellow wheeled just as the plane suddenly leveled off, rushed on for a split second, then arose a dreadful crackling noise, a mad ripping of fabric, screams and shrieks. Roark felt himself catapulted through space and he saw more lights than he had since the siege of Durpal. Then darkness descended like a smothering curtain of black velvet.

II

THE reek of hot and oily smoke restored Captain Lawrence Roark's consciousness with far more effectiveness than could the most approved restoratives. Eyes yet dazzled by a series of blazing comets and a rather effective fiery rain, he blinked and beheld vast sheets of flame soaring high into a misty twilight. He was lying clear on cold and very hard earth with wreckage all about. Apparently the plane's crash had been broken by a clump of young pines and vines just tough enough to slow the fall. Nevertheless she had broken in half and had strewed passengers and luggage far and wide. It was, Roark realized, the forward end and one wing which was burning furiously; the other wing and the tail lay some thirty feet away, nearly undamaged.

Conscious that his fellow travelers were either lying unconscious or dazedly regarding the wreck, Roark staggered to his feet and tried to make a count despite the blinding barbs of pain which kept shooting through his head. Gasping, shielding his face from the fire's terrific glare he circled up wind to discover Jaffar Kahan spouting weird oaths in Pushtu and dragging the badly dazed Air Corps Officer out of danger. The Rissaldar-Major's turban had vanished and his scalp, naked save for that single lock by which Azrael would some day pull him up to paradise, gleamed bright in the furious firelight.

What of that noisy French woman? He glimpsed her lying beyond a piece of wing fabric either dead or unconscious, but at least safe from the crackling flames.

The Vance girl? Limping, he hurriedly circled the wreck but found no trace of her, so, though a tornado of sparks stung his face and hands, he groped at a vast rent in the fuselage. Coughing, half-blinded, he parted a section of fabric and crawled inside.

It was hard work squirming through a mound of tumbled luggage and chair seats, but at last he came upon a figure that moaned softly. Could he get her out? Ugh! The pungent stench of burning hair and scorched flesh beat strong in his nostrils as flames, fanned by the rushing wind, swept embers from the burning nose over to the fuselage and set it afire. Half strangled, he found a hole and thrust the Vance girl through it so hurriedly that her tailored coat ripped, but her slim figure slid out onto the ground. Blackened and wheezing like an asthmatic,

Roark had to draw several deep breaths before he could drag the unconscious girl further away.

From amid wind-driven smoke clouds the Bhutian materialized; his gold-rimmed glasses were gone but an inscrutable glitter played in his dark eyes as he said:

"Rejoice, Sahib, that Siva has turned aside his face—this time. The Inscrutable Ones no doubt have a reason?"

"Take this girl," snapped the lancer captain, beating out sparks that glowed on Anita Vance's clothes. "Pilot's still in there."

"No need. Pilot's dead," cut in the Air Corps Major who, with set lips, was improvising a sling for his left arm which just below the elbow sagged at an impossible angle. "Poor devil was killed when we crashed—so was that Afghan beggar who went after you with his snicker-snee."

NIGHT was falling with appalling speed so Roark made a hurried survey of the situation and found small encouragement. As nearly as he could tell, the transport had crashed in one of those innumerable narrow valleys which serrate the lower Himalayas.

The French woman had suddenly recovered consciousness.

"Au secours! Help!" she began to whimper. "Oh *mon Dieu!"* and mascara drew inky rivulets down her cheeks. "Only savages would live in such a country! We shall all be murdered. Help! They will cut our—"

"That's nonsense, madam," snapped the Air Corps Major, whose name was Watling. "Sheer nonsense, so kindly omit further demonstrations. Most likely we're not over ten miles from Darjeeling—or in Sikkim perhaps. What say, Captain?"

"Or rather," perfectly Roark disguised his mordant uneasiness and began to chafe the Vance girl's wrists.

Though his broken arm was obviously causing him agony, Watling tried to speak casually.

"Do you see? There's no call to be alarmed, madam—"

"Mademoiselle," corrected the woman and smoothed a sadly disordered skirt over her plump knees. "Mlle. Lucie Duval. I'm all—how you say it?—of a terror."

"No need—the border tribes have a lively respect for the Raj. I say Roark, where would you say we are?"

Roark's attractively bony face contracted; said point being of supreme importance, not only to the plane's survivors but to Lieutenant Brooke, helpless somewhere under threat of torture. Poor gay, reckless and impulsive Geoff! Where had his "snow leopard hunt" come to grief? More important still; had he fulfilled his vitally important mission of tracking to its source the unrest and anti-British propaganda which of late had been spreading so dangerously among the already truculent Independent States?

"Perhaps our native friend here has an idea," Roark evaded.

The Bhutian however, only shrugged and seemed strangely unconcerned. "Only the Omniscient may be sure. It is possible we have come down in Bhutan."

"You know we haven't," Roark snapped. "You saw that city below just before the motors quit, and there's no such place in Bhutan."

The Bhutian scowled and his previous ingratiating manner evaporated. "Surely, the most worthy Captain Sahib knows that in these snow crested heights each valley holds its secrets from the rest."

"Don't lie! You know where we are!" His breath glowing red-gold in the firelight the lancer captain got up and stalked over to the native. "You spoke of a 'Valley of Tigers'?"

"The name merely occurred to me," the Bhutian bared strong white teeth in a snarl. "Gyur-Mé, Vice-Wazir to the Rajah of Bhutan, is no beaten dog of a British subject who can be ordered to heel!"

"Drop that tone, my lad," cut in Major Watling. "What is Bhutan anyway, but a dirty, backward, little principality?"

"Fat grandfather of a pig!" Evil lights played in the Bhutian's eyes.

"What's the beggar saying?" Watling snapped.

But Roark, who understood well enough, deemed it unwise to translate. However, he caught Gyur-Mé by his rather grimy collar. "Enough of such talk. We're in a bad mess and Major Watling's hurt. Plans of some sort must be made at once, eh Major?"

"Listen!" Jaffar Kahan had held up a hand and was peering intently into the gathering darkness. "Huzoor, did you hear *that?*"

IN THE distance could be heard a guttural, coughing cry which set the hairs to lifting on Roark's neck. Major Watling recognized it, too, and his good hand sought the flap of the pistol's holster.

"*Shere*—a big tiger!" tensely whispered the Rissaldar-Major. "Listen, my lord's mate answers. She is on the heights to our left."

"Tigers?" Mlle. Duval uttered a little moan, then threw a coat over her head and sat rocking to and fro in an abandonment of terror. "I, Lucie Duval, a meal for tigers! *Ah, c'est trop fort!*"

"They're merely hunting," Watling assured her. "Brutes haven't winded us—yet."

The mist was rapidly lifting and Roark saw, as he had suspected, that the plane had crashed in a valley hemmed in by precipitous cliffs.

Uncertain of the best course, Roark surveyed the surrounding terrain with hurried care and realized that for the most part this gorge was a semi-desert, relieved here and there by the ruins of varying size and shape. The nearest refuse of any promise seemed to be a triangular hill looming perhaps a half-mile distant.

All at once the scorched and still badly shaken Lancer Captain distinctly saw a light blink on once, twice—three times. Then it went out for good.

"I say!" Watling cried. "Did you see that light? We're in luck after all."

"Rather! Can't say as I fancy camping out with those beastly tigers singing so near."

"What's happened?" Without very little fuss the Vance girl sat up and slowly rubbed her eyes.

In an instant Roark was kneeling beside her. "We're safe for the moment, but there are tigers about—can't make out what they'd be doing in a semi-desert like this valley. What is it, Major?"

"I'm for going over to where we saw the light. There's small sense in staying out with no rifles." Though his face was gray with pain he brightened.

"I say, Roark, perhaps we can arrange a *shikari* before we leave the valley—haven't bagged a decent tiger in years."

"Please, *messieurs*, please let us go to the village," whimpered Mlle. Duval. "I have great hunger—and I am sure my poor hair is a sight."

"I, too, will seek the village, before the lords of the jungle come closer," announced Gyur-Mé from the background. "Surely, Captain Sahib, you will come, also?"

"No. Fancy I'll wait till morning and make sure what's what," Roark returned, recalling Brooke's disaster. "I'd rather go cold than fall in with some of the gentry inhabiting these parts."

MAJOR WALTING'S ruddy countenance contracted.

"Don't be such an ass! No native would dare touch us; beggars know jolly well the Raj would be on their necks in a week."

"I know these mountains, sir," Roark retorted. "Possibly a bit better than you!"

Jaffar Kahan interrupted the careful rewinding of his turban to say, "The Captain Sahib is right, sir. Strange things happen in these mountains."

Angrily, Watling wheeled to Miss Vance. "I trust," said he, "you'll not be so foolish as to spend the night in the open? I—I'll guarantee your safety at the village."

"Thanks, Major," she replied, summoning a wan smile, "but I rather like Captain Roark's way of doing things. Besides I've never seen a wild tiger."

"A wild tiger! 'Pon my word!" For the first time Major Watling goggled and seemed utterly at a loss.

Silently the survivors separated and Watling's party became lost amid the lonely strata of mist lingering on the valley's floor.

"So you want to see wild tigers!" Roark chuckled. "Well, Miss Vance, I hope your wish isn't too thoroughly satisfied. But at least tigers are a known quantity."

"Known quantity? What do you mean?"

"Didn't like the way that light went on and then off—"

"Br-r! It's colder than a seal's nose already." Anita Vance chattered and hurried over to the plane's embers. "And now where?"

"To start with, I think we'll skirt the right hand side of the valley. I'd like to get near enough to that village where those lights came from to observe it without being seen, if that's possible."

"Village? How do you know there's a village?"

"We saw a light, Miss Vance—lights that is."

"Huzoor," Jaffar Kahan's voice had gone hoarse and was taut as an overtried cable. "My lord, the tiger and his lady approach. They come up the valley towards the fire—they will wind us any moment."

Roark hesitated, it seemed folly to abandon the comforting warmth of the plane's embers, but reason warned that soon they would be cold and there would be no refuge from the great beasts.

As if to banish his decision, a tiger again uttered its coughing snarl—this time perceptibly nearer. Bitterly Roark lamented that, unlike Jaffar Kahan, he had stowed his automatic in his lost musette bag and so was quite unarmed.

"Let's go," was all he said then, steadying the silent girl, he struck off with Jaffar Kahan a step behind.

Once free of the firelight he found he could see far better than he had hoped and climbed steadily up a slope which shone ghostly gray.

"Hello, here's what's left of a road!" Roark presently commented. They had traveled some half mile when the silhouette of a ruined tower thrust its slender length above the debris of what must once have been a substantial mansion. All but isolated, the tower seemed accessible over a sort of causeway that rose above a deep gulley.

Just then Jaffar Kahan, his breath all silvery, stepped close and gestured sharply for silence. In frozen attitudes the fugitives paused; all three heard the click of pebbles sliding down the slope behind.

"My lord, the tiger has our trail," breathed the Rissaldar-Major and Roark felt a tremor shake the girl at his side, as she queried, "I—I can't see it."

"You won't," was Roark's grim retort, "until they're ready to spring."

Though there was a glow of prophetic moonlight on the jagged, snow-capped peaks hovering above the fugitives, the only light for the moment was that of myriad stars.

"There's just a chance for us if we reach the ruins."

"But Jaffar has a pistol—"

"As a tiger gun it's just a shade better than a sling shot. Can you run?"

"I—I think so," the girl panted, "but don't bother about me."

At a quick trot Roark led on up a road all but obscured by debris fallen from the mountain above, and meantime calculated the tower's possibilities. Um. It was so slender it more resembled a minaret. Probably it was far gone in decay and its lower tiers were choked. He threw a look over his shoulder and his finger tips tingled; less than a hundred yards behind, two—or was it three?—great dark shapes drifted along, pausing every now and then to sniff the earth.

"Big ones!" was Jaffar Kahan's grim comment. "But they have not *seen* us yet. If we gain another hundred yards—"

"That tower!" Roark gasped and caught the girl as she tripped and all but fell. "Run ahead—see if we can get into it."

Had Watling been right, after all?

Panting, the three pounded on with the bitter wind whistling about their ears. Here and there a few gale-stunted shrubs had taken root among battlements more decorative than strategic. Footing became desperately uncertain as the fringes of the ruins loomed all about.

A HEART stilling, infinitely predatory yowl, sounded behind and there was no need to remark that the man-hunters had sighted their quarry, so up a wide staircase, along a shattered loggia, and over a series of debris littered terraces, fled the breathless fugitives. From all sides great stone faces leered down and windows and doors gaped black as eye sockets in some Cyclopean skull.

Stealing a backward glance, Roark was appalled to behold the largest tiger he had ever beheld closing in with the appalling speed which the cat tribe can muster for short distances.

"Run!" he snapped at the girl. "Get across the causeway and yell if there's a way into the tower!"

The Vance girl wasted no time in questions or hysterics but, gathering her skirts garter high, darted out on the causeway over the gulley. Meanwhile Roark and his Rissaldar-Major followed at a slightly slower pace.

"Shall I shoot, Huzoor?" gasped Jaffar Kahan. Something in his voice prompted Roark to wheel and, sick with dismay, he beheld the foremost tiger bounding down towards the causeway.

III

SEEN against the paleness of the causeway's stonework the beast seemed enormous, and from its throat burst a querulous squalling. Very distinctly Roark could see the tiger's ruff bristling and its ears flat to its skull.

"This way, Captain! Found stair leading up—" Low pitched but steady was Anita Vance's call. "It's blocked—kind of —but maybe we can get up."

"Go up," Roark ordered. "Jaffar, don't shoot till the very last moment. Shot would tell everybody in valley where we are."

"What do you plan?"

"A shikari's trick—might gain us a little time."

All the while backing slowly along the causeway, Roark in frantic haste unfastened his Sam Browne and passed it to Jaffar with a curt, "Hold this," then stripped off his tunic. Would he be given time to try this ruse? It hardly seemed so for, with its eyes jewel-bright the tiger was gliding forward just a little faster than the man retreated. Behind came its mate switching her tail in eager jerks and with the mist of her breath sketching an evil halo about her flattened ears.

Hands aquiver, Roark swiftly balled the tunic and secured it with its sleeves. It *would* have to be his best uniform with

epaulets of solid silver mail and cut as only Shreve in Jermyn Street could cut a lancer's tunic. Snatching out the amazed Rissaldar-Major's *kukri,* he locked his teeth and deliberately cut a gash in his left forearm. Still retreating, he let the severed veins spatter plentifully onto the tunic.

"Aie-e-e! Protector of the Poor," Jaffar gasped. "Why waste *your* blood? Take mine, 'tis of no great worth."

"We'll save yours for dessert," Roark flashed a fleeting grin and tossed the blood drenched garment as far up the causeway as possible. In a flash the male tiger pounced upon the lure so redolent of the sickish sweet reek of fresh blood. A fraction of a moment late, the tigeress joined her mate in worrying the luckless tunic, and thus gave the fugitives opportunity to race across the balance of the causeway.

"Here! But we can only get up part way," the Vance girl was beckoning from a window halfway up the minaret. "Stair's choked above."

The tigers, quickly disillusioned, came bounding over the causeway and emitted snarling roars when Jaffar disappeared through the little tower's slot-like doorway.

A paw tipped with bared, eager claws, slashed at Roark as he darted inside and went scrambling up a steep spiral staircase so narrow that his shoulders scraped walls rank with countless swallows' nests. The birds, shrieking dismay, added to his confusion by fluttering about his head and eyes. Panting, bleeding and bathed in sweat, Roark paused in the dank darkness of the turret and decided he had never heard sweeter music than the disappointed roars of the great cats. Apparently they were not yet ready to try the stairs. Faugh! The pungent, carrior-like reek of man-eaters was wafted up from below.

Crouched on a small platform designed to shelter a forgotten generation of archers, he came upon Jaffar Kahan and the American girl. The latter was busily ripping cloth of some kind.

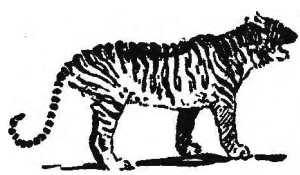
"What's the matter? Are you hurt?" he queried sharply.

"No. Thanks to you and Jaffar. He's just told me about you," came the quiet reply. "I'm making a bandage. Your quick thinking saved us—it—it was splendid and brave."

"The Captain Sahib is famed the length of the Border for guile," said Jaffar Kahan simply. "I go to guard the steps, Huzoor."

"Hold out your arm, please," she directed her eyes, seeming simply enormous in the half light. "Jaffar will look after the tigers. Oh—h did you *have* to cut so deep?"

"Half measures in a crisis aren't sound tactics," he smiled as she deftly set to work. "Or so they taught us at Sandhurst. Well, you've seen some wild tigers. Will these do, or would you prefer more rugged specimens?"



"These will do very well—"

"Incidentally there can't be much game in so bare a valley; wonder where the brutes get their food? Listen, there's another one!"

"Please hold still—er, Captain—" she smiled. "Funny, isn't it? I can't even be sure of your first name, yet you've kissed me and—and saved my life."

HIS free hand for an instant rested lightly on her shoulder. "That only evened the score, my dear. I seem to recall a certain Afghan—he'd have got me if you hadn't—"

As their eyes met, the Vance girl's flying fingers faltered just an instant—

"Anita," said he quietly, "I don't know

what's in store for us—but—well, I'd like you to know that—I—I feel I couldn't have a braver or steadier companion."

"Thanks, Larry—it *is* Larry, isn't it? I'll try not to be a handicap. I—I don't want to be and I *won't* be!"

Lawrence Roark blinked, so hard it was to realize that at five o'clock they had not even known of each other's existence as they boarded a perfectly commonplace transport plane bound for Darjeeling, but at eight, three short hours later, they had twice looked death in the face and were now lost in an obscure valley. Hungry and cold, they were crouching besieged in a mouldering tower by some equally hungry tigers.

"It hasn't stopped bleeding," Anita Vance's voice broke in on his thoughts. "I'll have to fix another compress."

"Please don't bother."

"I will bother," she announced and, raising her skirt, deliberately ripped a length of silk from her slip.

"There," she slid his arm into a neat sling. "It shouldn't bleed any more if you're careful. What are you looking at?"

His profile, powerful and slightly aquiline, was in silhouette.

"Look!" he cried in a curiously tense undertone. "See that peak with the moon on it?" Shivering, he indicated a vast mountain, all silver dusted with moonlight. "That's Kinchinjunga! The saw-toothed one beyond is Kulhakangri!"

"Oh, aren't they beautiful!"

"Not from here," came the grim reply. "It's as I feared, we've crashed on the *wrong side* of the Border—in Tibet. Poor Watling—I shouldn't have let him start out like that!"

"I don't very well see how you could have stopped him," Anita Vance protested. "After all, he is a superior officer."

BUT Roark made no reply, only drew the girl close, for a bitter wind was rising and was beating through the ruined minaret's fabric-like little whips of wire. Below, Jaffar Kahan could be heard stamping his feet and muttering to himself.

"That pass up here is where Johnny Gaunt lost the pigeon!" he muttered over the already moaning of the mind.

"Lost what pigeon, Larry? Have you gone out of your head?"

"Not yet, but soon," came the abstracted reply. "Sit closer and I'll tell you the whole story—

"An officer of my regiment and my cousin, by the way, were ordered across the Border last month—er—to do a bit of Intelligence work among the tribes near Tawanz—ugly blighters they are, too."

"That's nothing like spying, is it?" she smiled.

"You're a bit blunt, Anita, but quite correct. There's been a steadily increasing restlessness among the mountain tribes—usually its first one group and then another, but this time they're all making trouble at once, which is something new." He paused, then added, "And very dangerous, since we've very few troops on the North East Border."

"I see," the girl said, through chattering teeth. "You believe there's something back of it?"

"Our government is convinced there is. If this united attack is delivered, God help the towns and villages in Bhutan and Sikkim. They're not used to raids like the people along the Afghan border."

From below sounded an impatient snarl and Roark on peering below saw that the tigers had scaled a section of broken wall and were crouched some twenty feet below, eyeing the tower top with all the hopefulness of a watch dog regarding a treed tramp. Further off, the tigress flanked by a pair of nearly grown cubs paused and lapped at rain water in a broken fountain.

"So, you can see," Roark continued, "a raid right now would be successful—dreadfully so, but we might check them if—no! The whole problem's to locate the trouble at its source. That's what Geoff

was sent to find out. He was sent there to hunt snow leopards."

"Oh, I see! You are on your way to meet your cousin?"

"Say rather I'm trying to find him," Roark returned quietly and drew the girl's head down on his chest. "Frightened?"

"Ye-yes. I've a feeling something dreadful is going to happen to us. But—let's not think about it. It's too cold and dark. You promised to tell me about the pigeon. Remember?"

"I was coming to that. Well, Geoff reported he was making headway, then on his way back from Tibet, he dropped out of sight. We heard nothing, though our best secret agents combed the Frontiers for weeks. Yesterday, however, a *kitmaghar* found a little basket on our mess room's doorsteps, and—"

ANITA VANCE emitted a little giggle. "—and there was a baby in it?"

Roark patted her head. Good stuff this girl. "No, but it held a live homing pigeon and a note written in perfect English on paper, believe it or not, bearing the Imperial Russian Government's watermark!"

"Since said government no longer exists," said Anita Vance over a particularly eerie wail of the wind, "where could such a message have come from?"

"That was what I was sent to find out in a hurry," Roark replied. "The note went something like this:

> Colonel and Officers of the 25th Lancers:
>
> For some days I have had as my guest Lieutenant Geoffrey Brooke of your Regiment. He has expressed, much against my wishes of course, the desire to reward my hospitality to the extent of some ten thousand pounds!"

Excitedly Anita sat up. "Why, why, Larry, that's around fifty thousand dollars! How absurd! No army officer has even heard of that much!"

"Poor old Geoff has, worse luck," Roark said bitterly. "He squandered a lot before he came out east but his family's still rich as Croesus; tended to business more than mine I expect."

"Go on," the girl begged, her lovely features revealed by the moon.

"Geoff's family was to purchase emeralds to the value of £10,000 and attach them to one of three pigeons which would be delivered. The bird, on being liberated, would, of course, find its way home. Very neat, eh?"

"How perfectly ghastly!"

"Very," Roark admitted and tried to forget the poignant throbbing of his wounded arm. "A note in Geoff's own handwriting was enclosed, but it was so shaky they must have tortured the devil out of him." The thought crossed Roark's mind that a like fate for them was no remote possibility. To think of this lovely, straight limbed girl tormented as only primitive mountaineers, steeped for centuries in brutality, could torment her. More than ever he wished he understood the significance of those blinking lights. He drew a deep breath and hurried on.

"Geoff admitted he'd no hope. The message sent by the first pigeon was to state that the emeralds would be bought. If the second bird failed to bring back the stones," Roark stared out through an archer's slit, "they'd cut off his hands."

"And if the third bird—?"

"In due course the C.O., Colonel Foster, would receive Geoff's head nicely smoked and salted. Swine signed himself 'B'."

"Oh, how awful, how perfectly dreadful!" But suddenly a thought aged the smooth oval of the girl's face. "The pigeon went through the pass up there?"

"Yes," Roark nodded, and the movement evoked a snarl from the grim watchers below. "That's why I'm so confounded uneasy."

"But how could you know the pigeon went this way?"

"The air force detailed two of its fastest pursuit ships to try to follow the bird or at least to determine its line of flight. That way we would have at least a clue as to where poor old Geoff was being held. Well, they were able to follow the bird to the entrance to Chumbi Pass, yonder, then a mist came up and they lost it. So," he said, "we reasoned Geoff's not very far from the pass."

"Why?" Anita tried to snuggle close but only succeeded in intercepting an icy draft.

"Having come all the way from Rampur, the pigeon couldn't be expected to fly much farther, let alone up to the Plateau of Tibet. Br-r-r. Let's dance a breakdown."

The wind had grown so cutting it seemed to have been honed on glaciers. Roark got up and commenced to flail his good arm. Anita rose stiffly to follow suit, but paused and suddenly pointed beyond the great triangular hill. In the far distance a long narrow mirror seemed to lie between two tall mountains.

"A lake!" Anita cried. "Isn't it simply gorgeous? Like a silver dollar in a black velvet casket. Queer, it seems to balance on the top of that hill."

"It isn't a very large one, but it'd be nice to have a drink from it."

His voice died, for down in the valley lights blinked, then shots rang out and a woman screamed in mortal terror.

IV

IT WAS a dreadful, half-frozen night the three spent beneath a vast full moon, drew diamantine sparkles from the glaciers, which rose three miles in the sky, dominating the desolate valley of ruins, and always the great tiger crouched below, motionless save for the tip of his tail. Among the sable shadows of a broken peristyle, the tigress and her cubs prowled, every so often lifting their big heads to peer at the chilled mortals above. Alternately Roark and the Rissaldar-Major guarded the stair and heaved a deep sigh of relief when with impending dawn the man-eaters seemed to slink away over the bodies of fallen idols.

"A new day," Anita sighed. "I wonder what it will bring us?"

"Sometimes Allah is kind and veils the Book of Fate," grunted Jaffar Kahan, returning his pistol. "How does your honor's arm?"

"A bit stiff, but not bad," admitted Roark. "As soon as it's a bit lighter we'll try for shelter on the mountain side. Might find some herder's hut."

Suddenly the sun peered over a snowy crag and like a Titanic spotlight flooded the valley with glare, revealing an unforgettable vista. Dotting the length of a valley which seemed about five miles long were the dry and weatherbeaten ruins of what once must have been an exceedingly rich and populous town. For the most part its structures were of a corrupt Hindu architecture.

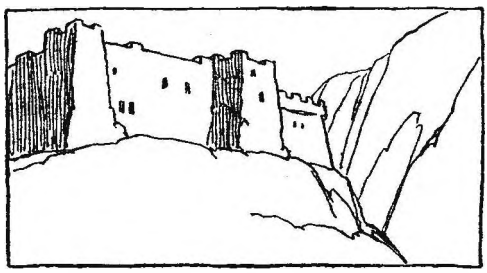
"Look, Huzoor, once there must have been plenty of water." Jaffar Kahan was indicating what undoubtedly had been a stone-lined canal.

Somewhat enheartened, but keeping a lively lookout for the tiggers. Roark and his companions descended and struck out for the opposite side of the valley where a growth of stone pines and junipers offered a measure of shelter.

Beyond it a rocky gorge seemed to lend hope that escape from the valley might be possible in that direction. Skirting the remains of a small temple the three peered cautiously over the stones of a collapsed peristyle before attempting to cross a bare space of considerable width. No chances for Lawrence Roark! Not with Geoffrey Brooke's fate ever in his mind.

"Huzoor! Look at that hill!" Jaffar Kahan was pointing to the center of the valley at that which the fugitives had taken for a vast hillock. Seen by the light

of morning it was a magnificent, many-towered palace. Tier on tier and terrace on terrace its yellow-red hulk arose in stately majesty. Fretted pinnacles, vast spires, and the gigantic effigies of beast headed gods were all gilded by dawn.



"It was yonder, Captain Sahib, we saw lights last night."

"You must be mistaken, Jaffar Kahan. That's a ruin—it looks quite deserted," the girl quickly objected. "Who would live in a place like that?"

"Who?" Roark echoed to himself, wondering at the origin of the sharp uneasiness which invaded his being.

"Beware!" clamored the watch dogs of his brain.

EVEN as the trio admired the great structure's superb proportions, there appeared among its outworks a party of some twenty-five men in brown and black robes. These without any delay struck off for the remains of the plane with the sunlight glinting on their rifle barrels.

"Oh!" Anita's breath came in with a sharp click. "You were right, Larry, they —they—— We're lost!"

More prominent than usual were the Lancer Captain's cheekbones as he said, "Not yet—we'll have to think fast and make no mistake. They've a pair of cheetahs with them."

"Aie-e!" Jaffar Kahan's dark eyes narrowed. "It will be hard to shake off the cat-dogs; until I saw them I hoped—"

"What's a cheetah?" Anita breathed, sinking back in the shelter of a fallen column.

Roarke explained, and was conscious of a chilling void where his stomach normally existed. "A species of leopard which, as Jaffar says, are very like dogs. For centuries the Indians have used them for tracking down game."

"What are we to do, Huzoor?" sharply demanded the Rissaldar-Major. "The cat-dogs will find our trail very soon."

Roark made no reply. He was struggling to see his course. Upon it depended Geoffrey Brooke's life and the precious information he had collected. A wrong step and countless thousands of helpless villagers and town dwellers would perish beneath the onslaught of barbaric mountaineers. Once years earlier, he had entered a small city recently sacked by Zongs and the memory of the sights therein still haunted him. Children buried to their necks in the earth with little fires built on their heads, gray beards impaled on pikes and tender maidens slain by the roadside when exhaustion halted their flight into captivity.

"There's no water; but if we can walk far enough on bare stone, our scent will be very faint and the cheetahs mightn't be able to follow."

ACCORDINGLY he picked a tortuous course along a row of overturned columns, looked back on his trail like a wary old stag, and brought the flight to an end at last in the shadows of a gazebo crouched in the lee of a ruinous wall on which countless little lizards sunned themselves. In the distance the pursuers were seen quartering uncertainly up the valley, a big native sepoy with difficulty restraining a pair of magnificent cheetahs which were strained impatiently at their collars.

"And if they find us, Huzoor?" Jaffar Kahan breathed, his dark features leaner looking than ever.

"They may not follow our spoor."

Age-long minutes of racking suspense elapsed and, heart in mouth, the fugi-

tives watched that sinister group of riflemen bear away from their hiding place ere they disappeared beyond a group of roofless stables.

Sweating with anxiety, the Lancer Captain gnawed his lip. Had the strangers hurried away? Or had their animals solved the puzzle of the trail? Were they even now closing in, bringing instant death, or at best a respite before the infliction of some outlandish torture.

All at once Anita stirred and her breath warmed Roark's cheek as she cried in a low, soft tone, "If—if they find us—you will—that is—I'll understand if you turn your gun on me—"

His look bespoke his admiration of her courage, but he sensed the terrific responsibility she had so unconsciously given him.

Jaffar's thin lips parted in a slow smile framed by his fierce scarlet beard, but all at once it vanished and he sank flat as Roark and the girl shrank further back into the shadows. Feet were moving cautiously over the barren ground, not very far away.

"Oh-h! Anita went paler than the alabaster wall beyond her. "They've followed us."

"Sh-h," Roark whispered. Through broken joints in the masonry, the three riveted their gaze on a gap in the wall below. If the cheetahs had unravelled Roark's strategy, they would appear beyond those bull headed gods supporting the entrance to this blasted garden.

"They've lost it," the girl sighed and her fingers relaxed on Roark's wrist. "You—you've fooled them."

"Quiet! Cheetahs hear as well as they smell."

In the chill dark, the three crouched, Roark with the lanky Rissaldar-Major's pistol cocked. Stealing a sidewise glance, he noted the strength of her profile, the vivid warmth of her parted lips.

"Allah be praised!" Jaffar Kahan heaved a relieved sigh, but cut it off short for into the gap of the wall stepped a singular figure; a figure, which gave Roark the shock of his life. Yonder distinctly dashing in a cloak of gray, unbleached wool appeared *Geoffrey Brooke!* Roark in stunned surprise noted that he still wore his Lancer's tunic and Sam Browne belt.

"I say in there! Don't shoot," he yelled. "We won't hurt you."

Roark rubbed his eyes. Could that really be Geoff Brooke yonder? Brooke whom he had pictured as the wasted captive of some fierce mountain overlord? Incredible, but yonder *was* Geoff, that long reckless face and rather close set eyes were unmistakable.

FRAMED by the sunrise in the gap, Lieutenant Brooke paused a moment, then advanced, and at his heels appeared a sturdy slant eyed Tibetan, fighting to restrain a pair of cheetahs. These, scenting the close proximity of their quarry, squalled, spat and flung themselves furiously against nail studded collars.

"I say, come out of there! We're not going to hurt you."

Roark started to utter a glad shout but bit it off. If these men weren't going to hurt a party of strangers, why then those shots and screams last night? There remained, however, nothing to do but show himself. As he rose he whispered to Jaffar, "Can't understand this. Shoot the mem-sahib if anything goes wrong."

Blinking in the dazzling sunlight, he stepped out on to the ruined terrace, across which the 26th Punjab Lancers' signal officer was advancing.

"Larry!" The other halted, open mouthed. "How in God's name did *you* get here?"

"I was going to Darjeeling on leave, but took a bit of a detour. I say, Geoff, what does all this who-struck-John mean?"

An enigmatic, hitherto unfamiliar ex-

pression flitted over the newcomer's features and his pale blue eyes wavered. "Where are the others?"

"Here!" Jaffar Kahan appeared, his shrewd eyes a-glitter to either side of his hawk-like nose.

"All-powerful Allah! 'Tis Lieutenant Brooke Sahib!" He snapped a salute ere he realized that Brooke's uniform lapels were minus of the famous boar's head insignia of the 26th Lancers; substituted in their place was a symbol done in silver, a tiger's head clutching a human figure between its jaws.

"Ah, Rissaldar-Major, this is a pleasure. Who's this?" Anita Vance, flushed and attractively dishevelled, stepped out of the gazebo.

Very deliberately, almost appraisingly, he studied the slim girl, then smiled wryly. "My word, Larry, you certainly do know how to pick your traveling companions."

Angry color stained Roark's rather high cheek bones but he made the presentation. What had come over Geoff! Desperately but futilely he attempted to reconcile the homing pigeon and its pitifully worded note with the present scene. Never had Geoffrey Brooke seemed more entirely nonchalant or untroubled in all his care-free existence. And again, what of those cries the night before?

A detachment of curiously assorted natives appeared, clad as mountaineers but nonetheless bearing the indefinable stamp of trained troops; Chinese, Tibetans, Bhutians and half a dozen other independent nationalities were among these lean, wolfish irregulars.

Brooke held out his hand and said quite casually, "It's merely a matter of form of course, but I'll have to have your pistol, Rissaldar-Major — rule of His Excellency." But he flushed as, without a word, the tall Seyid in khaki passed over his weapons and hurried on to say, "I'm sure Miss Vance, that you and Larry will enjoy meeting Prince Buriev. Most remarkable chap I've ever met—"

"What a relief—" laughed the girl. "Lar— Captain Roark was so worried about you and we were expecting wild and woolly mountaineers to do perfectly dreadful things to us!"

"The valley and everything in it is yours to command, dear lady," Geoffrey Brooke assured her as he strode beside her, leaving his cousin to tramp along with Jaffar Kahan a few strides ahead of the cheetahs and that leathery faced detachment who, though they carried their rifles at ease, were none the less very vigilant and never took their eyes off the quartet preceding them.

"You'll find all reasonable comforts at headquarters," Roark overheard his cousin say.

"Surely not hot water and soap?"

Laughed he in the green breeches, "The fair name of Bidnacore would be forever tarnished if there weren't plenty of comforts for so fair a guest."

Apparently utterly insouciant, Geoffrey Brooke was picking his way along a road that wound past groups of ruins very impressive in their extent and delicate decoration.

"If I weren't so very hungry," sighed Anita Vance, "I'd find all this just like a page from the Arabian Nights."

Roark could no longer bear the suspense and beckoned his cousin.

"What — who is this Prince Buriev you mentioned?" he demanded and tried to hold Brooke's eye. The other, however, looked away as he said, "A very remarkable chap, old fellow's a splendid soldier. After the White Army broke up he led the remains of his *sotnia* down here."

"Oh, a Cossack?"

"Yes. He's a hetman of the Kuban Cossacks, and as I was saying, led some seventy-eighty of his men clear across Mongolia and Thibet and, er — settled here."

"I see," Roark nodded, then with a knife in his voice said, "And just what's happened to your British insignia?"

BROOKE slashed at a pebble with his riding crop.

"There's a future for a soldier under Buriev and one doesn't have to roll over and play dead every time a red-faced brass hat shows up."

"Great God, Geoff! Do you realize what you're saying!" Roark's eyes took on the cold blue-gray glitter of bayonet points as he sought desperately for some subtle hint that all this was to be discounted—was part of a ruse. In vain.

"You're telling me you've deserted?"

"'Deserted'? My dear cousin, that's a very ugly word. Let's say that I have—er—shifted my allegiance."

"Geoff, you *can't* mean what you are saying!" Roark's voice shook. "You must be crazy!"

"What's the use of slaving away your best years doing paper work and growing fat in Cantonments? Everytime I think about the garrison life over there," he nodded towards Chumbi Pass, "I could kick myself."

Again Roark withheld judgment and praying for some inflection that might convey Geoff's insincerity, but the signal officer's voice was firm and his manner was quite untroubled.

Smothering a strong impulse to land a hard right to the traitor's jaw, he forced himself to speak calmly. "And what was the idea of that carrier pigeon and the note you wrote?"

"Well, if you must know; the family's got entirely too much of the old oof for their own good. It's bad to let 'em go on building up high blood pressure. His Excellency needs a spot of ready cash so when I joined up we worked out the idea. Neat, wasn't it?"

"You unutterable swine!"

"Oh, no I'm not really," calmly protested Geoffrey Brooke. "I fancy I'd have felt just the way you do a month earlier, but after all the sinews of war are necessary."

War! A horrible thought seared Lawrence Roark's brain. "War? What is this fellow you have gone over to trying to do?"

"We live and sometimes we learn," snapped Lieutenant Brooke. "You'd better be tactful, cousin, Prince Buriev is a sensitive soul."

V

IN FULL glory the new risen sun revealed an amazing fortress-palace which, apparently quite deserted, loomed at the end of the road. Its battlements, climbing in weather-beaten tiers, were massive but decorated near the top by exquisitely carved designs, and on the corner of each bastion the effigy of a huge tiger glowered down this desolate valley. Dominating the whole scene stood a vast tower of lacy stone work sculptured with magnificent reliefs depicting the war of Siva against Hanuman and his monkey subjects.

"You've a very dry country here," Roark commented when the little column tramped into a street lined with roofless houses and crumbling shops, "though there must have been plenty of water once, judging by the canal yonder. What happened to it?"

"Haven't the foggiest idea, old man. Well, here we are."

After passing through a triumphal gate

supported by a pair of elephants hewn from basalt, the party entered an out work of the stronghold. What strange community was this? Why should a wandering Cossack elect to inhabit this vast ruin and for what purpose had he recruited these hard-featured mountaineers?

"Huzoor, I can't understand this," Jaffar Kahan murmured. "From whence come these people? And what does Lieutenant Brooke Sahib want with them?"

"God only knows!" returned the Lancer captain. "But it is well to tread warily and talk little." Faugh! To Roark's nostrils wrinkled a breath of air brought the stench of carrion.

"Only the dead smell like that!" Jaffar breathed, as beyond the barbican summit clouds of carrion crows fluttered up as if from the very bowels of the earth. A strange sense of unreality seized Roark; all this must be the result of a bad spill at polo. But that remarkably lovely girl with the red-brown hair was real—and so too was Geoff Brooke!

As Brooke led into the barbican gate's purple-blue shadows, the escorts closed in, dressed their ranks, and set straight their equipment.

The Vance girl, who had approached a sort of rough foot bridge beyond the gate, flinched back as a hideous clamor made the passage resound, but Brooke merely led on.

As the snarling roars reached a crescendo, Jaffar Kahan's hand sought the spot where his *kukri* customarily swung and Roark peering over the foot bridge's rail beheld a moat, perhaps thirty feet deep by as many wide. The bottom of it was littered with dried bones.

"Good God!" he choked and felt invisible fingers clamp down on his throat. Uncomfortably near, six or eight tigers, huge tawny brutes, were leaping high in an effort to reach the foot bridge, but always fell back upon the emptily staring skulls and shattered femurs. Quickly Roark appreciated the palace's unique protection; this smoothed sided moat completely encircled the vast structure. Snarling and spitting, the great cats glared up at the men passing just out of their reach.

"Cunning pets, eh?" Though the air was poisonous with carrion, Geoffrey Brooke paused. "They form an effective protection, though."

"Oh, Larry!" For a second time Roark found Anita Vance in his arms. "Look! Some of tho-those bones look human! How do you suppose the tigers got them?"

"I fancy some cemetery was abandoned and the graves emptied into the moat," Roark suggested, and silenced his cousin with a warning look. "You can see the bones are very old." Fervently he prayed that she would not notice bloodied bits of rag lying beyond a section of fallen cornice from the crumbling battlements.

An entrance had been let flush into the stronghold's façade and standing there were a pair of savage looking *Lepchas*—original inhabitants of Northern India who had been driven into the Himalayas by relentless persecution. These presented arms to Brooke with a significant precision.

On passing a guard room they entered a long dark passage, lit at intervals by kerosene lamps.

"Isn't this queer?" came Anita's cautious whisper. "What's going to happen to us?"

"I don't know," he returned, "but we can always trust my cousin."

Brooke opened a stout iron door, whereupon warm air, redolent of human occupancy, filled the corridor. It was bare save for a grass rug of native manufacture and some rough stools, but carefully screened windows were admitting fresh air and reassuring sunlight.

"This way, please, Miss Vance." With a little bow, Brooke indicated to a yel-

low painted door. "You can freshen up in there."

"Please, I—I'd rather not," Anita said calmly and passed her arms through Roark's. "I'd prefer to meet His Excellency with Captain Roark."

BROOKE'S long visage hardened. "You'd better do as I suggest," he urged. "I assure you everything will be all right."

"Look here, Geoff," he turned to Brooke. "Is it absolutely necessary?"

An unfamiliar glitter was in the ex-Signal Officer's eyes as he nodded. "Quite."

"All right." Perforce, Roark swallowed his sharp misgivings and gave Anita's shoulder an encouraging little pat. "Go along wid yez, then; we'll be seeing you shortly."

Brooke then escorted Roark and the wooden-faced Rissaldar-Major to small rooms surprisingly similar to their quarters back in Rangpur.

"I say, Geoff—" Roark began when he and his cousin stood alone in the room, "you can't mean what you said a while back?"

Coldly, Brooke stared and said, "Can't I? Try any funny business and you'll find out. You'll be sent for in ten minutes."

And with that Roark's cousin stalked away down the corridor.

Though filled with deep misgivings Roark nevertheless washed and shaved and after momentary hesitation donned a clean gray flannel shirt lying ready on a low charpoy. He was just combing his hair when a Cossack, with the faintly oblique eyes and flat face of a Tartar, knocked.

After a considerable walk down through hollowly echoing passages the bandy legged Cossack halted before a black painted door blazoned with a gilt tiger's head.

In it appeared Brooke, this time wearing the full skirted dark green tunic of a Cossack.

"Hello Larry, glad to see you looking a bit less like a chimney sweep. This way."

Entering, Roark found himself before a wide dias upon which sat a big heavy bodied individual in the uniform of a Colonel of Kuban Cossacks. Two of the brightest black eyes Roark had ever beheld dominated a little pug nose and a face that could only be classified as mask like. Two long mustaches swept down from the corners of a wide and colorless mouth, but otherwise, Prince Buriev had shaved off every hair on his head.

So utterly expressionless were his round, faintly yellowish features, that they might have been cast in bronze. From his left ear dangled an emerald earring. An ivory handled scimitar lay across the knees of this neat figure in green, black and scarlet.

"Captain, the Honorable Lawrence Roark," Brooke announced in faintly derisive tones. "His Excellency, Sergei Buriev, Hetman of Kuban!"

The hairless man made no comment, only sat frankly appraising the spare, long athletic figure before him and drumming gently on his sword hilt. Grouped to left and right a number of native dignitaries muttered among themselves.

A SMILE, bland and appealing, but cunning and cruel as well, broke like a ripple over the calm of Buriev's face.

"Be welcome, *Monsieur le Capitaine,*" Buriev murmured. "We are most delighted to 'ave you here. From my aide I 'ave heard of your great resourcefulness and intelligence in saving that bridge. Its name, what was it?"

Roark relaxed a little and wished that his boots were a bit cleaner—a chap's morale suffered when his tack wasn't up to scratch. "Black Angel Bridge, sir. But

my cousin has exaggerated. I was very lucky."

"About me, I like lucky men," the Russian commented. "I reward very well examples of resourcefulness and—intelligence. But yes, very well indeed I had hoped you would arrive as you have—in time to go on a little campaign with me."

Roark, quickly glancing about, could find no trace of Major Watling, of the French woman nor of Anita Vance, but Gyur-Mé, the Bhutian, stood not far away eyeing him with distinct disfavor. Beyond the vice wazir a tremendous map of the area had been sketched upon the wall.

"It is of interest?" Buriev put the question and two or three officers began speaking in Russian.

"It's a fine job," Roark said and noted how Bidnacore had been rendered in black and yellow while contiguous Independent states were bounded *with the same colors!* But what chiefly held his interest was a number of little flags, each bearing a tiger's head. These to the number of several dozen had been thrust into dots indicating various British frontier cities. Darjeeling, Cooch Behar and Maldah all were marked and grimly the Lancer captain realized that the black and yellow line, which apparently included this strange man's sphere of influence, included *all* of the troublesome border states.

Surveying the assembled natives with greater care he was interested to recognize a noted agitator from Bhagalpur on whom the Intelligence Office blamed a number of bloody riots along the Nepalese border. Beyond him stood a hawk-eyed Gurka deserted from the Indian Army, and yet further on was a suave Bengali known to have conducted extensive dealings with certain German munitions dealers, with the result a dozen well equipped hill tribes had indulged in a series of sudden and sanguinary swoops upon the lowlands. A fine crew of trouble-makers!

"I am so very please' our little map amuses," Prince Buriev smiled. "And what do you think of it?"

A ready reply did not occur, so Roark merely shrugged and said, "It doesn't mean much to me. I don't quite understand."

"No? Hazrat Gul, will you be good enough to explain what those little red flags mean?"

The Pathan's cold blue eyes questioningly passed over Roark, but yielding to Buriev's stare, he bowed and said, "Each of those flags represents a town or territory in which there are bands of men faithful to His Excellency and led by an officer who has been instructed here. Tomorrow they will prepare to aide the main body as it crosses the Frontier."

Tomorrow! The word struck Roark with the force of a bullet. Good God! Only yesterday, nearly all available Northeast Frontier troops had been dispatched to the other side of the peninsula to suppress another nasty little Afghan war. How had Buriev learned so quickly?

VI

WHAT so soon impended, Roark learned, was an age-old raid across the Border—but prepared for and designed upon a scale never before attempted. Upon signal the men within British India would rise, anticipating the swift animal-like pounce of Buriev and his savage mountaineers—men who hungered for the all-but forgotten days when the only law was a sword in a strong hand.

"We shall execute, my dear Captain, the greatest raid in history," Buriev concluded briskly. "The next five days Northeast India will have cause to remember. And we? In a week we shall be back among our mountains with

enough gold and jewels to carpet this room knee-deep. *Bogu!* For guests the loveliest girls in twenty cities shall be ours!"

Roark listened, appalled at the matter-of-fact picture this earnest, shaven-headed fellow was painting.

"I am informed, Captain, that you 'ave great familiarity with the terrain along this border?" The blank-faced Cossack's vitreous black eyes sought Brooke who had seated himself upon a divan and to converse with Gyur-Mé. "Your cousin's knowledge of wireless 'as been invaluable and he will be a rich man when the campaign is over. You, *mon cher capitaine,* could be useful on my staff, almost indispen—" Roark's quickly drawn breath checked Buriev's speech. "You were going to say?"

"That you assume a great deal, your Excellency. Perhaps I am not interested in your quaint proposition?"

"My dear Captain, it would be unnatural and ill-advised to refuse me." As the Cossack offered a cigarette case, his face might have been frozen butter for all its expression. "Consider, please for one week's work you will earn more than the life pay of a British General! There is no risk. You can ride in disguise. Who will know Captain Roark has not been a prisoner among some savage mountain tribe? Stay with me and you shall lead a regiment of the finest Frontier fighters in India, and name your own pay!"

When Roark remained silent the Cossack continued along a more subtle tack. "You seem a soldier bred, Captain, so listen well. During the next week I promise you more real fighting than you will see in twenty years of service with the Raj."

Aware of Brooke's eager look, Roark absently rubbed his wounded arm, said nothing.

"You hesitate?" the Cossack's voice dropped, became very friendly. "*Bon,* that is only intelligent, but permit that I advance still another argument." Crooking a forefinger, he issued a crisp command to a Cossack aide and the others present immediately arose as if well aware of what impended.

"Come, gentlemen, we are about to witness an exhibition of marksmanship." Buriev's tongue appeared to wet his leathery lips as a pair of Tibetan orderlies flung back an exquisitely carved alabaster screen, revealing a narrow balcony.

Mystified and uneasy, Lawrence Roark followed a series of grim warriors in *kamsi* and *korta* out into the morning freshness, and was amazed at the size of some great stone idols forming a spire on the far side of the moat.

"Now, my friend," Buriev suggested smoothly, "suppose you postpone your admiration of the architectural glories of my capitol and look down there."

Below the level and to one side of the balcony a short shelf projected from the palace wall; upon it had appeared a pair of stalwart Lepchas bearing a coil of rope.

THEN, amid a murmur of excitement on the balcony, Major Watling was brought out, unbound, but tightly held by two more natives. His graying hair was awry but he still wore his tunic and his broken arm rested in a crude sling.

"You intend to hang him?" Roark involuntarily gathered himself.

"You do not flatter me," Buriev said briskly. "No. I merely indulge the

wishes of a guest. Incidentally, the man at your back is very quick with his danger, so please do not contemplate a rash move."

The Air Corps officer was pale as death, but he held his head high when the Lepchas secured a loop of rope about his waist. Chancing to raise his eyes, he beheld Roark's haggard features on the balcony.

"Don't listen to that Cossack," Watling called as they made ready to lower him into the moat. "Scrag him if you can!"

Once the Air Corps Major's feet were pressing the dry bones in the moat, one of the Lepchas threw back his head and emitted a peculiar wailing cry which went winging eerily along the moat and presently came echoing back from the ruins beyond it. Up from the shade of an idol fallen into the moat at once appeared a magnificent tiger. Another and then another.

Roark sighed. Too well he recalled the ancient Indian method of disposing of captive warriors.

The Cossack rubbed his shaven scalp. "Last night Major Watling and I 'ad the pleasure of a talk in which he expressed a wish to hunt tiger! I merely seek to oblige a guest."

From his belt Buriev drew an automatic and held it up for Roark's inspection.

"We 'ave below at the moment exactly eight tigers; this admirable pistol holds eight bullets. *Bon!* Therefore a mathematical possibility exists that the excellent Major Watling can destroy all my pets. In such a case I shall be delighted to restore him to your gallant Indian Army."

"But," Roark choked, "that's *only a twenty-two!*"

"Yes, a twenty-two high-powered," the Cossack returned. "But somewhere I 'ave heard this Watling is a famous *shikari.*"

He tossed the pistol into the bone-littered moat and the sunlight glinted on his naked scalp as he leaned out over the balcony's low rail.

"You wanted some tiger shooting?" he called. "Well, go ahead!"

Though obviously a little bewildered, Watling cast off the lowering rope, stooped and caught up the pistol before he backed to the wall and commenced to move further and further away from the balcony.

Sickened, Roark watched a pair of big orange and black man-eaters go galloping over to the doomed soldier. In helpless fury, he saw Watling halt, swing about, sight quickly and fire.

As the moat's scarred walls resounded to the report the foremost tiger wheeled suddenly and began biting at his side.

"Pas mal!" Buriev murmured, his oblique eyes aglitter. "Remember, Captain, this object lesson is not entirely for the amusement of my native friends."

Twice more the little pistol spoke and dreadful sounds arose from the moat. In an agony of anxiety the Lancer captain watched Watling whip up his automatic; a tragic figure in dusty field boots and blood stained breeches. He fell back a stride before three striped beasts which, aroused by the squalls of their wounded companions, bared yellow fangs and gathered for the spring.

WITHOUT warning, the doomed soldier wheeled, aimed and fired at the balcony. The hollow, distinctive *thock!* of a bullet inflicting a belly wound made Roark wheel in time to see a gaunt Tibetan khan double over, clawing at his abdomen. Again the pistol spoke but Buriev had long since flung himself flat. Watling's last shot struck no one on the balcony. He had gone down under a trio of great striped beasts.

Still impassive and not at all ill-tempered, Buriev led the way back to the council room.

"Is not life full of disappointments?"

he sighed, eyeing the great map. "Major Watling was a fine sportsman. Magnificent, no?"

"There are worse deaths," Roark replied steadily.

"Very sad," the Tartar shrugged just a little, and his emerald gave off blue-green fires. "Please to reflect upon his fate until this evening."

"I will," Roark replied. "I've been wondering whether, as a race, we English are not growing too soft. I know I've felt myself slipping a bit. Life in cantonments is too easy." He cocked his head a little to one side, curiously surveying the master of Bidnacore. "Just why did you imagine that I, a British officer, would even consider coming over to you?"

Buriev glanced out at the desolate terrain of the valley, all hazy now in the terrific sun of mid-day. He turned and said quietly, "Captain, I'm a great believer in heredity. I know something of your family. For generations they have been fighting men, men to whom wealth meant nothing at all; men who in another age would 'ave led crusades, who would 'ave conquered those soft swine down in the plains. Your cousin, he is of the same breed and if he feels that way, why should not you, a fighter of even greater reputation? Bah! That is pig's life down in India, fit only for women and slaves." He fashioned a smile of surprising charm. "I trust I have not been mistaken in my interpretation of the law of heredity? You will dine with me this evening. *Au revoir*, Captain Roark."

VII

"EXCELLENCY?" A flat-faced Tartar clicked his heels. Roark, seated grimly thoughtful by the torment chamber's window, glanced up.

"Yes, Ivan?"

"Among others, the Kul-Khan of Akas has arrived with some men from Chivang."

"Ha!" Buriev's bronze tinted features lit. "So that old bear from Akas 'as come in."

"He is very suspicious, Excellency."

"No matter. Good! Show them in."

Presently were led in a group of scarred and leather-featured mountaineers who, if their costumes meant anything, must have come from somewhere above the Burmese border.

For the most part they greeted Buriev with reserve but two or three hawk-featured ruffians with greasy little plaits of hair falling from beneath the flaps of their *pir* caps kissed the sleeve hem of the Cossack's blouse. The group, Roark identified as semi-bandit princelings who, dissatisfied with the Raj, were wandering in dangerous paths to rid themselves of it.

"My thanks," said he in fluent Chivi, which Roark understood. "I trust you will not regret having answered my invitation."

Prince Buriev's reception of these shaggy, hard-bitten tribesmen was masterly. In one breath he was all flowery compliments and hospitality, in the next a stern, tight-lipped autocrat, and again eloquent painter of rosy pictures.

After about twenty minutes gifts were distributed and the visitors smiling; yet they were not assured. Roark felt it—and so did Buriev. He even treated the Englishman to a wry grin as if to say, "You aren't fooled either."

Presently the Cossack arose, suggested that his visitors might be interested to inspect Bidnacore and led off down a long corridor terminating in a long flight of stone steps leading precipitously downward.

"These," Buriev announced, opening a door, "can unlock the treasures of Maldah for you." He turned to the Kul-Khan, a lean greasy fellow with a feral body odor. "Could your mountaineers

not use such splendid rifles with good effect?"

"It is possible," murmured the Akas, but his eyes shone.

"Come in, Captain Roark, and look."

The Lancer captain obeyed and found himself in a tremendous, rock-hewn chamber. Despite himself, he started, for, ranged on wooden racks about him, were many dozens of carefully greased light machine guns. A small mountain of cased rifle ammunition and hand grenades filled one end of the subterranean arsenal and to one side were at least twenty thousand Mauser rifles stacked in orderly piles. Further on, a crew of Tibetans were busy cleaning breech blocks, their faces impassive and intent.

Incendiary bombs, one pound mountain guns, sabres, and thousands of saddles and bridles met the awed gaze of the natives—and had their effect. Further on were tents, stacks of lances, picket ropes and medical supplies.

No wonder His Excellency, Prince Sergei Buriev was in need of ready cash! Promptly to Roark came the realization that this valley must be readily accessible from the North; no such stream of munitions could have passed unnoticed through British India.

"You see?" Buriev's ready smile included all his weather-beaten visitors.

"Yes, Excellency," grunted a scar-seamed tribesman. "But the white men, always they have something more—always they win."

"Always?" Buriev shook his head. "Let me show you something."

TWO Lepchas were squatting before a stout door of wrought iron bars whipped up razor-edged yataghans in salute, then unlocked and pushed back the portal. One of them went ahead lighting a series of lanterns.

"Ar-r-r!" The graybearded Khan of 'Aksa pinched his nose at an evil, rancid odor which rushed out of a long, low dungeon. Along its further side ran a wooden platform and upon this was ranged a series of small cages. What was in them? Roark, a step behind Buriev strained his eyes.

"Wagh!" ejaculated a sub-chief with deeply pitted face. "Men!"

"Yes," Buriev remarked. "All soldiers of the Raj, and no two from the same regiment."

Roark's stomach turned. Something told him Buriev was not lying. Why had he done this dreadful thing? An instant later he understood. What more powerful propaganda could be given a group of semi-barbarous tribesmen? Despite himself, he credited Buriev with a shrewd understanding of his problem.

Stonily, the Lancer captain passed along the row, sickened to hear familiar accents, piteous prayers and hearty curses from these luckless wretches staring through the bars from hollow lackluster eyes. Above each cage was affixed a placard inscribed in French, Phustu, Bhuti, and Chinese stating the inmate's regiment.

"I captured all of them in battle or by stratagem," Lips set in a bleak smile, the Tartar turned to Roark and, indicating a corner cage, spoke in English. "Now 'ere we 'ave a splendid specimen of staff offi-

cer; a bit old but very pig-headed. Over there is a typical artilleryman. Tsk! Tsk! Lieutenant Hadley is still losing weight. Gregor, we must try a change of diet! And look, is he not a beauty, my aviator? For the moment he is the gem of my collection."

"I'll kill you yet, you yellow shame of your mother!" snarled a black haired young fellow in the cage.

"Until that day, my friend—be patient."

In the other cages of this tragic group were Sikhs, Ghurkas and prisoners from tribes supporting British rule, and at them especially stared all the leathery mountaineers.

"Alas!" Buriev sighed as the inspection drew to a close and the half naked wretches sank muttering back on their filthy straw, "only one month now I 'ave lost the prizest of my collection, one splendid specimen of English Lancer officer." Buriev indicated a small cage set apart from the rest. "Bogu! He *was* a beauty. Never 'ave I heard a man curse as he could, and not one instant did he lose his ferocity; but in the end he went mad. Very, very sad, we 'ad to shoot him; and so Captain Roark, you will understand why I am curious as to your intentions?"

ROARK nodded; there was no doubt that this Cossack's methods were effective. The hawk-faced Kul-Khan of Akas, quite the most influential chieftain above the Burmese Border, had shifted his attitude from suspicious incredulity to tolerant skepticism, and now he was drinking in Buriev's every word.

"Live a thousand years, oh most noble Prince," cried the Kul-Khan. "But what will the British do? For all I and my men know, there may be many regiments waiting in ambush to receive us."

The other chieftains, eager to embark upon the adventure, jabbered explanations and reassurances, but still the Kul-Khan of Akas shook his head beneath its dingey green and gold turban, and his hard black eyes remained obdurate.

Courteously, Buriev bowed from the waist and Roark strained to lose nothing of his reply.

"A shrewd question, Oh, High Doorstep," he said in the vernacular. "Permit me to show you how we learn exactly what the British are doing! Come my friends and you will see how many others trust in me!"

From the depths of the earth the group climbed to a tall tower overlooking the valley. Everywhere Roark noted activity. Quietly but speedily, hundreds of natives were riding or marching down into the Valley of Tigers. Roark knew the breed; wiry fighting men who could exist for days on a brick of tea and a small haversack of dried meat. A strange sight they made pitching camps on the barren twilit plains beyond the footbridge. He could visualize them—lawless brigands, proud, and quite barbaric in their grimy furs and gold mounted belts. Many, no doubt, carried scimitars which might have been wielded against Alexander's Companions.

When the utterly astounded Lancer Captain glanced up the valley it was to behold long lines of tribesmen straggling down a trail from the direction of the high lake he and Anita had noted on the previous evening.

Anita! Poor girl, what had become of her? He tested the bandage she had arranged. It was still tight. And what had been the fate of Jaffar Kahan and of timorous Lucie Duval?

"This way, Captain." Buriev bowed, permitting his guests to precede him into a room filled by a small dynamo's whining.

A stifled gasp burst from the Lancer Captain. There, removing a last lingering doubt, sat Geoffrey Brooke transmitting a radio message!

For the benefit of his dark featured guests, the Cossack explained. "We 'ave, as you see, an excellent receiving set. Thanks to my aide, Major Brooke, who fortunately is familiar with the British Army code, we 'ave learned exactly where the troops of the Raj are moving. You see, most worthy Khan, I make no idle boast." Buriev's pudgy fingers caught

up one of many slips lying at Brooke's elbow and, grinning, he passed it over to Roark who read:

"Subject: General concentration of all troops in this area at Syhalt. Following arrival of 2nd Battalion of 24th Sikhs, 'C' Troop of the 26th Punjab Lancers will proceed to that post."

The message blurred before his eyes! Only two days before he had helped draft orders diverting 'C' Troop from Terai, its previous destination, to Syhalt! There could be no doubt that the signal officer was giving correct information.

Never had he so yearned to kill a man as this reckless young cousin who was so blithely desecrating the record of a splendid regiment. How could any officer of the famous 26th sink so incredibly low?

"Congratulations, Geoff," Roark managed to say. "You seem to be doing a thorough job. I hope His Excellency pays you well."

The other looked up and, with an impudent grin, stripped off his earphones.

"He does. Hope you'll come to your senses, too. Here's adventure and conquest to be had for the taking. Another of my name made himself Rajah of Sarawak, don't forget, and his descendants rule even now."

"Good boy, good boy," Buriev was grunting as he ran through the dispatches. "These check with my other information. *Bon.* You see, Roark, at first I was afraid Brooke might attempt to deceive poor old Sergei Buriev, but no—" Lighting, his gaze swept the hawk featured group beyond the wireless set.

"You see how it is, my friends? We shall crush the English at their concentration point. They will not be too many."

He turned to the Kul-Khan of Akas. "Your valiant lordship is perhaps now convinced? The chances for a successful raid are they not good?"

During a long moment the Kul-Khan deliberated, tugging at his forked henna-tinted beard. "The loot should very rich be—and, Allah willing, we should slaughter the accursed infidels like ticks on a blanket." In silence he thrust forward the ivory hilt of his yataghan and with a savage smile Buriev gripped it; let it go.

"Your warriors are nearby?"

"Before dawn they will come ready for war—and for the weapons your Excellency has promised."

VIII

GEOFF BROOKE really was a traitor! Nothing could explain away the intent behind Geoff's accurate translation of that damning dispatch. How else could the signal office have known that Troop "C" had been diverted from its original destination at Terai to join in the general concentration at Syhalt? Grimly he hunched on the edge of his bed and considered various means of murdering him with whom he had spent a joyous boyhood among the green hills of Devon. The killing must be accomplished soon—every dispatch the traitor translated increased the chances of Buriev's ghastly invasion. Buriev had given him until dinner time to make up his mind and now his wrist watch's hands were nearing seven.

A difficult problem this. After all, Anita and Jaffar Kahan must be considered. What had happened to that grim old warrior? Though maintaining a sharp look-out he had seen nothing of the Rissaldar-Major amid all his comings and goings within the ruined stronghold.

Relief welled like a cooling tide within him when Anita, lovely, but pale as death, was shown into a small dining room equipped in European fashion and set with five places. Already standing before a candle lit table were Buriev, Geoff Brooke, very handsome in a Cossack's uniform and Lucie Duval. Both Geoff and Lucie were busy with a tray of cocktails, and it seemed that the French woman, distinctly handsome in a native

serai, had forgotten whatever qualms she had previously felt.

Roark smothered a contemptuous remark, schooled himself to affability.

"Oh, Larry!" cried Anita, eyes softly aglow. "I—I was so worried."

"No need," he laughed. "Prince Buriev and I are—er—beginning to understand one another."

The Cossack's fatty eyelids opened deliberately. "Ah, so?"

Geoffrey Brooke set down his glass with a delighted, "Stout fellow! This makes matters much pleasanter! As I said, we don't live forever, and I've always had a hankering to ride on an old-fashioned raid."

"Spoken like a true philosopher, eh, Mademoiselle?" Buriev strode over a lovely Bohkara rug to offer the French woman a paté of egg chopped up with chives.

"Parfaitement," she smiled and nervously fingered a cheap little ring. "More and more one comes to realize, Monsieur le Prince, how much fortune favors the brave." She sighed and fixed her eyes just a little too innocently on Lawrence Roark's ruddy features. "But, *Monsieur le Capitaine Roark* — you surprise me. You English are generally so ver' ver' stubborn."

His lips set in a heart warming smile, Buriev lifted a well frosted glass and regarded it with absurd concentration.

"Captain Roark is no parade ground soldier — I think 'e loves the sound of whistling steel. Besides, 'e 'as considered well and would not attempt to deceive so trusting a person as myself."

Anita winced, ran over to Roark. "Larry! You haven't joined up with this dreadful creature?"

"'Dreadful creature?' Dear, dear," sighed the Cossack draining his cocktail. "So much for vanity! Who would 'ave thought Sergei Buriev was a 'dreadful creature'?"

"But you are not, *mon prince,*" murmured Mlle. Duval. "To me you are irresistible."

WITH difficulty ignoring the utter bewilderment of Anita's expression, Roark managed a careless laugh. "I haven't seen active duty in months, my dear, besides it doesn't matter much to your real fighting man what uniform he wears."

"And what a fighting man!" Geoff exulted. "Your Excellency has no idea of—"

"Perhaps I 'ave," smiled the Cossack. "A martini, Mademoiselle?"

Said Anita mechanically accepting the glass offered by Buriev, "You — you're going to throw over your commission? You'd break your oath as an officer and—"

"Women don't understand war and fighting," Roark cut in with a small shrug. "Be a good girl and drink to a successful campaign."

Stricken, her dark blue eyes probed his until it seemed that only he and this pallid girl in the scorched and hastily mended travelling suit occupied the room.

"As we all know, Anita, this is a changing world of ours. Wise people will change with it. Eh, Miss Duval?"

The Frenchwoman's teeth gleamed behind skillfully brightened lips. "But yes. Is it practical to defy fate, like our silly friend Major Watling?"

"Something has happened to him?" Anita gasped.

"But yes," blandly interpolated Buriev. "He decided to go tiger shooting; he was unlucky."

"Then *that* was the shooting and roaring I heard!" A hand, expressive of revulsion flashed to the American girl's throat. "And that's where the bones in the moat really came from!" Very lovely in her fury, she whirled on Roark and gave him a stinging look. "And you—you'd join this murderer?"

Defiantly her head went back as she flung a burning glance on their shaven

headed host; he was laughing in deep amusement.

"Bogu! Excitement becomes you, Mademoiselle. Before, you were a bit too pale. If my presence is so utterly repugnant, one will not force you to remain against your will!"

He clapped his hands to summon, from nowhere it seemed, a Cossack orderly.

"Conduct Mademoiselle to the suite of the White Leopard," he directed. "No, Captain Roark, please do not mistake. It is that my guest suites are named after various animals."

In frozen silence, Anita Vance stalked out just as dinner was announced.

"It is too bad Miss Vance's appetite fails." Buriev sounded almost plaintive. "Who could guess that even the mention of tigers would upset her nerves?"

Prince Buriev proved not only a graceful host, but also a skilled conversationalist and Roark began better to understand his success. Suddenly he found himself regarding this polished gentleman in the light of an atavist—a reincarnation of the lusty, strong-handed rajahs who, until the British came, had ruled and ravaged India for a thousand years.

Over coffee, the Cossack enlarged upon his plan. With dawn the first elements of his forces would pour down from the mountains into an area in which previously posted agents would have put every telegraph, telephone and radio station out of commission.

"But, your Excellency, it's already nine o'clock. How can you possibly reach these agents?" queried the Lancer Captain over his brandy glass.

"It is so very simple!" Buriev explained with a wave of his hand. "Tonight, at midnight, one of my men will wireless a pre-arranged message. You were about to ask something, Captain Roark?"

"I was wondering about my Rissaldar-Major?"

"Such an obstinate fellow—like most Seyids," Buriev grunted, passing a hand over his hairless cranium. "Until he becomes more reasonable, he shall 'ave the late-lamented British Colonel's cage."

HE shrugged and, dismissing Geoff and the Duval girl, forthwith commenced to cross-examine Roark so rapidly that that harassed individual was hard put to find satisfactory answers.

"So far, so good," Buriev sighed at length. "I shall check on what you 'ave said concerning food and forage to be found in Syhalt." His slanting eyes glowed. "Ah, my friend, *that* is the man's life! At last, at last, the saddle and the bivouacs once more! Will it not be good to swing the sword again, to hear machine guns rattle and the screams of fighting horses?"

Roark nodded, thoroughly infected with his new commander's enthusiasm. He was understanding Brooke's change of heart a lot better now.

The Cossack paused in leaving and said curtly, "Permit me, Captain Roark, the honor of detailing to your service my faithful veteran, Gregor." He verbally underlined his next words. "If he follows you very devotedly, I am sure you will understand, eh?"

Roark understood.

"Now, one last thing. The pretty American girl, she means something to you?"

Roark hesitated, then shrugged. "Not yet—sometime perhaps."

"That is fortunate. As a gentleman you will do nothing to make her stay in

Bidnacore an unhappy one." The chunky figure in green bowed, Roark saluted and was saluted in return. "Gregor will show you where to find the maps. You had best study them until I send for you."

Gregor, his "aide," proved to be a thin, long-legged Cossack, whose natural ugliness had not been improved by a terrific sabre slash across the right side of his face. His remaining eye, however, was beady and alert.

It required small effort on Roark's part to simulate interest in Prince Buriev's neat and very carefully detailed map of the Valley of Tigers and its environs. Unmistakably it showed the work of some skilled military cartographer and from its contour lines Roark deduced the reason for Bidnacore's desolate condition.

At some not very distant time the valley had been shortened at its upper end by a landslide of gigantic proportions. The avalanche, it seemed, had dammed a mountainous river which previously had watered Bidnacore. Adding insult to injury the slide had also diverted the resulting lake's overflow down to a neighboring valley, leaving the Valley of Tigers practically arid.

"Um-m. So I was right," he mused. "There *are* two passes into the valley from the north. Let's see now, the lower and broader one leads into Tibet. It'll be over this one most of Buriev's tribesmen are coming. The other will show the way to the Kul-Khan's men." Then to his surprise he noted a third—the Yamdok Pass. It was certainly narrow and very steep but, with strategic perfection, it gave access to the rich plains of Northeastern India.

HE studied this with greater attention and decided that at points it could not be over five feet wide. At others it wound along breath-taking precipices. Roark then surveyed other and less instructive maps, for always Gregor's one eye rested upon him.

It was nearing eleven—and the hour for Geoff Brooke's dispatching of the Cossack's *alerte* to his agents below the Border. Lost in thought Roark bent over the map table, conceiving and discarding a dozen plans, but it was hard to concentrate, so loudly did the ruin hum with activity.

The tigers in the moat, too, kept up a continual uneasy roaring at long lines of tribesmen who, under the watchful eyes of Buriev's men, filed over the foot bridge and returned equipped with rifles, incendiary grenades, and heavy drums of machine gun ammunition.

In the wake of their wolfish Khans, Emirs, and petty Rajahs, Lepchas, Tibetans, Ghurkas, Bhutians, Chinese and sour-smelling ruffians of every description swaggered in the corridors beyond the map room door. Other marauders had pitched camp outside the walls, their inately savage natures stimulated by deep draughts of *marwa* and *chong*, a powerful whiskey distilled from rice and millet. In all directions their campfires cast a ruddy prophetic glare on the great stone faces above them.

His first task completed, the harassed Lancer Captain arose quietly with intent to rid himself of the one-eyed "aide." It would be no easy task, he foresaw. Twice, when he made unexpected gestures, the Cossack's pistol had slid from its holster.

An inspiration came, derived from a scarce-remembered accident in Marseille's infamous *Vieux Port*. Would it work? That yellow faced Cossack was so infernally wary, yet he knew he must try the trick.

Roark, glancing up from the map table called, "Bring me panel Number 4 of this map, Gregor. Number 3 doesn't show the fords I want to check."

When the Cossack produced the long roll of paper and came forward, Roark slid off of his seat; but some sixth sense must be warning Gregor that this smiling Englishman was meditating violence, for

resting one hand on his Luger's butt, he offered the map with the other.

"Thanks," Roark said and made as if to take it, then with amazing speed whirled about on the ball of his left foot and presented his back to the amazed Cossack. At the same instant he stooped far over, steadied himself on his fingertips and, exactly as had that *voyou* in Marseille, kicked upwards with every ounce of strength in his body.

The maneuver was one of the deadliest in all of *la savate's* murderous repertoire and by all the rules, his boot heel should have clipped the worthy Gregor on the chin, knocking him colder than a seal's nose. But the Cossack was endowed with feline quickness and in the last split second swerved, suffering only a glancing blow. Quickly recovering, Roark grappled and became engaged in *the* fight of his career.

Desperately he clamped one hand down on Gregor's bristly throat while with the other he sought to keep the Cossack's big Luger in its holster. After falling with an appalling crash, the two went rolling over the map room's floor, their feet thumping and their mouths working with effort.

Roark, terrified that at any moment a passing orderly might intervene, tried for a quick decision but was thwarted by the one-eyed rascal's unexpected strength. All at once the other ceased tugging at his pistol and, almost too late, Roark realized that Gregor had snatched out his hiltless Cossack knife. Only the thought of Anita, helpless in this strange hell-hole, and the impending doom of the thousands of helpless natives, lent him strength to stay the other's powerful thrust. Somehow he caught that sweating wrist in time and held on for what seemed like aeons.

As in a nightmare he saw, not three inches distant, the Cossack's battered face go dark red, then purple and its one eye begin to bulge horribly. Wheezing, sheltering his head as best he might from the other's desperate battering, Roark hung on until at last Gregor's movements slowed, then ceased altogether. It would never do to have his "aide" recover too quickly, so he retained his grip a full minute longer.

Panting, slashed by the Cossack's clawing fingernails, he reeled to the door and turned its heavy key. Hurriedly he then flung himself upon the Russian and stripped the body of its long-skirted, dark green tunic. Using India ink from a drafting board, he crudely counterfeited the unconscious man's bushy eyebrows and buffalo mustachios; next he used red ink to copy the scar. This makeup would, of course, be ineffective save at a distance, but fortunately the late Gregor was approximately of the same height and build.

A *chapka* of black astrakhan was lying on a nearby bench so he jammed it on his head and buckled on the dead man's pistol. Finally he slung the Cossack's knife from its baldric about his neck; he would have use for that dagger ere long.

BEFORE quitting the map room, he took the precaution of bundling his "aide's" limp body into a closet half full of range-finding devices, and pocketed the key.

Setting his jaw, Lawrence Roark steeled himself to the work ahead and his feet seemed hardly real as he headed down the hall towards that room from which came a dynamo's whining song. Twice Cossacks crossed the stone paved corridor ahead of him. Luckily they were busy and obviously preoccupied.

He dared not think about Geoff Brooke but persistent visions filled his mind's eye. One was of two little boys in a pony basket cart sawing hard at the mouth of a frightened Shetland. Another was of two schoolboys handing a pair of "townies" a fine trimming. Why had the Weird Sisters spun out the web of fate in this fashion?

His boots rang hollow on the radio

room's threshold, but Geoffrey Brooke, late of the 26th Punjab lancers, remained bent over his instrument in an attitude of deep concentration.

"It's time you got back, Viroff," he called. "Rush this roster of troops in Syhalt to his Excellency. He's been expecting it.

Without turning his handsome yellow head, Brooke held out a sheet of blue paper. An instant later the message fluttered to the floor because Roark had brought the tang of the Cossack's knife down on the radio operator's head—instead of driving a foot of razor sharp steel into his side.

IX

AS HIS cousin's body crashed to the floor, Roark spun about and locked the door.

Steeling himself, he then contemplated that figure twisting so slowly on the room's floor of polished stone. Feebly Geoff rolled over, tested his scalp and when he found it bloody an expression of awful surprise crept over his graying features. Roark could see he knew he was on the threshold of death.

"Larry! I—I was just coming for you!"

Harsh as the rasp of steel drawn over stone came the Lancer Captain's reply, "Were you? Only reason I haven't stuck you is to see you properly hanged!"

The stricken officer's blue eyes widened in a terrible plea for credence. "Larry, mustn't think that! Didn't for a moment plan anything but—" he stifled a groan.

"Why make matters worse by lying?" His face a bronze mask, Roark bent above his cousin.

Desperately one of the injured man's hands reached up to catch Roark's wrist and left a little bloody smear on it.

"You, you've *got* to believe me. It was the only way to—"

"In spite of everything I believed in you," Roark mercilessly cut in, "until I saw you translate the dispatch ordering 'C' Troop to Syhalt."

"But that was a lie!" protested the stricken man in stronger accents. "Every message I've deciphered is false. 'C' Troop got orders for Terai just before I pulled out. That's why I told this Cossack swine it was detailed to Syhalt."

"But that's just the trouble! 'C' Troop *is* moving to Syhalt! The orders were secretly changed two days ago!"

With the force of a fist the nature of his ghastly mistake struck the Lancer Captain. Brooke, really believing that Unit "C" Troop *had* been ordered to Terai had substituted another station at random and because there were not many likely places, had, in all innocence selected that very post to which the troop *had actually been ordered!*

The room swam before Roark and instead of one pallid, sweating face, he beheld dozens, hundreds of them dominated by sad and reproachful eyes.

"Oh, Geoff! Geoff!" he groaned. "Try to forgive me, but what else *could I think?*"

"In your place, I'd have thought the same." Geoffrey Brooke's pale lips hardened. "Give me a hand up. We've got to stop Buriev. In spite of all I could do, the swine knows pretty well where and when to attack. Our only chance is to stop him this side of the Border. Once across, he'll simply wipe out our troops at the concentration point." Brooke's voice grew stronger though a fire-bright pool of blood went creeping out over the floor.

"Don't know how—but we must carry on." He coughed softly. "Sent pigeon hopin' you'd trace it. Now, we've got to get out of here quick. Messengers will be coming."

"Can't you broadcast a warning to the Frontier Forces?"

"No, this is only a receiving set. Another man is doing the sending. I'll have a try at reaching it, though. If I can't

reach the other room, where'll I meet you?"

"Down where Buriev keeps the prisoners."

"Right. Now wipe off my neck, old man, and lend me your chapka and a handkerchief—mine's soaking and I can't go around like this."

He snatched out a handkerchief and made a rough compress then, stopping the bleeding by jamming on the Cossack's cap, he gave Roark a reckless smile and went out so very quickly Roark was rowelled by a sudden suspicion. By God, *had he been mistaken?* He wavered, then in sheer desperation returned to his confidence in Brooke.

ONLY the urgency of the situation enabled him to rouse himself as promptly as he did. "Keep Buriev this side of the Border," Geoff had said—and he had known every detail of the problem. While the dynamo droned on, the Lancer Captain glanced about and, noting an open window, ran over to it.

Below lay the bone-carpeted moat and into it he dropped the bloodied handkerchief. Then, with the skirts of Gregor's Cossack tunic hampering him no little, he dragged a thick grass carpet over to the wireless desk in hopes that it might, for a time, conceal Brooke's blood. Barely had he straightened the overturned operator's chair than the vice wazir, Gyur-Mé, entered without bothering to knock.

"Well, Brooke Sahib, I—"

"Quiet!" Roark muttered, levelling Gregor's Luger at the Bhutian's eyes. The dark-faced plotter gathered himself but, reading death in the other's blazing gray-blue eyes, stepped inside when the latter beckoned. In short order he was disarmed.

"Try any funny games, my lad, and I'll blow you in halves! Lead me to the room of the White Leopard."

Fortune still attended Roark, for in climbing a wide flight of steps and passing along a corridor they encountered nobody. Though muttering angrily, the Bhutian nonetheless led past a portal marked with an elephant, one with a deer, and halted before a door upon which the outline of a very frisky leopard disported itself.

Roark turned a key left in the lock and with his pistol barrel motioned Gyur-Mé in before him.

"Get out!" A stifled cry struck Roark's ears when he followed the scowling native inside and closed the door.

On a charpoy Anita Vance was sitting, her eyes simply enormous with fear, but very lovely in a dressing gown of green silk.

"Who—who are you?" she demanded, and Roark wondered until he recalled his crude efforts at make-up.

"Roark. Come, Anita—every second counts."

"Does it?" She recoiled when he hurried over to her. "Your friend Buriev is tactful to send *you* and this wretched native to fetch me!"

"Don't be a fool," Roark snapped without removing his eyes from the prisoner. "Grab some clothes and come. No time to dress here."

"Oh, Larry! Then you didn't—"

"Shut up and get moving! Here, take the wazir's pistol. If anything happens to me, use it on yourself. Now then, my treacherous Bhutian friend, you'll lead us to the dungeons, and if you value your worthless life, we won't meet people!"

"Only gods can perform the impossi-

ble," Gyur-Mé returned, but went gray under his dark skin. "Does it matter just where one perishes?"

Probably none of the three realized what a dramatic little procession they made, Roark wearing his inked mustachios and Cossack tunic, the gold spectacled Bhutian with hands raised and Anita, clothes over her arm, hurrying along like a guest escaping from a burning hotel.

THEY had a narrow escape when a party of Lepchas, lost among the strongholds's maze of underground passages, came blundering by. Rigid in the semi-darkness, Roark dug his pistol's muzzle hard into Gyur-Mé's back and heard one of them say, "Last year the *Engleeshi* slew my wife's brother; soon I shall slay at least five of them and take womenfolk for my chattels. Every day until they die, I shall have these Memsahibs whipped with whips of silver wire, that their cries may rise to Paradise and make music in my brother's ears."

"Haste! Haste!" another urged. "See to it, Kang, that we are given many grenades and a measure of that powder which has a hundred fold the strength of that which we put in guns. In forcing the lock of a strong room nothing is more useful."

Puzzled by a minute sound behind him, the Lancer Captain turned and beheld Anita slipping her skirt on above her nightdress—she had already discarded the trailing negligee, and had laced her shoes.

"Bring on your tigers!" she breathed as she straightened her torn jacket.

Long before Gyur-Mé spoke, Roark guessed the proximity of Buriev's prison by its odor in the rock-hewn corridor.

Gyur-Mé, suddenly affable, said as they halted before a ponderous iron door, "If the Memsahib will turn the key, I can lift the bar."

Roark nodded and instantly perceived his mistake. Anita, in crossing to the door, for a split second protected the Bhutian from him. In a twinkle the dark-faced traitor went darting down a lightless passage. There was nothing for Roark to do but fire point blank and hope for the best.

His heart stopped for, in the confinement of the gallery, the report of his pistol sounded deafening as the discharge of a 75. Whether he had killed Gyur-Mé or not, he could not be sure, for the fellow screamed once and then made no further sounds. This was, of course, just what a clever man would do if he was slightly wounded or unhurt, but there was no opportunity to investigate. Due to the Lugers report, there would be small time left to him before the stronghold seethed with pursuers, so he flung himself through the prison door and turned up the wick of a lantern smoking redly from a hook.

"Roark Sahib!" Cramped in his cage, Jaffar Kahan started up.

"Quick. The cage keys?"

"They hang on the rock to your left!"

"Wake up! Wake up, all of you," Roark called, then, taking one of two key rings, gave Anita the other. Together they bore down on the row of iron cages. Unfortunately, the padlocks were unnumbered and the correct key could only be discovered through laborious trial and error, so, though Roark's fingers fairly flew, precious minutes were wasted.

Where the devil was Geoff?

Emitting husky croaks of joy and thanks, perhaps eighteen scarecrows crawled stiffly out of their cages and gathered about Roark in a noisome, half naked group. Of them, Major Wilson, the blond bearded staff officer and a gaunt infantry lieutenant called Carver, seemed strongest and most alert so between Jaffar Kahan and them, Roark divided the remaining fifteen prisoners, many of whom seemed hopelessly dulled by their long imprisonment.

"We'll go to the arsenal and get arms," Roark announced. "Then we'll see what can be done about changing the design of this pleasant little place."

"Right-o," grunted the aviator, his eyes red as a sewer rat's in the lantern light. "There's blasting gelatin in the magazine. The guards spoke of some. When I find Buriev—"

"Haste, Huzoor!" Jaffar Kahan called from the door. "I hear voices, and men are running."

With Anita at his side and the smelly pack of ex-prisoners at his heels, Roark ran out into the passage confident of only one thing; these men would battle to the last ounce of their strength. But what could the few of them, all but unarmed and most of them desperately weak and sick, accomplish against Prince Buriev's savage levies?

X

ONLY the patter of bare feet broke a breathless stillness, when the shaggy column dodged a ranging patrol and followed a series of dim, rock-hewn passages until one of the released officers said they had reached the stronghold's main subterranean passageway. Breath hovering in his throat, Roark peered around a corner and beheld a number of Nepalese swaggering through a door which he recognized as that of the arsenal. Quite distinctly the Lancer Captain made out a detachment of Prince Buriev's followers supervising the distribution. Other parties of tribesmen drew near as the Nepalese reappeared, brandishing on high their newly acquired arms.

Apparently the arsenal guards, hindered by the dim light, mistook Roark's group for a fresh band of tribesmen coming to draw arms. They soon learned their error when, with a silent but deadly rush, the emaciated British fell upon them.

"There, Johnny, that's for the rotten food!" grunted a red haired cavalryman and by sheer fury wrenched a rifle from a goggling Tartar.

Noisome rags aflutter, the ex-captives overpowered the nearest of Buriev's men while Roark's Luger and Gyur-Mé's weapon, now handled by Jaffar Kahan, checked the advance of some guards who came running out of the magazine. The slamming noise of rifle firing increased, yells and screams arose and Roark's nostrils became stung with bitter powder fumes.

"Keep close to me," Roark warned when Anita stooped to catch up the rifle of a fallen Cossack. Then to his followers who had hurriedly slipped on ammunition belts and bandoliers, "Hurry! We can't stand 'em off long! Try to find the gelatin!"

Would it in anyway be possible to mine the magazine? Perhaps, though at every instant the alarm was spreading. This present lull could be of but the shortest duration. As if to emphasize the fact, a bullet whined past Roark's ear as, leaving half his force to hold the magazine's door, he had led the rest deeper into the arsenal.

"Find some H. E., dynamite or gelatin!" he gasped. "It's our one chance."

Then commenced a frantic hunt. It was confusing, for everywhere rifle chests lay open and paper containers for cartridge clips lay like leaves on a forest floor.

"Blasting gelatin!" Roark kept yelling in a sort of refrain. "Everybody hunt! We've got to find it."

Desperately his eyes roved over the plethora of war-like gear. He saw cases of grenades, knives, rifles, pistols, but no explosive.

"Look there!" Major Wilson yelled, pointing to an iron door which was slowly swinging closed. Roark and a few others raced towards it, but just beyond reach of their clutching hands, a

solid iron postern clanged shut upon Buriev's main powder supply.

"Come on!" Voices hoarse with anxiety were shouting from the arsenal's entrance. "Here they come! We must get out now!"

In disappointed fury, Roark abandoned his hopes of blowing the stronghold sky-high and wheeled on five native officers, Ghurkas, who with matted hair hanging over their eyes, were tugging at the lid of a red painted case.

"Here is blowing powder, Sahib!" gasped one. "But not enough."

"Take it. Carry it in those haversacks. Anita, grab those fuses—try to find ammunition for this Luger."

"Larry! Quick!" implored Brooke's familiar voice. "Delayed 'em. But they'll be here any minute. We've just time to clear out!"

"Get to the radio?"

"No—impossible. But follow me. I know a way out."

Roark nodded, swung a pair of bandoliers over his shoulder and paused just long enough to shatter a lantern amid the litter of paper boxes; seeing it well ablaze, he then led a rush through the body littered entrance.

IGNORING the yells of an approaching mob of Cossacks and Nepalese, Roark formed a rear guard while Geoff Brooke, herding the feebler fugitives along, started down a dimly lit passage.

Pursued by a party of Cossacks rendered wary by the desperate markmanship of the English they began their retreat. It was a fearful trip! Every so often another officer would fall with a strangled, "Oh my God!" or in dreadful silence. Cold sweat trickled inside Larry Roark's collar when he thought of what would happen if a bullet found one of those haversacks the Ghurkas carried.

What now? Roark, because the retreat had slowed, glanced over his shoulder. His ears ringing like a beaten gong, the Lancer Captain glimpsed moonlight down the passage ahead. Geoff Brooke had halted, his slim body silhouetted and his head turning sharply from left to right.

Anita came running back. "He—he's made a mistake; only the moat is down there."

Brooke, however, called back, "It's all right—tigers are better than Buriev. Unsling your rifles, you first two. I'll go first, and for God's sake be gentle with that gelatin!"

The pursuers meantime had closed in and a volley whistling up the passage keened and ricocheted along the rock walls.

"Allah!" A big Sikh Woordie-Major slumped dead at Roark's feet and a Scotch Ordinance officer staggered in a dizzy half circle before he collapsed with a groan. "Go on, laddies, Ah'm fair spent!"

Coolly Roark directed a return fire so deadly that Buriev's men retreated around a bend in the turret.

"Now! Out of here, quick!" He had to slap one or two of the ragged ex-prisoners on the shoulder before they would cease firing.

Arriving on the lip of the entrance Roark beheld Geoff standing on the opposite side of the moat helping to pull the fugitives up on the far wall. Two men with rifles crouched on guard for the dreadful watchers in the moat but they, puzzled no doubt by the unaccustomed activity, had slunk off to some retreat.

Last of all Roark dug boot toes in the masonry's weatherbeaten stone work and swung down to the floor of the moat and to his dismay counted only eleven of the original eighteen ex-prisoners. Most of

them crouched across the moat, clutching their rifles and casting anxious glances at the firelit floor of the Valley.

Brooke leaned over the edge, head and shoulders black against the stars. "Seems quiet ahead—"

"Hurry! Go up those foot holes! Main encampment's at the other end of the fort. Near foot bridge. We've a chance!"

"Larry!" Anita gave a small cry of relief. "Oh, hurry! Be careful, dear."

"Aie-e!" cried one of the Ghurkas. "It is far to the mountains and—Allah, but I am weak!"

Roark had followed his handful of desperate wretches up a series of niches cut in the stonework and was scrambling over a heap of disjointed masonry when from the mouth of the passage through which the party had escaped jets of flame raked the night. The volley, raggedly delivered, claimed a victim. Roark hurrying ahead heard the clatter of a falling rifle and the thud of a heavy fall.

"Larry, wait!"

"No. Come on! We've only a small chance!"

Anita called something and Wilson paused, but Roark raged at them, drove them on. He had reason. Quite distinctly Buriev's stentorian voice could be heard shouting, "After them! Warn the tribesmen beyond the gate! Fetch the cheetahs, Ivan!"

Moving at a cautious dog trot the little column of fugitives managed to avoid a Bhutian encampment, but in so doing blundered into a party of mountaineers who, disdaining fires, had merely rolled up among the rocks in their goat hair blankets. Confusion followed, but strangely no shots and Roark's party got through and pounded on up the valley, wheezing and gasping in the rarefied atmosphere. Suddenly the prisoners' wretched physical condition told, one of the Ghurkas collapsed and lay as if dead.

"I'll take that!" Anita, without hesitation, caught up the fallen man's gelatin freighted haversack.

Up and up scrambled the rescued prisoners, cursing heartily but otherwise ignoring their bare bleeding feet and pitiful weakness. Now they began to see the valley at their feet as a whole and found the sight nowise reassuring. Everywhere torches were weaving mad patterns in the moonlight; many streaming up the valley in pursuit. But no glare of leaping flames shone in Bidnacore, not even a signal pillar of smoke testified that the fire set in the magazine had gained headway. "Hell! We might have had that much of a break!" Roark swore.

"All this in vain!" Jaffar Kahan panted presently. "They follow—see, Huzoor? They come by the broken aqueduct. Hear the cheetahs whine?"

"Faster!" Roark implored. "If we can get to Yamdok Pass we will be safe, but we've got to go faster!"

Brooke passed on the command for the benefit of those breathless wretches who had begun to straggle. Despite the Lancer Captain's efforts less than a quarter mile above loomed a vast, over-hanging ledge under which a few pounds of blasting gelatine should accomplish much. If only his companions were in better condition! He bit his lips for the poor little Ghurkas' short legs were cutting the party's speed to a snail's pace.

A few hundred feet further up, two of the remaining four Ghurkas fell fainting, but Wilson, the old staff officer, revealed an unexpected store of endurance and shouldered both their burdens. Ears ringing with the thin atmosphere, the fugitives toiled up the mountain all too aware that followers had gained so much that they might open fire at any minute.

Half blinded by sweat, his leg and arm muscles becoming one burning ache, the Lancer Captain fixed his eyes on that narrow star filled gap on the horizon which gave access to the riches of India.

He concentrated on that and on keeping Anita going. She was sobbing for breath and stumbling frequently now. Had they brought enough gelatin to close the pass? All at once the cavalry captain, rags furiously a-flutter, uttered a stifled groan.

"My God, Roark! Look, look! Up there!"

To Roark's utter despair, a number of white robed figures had appeared in the Pass and, raising a fierce yell, opened fire.

"That does it!" Brooke shrugged and began looking around for a rock. "Don't let Buriev take any of you chaps alive. Well, we've made a good try—that's something."

"Wait!" Swaying in the fierce wind, Roark gestured sharply. The others obeyed. Those bullets from the Yamdok were high—marksmen almost invariably overshoot down hill. He forced calm on himself; saw the situation in perspective.

Buriev, plainly visible, was urging on his men with the flat of a tulwar, disdaining to open fire. Why hurry? The fugitives were so neatly caught between two fires.

"I say, Roark," pleaded Wilson. "We are all dying of thirst. There's a little lake over there to the left. It's downhill. Perhaps we can hold these devils off till the moon goes down."

A FIERCE grin lit Roark's features. By God, that was the spirit! There was no downing these officers of the Raj. Since Anita, too, was nearing the end of her tether, the gaunt Lancer Captain shifted his burden of rifles and led off for the lake.

"Think, you fool! You've got to think!" he told himself as at the back of his harried brain a nebulous idea stirred. "If Buriev gets down into India—"

The handful's retreat to the silver surfaced little lake was not unhampered; rocks slipped and slid under their feet and bullets were singing and ricocheting all about. The aviator staggered, gave an awful cry and went rolling, bounding down the mountains.

All at once Roark recognized this terrain. His party was actually climbing out on the landslide he had noted on Buriev's map. That Nature had performed a very neat engineering job when she spilled the avalanche across this valley Roark appreciated. The lake's waters were lapping almost to the titanic barrier's crest. Roark was still whipping his brain for a plan when Brooke called out.

"Got—stop those beggars—slow 'em up! Gaining too fast." He pointed downhill at a tide of figures in wildly blowing coats. Doggedly, a detachment of Buriev's men were toiling upwards, with the moonlight bright on their weapons.

"Right! Line of skirmishes, gentlemen. Keep 'em back no matter what happens." Roark caught up the gelatin containers, a reckless grin on his lips. "Come along, Nita!" His groping mental fingers had closed on the hitherto elusive idea. "Never mind the rifle," he panted. "We're taking the haversacks. Keep sniping, Geoff; delay them any way you can, but when I yell, run like hell! Up hill, understand?"

Some eight survivors went scattering over the moonlit mountainside expertly seeking sniper's posts among heaps of boulders which had fallen to spell the ruin of Bidnacore.

"Don't worry, I'll keep up!" was Anita's encouragement and she came scrambling after him over the old avalanche's tumbled earth and rocks.

"Tops—that's what you are!" he cried over the roar of the wind when some fifty feet below the little lake's level, he halted. He held out a pocket knife. "Trim these fuses in lengths of about six, eight and twelve inches, split their ends!"

Though aware that Brooke, Jaffar

Kahan and the rest were directing a staccato volley at Buriev's advancing forces, he concentrated on the problem at hand. Bullets from below now commenced to hiss overhead and one went "Spang!" on a rock beside him, stinging his cheek with lead particles.

Keeping a steady grip on his nerves, Roark, amid a spattering of bullets, selected certain crevices in the avalanche's wall.

Gradually, a sickening conviction came home. If the action of the gelatin was anything like that of dynamite, there was far from enough to perform the Herculean task he had in mind.

"Here are the fuses," Anita came crawling over when he began tamping the explosive in place. Madly her long hair was whipping about her eyes.

"Thanks. Get the idea?"

"No, Larry," she cried above the increased rattle of shots.

"Strung—charges out near the lip of this barrier. Trying to time the fuses so as to burn out—same time. Ah! Now, get to shelter!"

RISING to full height, he yelled, "Run!" to the skirmishers below. But either the wind carried away his voice or the report of their rifles had deafened Brooke's party—never a man turned his head.

"How long do these fuses take to burn?" Anita queried.

"Around five minutes. Why?"

"You light them. I'll go warn Brooke." And before he could stop her, Anita went scrambling downwards.

Though the furthest fuse ignited readily enough, the second, more exposed to the wind, would not catch fire during several maddening instants. His schedule upset, Roark smothered a furious exasperation but, dodging among the stones like a vast land crab, he scrambled over to the next of his mines. In his brain burned a feverish anxiety when the last fuse took fire and he blundered frantically away.

From below were rising eerie howls, then something rapped Roark's shoulder —hard—and he staggered. Buriev's men had come close—too close!

"Nita!" he shouted faintly; worried

that blood should pour down his left arm so fast.

More bullets screamed by and went ricocheting off among the rocks, but he struggled on across the natural dam's moon-bathed surface; climbing, climbing, but seeming to make no more progress than a nightmare sufferer. Vaguely he sensed a ragged line of dark figures not a hundred yards below.

Beset by increasing weakness, the Lancer Captain fixed as his goal the safety of a rocky knoll. Ah! Anita must have given warning, for ahead of him other fugitives were scrambling for refuge and some small stones struck him. Craning his neck, he glimpsed Anita and Geoff Brooke's riflemen not far above.

"Get to shelter!" Anita heard, but instead came slipping and plunging back.

"No! No!" he croaked, wondering why a solid mountain should sway so queerly. They'd never have time to reach the knoll, instinct warned, so he headed

for a narrow cleft some few feet away. It was shallow, but the only other refuge.

Aquiver with anxiety, they watched Buriev's dark skinned tribesmen scatter over the landslide and hasten their upward progress.

"Good-by, darling. You were splendid. Too bad—" Weakly he thrust Anita behind him and turned with the intention of staving off the final moment.

Lord, in spite of everything, they had climbed very high. Bidnacore and the whole Valley of Tigers lay below with Prince Buriev's citadel suggesting a toy house.

Many lights were wavering and blinking all around it. Then, revealed by the moonlight, he saw Buriev himself, collar torn open and heaving chest exposed. Only by a deliberate effort could Lawrence Roark raise his Luger and sight along its wavering barrel, but before he could squeeze its trigger, a blinding sheet of flame soared hundreds of feet into the sky and an infernal heat singed the Lancer Captain's brows.

All but simultaneously another terrific explosion took place. Huge rocks soared high and wide and all the world became an outrageous, fiery pinwheel. A nearer concussion struck Roark full in the face, and with blood running from his nose and ears, he was blown back across his semi-conscious companion. A maelstrom of sound composed of titanic impacts, of terrific rumblings and a booming roar such as he had never heard beat against the heavens.

Shakily, Lawrence Roark inched to the cleft's entrance. Amid vast clouds of spume, great javelins of water were hurtling through an aperture in the natural dam's crest. Before the Lancer Captain's awed eyes the raging waters gathered force, scooped up huge boulders as if they had been pebbles; magically the breach grew rapidly wider and deeper. Thundering floods cascaded below, insanely eager to resume their former course.

How long Roark and Anita clung together they had no idea, but at last a measure of the turmoil subsided and through a moon-tinted mist they saw that the lake had become but a vast, dank bowl studded with wet stones.

"Look!" Anita gasped. "Bidnacore!"

Gone were the twinkling camp fires and the disorderly encampments. Vanished were the long lines of tethered horses and all the busy life of the place. Supremely desolate, only the highest of the palace's towers arose above the surface of a great, turgid lake.

How Lucky Is It to Be an Outlaw's Brother?

IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "Big Medicine at Buffalo Bend," etc.

IT was suffocatingly hot, where the man crouched in the shade of a cat-claw clump, and stared wolfishly at the ranchhouse and clearing below him. A few head of cattle drowsed along the corral fences, or drank from an old concrete watering-trough in the shade of an old wooden windmill.

The man was about forty years of age, with straggling, sandy hair, his harsh jaw stubbled. The grayish-blue eyes on each side of his hooked nose, were small and round, like the eyes of a monkey. He wore a battered sombrero, faded shirt, weathered overalls, and his once-fancy cowboy boots were scarred and worn. Around his narrow waist was a well-filled cartridge belt, and a black-handled Colt sagged in a home-made, quick-draw holster.

Mark Kane, known as *El Lobo Solo* along the border, had been having a run of bad luck. In fact, it was so bad that *El Lobo Solo,* The Lone Wolf, was at bay. No food, no water, no horse. What could be worse? And a posse was on his trail. He licked his dry lips, as he looked down on this prosperous-looking little rancho. Food, water and horses. He might even collect a little money, a riding rig and a rifle.

His own horse had died under him twenty-four hours ago; died from the impact of several well-placed bullets. Of course, there was always the danger of guards being posted at the outside ranches. That was why *El Lobo Solo* contented himself with sitting in the shade of the cat-claw, and watching the place. He was worth five thousand dollars, alive or dead —perhaps more, since he had attempted to holdup the Cattlemen's Bank at Poncho city, and killed the cashier.

But the man was not whining at his bad luck. It was all in a lifetime. Soon he would have another horse, food, water—and be on his way across the border, where there would be no sheriff on his trail.

The sun was still an hour high, when he slunk away from the cat-claw cover, entered a little arroyo and carefully made his way down to the corral corner, where he crawled through and went to the stable. He swore softly, when he discovered that the stable was empty of horses.

Boldly he went to the house, knowing that ranchhouses are seldom locked. This one was no exception; so he went in and investigated the place. Of food there was plenty. In fact, the table had not been cleared of the last meal. But there was only one place set at the table. *El Lobo Solo* ate ravenously of the cold food, drank copiously from the luke-warm water in a bucket.

He found a plentiful supply of tobacco, cigarette papers and matches, filling his pockets. In a corner of the main room he found a thirty-thirty-Winchester, and a belt filled with cartridges. Loading the gun, he placed it on a table, and began searching further.

Suddenly he paused, his little eyes narrowed, as he looked at a big portrait on the wall. It was one of those gaudily framed monstrosities, known as a crayon enlargement, a bust picture of a man.

El Lobo Solo blinked slowly, his thin lips drawing back in an incredulous snarl. He swayed closer. Except for the difference in garb, the face of *El Lobo Solo* looked back at him from that frame. The same small, round eyes, hooked nose, lean, harsh jaw, unruly hair.

"I be damned!" breathed the man. "I shore be damned!"

SO engrossed was he that he did not hear a man ride up to the ranch-house. Not until the door creaked open did he realize that he was not alone. He whirled and drew his gun, all with one motion. Just inside the door, his hand still on the knob, stood the man of the portrait—the double of *El Lobo Solo.*

Neither man spoke, nor moved for at least ten seconds. Then *El Lobo Solo* said:

"Shut the door, Jim."

Slowly the door closed. Jim Kane, rancher, faced Mark Kane, his twin, for the first time in ten years.

"Unbuckle yore belt and let that gun fall, Jim," ordered *El Lobo.*

With fumbling fingers the belt was unbuckled, and the gun thudded to the floor.

"Set down there in that chair, Jim. Yuh don't act like yuh was glad to see me. Yuh ought to be ashamed—me yore own twin brother."

Grimly the rancher looked at the outlaw, who chuckled softly.

"Still surprised, eh? Wonderin' where I came from, eh? Honest Jim Kane, well-known rancher, entertains his twin brother, *El Lobo Solo.* That ought to sound good to the folks around here."

"You ain't lyin', are yuh?" asked Jim Kane huskily.

"No, I ain't lyin'—and I ain't braggin'. That damn posse ain't so far away. Funny, ain't it? We look jist alike, Jim. But yo're a honored citizen, while they're offerin' to pay ten thousand dollars, alive or dead, for me. Yuh don't need to look at yore gun. We're queer folks, us Kanes. Blood ties never meant a damn thing. Mebbe yo're different. You allus was kinda soft, Jim. Mebbe yuh didn't have the guts to do wrong. But I wouldn't let yuh have a gun—knowin' what yuh do."

"But that posse—you can't stay here. I've got to—"

"You ain't got to do anythin'. Sa-a-ay! Wait a minute! By God, I've got it! Take off yore clothes."

"That's what I said. Wait a minute! All I want is yore shirt and overalls. The rest is enough like mine. Shed 'em, damn yuh!"

"But I don't see—"

"I'll do the seein' for both of us, Jim. Peel 'em off."

El Lobo Solo backed away a safe distance, as he also removed his shirt and overalls, which he tossed over to the brother. The change was quickly effected. Jim Kane looked curiously at the buckle on the small belt. It was of carved bone, showing a howling wolf, carved in deep relief. The same artist had carved the wolves on the bone handles of *El Lobo Solo's* Colt .45.

"My trade-mark," laughed the outlaw.

Fear flashed in the small eyes of Jim Kane.

"Are you tryin' to—?"

But his query was never finished. *El Lobo Solo's* gun thundered once—twice, and Jim Kane died, with the unfinished sentence on his lips.

For several moments the outlaw stood there, his lips drawn back in a snarl. Then he laughed quietly, choking a little from powder fumes.

"Ten thousand dollars," he whispered to the dead man, as he buckled his holstered gun around the dead man's waist. Swiftly he adjusted Jim Kane's belt around his own lean waist.

"I'll collect ten thousand dollars on you," he whispered. "Yo're *El Lobo Solo* now, you law-abidin' fool. I'll take yore ranch, too. I'll feel so bad about killin' my own brother that I'll leave the country. But I'll tell 'em a good story, don't worry about that."

HE walked over to a window and looked out toward Poncho City. With a wolfish grin on his thin lips he went to another window.

"The posse is closin' in, *El Lobo Solo,*" he told the dead man. "They must have figured right. They wasn't far behind. Well," he laughed quietly, "they'll get yuh —dead."

Calmly he opened the front door and walked out on the little, vine-covered porch. Jim Kane's horse was tied to one of the posts. With studied indifference he leaned against a post and rolled a cigarette. He heard soft footsteps along the side of the house, but paid no attention to them.

Turning his head slowly he looked at five men, who had bunched just around the corner, guns in hand.

"Howdy, Jim," said one of them quietly.

"Howdy, gents," replied *El Lobo Solo.* "I was just goin' to take the news to town."

"News, Jim?"

"Yeah—news. This is the end of yore chase; I just shot *El Lobo Solo.* He's inside the house."

More men were coming from down by the stable and from the rear of the house and the outlaw smiled grimly. They had called him Jim. He was in the clear. They came up to the porch. The one who had called him Jim came up the steps, and before the outlaw had any inkling of danger, he struck *El Lobo Solo* across the side of his head with the barrel of his gun.

It was a stunning blow, but did not quite knock him unconscious. He had a dim realization of being dragged by the collar. There was the limb of a tree above him, and somebody was talking about a barrel. Then he heard a voice saying:

"I realize how yuh feel, Ed. She was yore sister, and I don't blame yuh much; but I wish he was able to realize what's goin' on."

"Bein' married to him was plenty hell, I reckon," said another voice.

"Plenty? I hope to tell yuh. And when the dirty dog found out she was leavin' him, he follered her to the depot and tried to kill her."

"I reckon the feller in the house is the old Lobo all right, panted a voice. "He's got that carved belt-buckle and the gun that's in the reward notices. But he's a twin to Jim Kane, boys; and Jim Kane killed him."

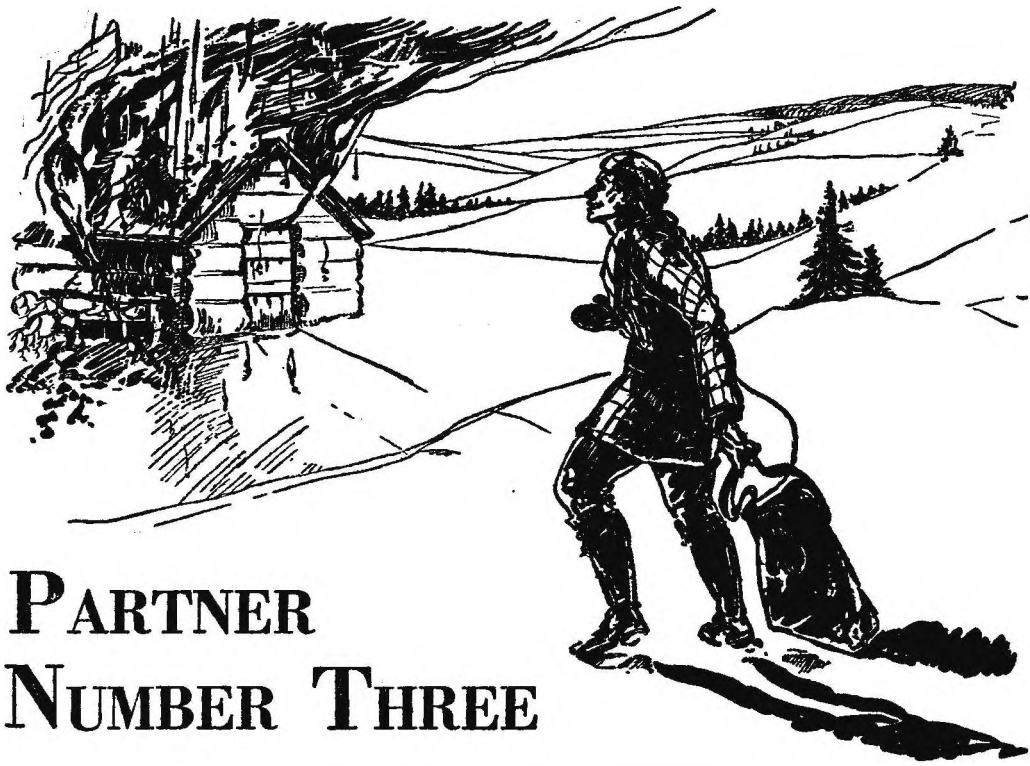
"It runs in the family, I reckon."

"It does," agreed El Lobo Solo painfully.

"Killin'?" queried a voice.

"No—bein' a damn fool."

One Time the Mounted Didn't Get Their Man



PARTNER NUMBER THREE

By H. S. M. KEMP

Author of "Sergeant Jim Invests," "Guardian Angel," etc.

IT BEGAN in the Hotel McDonald in Edmonton, with Jerry Boardman twitting Inspector Dew over the supposed slogan of the Mounted Police—"We always get our Man!"

"But that isn't a slogan," protested the Inspector. "You're speaking of something that came in with feature-writers, the movies, and 'Rose Marie.'"

"Then what is your slogan?" asked Eric Hardy, the globe-trotting Englishman in the rough tweeds.

"Our slogan, if you choose to call it such, is *'Maintiens le Droit*—Maintain the Right.' We do that, and can guarantee nothing further."

"But you always do get your man, don't you?" teased Jerry.

The Inspector removed the cigar from his lips and scrutinized the ash.

"It all depends on what you mean by 'getting' him. So far as running down a known criminal is concerned, I suppose very few get away on us. But as to convicting every suspect, well, that's something else. For instance—" and the Inspector seemed to hesitate—"there's Joe Brown."

Boardman and Eric Hardy waited for the Inspector to continue.

"And who," prompted Boardman at last, "is Joe Brown? The movie star?"

Inspector Dew smiled thinly. "No. And Joe Brown isn't his real name, though it'll pass. Joe first came to our attention in 'twenty-nine. He was a trapper, who went north with a partner. The partner never came back; but Joe did—with both lots of fur. According to Joe, the partner dropped through the honeycombed spring ice and was drowned. A couple of years later Joe took another partner, this time

on a gold-hunt. Joe happened to be broke at the moment, so he could not put up his share of the outfit. But he was flush enough in the spring. They found no gold, though the fur-catch ran rather well. Again Joe got it all."

Boardman grunted. "And what happened to this partner?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Joe's story is that the man went out on a moose-hunt one fine spring morning and failed to come back. They were up in the Cree Lake country with a thousand square miles to themselves; so, although a search was made, partner Number Two was never found."

"And then—?"

"The winter before last, another thing happened. Joe married an Indian girl from the Fish Lakes. Her father was the chief of his tribe and was wealthy. Had a thousand dollars in the bank. When the girl married, the old boy settled half that amount on her as a dowry. For his part, Joe got a team of Brochet huskies, a new canoe, and the old man's blessing. But the idyll petered out. The following summer, Joe and the wife were fishing a net. The canoe capsized, and the woman drowned."

There was a moment of quiet when the Inspector finished. It was broken by Eric Hardy.

"Rum business, what?" he exclaimed, and looked from the Inspector to Jerry Boardman.

"And you can pin nothing on him?" suggested Jerry.

The Inspector shrugged. "We spent six months on each case, and proved just nothing at all."

"And in the meantime, Joe's probably ready to take on partners as fast as they come along!"

"Why not?" growled the Inspector. "He's smooth, long-headed, and plays a game which is hard to beat. But as for this 'Get-your-Man' stuff, Joe is one that we haven't got." And then he added, grimly. "And one that we probably never will!"

A moment or so later the Inspector was paged by a bell-hop, and he was forced to leave.

But the sequel came the following morning. Eric Hardy called on him in his private office.

The typical Englishman, Hardy—blond, blue-eyed, brick-red of face and with a tooth-brush mustache. In his shaggy tweeds he looked much heavier than he actually was, for his six-foot-one of height was mostly lean hardness.

He shook hands with the Inspector, took a chair and passed across a gold cigarette case.

"Smoke, Inspector? Hope I'm not intrudin'?" He tapped his own cigarette on a thumb-nail, flicked a lighter for the Inspector and mentioned the weather. Then he came down to the real purport of his visit.

"About this Brown johnny and your talk last evenin'— You've got me stirred up no end. I take it you want the goods on him but haven't been altogether successful in gettin' 'em? Well, see here, Inspector; I'll make you a sportin' offer—I'll prove Brown a murderer, or at least an attempted one, or I'll buy you a new hat!"

THE Inspector frowned, completely nonplussed. "I don't understand."

"Simple. Absolutely. You confessed last evenin' that your men had failed. I want to see if I can do a little better than they."

"In other words," observed the Inspector bluntly, "you want to show us up."

"Why, my dear man!" Hardy laughed with profound amusement. "Nothin' like it! I appreciate too well what you've been up against. You've been dealin' with something vague; something that no one knows anything of except Joe Brown himself. My plan is extremely simple. I'll get a grandstand seat and see things just as they take place."

The Inspector was still frowning. "I may be thick-headed—"

"Then see here," explained the Englishman. "Joe Brown is alive, I presume. I'll dig him up and represent myself as a man wanting to go north and looking for a partner. I have a little money, and with that it shouldn't be hard to hook the lad. Then, when he tries to do me in like he did the rest, I'll nab him and turn him over to you."

The Inspector tried to stare Hardy down, and made a poor job of it.

"How would it be," he suggested, "if you laid your cards on the table?"

It was Hardy's turn to frown. "My cards? You think I have some ulterior motive? Absolutely none! Fact is I love the unusual, the bizarre. Call it a craze for excitement if you like. I found it in the War, as a British agent; and since then, well, I've flown the Atlantic, shot tigers in India, and hunted grizzlies in your Rocky Mountains. Now, with a dead end in front of me, this looks jolly sportin'. Myself against Joe Brown! And I'll post the money for a new hat before I start!"

The Inspector grunted. "Yes. You against Joe Brown. And Joe will hold all the tricks. You're out to get him alive; but he's out to get you dead. And he'll have his chance every twenty-four hours of the day."

Eric Hardy looked up, smiling quizzically. "Think so? Don't forget that I have one advantage denied to those other johnnies—I'm prepared. During the day, I'll be on the lookout, and in the night, well, somebody once said I have a sixth protective sense. Funny, but I think I have."

The Inspector tried to argue, and his arguments grew weak. "I still think you're mad, but if you're bound to become partner Number Three and *must* risk your neck to get a thrill out of living, here's the dope—

"His name is Bull Regan, a cross between a Liverpool-Irish dock-rat and an American honky-tonk singer. Claims to have been born on a tramp-steamer out of Singapore and looks the part. A broken-nosed thug with hulking shoulders and a knife-slash down the right cheek. His hangout is Spruce Lake on the C.P.R., and he's a curly wolf from the original litter—"

ON THE third day following his conversation with Inspector Dew, Eric Hardy arrived in the frontier town. Cautious inquiries elicited the information that Bull Regan was still on hand; and Hardy located him from the description that Inspector Dew had furnished. Regan he noticed leaning in the doorway of a restaurant, a toothpick in his mouth. There was the broken nose, the hulking shoulders, the knife-slash down the right cheek. Hardy nodded in inward satisfaction and prepared to bait his trap. He purchased a tent and camping equipment, a canoe and engine, and, lastly, a four-months' outfit of grub. That afternoon he met Regan again.

It was on the crooked sidewalk that fronted Spruce Lake. Regan, half-seas over with rotgut hootch, stood talking with three other men. As Hardy came abreast of them, Regan turned.

He blinked, straightened, blinked again. "What th'—? Say!" he jeered. "Lookit th' Prince o' Wales! Choke-bore pants, five-gallon hat an' all!"

His three cronies laughed. Regan grinned at them in acknowledgment, a grin that became drunkenly bullying when he faced Hardy again.

"Anyways, dood, welcome to this cock-eyed dump. And put her there!"

For a fleeting second a steel tenseness swept Hardy's face, but as quickly it vanished again. He had a role to play; and now was the time to play it. He took Regan's hairy paw and shook it crushingly.

Regan frowned, as though surprised.

Then, "Whatinell are you doin' in Spruce Lake?"

Hardy shrugged and gave a fatuous smile.

"Nothin' particular, y'know. Time on my hands and all that rot. Thought I'd like to see the country north of here. But, apparently," he shrugged, "one has to have a guide to do it as one should."

The three nodded. Regan's bullying manner suddenly dropped. "Oh, shore," he agreed, and spat knowingly. "You gotta have a guide."

"Perhaps," suggested Hardy after a pause, "one of you gentlemen could procure a guide for me. Not right away if you're busy, but soon." He indicated the newly erected tent on the bank overlooking the lake. "My diggin's; and I'll be pleased to see you any time at all."

He continued up the street, made a purchase or two, then returned. Regan and

his cronies had gone, but he was to see Bull Regan again that afternoon. In fact, the man turned up at the tent within the hour.

Drunk he may have been earlier, but Bull Regan was now sober as a bishop. He returned Hardy's greeting, took the proffered seat on a box and mentioned that the weather was fine if a feller liked her hot 'n dry.

"And so you want t' go north," he observed at last. "Well, here's a pig with th' same snout, only longer."

Hardy smiled up from the bacon he was grilling. "Oh, yes?"

"Yup." Regan smiled in turn, but to Eric Hardy it was more of a leer. It accentuated the brutality of his face.

"When a feller hires him a guide," went on Regan with ponderous wisdom, "it usually sets him back a piece of change. Me, now, I got something different to offer. If we come to terms, it won't cost you no money at all. That is, exceptin' what you've already paid out fer grub."

A LITTLE thrill of excitement rippled Hardy's nerves. "Yes? And just what have you to offer?"

Regan waited till the bacon was cooked; when Hardy split it into two portions, got out another set of dishes and invited Regan to eat. The man accepted, and during the meal made his proposition.

It came first in the form of a piece of quartz which he rolled onto the cloth. "Ever see anythin' like that before?"

Hardy picked up the fragment, hefted it, and passed it back. "Gold of some sort, I'd say."

"Gold is right," grunted Regan. "Fifty dollars a ton."

Hardy raised a polite eyebrow. "Something you've recorded?"

"Somethin' I found, but never did record. It was like this—" Regan emptied his coffee-cup, shoved food into his mouth, and went on. "Last winter I was trappin' on th' Vermilion River, which is 'way to hellangone west of Reindeer Lake. Come spring, the shack burned down. Left me in a tight spot. I didn't have no grub, the fur was all burned up, and the only thing between me 'n starvation was a rifle and ten rounds o' shells. So I Injuned her, south. That's when I found this stuff. Camped on an island in Reindeer Lake one night, and there she was. I shoulda staked there and then, but my belly was worryin' me most. I bumped into a camp o' Nitchies a coupla days later, and chiseled enough dried meat off'n 'em to put me into Pelican Narrers. Chored around there a spell, then ended up in town. I ain't been back north ag'in, not havin' the price; but the stuff is waitin' for me any time I say the word."

Hardy heard Regan through. The

Englishman's face was impassive, but that thrill of excitement was now more pronounced.

"Then why not interest some of the people in this town about it? They should take the gamble of outfitting you."

"They don't trust me and I don't trust them," was Regan's reply.

"Well, start a company."

"And get gypped. Not me. But tell you what I *will* do. You say you want a trip north. That's all right. I got a gold proposition but no way of reachin' her. You got a way of reachin' her, but no gold. We'll pool things—your grub and my gold. Fifty-fifty on the whole blamed thing."

Hardy's face was hidden as he stooped to retrieve his knife. When he looked up he was smiling.

"That's jolly decent of you—" he began.

"Decent, nothin'! It's a business proposition."

"But why trust me, instead of these people in town?"

"Well," and Regan seemed to be choosing his words; "if I took them in it'd mean a mob. And I can't handle no mob. But you 'n me, just two of us—well, two's all right."

"Two," echoed Hardy slowly, "would be just the thing." He did not say any more at the moment, but went on with his supper. At its conclusion, however, he referred to the matter again. He cross-examined Regan, his attitude that of a man of caution. "Naturally," he pointed out, "you don't know me, but I don't know you. And if you're game to show me the country on a no-wage basis, I suppose I shouldn't demur. Very well," he gave in at last; "the deal is made."

THERE seemed to be no more strings to Regan's offer, but on the following day he hunted up Hardy with a suggestion.

"The way she is, bein' the end of August, we're cuttin' her kinda fine. The gold is two weeks of good travel north. We need a few days for stakin', and mebbe ten days for gettin' back. Add to that a week 'r ten days windbound on the big lake, and there's just the chance of gettin' frozen-in. I was wonderin'," he asked Hardy, "how would you like a spell at trappin'? Say till Chris'mas?"

Hardy wondered, also. "It might be all right," he agreed. "If I bring out a book of travel as I intend to do, a bit of winter color would be top-hole."

"Sure. It'll mean gettin' us about a hundred traps, some poison, and winter clothes. Grub needn't worry us. We can kill all the meat we want."

But Hardy was frowning. "Poison, did you say?"

"Fer the wolves. And there's lots of 'em on Reindeer. It don't pay a guy," explained Regan, "to work his legs off fer them fellers. Bit of poisoned bait does it for him."

"I see." Hardy's eyes took on a thoughtful look. "Quite an idea, that."

So Hardy bought the traps and the winter clothing; the strychnine was Regan's own particular purchase. But the first day out of Spruce Lake, the poison disappeared. Regan was off hunting wood for the noonday meal. Hardy went through Regan's pack, found the crystals and promptly heaved them in the lake. He fastened the packsack again, with a grim little smile.

It was two days later that Regan, going through his pack for a plug of tobacco, noticed the loss.

"Where th'—? Hey!" he suddenly bellowed. "Where's that poison?" He dug deeper into the sack and finally dumped the whole thing. "Whatcha know about that?" he muttered. "I was sure I put her in here."

Hardy was toasting bread over the fire. "Lost something?"

"That bottle o' strychnine. I put her right in my packsack—'r did I?" A vague doubt crossed Bull's bearded face. "Yeah,

I'm sure I did!" And he started his hunt anew.

Hardy finished the toasting of the bread. "Why bother?" he asked. "If it has been packed somewhere else, you'll find it. If you forgot to bring it along, you're only wasting time."

The search abortive, Bull began to stuff his belongings back into place. While doing so he cursed in a steady monotone.

"Helva good start we're makin'! Wonder we didn't ferget th' canoe. Yeah; and more than that, the dope cost me five bucks!"

THE loss of the poison worried Regan all that night; but by morning he was in a brighter mood. They started early, and fine weather and successive long days took them ever northward. They passed the post at Pelican Narrows; crossed Frog Portage and turned down the Churchill. Then came the Reindeer River, and finally Reindeer Lake.

At the Hudson's Bay South-end Post they replenished their grub-box. The trader himself was not home, but their wants were attended to by a young halfbreed. After that they struck up the east shore of the hundred-and-fifty-mile lake; and the search for Bull Regan's fabulous gold began.

Eric Hardy was little concerned about the gold, but he paid tribute to Regan's astuteness. The man might have chosen any setting for his mythical find, but to select Reindeer Lake was a master stroke. "On an island—" Regan had said. The lake seemed full of islands. In a four-mile stretch Hardy counted twenty of them. If the lake were a hundred and fifty miles long the number of islands would run into the thousands. Hence, when Regan failed to produce island or gold, he could always fall back on a solid defence. He could not relocate the island he had in mind.

It came to that in time; at the end of a week to be exact. They had poked into bays, skirted points, searched everywhere. But the quest had netted nothing. Amused by it all, Hardy turned to shut off the engine and rode the swell left by a dying wind.

"It looks, old top, as though we're huntin' a needle in a haystack. Now if you could remember something definite—say if the island were big, or small; timbered, or hard, bald rock—"

In the bow, Regan bit into a plug of tobacco and growled his reply.

"Told you a dozen times. She was about a half-mile long, full o' lodgepole pine, and a little piece off-shore."

"Then there it is!" Hardy pointed to an island a couple of hundred yards away. "Fits the specifications to a T!"

It did; but so did a hundred others.

"T' hell with it!" grunted Regan. "Le's make camp."

There was this to be said for Regan, he treated the loss of his mythical gold lightly.

"And suppose we don't find the gold immediate?" he argued. "We got all fall and winter. So what?"

Exactly. So what? But now, five hundred miles deep in the wilderness, Hardy was taking no chances. Always a snub-nosed derringer was in his hip-pocket by day and under his pillow by night. He awoke at Regan's least movement, and never wittingly did he let the man get behind him.

But the change of seasons crept up on them without Regan making his play. The leaves fell; great wedges of geese drove steadily south; and mornings brought a thin skim of ice amongst the rocks on shore. Regan made his suggestion.

"Time we was puttin' up a camp."

The shack measured ten feet by fourteen; and when it was concluded Eric Hardy knew how a woodsman went about snugging-in. It stood twelve logs high, was shake-roofed, chinked inside and out with moss. At Hardy's own suggestion the bunks were constructed each at a far

end of the building, the fireplace and the home-made table in the middle.

"Sociable coot, ain't you?" leered Regan.

"Not that at all," retorted Hardy. "But with the door in the middle, we're both away from the draft."

"That's right, too. Never thought of it."

"I," smiled Hardy, "think of everything."

At the first snow, they set out their traps —fifty apiece. Hardy himself could not have caught a mouse; but Regan was patient in his tutelage and the Englishman quick to learn.

FUR was plentiful that year. By Christmas they had caught thirteen hundred dollars' worth.

"What d'we want t' quit fer?" demanded Regan. "Sure, we'll stay till spring."

Hardy recalled that those other partners of Bull Regan had stayed till spring. They—like him—had toiled all winter; and Regan had netted the double catch.

"Certainly," agreed Hardy. "Let's stay."

They spread their fur on the wall of the shack. It was a choice array—the sheen of foxes, the dark dignity of fisher and marten, the contrasting shagginess of lynx and wolf.

"And if we'd only got that poison!" growled Regan. "But there she is—we ain't!"

So far as human life was concerned, however, they could almost have been at the Pole. True, Graham, the trader from the South End, came up once with a string of dogs, and Dornberg, the German trapper from Porcupine Point, dropped in twice. Hardy welcomed the Hudson's Bay man, but had little esteem for the German. Dornberg was loud-mouthed and dirty, but he and Regan seemed to hit it off.

One night Dornberg brought down a bottle of home-brewed liquor, and the two went on a noisy drunk. In the celebration, Dornberg crashed against Hardy and mangled his toes. Words followed, and for a moment it looked as though it would develop into a three-cornered fight between the Englishman and the two drunks.

"Aw," whassa matter with you?" growled Regan. "Goin' high-hat?"

"Everything's lovely," was Hardy's cool response. "But keep to your own end of the place."

And with Regan reaching for the crock, the tense moment passed.

After a little while Hardy kicked off his moccasins and rolled into bed. Dornberg went out at midnight and could be heard scolding his shivering dogs. A few minutes later, a series of drunken howls indicated that the man was making for home.

"Helva nice song-'n-dance you put up tonight!"

At the sound of Regan's voice, Hardy turned. Bull Regan was standing beside the table, drunken eyes crinkling and a sneer on his bearded lips.

"Yeah! Helva swell way t' treat a guest!"

Hardy raised to an elbow and faced him. "Your guest? Or mine?"

"Don't matter. You'd no need t' put up th' squawk you did. If it hadn't been for showin' y'up in front o' Dutchy, I'd a—"

Regan hesitated; and Hardy swung from the bunk to his stockinged feet.

"You'd have—?"

"I'd 'a taught you some manners!"

Hardy stood there, his face cold and merciless.

"Perhaps you'd like to teach me now?"

Bull Regan stiffened, then he lunged around the table, fists bunched.

Hardy weaved, ducked; and as Regan went by, swung a savage uppercut. He turned, met another of Regan's rushes. Regan's blow grazed his head; and while Regan was off balance, he pivoted with a

short right hook that exploded directly beneath Regan's ear. The man went down, cold before he touched the floor.

Five minutes he was out, then he crawled to hands and knees and blinked dazedly at Hardy sitting at the table.

"The lesson," remarked Hardy, "was a total loss."

Regan spat on the floor and lurched upright. "Whatcha hit me with?"

"Does it matter?" Hardy smiled. "Anyway, we'll forget it. We'd better both go to bed." Without another word he wriggled into his blankets; but Bull Regan stood there glowering at him suspiciously.

The oil in the lamp burned low. Hardy called attention to it. Regan blew down the chimney, and a moment later turned to his own bunk. But there was no immediate sleep for Hardy. Nerves tight, he lay and listened.

Regan cursed, punched his pillow, turned and twisted. There was a half-hour of quiet; then came another creak and the sound of sliding footsteps. Hardy's flashlight snapped on, catching Bull Regan in the middle of the floor.

"Lost something?"

Regan froze. Then, "M' pipe," he muttered. "Can't sleep."

"It's on the shelf over the window. Your tobacco, too."

Regan found the articles, loaded up with tobacco and struck a match. He returned to bed again, and for ten minutes came the gurgle of the pipe and the dull glow of it. Then the pipe was laid aside, and soon there came the sound of Bull Regan's steady snoring.

But the next day brought the man up in a morose and sullen mood. He ate with Hardy, then shoved his plate to one side.

"We're finished," he stated bluntly. "All through."

Hardy frowned across at him. "What the devil d'you mean?"

"What I said. Either you go and I stay; or I go and you stay. Suit yourself."

"Go where?"

"Any place. Put up another camp, 'r get outa th' country. When partners quarrel, it's time fer a showdown."

"For heaven's sake!" exclaimed Hardy. "I'll admit we had a bit of a row, but nothing to work up a sweat over!"

Bull Regan glared truculently at him. "I told you. And I don't bluff. Are you goin', 'r am I?"

For a moment Hardy was completely balked. He tried to fathom Regan's mind, tried to get his viewpoint. In all probability, and despite what the man had said about not bluffing, Regan expected him to crawfish. Regan wanted him to apologize, to beg not to be turned adrift five hundred miles from home. The bully in the man was showing through. But Hardy's jaw came up.

"I'll go—as soon as I can get my traps together."

"O.K.," grunted Regan. "I'm goin' around my own line today. See you when you come back."

They rose from the table, leaving the dishes unwashed. Hardy put on his fur cap and his mitts. Regan reached down his cariboo parka. With packsacks on their shoulders they went out, Hardy to his line that ran in the bush, Regan to his along the shore.

While he traveled, Hardy fell to questioning things again. Regan's explanation about quarreling partners was all drivel. There was more to it than that. Regan had an idea in that astute head of his; but what the deuce could it be? Then a mile from camp, Hardy stopped short. He wheeled, raced back the way he had come.

He made fast time, but not quite fast enough. The last twist of the trail brought him up abruptly— The cabin was a blaze of flame.

For an instant he stood there. The roof fell in. A swirl of smoke and sparks shot upward. Hardy became victim of murderous emotion. He saw through Regan's pretty scheme now. Regan, beaten in a fair fight, had taken this method of revenge.

"He'll have taken the fur, and the grub. And I'm left shanghaied. Perhaps!"

Hardy turned his attention to the ground.

Two days previously it had snowed—a light fall that did little to hinder travel but which would be of inestimable value to anyone searching for tracks. Apparently Bull Regan, in his criminal haste, had overlooked this factor.

The tracks were there. Curiously enough, they led towards the north—to where Regan's boozing-pal, Dornberg, had gone the night before. Hardy nodded in swift understanding.

"Exactly. He and Dornberg had it all cut and dried."

He dropped his pack and his rifle in favor of speed. In his younger days, Eric Hardy had been a star distance runner for his university. Something of the old stamina and skill remained. As well, there was vengeance now to spur him on.

He made three miles; then caught sight of his man slipping around a twist of the road with a bulky sack on his shoulders. Hardy sped soundlessly on, and at six feet, launched his attack.

They went down together, plunging into the snow beside the trail. There was an oath, a roar of surprise; and Hardy found himself locked in a death-grip with Dutchy Dornberg.

The shock of discovery almost caused Hardy's undoing. Dornberg seized him by the throat; rammed gouging thumbs in his eyes. Hardy twisted quickly, and rained a battery of blows in the German's face. As the man wilted, he rolled on top of him. And there, kneeing him in the stomach, he drove with the heel of his hand to the point of Dornberg's jaw.

IT WAS the finish. Breathing hard from the run as well as the fight, Hardy stood up. Near Dornberg's prostrate figure was the bulky sack. From somewhere at hand a dog growled. Hardy looked in the latter direction, saw a smoldering campfire and four tethered huskies. "I see," he gritted. "Another ten minutes, and I'd have had the devil's own run!"

But thoughts of that vanished. From down the trail came a bull-roaring voice. Hardy turned to see Regan lumbering forward, cursing as he came.

"Another move," howled Bull, "and I'll blow you in two!" He had his gun, and his face showed he meant it.

Hardy waited till he came up, then waved a hand at the slowly recovering figure of Dutchy Dornberg.

"Your villain," he announced. "There's no need to shoot."

Regan's eyes were blazing, but there was doubt in them as well.

"What's he doin' here—with you?"

"I've just nabbed him," explained Hardy. "He's the lad that burned us out."

There was a rumble like a volcano going into action and Bull drove forward. But Hardy was too quick.

"Wait till he gets up—and then wait a little longer. There's no use in thrashin' the swine. It'll net us nothing."

"I'll take him apart!" howled Bull. "I'll shove m' hand down his throat 'n yank him inside out!" He ground his bearded jaws and split the morning air with savage curses. "Burn up our shack, will he, and th' fur—!"

"The fur is here," observed Hardy. "As they say, in the bag. But what made you come back to the cabin so soon?"

Regan hesitated. His rage seemed to cool a trifle. For a moment a guilty, deprecating look crossed his features.

"I guess I'm an ornery sorta cuss," he said apologetically; "but after our row I kinda thought you might—you might want t' get back at me—and—and—"

Hardy laughed a laugh of sheer good spirits.

"Don't apologize at all, old chap. Y'see, I thought the same about you!"

A MONTH later, Eric Hardy walked in on Inspector Dew. He shook hands with the surprised officer and offered him a cigarette. The Inspector took the smoke and continued to stare at Hardy.

"I've been fretting about you, man. Lord, have I?"

"About me? Oh, I say, y'know! Fact is, I've had a rippin' time." Hardy gave a resume of his meeting with Bull Regan and the subsequent weeks north. He touched on their trapping experiences and wound up with an account of the burning of the shack.

"My pal Bull wanted to haul Dornberg out and turn him over to you. But that was too much trouble. We let him go, then hoofed it to the South End and bought a bit of food. Finally, we collected a team of huskies, breezed south—and here we are!"

"*We* are?" emphasized the Inspector. Regan too?"

"Absolutely. And take it from me, Inspector, Regan's all right. I don't care whether he lost two partners or a dozen of 'em. And I don't care what you may think about the drowning of his wife. Bull's unlucky, perhaps, but he wouldn't kill a fella any more than he'd rob a poor-box. And I'll tell you why—

"The mornin' that our shack was burned, he went around his line. The first trap he came to had caught a fox; and the fox was away with the trap. He followed him, and caught him. And—now mark this down for Ripley!—the fox was lying on the identical spot on a nearby island where Bull had found his gold-showing a whole twelvemonth before!"

The Inspector frowned. "You mean he located his gold?"

"Absolutely, old man. And showed me the spot. We staked it there and then, came in, and recorded it today. I'm trottin' back to England to interest some pals of mine in the thing, but we'll be only too glad to let you in on the ground floor."

The Inspector grunted. "I've heard of these mines." His thoughts traveled. "So you didn't prove Regan a murderer after all? No more than we?"

Hardy gave a wide smile. "No more than you. Which brings us to something else." He reached down, picked up a paper bag and laid a ten-dollar Homberg hat on the Inspector's desk. "With my compliments, Inspector. I'm glad I lost."

"By Jove, yes! The hat. You lost your bet!"

"I lost my bet," agreed Eric Hardy. "You've got your hat. But I found a fortune—and a Man!"

Adventurers All

Lum Mo-Au

IT was on the first of my several trips upriver through the Yangtze Gorges that an event occurred which brought me so close to death that I have no wish to repeat it, amusing though it is in retrospect.

My paper in Shanghai was sending me into the fastnesses of western China to write famine, banditry, opium, politics, anything I might come across. Subsequent events proved that I was to come across plenty.

The up-trip was made in the good ship *I'Feng* and was without any untoward incident—striking the rocks at the head of the Ox Liver and Horse Lung Gorge, cementing in two hours and away again was not considered out of the ordinary for a Yangtze skipper—and I breathed easier when we arrived at Chungking, the western terminus of the Yangtze Rapids SS. Co.

But there a complication awaited me in the form of the famous "solid gold Rolls Royce" of Marshal Liu Hsiang, overlord of the province. A young Princeton graduate Chinese under a weird looking hat of striking bright green was in the tonneau. I was to be the Marshal's guest during my stay. Wise old Liu; he knew the value of favorable publicity.

There was nothing to do but accept, see what I was shown and more I wasn't shown, then write what I wanted on return to Shanghai.

"I've heard of this car ever since I landed in China," I said as we started for the *yamen*. "Is it really gold, solid gold?"

"Well, brass, but shined daily. It impresses the natives," came from beside me.

"And the hat you're wearing?"

"Ah, *'lum mo-au,'* that's green hat. His Excellency has a sort of brain trust. We all wear these hats. They impress the natives also."

For two weeks I was entertained as only a rich Chinese can entertain. The "solid gold" car was at my disposal and I saw the surrounding country outside and in. There was no banditry, the Marshal was beloved of all; there was no opium, the Marshal's wealth came from taxes well administered—the acres of poppies I had seen on the way up were grown for amusement only. I listened and made no comment.

Yet always at my side was the Princeton Chinese to interpret Liu's amusing remarks. The old man had plenty of them, the first sense of humor I had met in the usually stolid Chinese.

FINALLY the day came when I was to leave. Old Liu surprised me by making me a member of his brain trust. I was given a green hat and I found a kick in wearing it to the boat as the onlookers stared in wonder. But they were staring more pointedly at the Marshal and few cheered. I could guess why—he was hated for his opium "squeeze" and his vicious taxation. A month before an attempt had been made on his life and twenty men were killed in rebuttal. That they had had

nothing to do with it was beside the point —they had been beheaded for the impression.

A further surprise was in store when Liu announced that he was coming down to Ichang on my boat for a conference with the Hupeh *tutu.*

So we started, his brain trust with him —though I failed to notice that no one wore his *lum mo-au.* But I wore mine and Liu encouraged me. My red hair protruding from under it gave him a great laugh.

The second night we anchored below Pei-tsen, the center of the opium district. Five of us, with Liu, were in the saloon playing *mah jong,* bottles of cognac on the table and fine cigars nearby. It was very hot but the ports were closed and the shades drawn because the Marshal was "subject to colds." But he made no protest when I opened the one above me for he sat at the far end of the table.

There was an eerie stillness over everything, punctuated only by the clicking of the ivory cubes. Gradually the lights of the village were blotted out for the night.

Then suddenly a shot resounded. Simultaneously something sped past my ear with a faint hiss, struck the table and went under the cloth, wriggled along snakelike for a couple of feet and came out the other side, striking the steel housing with a metallic c-l-u-n-k.

I broke out in a cold sweat on the instant. And I saw old Liu slide off his chair under the table as though he had been sprung. The Princeton Chinese leaped up and smashed the swinging light.

The skipper came along the deck on the run. A moment later the hooks were upped and we floated a few miles downriver. Then we anchored and everybody had a good laugh—everybody but me. The Marshal laughed loudest of all.

"Why did they try to pot me?" I asked.

The question was translated and the reply came back, from old Liu. "Because of your *lum mo-au.* Some farmer thought you were me. Isn't that funny?" Then everybody laughed again.

Looking at those holes in the tablecloth I didn't think it was funny. I took a stiff snort of cognac and went out on deck. Heaving that green hat in the river, I watched it float downstream. Then I went back and found the bullet.

But I'm laughing now as I look at that slug on my watch chain.

Alfred Batson

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MARSHAL OF SUNDOWN

By JACKSON GREGORY

Author of "Dark Valley," "Dead Man's Vengeance," etc.

PART II

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE.

JIM TORRANCE, riding up from the South, comes into the little town of Sundown. His first unusual act is to ask if any of the townsfolk know Jim Torrance, and some of the best liars do. But Torrance keeps a still tongue. Then he becomes very involved in local affairs, for he rides away with Sally Dawn, daughter of one of the old cattle-barons, who seems to have been fighting a losing fight with the evil forces of the town, and who—to her own horror—has shot Steve Bordereau, gambler and bad man. Jim and the girl escape into the mountains in a snow storm, and plan to hide in the ghost

"Looks Like a Million Dollars," Said Yarbo. "Looks Like They'd Got It for Keeps," Growled Jim.

town of Pocket Valley, but find some of Bordereau's henchmen there ahead of them. Jim leaves Sally holed up in a deserted shack while he rides for provisions; on his way back to her, he rides on the trail of Clark Murdo, who, now that Bordereau is dead, would be head of his outfit.

VII

JIM TORRANCE was tempted up to the yielding point when he came to that spot on the mountain flank where a fresh track led deep into the dark ravine. For this far had Clark Murdo come from Pocket, and here he had turned off to rejoin his companion of the earlier morning. And Torrance, so sorely tempted to follow him, kept saying to himself, "I'd know a lot if I overtook those two, and I've got the crazy hunch that at last I'd come up with a man I've been looking for, for a long, long time."

But there was that girl waiting for him high on the ridge. He couldn't quite make a go of just letting her wait. He couldn't quite get her face out of his mind's eye. She had stood pretty nearly all the punishment you could expect her to stand; alone up there for hours with only her own tragic thoughts for company, the kid must be nearly at her rope's end. In losing her mother it seemed that she had lost all she loved. On top of that there was a corroding horror in her soul; she'd be thinking over and over and endlessly over, "I killed a man." She'd be remembering the look on his face when he fell; she'd be thinking of him dead and soon to be dug under. With just those two to think of, her be-

loved mother and an ancient enemy, both dead so recently, she could no longer be left alone by any man who did not love torture for torture's sake.

So, though rage was in his eyes, Torrance rode on and let a chance slide by. Presently he got to thinking of other things. For one, Clark Murdo by now knew that he had been tricked into believing that Torrance had come up through the Flats in the South; he would have noted that another horse than his had recently traveled this way; he would have guessed mighty close to the truth. He could scarcely avoid being sure that Torrance, too, had stopped over last night at the old deserted mining camp. It was a simple step from that surmise to the next —that Sally Dawn Cannon had stopped there with him and was perhaps there now; that Torrance, like himself, had gone down to Pocket Valley seeking provisions for still another mouth than his own.

"And he may be showing up as soon as he carries the news along to his teammate," mused Torrance.

Further, he marked that it was no longer snowing so heavily; considering that this was the first storm of the season it might reasonably be expected to wear itself out soon. That fact would have its bearing on events.

When he came to the mountain cabin, there was Sally Dawn in the open doorway waiting for him, a pale and weary, tragic figure with eyes looking unnaturally large; he knew that in his absence she had broken down and wept miserably. But a flash of gladness came into her eyes on seeing him.

"I had no way of telling how long you were gone—I began to be afraid—"

"You began to wonder whether there was any breakfast coming up, I'll bet a man," he said lightly as he dismounted.

"Honestly, I forgot about breakfast!"

"You ought to be starved."

"Maybe I am!" She looked at his bundle in the barley sack. "I am starved!" Then her eyes traveled questioningly back to his. "Tell me what happened. What about Clark Murdo and the other man?"

HE tethered his horse near the door and they went straightway to the fireplace where she had a small fire still burning. But she thought to ask.

"Aren't you bringing your horse inside again?"

"No. We'll be riding right away, just as soon as you've eaten. And I'll tell you about things while ham's frying and coffee coming to a boil."

"Coffee! I'd rather have a cup of hot coffee than a buckskin bag full of gold dust!"

"Sure," he grinned at her. "It's a lot more inviting this time of day."

Together they prepared her breakfast while he explained how first of all he had eaten down at the Pocket. "I'd have waited for you," he told her, "only I wanted things to look natural to Murdo." Then he told her briefly of his encounter with Murdo, of Murdo's having asked Andy Stock concerning her, of his general tall curiosity about Torrance's movements, about him having taken a sack of provisions to his somehow-mysterious sidekick.

"They're after me, of course," said Sally Dawn.

"That doesn't explain their hiding out in that canyon," he retorted. "But, yes, of course they're after you. So as soon as you've had all the coffee and hotcakes and ham you want—yes, I've got a couple of eggs, too—we'll fork our saddles and get out of here."

"But they'll be watching the trail, won't they? They'll see us on our way down into the Pocket."

"No they won't, because we're not headed down there. We're turning tail right here and drifting back to Sundown. We'll make an easier and quicker trip going down, and all by daylight too, than we

made coming up. Even if they follow, I don't think they'll overtake us. And if they do come up with us—well, that won't happen until it happens."

Round-eyed and puzzled she heard him out without an interruption, then she exclaimed:

"Sundown? You mean we're to go back there? After all this long ride, after we've almost got away? Back to Sundown?"

"Here's sugar for your coffee. Here's milk." He jabbed a hole in the can with his knife. "Yes, back to Sundown. It's exactly where they won't be expecting us to go; likewise, I'm beginning to think it's where you'll be safest. And it's where you belong; it's where your ranch is. Mine, too."

"Your ranch, yes. Mine?" She shook her head and sighed; time was when she had loved that ranch, King Cannon's and her mother's and hers, with all her heart. "Mine is as good as gone from me for good now."

"Maybe," said Torrance. "A man never knows."

"I'm not sure that I want to go back to Sundown," she said, and sounded altogether independent about it.

"Scared?" asked Torrance, and stirred the sizzling ham with a stick. "Here's a hunk of bread and a dab of butter."

"Of course I am! Have you forgotten all the things you said to me about letting those men grab me?"

"While you finish eating, I'll saddle your horse," said Torrance, and rose from his squatting position on the earth. Standing high above her, looking down on her tumbled brown tresses and then into her uplifted puzzled gray eyes, he added, "No, I haven't forgotten. I've sort of changed my mind, that's all."

A faint flush came into her cheeks and a flash as of fire into her smoky eyes. She could only surmise that he had had enough of their adventure together. She said swiftly:

"You can go back! I'm going on. I'm never going near Sundown again as long as I live."

Then she was treated again to the sound of that soft chuckle of his.

"If you don't go back, I don't go either," he said, and grinned down at her. "But as it happens, we're both going. Side by each, as the feller says."

Then he went and saddled her horse.

THE return journey, as he had predicted, was much easier than had been their trip up into the high places. By the time they had dropped down two or three thousand feet there was but an inch or two of melting snow underfoot. And all day long they had met no one and had caught no glimpse of Clark Murdo or any other following them.

In the early gray dusk she pointed, saying, "There's your ranch. We're almost there."

He seemed to come up out of a deep reverie.

"Know a funny little rooster named Sam Pepper?" he asked.

She looked at him wonderingly, he was so grave in his questioning.

"Of course I do! Everybody knows Sam Pepper. He *is* funny, but I like him. What put him into your mind?"

The gravity slowly faded from his face and in its place came a slow smile which in the end gave her the warm feeling of being enveloped by it.

"When a man needs a helping hand," he said, "he's got to think about a lot of folks he knows. Me, I've hit on Sam Pepper!"

"For help? Mercy! What sort of

help? I never knew a more helpless creature."

"Is there by any chance a Mrs. Sam Pepper?"

"There is. She's a darling; everybody loves her, the most motherly—"

But something came into her throat at the last word and she broke off, averting her face. Torrance didn't say anything; he leaned outward from his saddle as though to pat her shoulder, but withdrew his hand without touching her and without her seeing.

When they came down along the road in front of his gate he reined in his horse and said quietly:

"I want you to stop here a little while. If the coast is as clear at my place as it looks, and as it ought to be, I'll poke over to have a word with Sam Pepper—"

"I'll go with you! Let's go straight on there first of all."

"Please!" It was the first time he had ever said that to her. "I've been thinking about this all day. I'll go alone to Pepper's first; I'll make sure no one else is there. You'll not be kept waiting more than a few minutes.

She nodded then and they rode on to his ranchhouse. The place was empty; there was no sign that any prowlers had been about. He hurried her into the house and her horse into the barn; it was nearly dark then. Less than ten minutes later he was leaning from the saddle to rap on Pepper's door with the loaded end of his quirt. The door was opened and a woman looked out, Mrs. Sam without a doubt. Sally Dawn's epithet "motherly" just fitted her. Middle aged, apple-cheeked, comfortable and cozy looking she greeted the stranger smilingly.

"Howdy, Mrs. Pepper," he said, and smiled back at her. "I'm your new neighbor, Jim Torrance. Is your husband here?"

"He ain't far," said Mrs. Sam, and stepped out in the yard to call her bugled notes, "Sam! Here's company."

She was calling and looking toward Sam Pepper's high hill, calling needlessly as it proved, for here already came Sam Pepper at a sort of dog-trot run.

"I seen you just riding home, Torrance," he said breathlessly as soon as he was within hailing distance. "You and somebody else. It was kinda dark and I couldn't quite make out for sure—you see, I just happened to be up on my hill and—"

"You two folks alone?" asked Torrance.

"Sure. Always alone. Better light down—"

"That was the Cannon girl with me," said Torrance. He speared the little man with a glance and after a fashion, through a long silence, managed to keep him wriggling on the spear point. Then he added slowly and significantly, "In case you might be interested I can tell you several other things, things that a lot of folks are wondering about."

Mrs. Sam snorted. "If there's anything on earth Sam ain't interested in, I don't know what it is. When he was born they say he was tryin' to count how many toes he had. But if Sally Dawn, poor little thing, is over to your place—"

"Them Bordereau men will tear her to pieces if they find her!" burst out Sam Pepper.

"I'll go over and fetch her," said Torrance. "We'll be back right away. And then I want a good talk with you, Pepper."

WHEN he brought Sally Dawn back with him she ran headlong into Mrs. Sam's mothering arms and put her head down on that deep, comforting bosom—and Torrance and Sam Pepper stepped along outside and sat on a log. That is, Torrance did; Sam Pepper couldn't sit still, couldn't even stand still.

"I aim to make a dicker with you, Pepper," said Torrance. "I need help and you're the one man can give it to me. And there are things you'd like to know about, and I'm the man can tell you things no other man can."

"What sort of help, neighbor?" asked Pepper curiously.

"I want you to help me find out things, to nose out some facts that are keeping under cover."

"Like what?" asked Sam, all eagerness. "What about?"

"Give me time and I'll tell you. Say, what's happened to Murdo?"

"Hanged if I know." He looked worried. "He's gone and nobody knows where! So's Doc Taylor! So was you and Sally until—"

"Who's Doc Taylor? What about him?"

"He was called in when Bordereau was shot. He went upstairs to look at Bordereau; I seen him. Next morning nobody could find him. I been asking folks; nary a one has seen hide nor hair of him."

Torrance stared at him through the growing dark for a long while, then whistled softly.

"I can tell you what Murdo's been up to all day and where he's been," he said crisply, and stood up. "And I can ask you this, 'Why did they bury Bordereau in such a hurry?'"

If Pepper had been doing a sort of restrained dance before, now he fidgeted himself into something between an Apache war dance and an Irish jig. He was all but frothing at the mouth as he gasped out,

"Mr. Torrance, I've been asking myself—"

"I know," said Torrance. "I can also tell you where the Cannon girl and I have been—I was on hand when Bordereau got shot, so I can tell you details about that—I can even tell you why I came up here looking for a man named Jim Torrance—"

"For God's sake!" pleaded the little man.

"Are you with me?" demanded Torrance sharply. "Will you throw in with me to find about everything? We'll be helping Sally Dawn Cannon, if that means anything to you. You'll learn one hell of a lot—but you'll keep your mouth shut about it all until I say the word or I'll chop you up into dog meat."

He looked as though he meant it. Sam Pepper shivered. Right now he clamped his mouth shut so tight that there were little puckers at the corners which Torrance, stooping so close to him, could see even in the fading light.

"It's a deal?" demanded Torrance.

Sam Pepper didn't open his mouth even then. But he nodded his head with a rapidity that made Torrance think of a woodpecker hammering on an oak.

"Go get your horse," said Jim Torrance. "We're riding into Sundown."

VIII

EARLY though the hour was, the Stag Horn was crowded. Excitement had run high in Sundown, and men clustered here where the current chain of events had seemed to have its inception; here, if anywhere, they could get the latest lowdown on what it was all about.

Florinda extravagantly attired, white-bosomed and sparkling with her "family jewels," strutted like a peacock. With Steve Bordereau away, with Murdo away too, she was more the tinsel queen than ever before. She disported herself as though it was she, Florinda de Valdez y Verdugo, who owned the place.

She saw Jim Torrance, travel-stained and somewhat hollow-eyed, come in with a furtive and apprehensive Sam Pepper at his heels, and stiffened.

Torrance's eyes were hunting her down. When they found her he came to her as straight as a string.

"Señorita!" he said to her in Spanish, and his tired eyes mocked her. "You are lovelier than a little white dove with pink feet; you are lovelier than a little dove sitting in the hollow of a man's hand. I am going to buy you some wine; and you are going to sit with me for three minutes and smile at me—and answer a question!"

Her teeth were like pearls, her loveliest and most genuine gems. Though she looked uncertain and frightened and ready to run, she smiled. She said, "*Si*, Señor Jeem Torrance," and made her skirt billow above her slim ankles as she led in haste the way to a secluded corner table.

Sam Pepper, goggling wide-eyed in all directions, followed the two like a little dog with its tail tucked in. He had been upstairs in these rooms just once before in all his days; that was when Bordereau had opened for his first night, and Sam's insatiable curiosity got him admitted at a cost in dollars which he had never confessed to Mrs. Sam.

The three sat down. Florinda looked at Sam Pepper as at a bug. The waiter brought wine. When Torrance began to speak, Sam Pepper ceased goggling all over the room and distended his ears instead.

"Florinda," said Torrance, "we have met before, you and I."

She nodded.

"In Nacional," she whispered.

"So you remember?"

Her eyes became mysterious, unfathomable. She said almost inaudibly. "I am not going to forget; not ever, Señor."

"Bordereau was there that night?"

"Yes."

"A man was killed that night?"

"Yes! You know—"

"Who killed him?"

"But I do not know, Señor! It was—I thought it was—"

"I did not kill that man. Did Bordereau?"

"I thought—I thought you killed him! Bordereau? But I do not know, Señor! Not anything."

He stared at her a long while, trying to make out whether she lied. By this time there were hot spots of color in Sam Pepper's tanned cheeks. Abruptly Torrance switched to other matters.

"With Steve Bordereau dead," he said, "who takes over here? Who's the big gun now at the Stag Horn?"

"Murdo. He and Steve were somehow partners."

"Are you and Murdo good friends?"

Her velvet-black eyes unsheathed themselves in a flash.

"He is a pig. I hate him." Only she said, "He is a peeg."

"Did you see Doc Taylor come in last night after Bordereau was shot?"

"Yes. I followed into the room. Steve was not dead yet. Then Murdo t'row me out."

"And Doc Taylor?"

"I do not know, Señor. He was there when I go. Two-t'ree hour after that a man comes running, telling everybody his little boy baby is sick; he is crazy to find the doctor quick. He come back two, t'ree time. He come again today; he say he cannot find the doctor. I do not know, Señor."

Torrance slid some money across the table. "You can go now," he said.

She rose slowly and with a queer, native dignity. The money she ignored absolutely as though she had not seen it. Her eyes were a little brighter, her face hotter with color.

"I am your friend, if you will have it that way, Señor," she said, in a soft voice which trembled just a trifle and which was very earnest. Then she hurried away, almost running.

SAM PEPPER, looking about to explode with all that pent-up curiosity seething within him, began babbling questions, but Torrance promptly shut him up, saying:

"Not now, Sam. You've got to wait, if it kills you. Right away I want you to help me. Remember that I'm a stranger here and that you ought to know everybody. We've got us a job of work to do tonight, and it might come in handy if we had a few other fellows, say four or five, to lend a hand. Men that are on the up-

and-up and that we can trust. How about it?"

Sam Pepper's eyes started roving again. Then he shook his head.

"Not upstairs, Torrance. Downstairs in the bar I'd be sure to find some boys like that, that I know and that a man can tie to."

"Step down and round 'em up," said Torrance. "Make it lively. Friends of the Cannon girl if you can find them. I'll be with you in no time."

Sam slid out of his chair and hurried out of the room. When Torrance went downstairs a few minutes later he had reason to congratulate himself on the choice of his ally; Pepper had already gathered half a dozen dependable looking men. Five of them, especially sought out by Pepper, were young stock men, and neighbors of the Cannons; the sixth, older and slightly bald, yet a man ready for anything, had not been invited but had horned in—and that man was Lying Bill Yarbo. Pepper looked at him accusingly; as for Jim Torrance, he was glad to have Yarbo of their number. At a nod from him they followed him outside.

"I'm playing a wild hunch tonight, boys," he told them. "I'll tell you all about it in a minute. First get this: if I'm wrong we're apt to have a fight on our hands, and if I'm right we'll be turning up to the light a pretty dirty trick that's been played and that's still in play."

One of the young fellows, lean and lanky Dave Drennen, who had once worked for King Cannon and who now was running a small spread of his own, spoke up quietly.

"Somehow what you've got in mind is to help out Sally Cannon? You're a friend of hers and you know what's gone with her?"

"It's to help out the Cannon girl, and to help me out, too. Yes, I know where she is. So does Pepper."

"Sure I do," said Pepper. "Right now she—"

"Keep it under your hat a little longer," commanded Torrance. "Now if you boys will wander along with me we'll get busy. Likewise I'll tell you what I'm banking on."

HE LED the way and the others came along, walking swiftly down the sidewalk toward a hardware store which he had noted on his first day in Sundown. It was too early for a store to be closed and there were a couple of articles he wanted. But the little group of men hadn't gone over a block when Sam Pepper, who seemed to have eyes in the back of his head and whose ears were always registering sounds to which others gave no attention, came to a sudden halt.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "There's Clark Murdo! And there's someone with him! Say, he's got the girl! That's Sally Dawn he's yanking along after him!"

Three or four riders had drawn up in front of the Stag Horn; that was what Sam Pepper had heard first of all. They had dismounted; Clark Murdo had called out sharply, issuing some swift command. Then he and those with him passed into the Stag Horn.

"So," thought Torrance, "Murdo followed us after all! Found the girl and has brought her here." He said aloud, "We'll go back, boys, but let Murdo show his hand first. Funny he has brought her back to Sundown; with so many folks around he can't raise a finger against her. He—"

"You don't know what you're talking

about!" snapped Sam Pepper. "He will hand her over to Rufe Biggs; Rufe's town marshal, as crooked and mean as a snake and a skunk—and belongs body and soul to Bordereau. Or did. With Bordereau dead, I guess he's in Murdo's pocket. He could jail her, couldn't he? After that him and Murdo could do as they damned well pleased."

"Just the same take it slow," muttered Torrance. "I've got something up my sleeve and we're going to know right soon whether it's an ace or a low card."

When they came back into the Stag Horn they saw that Pepper had things partly right, if not entirely. There was Rufe Biggs, town marshal, tall and yellow haired and pale-eyed, towering over Sally Dawn who looked very small and helpless and weary. There was Murdo, doing a lot of talking; there was hot fury in his eyes, to be explained perhaps by a fresh gash on his cheek from which blood was still dribbling. He kept dabbing at it with his bandana.

"She's yours, Rufe," he said. "I caught her hiding out up at Sam Pepper's place. You ought to arrest him, too. You ought to go grab that damn wife of his; she threw a butcher knife at me. Anyhow here's this Cannon girl that murdered my pardner. Me, I say, woman or no woman, let the law take its course."

No one laughed at the thought of Sam Pepper's wife attacking Murdo with a butcher knife; that could be explained solely by the fact that nearly every man here was a follower of the team of Bordereau and Murdo. They would laugh later, when Murdo wasn't there.

RUFE BIGGS, stepping closer to the girl, was just lifting his hand to put on her shoulder, just opening his mouth to announce her arrest, when Jim Torrance's voice, sounding flat and toneless, made itself heard through the brief silence.

"Me, I'm a stranger here, but there are some things even a stranger might like to know about. One is, why did Murdo have to see to it that Steve Bordereau got buried in such a hurry?"

Sally Dawn, hearing him, whirled about, all eagerness and expectancy. Murdo's black brows came down in a heavy frown.

"What the hell business is this of yours anyhow?" he demanded.

"Another thing," said Torrance in the same expressionless tone, "who killed Bordereau? This girl here? Well, how many times did she shoot him?"

"This ain't any trial court, brother," said Rufe Biggs.

"Of course it was the Cannon girl that killed him, and you know it," snapped Murdo. "She shot him twice, close up; once in the body, the second shot in the head. She—

Sally Dawn's gasp was drowned by Torrance's reply to Murdo.

"You're a damned liar, Murdo," he said. "She shot him just once."

Murdo's hand went as quick as a flash to his low slung gun. But Jim Torrance's two hands were already on his two guns, and there was a cold, deadly look in his low-lidded eyes which acted as a deterrant. Murdo shrugged.

"There's one more thing that a man might like to know about," Torrance went on after a little pause. "Where's Doc Taylor? Nobody seems to have seen him since he went up to take care of Bordereau."

A queer look came into Murdo's eyes at that; the color ran up into his swarthy cheeks, subsiding slowly.

"What the hell are you driving at anyhow?" he said thickly.

Torrance didn't answer him. Instead he said to Sally Dawn Cannon, "You'll be all right now; the marshal will hold you where you'll be safe for maybe an hour.

"Then we'll come back and see you home or wherever you want to go." He turned and went back to the door. "Come along, boys," he said, as the eyes of his

new allies followed him. "We'll know damned quick what it's all about."

This time Sam Pepper was the last to follow. He hung back long enough to ask of the girl. "Is Molly all right, Sally?"

"They were brutes to her. They left her tied up, so she couldn't come along with us. Yes, she's all right, Sam—and she was wonderful!"

SAM PEPPER then was sadly torn two ways; he wanted to rush back and free his wife and hear all details of what had happened; he wanted with all his heart to find out what Jim Torrance had up his sleeve, whether ace or deuce. In the end, hurrying after the men who were already hurrying after Torrance, he found a half grown, gawky and open-mouthed youth whom he dispatched to set Mrs. Pepper free. Then at a run he came up with Jim Torrance.

"Where we going now, Torrance?" he asked. "What we going to do?"

"We want a couple of picks and shovels," said Torrance. "We're going out to the graveyard."

Sam Pepper's mouth came open for an exclamation and remained open with never a sound being made.

Together with the tools which Torrance had mentioned they picked up a couple of lanterns. In the graveyard, companionably close to the edge of town, they shone the light of their lanterns on a freshly painted head board. It advised that Here Lay Steve Bordereau, Gambler, Friend and Gentleman.

"Let's dig," said Torrance. "We might be interrupted and there'd be sure to be some around here who'd say this sort of thing was against the law. Let's get busy."

Lying Bill Yarbo began swearing in his rich deep voice and was the first to wield a pick. Sam Pepper shivered delightfully from head to foot and was of no earthly use. A contagion of excitement spread over the others. In no time at all they brought the coffin up and pried the lid off.

Torrance, stooping to look closely, said only:

"This isn't Steve Bordereau. Who is it?"

A yell burst from Sam Pepper.

"It's Doc Taylor! Doc Taylor, by the powers! What's he doing dead here? Who done him in? And where's Steve Bordereau? And what'n hell's blazes does it all mean?"

"Let's pick up the box and carry it back to the Stag Horn, boys," said Torrance.

IX

JIM TORRANCE came stalking back into the Stag Horn. He had been away so short a time that he found things here pretty much as he had left them. Sally Dawn Cannon stood where he had seen her last and did not seem to have moved. Only a few paces from her, talking quietly into each other's attentive ears, were Clark Murdo and the marshal, Rufe Biggs, keeping their eyes on her all the time. The only change in grouping that Torrance could note was this: A dozen men, hard hombres he judged them and Murdo men, had gathered just behind Murdo and Biggs; they looked ready at the drop of the hat for anything they might be called on to deliver.

As Torrance entered, the room grew hushed and every eye turned to him. He stepped to one side of the door and got his back to the wall before he spoke. Then it was the girl whom he addressed.

"Everything's all right now," he said. "You'll be free to go in about two minutes!"

"Like hell!" roared Murdo, tense and worried and truculent. "All you're doing is a lot of wild talking. You'd better fold up and blow before you get yourself dehorned. Sabe, hombre?"

Torrance ignored him. To Rufe Biggs he said, "We stepped out to the grave-

yard. Somebody seems to have been digging out there. The boys are bringing you what we found. Here they come now."

They squeezed through the door, carrying the reduced box on their shoulders. It was Lying Bill Yarbo who set something down on the box when it had been deposited on the floor before Rufe Biggs.

"Here's the headboard that went with the box," said Yarbo. "Step up and read it, gents."

Neither Biggs nor Murdo moved or spoke; they looked swiftly at each other and looked away even more swiftly. Other men crowded close. One sang out, "Hell, they've dug Bordereau up! Can't they let a dead man lie in peace?"

"Maybe this dead man didn't want to lie in peace until he'd had his own funeral and not somebody else's," drawled Torrance, and kept watching Murdo. "Lift the lid off, boys."

A shout went up, "It's Doc Taylor! It ain't Steve at all! By the Lord, it's Doc Taylor in Steve's box!"

"You'll find he's had his head bashed in," said Torrance. "Whether that killed him outright or whether he smothered after his quick burial I don't know. Maybe the coroner can find out. Anyhow, Biggs, he's yours now. And you might ask your friend Murdo what he did with Bordereau and why he put Taylor in his place!"

"Why, damn you!" yelled Murdo, and again he went for his gun—and again he thought better of it.

"That's twice you've done that, Murdo," said Torrance. "Mean anything by it?"

MURDO, like Steve Bordereau in this, was a certain type of gambler, the cold-blooded, calculating type that will bet as high as any man—but only on a dead sure thing. Right now, though he had a hard, gun-slinging pack at his back, the odds for him personally did not appear to strike him as right. He got himself in hand, throttling down his anger which he so seldom let sweep him away, and spoke coolly and with the affectation of a sneer.

"Seems like, for a stranger, you're getting around," he said.

"And at that I've still got quite some traveling to do," returned Torrance. To the roomful of silent, puzzled men he added, "Later on you boys can figure out just what happened, but one thing ought to be clear enough to the thickest skull right now. First, Bordereau isn't any more dead than you are; he wasn't even bad hurt. The Cannon girl shot him high up, in the right shoulder I think it must have been. He put his hand up as he fell back and got blood on it and got the blood smear on his forehead. Then he got him his hunch to play dead, and you can take it from me he had his reasons for wanting to do that! Then some busybody brought the doctor in; and some helping friend of Bordereau's cracked the doc over the head to keep him from going out and spilling the beans. That done, they have the funeral right away, Doc Taylor taking Bordereau's place while Bordereau goes off somewhere and holes up until his wound heals. I'd say Marshal Biggs would be inside his rights to gather Murdo in and hold him on suspicion."

A lean and foxy-faced young fellow, that same gimlet-eyed young hellion who had come out to Torrance's place looking for the vanished girl, began whispering in Murdo's ear. Murdo listened, then grinned.

"You're right, kid," he said, and then spoke his piece to all who cared to listen, and that meant all within earshot. "Tor-

rance and some other boys go out and do some digging in the graveyard. They come back with Steve's headboard and a coffin! Who's to tell us it was Steve's coffin in the first place? And if it was, who's to say they didn't lift Steve out and put Taylor in? Who's here to say they didn't kill Taylor themselves?"

"That's right," said Biggs quickly. "Dammit, that's right."

"Better watch your step Echo Biggs," warned Torrance. "Anyhow get this straight; you can't arrest this girl for killing Bordereau when more than one of us knows Bordereau hasn't been killed. Now I'm going to tell you all a little story. About six years ago a pardner of mine and myself were down at a little border town called Las Lunas, sixty miles from Nacional. We had forty thousand dollars between us and were taking our time to sink it in a cow outfit. One day when Danny was alone at the cabin some gent stepped in, shot him in the back of the head and made off with our stake. And the gent that did that went to a good bit of trouble to make it look as though I had murdered my own pardner."

MURDO though slow with his gun tonight was quick with his tongue.

"A pardner killer, huh?" he said. "So that's what you are!"

"The gent that killed Danny," Torrance continued imperturbably, "stepped right along. But he still kept up his play at getting me blamed for his night's work. Twenty miles farther along he wrapped a bandana about his face, held up two sheep men that everybody knew had been hoarding for a long time, robbed them, killed one, said to the other. 'Me, I'm Jim Torrance, and when you hear me coming you better hide,' and kept on going. And only a year ago the same gent, or I'm guessing wrong, plugged a man down in Nacional when I was in town, and tried to throw that on me. His game was and still is clear enough; he knows damned well I'll get him someday if he can't fix it up so that some hot-headed party swings me to a cottonwood first."

"What the hell's this got to do with us?" demanded Rufe Biggs.

"Plenty. I came up this way looking for a man that calls himself Jim Torrance whenever he pulls a fast one. I've got a reason or two to bet any man of you a thousand dollars to a hundred that that gent is Steve Bordereau. And, if you want to know, that's why Bordereau is playing dead right now. He's the sort that shoots a man in the back, that tries to manhandle a girl, that sets his yellow dog on to smashing Doc Taylor over the head and burying him just to give him a chance to hide out. He means to make his find clean-up here, then drift along somewhere else where they don't know him, take a new name—and maybe get to be mayor or something like that."

"Got any proof of all this, Stranger?" demanded Biggs beginning to look a trifle uncertain.

"Somebody's already said," Torrance told him, "that this place isn't any courthouse. Besides, I've talked myself out for one night." He turned to Sally Dawn Cannon. "If you're ready we'll step along."

She started forward eagerly. Rufe Biggs put out an involuntary hand to detain her, but Murdo moodily shook his head and Biggs dropped his hand and seemed relieved to do so, and Sally Dawn came swiftly to Torrance's side. She stepped around the grewsome thing lying there on the floor staring up at her, and shuddered; but once outside in the clean night air, with friends about her, shudders were forgotten and an ecstasy thrilled through her. She put her two hands impulsively on one of Jim Torrance's hard brown ones. She said with a catch in her voice:

"Some day when I can get a good dictionary I'm going to read it all the way through." He jerked up his black brows

at her, as much as to ask, "Who's crazy now? You or me?" Then she ran on, "Maybe that way I can find the words to thank you! But for you, where'd I be now? But for you I'd all my life go on thinking I'd killed a man."

HE chuckled at last, the way she loved to hear him.

"Shucks," he said. "If you'd nailed Steve Bordereau proper you'd have saved me a job."

Then they mounted, all of them, and rode out of town. For a few minutes Jim Torrance and Sally Dawn rode neck and neck. That was while he said to her a word or two he felt impelled to speak. He said:

"You've got good friends and unless I'm a liar you're going to have a lot more real soon. You can go back to your ranch when you want to. Why not stay with the Peppers tonight? And when you go back home, why not have them come along, or Bill Yarbo and a couple of the other boys? And keep this in mind—you haven't lost your ranch yet; you can bet your sweet life that Bordereau pulled a crooked trick or two getting you folks out on a limb. Stick to it and you'll beat him yet."

At the edge of town they rode into the deep dark under a thick grove of big pines; when she said something to Torrance, still thinking him at her side, it was Lying Bill Yarbo who answered.

"Where's Jim Torrance?" she asked.

He didn't exactly know. No one else knew. They called for Torrance and got no answer.

He had dropped back, cut into a side trail and was already well ahead of them hurrying to his own place. He said to his horse, with whom he grew conversational at times when they had it all to themselves. "Here we've been putting in a lot of time messing around in a girl's affairs and letting our own slide. Let's change all that."

At his ranch he went out to the barn and threw down a plentiful lot of hay into the mangers; the stock would be finding short browsing and the feeling of the want of warm shelter. He pulled off his saddle and bridle, gave his horse a good rub down and a here's-thanks-old-boy slap on the rump, went out into the corral and tossed a skilful noose over his liveliest black mare's neck. This one he saddled and left in readiness; thereafter he went into his house for a shave, a bite and ten minutes relaxation flat on his back.

And then the thing happened which he might have expected, had he had all his wits about him. For of course he had lighted a lamp, and he had not covered his south window—and here came Sam Pepper on the run.

And Sam's words, as he bounced into the house, ran even faster than a spry Sam Pepper could travel. There was a gleam in his eye, there were red spots in his cheeks, there was something akin to venom on his ready tongue. From the doorway he cussed Jim Torrance up hill and down dale.

"What's eating you?" demanded Torrance, leaning on his elbow.

"You—you—you—" There Sam bogged down. But he grew vocal instantly. "You wanted me to help you, and I done it. You was going to let me in on a lot of secret doings—and instead, you run out on me!

"What's more, you only set me wondering about a lot of other things! I got a notion to cut your gizzard out and fry it in hawg fat and make you eat it!"

Torrance stood up. Of a sudden Sam Pepper, thinking himself about to be attacked by a man to whom killing was just a chore, leaped back out through the door which, perhaps subconsciously he had kept open against retreat.

"Don't shoot, Jim. Don't shoot!" he pleaded. "I was just funning. Shore I was, Jim."

Torrance laughed at him and sat back on the edge of his bed. Pepper sidled back into the room. And then, brushing

him aside, Lying Bill Yarbo came barging in.

"What the merry hell's going on here?" shouted Bill Yarbo, comporting himself like a storm wind blowing its heartiest. "You'd run out on me, would you? And connive with this tricky, lying Sam Pepper? The truth ain't in him and you ought to know it; and still you let him come in and pow-wow with you unbeknownst to others. Torrance, are you a damn' fool on top of other things?"

Here was another cue for a laugh from Jim Torrance that started low down somewhere in his anatomy and rose into a glorious crescendo. He got to thinking, "If I went out gunning for a couple of boys to keep me from going to sleep on my feet, I couldn't do better than S. Pepper and L. B. Yarbo." But all that he said to them about all this was said in that laugh of his.

He was a man with a tight smile, with now and again a mellow chuckle—with a laugh like that maybe once a year.

Sam Pepper stared, pop-eyed; Lying Bill glared. It was Lying Bill Yarbo who spoke.

"What'n merry hell are you talking about?" he demanded, and his big burly fists were doubled into young parboiled hams at his sides.

"Since you ask," said Torrance, "I'm going for a chat with Steve Bordereau."

"You do know then where he's at?" gasped Sam Pepper, goggling.

"I've got a notion. My horse is saddled. I'm riding right away."

"I'm going along," said Yarbo heavily.

"Don't you let him, Jim!" stuttered Sam Pepper. "There's like to be trouble when you find him. Me, I'm your man. Yarbo here, he'd let you down—he's the damndest coward in seven states and—"

Lying Bill made a lunge at him, but with almost incredible alacrity Sam Pepper scuttled across the room and established himself behind the headboard of Torrance's bed.

"Pepper's such a damn little liar," snorted Lying Bill.

This time Torrance didn't laugh; he was no longer in the mood for any light comedy.

He saw what ailed them both, each man hating the hide the other walked in, each wishing his own subconsciously acknowledged failing upon the other. He said curtly:

"You boys stood in with me tonight and I'm obliged. I'll be glad any time to do the same for both of you. Now I've got me a job that belongs to me and I'd better take it on single-handed."

"Dammit, you ain't got no gratitude!" yipped Sam Pepper. "If you had, you'd ask me along. You made a deal with me, remember; me, I done my part and you ain't done yours!"

"Oh, hell, come along if you want to," grunted Torrance. He got up and jammed on his hat. "You've got a ride ahead of you though."

"Me, too!" boomed Bill Yarbo. "If there's apt to be a showdown with Steve Bordereau, I've got a right to be in it. Hells bells, man, I'm the best friend Sally Dawn's got; me and her old man, King Cannon, was boys together and—"

"He never seen King Cannon but once," cried Pepper, "and then Cannon booted him clean off'n his ranch."

Yarbo made a dive at him and Pepper slid up close behind Torrance's back. Torrance sang out sharply:

"Look here, you two horn toads! You're both welcome to trail along if you're fools enough to do it, but I can't bother with you if you can't keep your damn mouths shut about each other. If you want to start something better stay here and do it. I've got something else to do than trying to stand betwixt you."

"I'll leave him alone if he'll leave me alone," muttered Sam Pepper.

"Me too," grumbled Lying Bill, though with reluctance.

"Only," added Sam, "it would be a heap

sight better if he went home and stayed there!"

But under that cold, low-lidded look that they got from Jim Torrance they

grew silent. And in the end, not over ten minutes later, the three mismated musketeers rode out together—toward a meeting with Steven Bordereau.

X

THEY made their packs, blankets, and bacon and beans, coffee, frying pan and coffee pot, and headed up into the mountains, riding the same trails Torrance and Sally Dawn had so recently traveled. They camped that night at the same deserted shack that had sheltered him and the girl on the first leg of their journey, and were up and riding at the first glint of a pale gray daybreak. No snow fell that day; by mid forenoon tattered streaks of clear sky were like faint blue banners above the far ridges. And when they came to the old mining camp high above Pocket Valley the mountains as far as they could see swam in a diaphanous purple mist, and the western horizon was aflame with a red-and-gold sunset.

"Now I'll tell you boys all I know," said Torrance, and hooked a leg over the saddle horn while he reached for the makings. "Murdo and somebody else camped here night before last. I could see Murdo through the window; the other man was on a bunk in the corner and I couldn't see him. And I couldn't hear what they were talking about. But I could tell that the other man was giving orders and that Murdo was taking them. So it's a fair bet it was Bordereau."

"Where'd they go to?" demanded Sam Pepper.

"Down trail toward Pocket. But they swung off where there's a narrow canyon. Then Murdo went down alone to Pocket, filled his grub bag and went back up the canyon. So it's my bet that that's where Bordereau is now, hiding out where nobody'd look for him, the same time he gets well of a bullet hole somewhere in his carcass."

"Me, I know that canyon like I know my hat," said Bill Yarbo. "And I know right where we'll find Bordereau, sure. You see, Torrance, about thirty years ago there was all hell to pay about the mines up here. And Sally Dawn's old gent, though he was a stock man first, last and all the time, took an interest. He was in the money in them days. He come up here; he bought up some mining properties; and he likewise grabbed off a little valley all his own for a summer range. What's more, he built him a house, and he'd come up here when he felt like loafing, and go hunting and fishing. That house stands there yet, quite a place, and it's up that canyon—and you couldn't find a likelier place for a man to hide out and lick his wounds."

"Far from here?" asked Torrance.

"Hell, no. If we poke right along we'll get there before it's too dark to see the whites of their eyes. Bordereau won't be all alone, you know."

"No," admitted Torrance. "He'd have someone—"

"I know!" exclaimed Sam Pepper. "He's got anyhow three-four, maybe more men with him! There's Hen Billings and Varny Slack and that half-breed, Joe Tortillas; that's three of 'em anyhow! And—let's see—"

"How would *you* know?" snorted Bill Yarbo.

"Me, I sort of notice things," snapped Pepper. "When I go places, I look around.

Now since the night Bordereau got hurt I ain't seen hide nor hair of any one of them three, and they're always hanging around where Steve Bordereau is! Yep. And—say, I ain't seen Turkey-trot Smith or Andy Pollack, and they was both in Sundown when Bordereau got shot! I'll bet he's got the whole gang up here!"

Torrance shrugged.

"There's just one way to find out," he said, and unhooked his leg from the saddle horn.

"Hey, wait!" said Sam Pepper, and looked worried. "It'll be dark—we better camp here overnight, anyhow. And maybe—maybe—"

BILL YARBO glared at him scornfully, then pretended spontaneous laughter. Sam Pepper went red to the gills.

"I ain't scared!" he sputtered. "I'm just using my brains. If only three of us go jumping a crowd like Bordereau's got—"

"There's only two of us that counts," said Yarbo. "Come ahead, Jim, let's get along."

"There's something else," said Pepper hastily. "You can bet your boots that Bordereau'll be ready for us! Don't you suppose Murdo got word across to him in a hurry? Them two are playing this game close together."

"If Murdo or a messenger had passed us—"

"He wouldn't have to. He could have come up by the Flats. Or he could have sent some sort of signal. Me, I noticed some smoke standing up in the sky back yonder over High Man's Ridge; I wondered about it, too."

"You would wonder," guffawed Lying Bill Yarbo. "Come ahead, Jim. Let the little rooster stick here or run back home to his old woman." Then he grinned very broadly, his eyes peering tauntingly at Pepper, as he added, "Maybe Murdo and a bunch of cutthroats are following along behind us now, Jim; maybe Mr. Sam Pepper, scooting back home, will run smack-kerdab into them!"

Sam Pepper, from red turned a pasty white and his eyeballs rolled. Then, when Torrance pushed on again and Lying Bill Yarbo fell in behind, Sam Pepper knew a moment of dreadful doubt. It was soon going to be dark. A timber wolf, perhaps the same hungry old fellow that Sally Dawn and Jim Torrance had heard, howled after a fashion to make the white solitudes seem ten thousand times more dreary and lonely. It wasn't that Sam was afraid of the wolf; a man in a haunted house wouldn't be afraid of the creak of a floor board; such sounds, however, didn't perk a man up.

He shivered and spurred hastily along after Torrance and Yarbo.

The old house that so long ago had been a sort of vacation home and hunting lodge to that great-hearted gentleman, King Cannon, when first glimpsed by Jim Torrance gave him a flick of surprise despite what Bill Yarbo had hinted of it. There was a small upland valley with a round bit of a lake like a dusky mirror in its center; there was a rushing stream pouring down into the lake; on a narrow bit of bench land stood the building, massive and four-square, honest granite for foundation, no less honest and rugged spruce logs for the rest of it. Candlelight glimmered out through two or three windows.

There came a hushed bleat from Sam Pepper alternately holding back and pressing up close to their heels.

"Listen!" he pleaded. "You damfools listen to me! Ain't you got any sense? Look how the place is lighted up; say, there's apt to be forty men there! If we go running into that mess—well, we might's well cut us our own throats and save 'em the trouble."

"Don't listen to him, Jim," muttered Bill Yarbo. And then in a confidential tone, yet one raised loud enough to make sure Pepper caught it, he demanded as

though in wonder, "Why'd you bring him along anyhow?"

"Funny they've got the place lighted up like that," said Torrance. "If it's Bordereau, and he's in hiding, you'd think—"

"Shucks," said Yarbo. "He ain't got the faintest idea that there's anyone on his trail. Up here, why a man might hang out all winter and never have a nose poked in on him. We'll take him clean by surprise."

"You're c-crazy!" stuttered Pepper. "Murdo's sure warned him."

"Come ahead, Jim," said Yarbo.

The two started on again.

SAM PEPPER stopped where he was. "Me, I'll guard the trail," he said faintly. "In case anyone's following us, I'll head him off."

Yarbo laughed and Torrance grunted. Sam Pepper watched them ride on, but himself sat where he was in the trail and shivered from head to foot. He saw his two companions draw on closer to the house, then turn off trail into a grove, then emerge on foot, moving on guardedly. He was tempted then to turn and scurry back the way he had come, at least as far as the mining camp, but the thought of being in that lonely place all night—and perhaps have some most unwelcome callers drop in on him, gave him a fresh set of jitters. He thought of going back only as far as the main trail, then down to Pocket Valley. But suppose he should meet Murdo and his gang coming up from Sundown by way of the Flats? He just stuck tight where he was.

Yet he'd have given anyhow a good left hand to know what was ahead of Torrance and Yarbo, what they were going to find out and just how things would happen to them.

"Maybe they'll be dead inside ten minutes," his dry lips whispered. His spare shoulders twitched as he added, "Me, too, maybe. Why'n thunder did I ever come along with two such crazy fools?"

Again Torrance led the way, watchful for some guard who might well enough be posted outside. It appeared however that Bordereau, as Yarbo had predicted, was confident that no one was likely to look in on him here. For when the two men came stealthily up onto the front porch of the old King Cannon mountain place and looked in at a window they saw that the men inside had no thought of anything but of their own affair. There was Steve Bordereau on his feet and moving about restlessly, carrying one shoulder stiffly, yet beyond that seeming whole and unharmed. With him were five other men.

"What'n hell are they doing?" whispered Lying Bill Yarbo. "Tearing the house down?"

"Who are they?" asked Torrance. "Know them?"

"Sure. That little weasel Sam Pepper guessed it; somehow he's apt to guess right once in a while. They're the fellers he said we'd run into. And take it from me, Torrance, they're toughern'n saddle leather. If it comes along to a scrimmage, you better shoot damn fast and twice as straight—or that little egg-sucking Pepper'll have the laugh on both of us."

Bordereau's men, under his orders, were making a wreck of the big rude-timbered living room. With pick and crowbar and hand ax, they were tearing up floor boards now, and had already demolished a considerable section of one wall in a corner near the fireplace. One man, down on his knees, was prying up stones from the hearth.

"There's six of 'em altogether, and maybe more hanging around," said Yarbo. "There's only two of you and me—"

"Better go back with your little friend Pepper," said Torrance.

"Why, damn you!" growled Yarbo. "Me, I can handle that crowd alone and single handed. I was just going to say—"

"Sh! What do they think they're doing in there? What are they looking for?"

Sam Pepper could have told him, nailing the fact on the head; and Sam

would have been in an ecstasy of interest to mark whether they found it or not. When this country had been filled years before with old free-lance miners, when King Cannon had come up here and looked around and made him this place, he had grubstaked many a man, he had been a friend to nearly all of them—and a lot of gold, both raw and minted, had passed through his hands. Sam Pepper would have explained, "Why he kept a lot of gold, King Cannon did, and he put it somewhere, didn't he? Here in this house, wasn't it? And it's never been found in all these years. Somehow, Steve Bordereau's got a hunch at last that he can find it."

But Sam Pepper, missing all this, wasn't on hand to explain, and Bill Yarbo didn't know. He relieved himself of a ponderous, thick-shouldered shrug.

"After all," he suggested, "we come up here to gather Bordereau in, didn't we? Me, for a long while, I've wanted to see that Bull dehorned. Now while he's busy, no matter what he's looking for—"

"The door'll be locked," said Torrance. "If we start anything through the window, they'll scatter six ways, douse the glim and have us guessing. Let's slip around back and see if we can get in.

"Fair enough," agreed Yarbo, and they started to withdraw. Just then however they were riveted in their tracks by a mighty uproar exploding in the room on which they had only now turned their backs. There was an excited yell in a high tenor voice, that of Joe Tortillas; there was a triumphant, bellowing shout that came from an exultant Steve Bordereau. And then a half dozen men were shouting like schoolboys.

Torrance and Yarbo whirled and ran back and peered in again. They saw what the excitement was all about. Joe Tortillas was the man who had been ripping up boards near the fireplace; he had come upon a small wooden box, pretty well rotted away, and from it dumped on the floor several rusted old tobacco cans—and thus proved that in old rumors there could be a lot of truth. What gushed forth was gold, some of it dust and knobby nuggets, some in minted coins.

"Looks like a million dollars!" gasped Bill Yarbo. And, oh, Sam Pepper, where were you then!

"Looks like Bordereau'd got it for keeps," snapped Jim Torrance, "unless—Come ahead, Bill! Now's our chance! At the back door. They won't be thinking of anything but that King Cannon gold."

He leaped down from the porch and ran, breaking through a deep snow drift at the corner of the house, and after him like a lumbering plow horse came Lying Bill Yarbo.

They found the back door locked. They tried a window; it, too, was fastened. They hunted further, hoping to enter without any splintering of wood or crash of glass. It was Yarbo who found a narrow door in a corner and got it open. He was aquiver from stem to stern—just as Sam Pepper shook through icy fear, so did Yarbo tremble with rage. He muttered in his throat:

"Damn him, Jim! That belongs to Sally by rights. It might get her in the clear again. And if Bordereau thinks for a split second—"

AGAIN a stone-cold Jim Torrance gave him a soft, "Sh!" to bring him back to some degree of caution. It would be like Bill Yarbo to go bounding in like a roaring lion.

"We ought to get the drop on them, Bill, but watch your step. Walk light and have your gun ready."

They entered directly into what had once been a large kitchen, the sort of place where you'd expect to have the ox roasted whole, the sort of kitchen a man like King Cannon was sure to dream into being. They saw strips of light under two doors, both giving entrance to the living room where Bordereau and his exultant followers were. Jim Torrance jerked his thumb toward one of these doors, then pointed to the other, and Bill Yarbo nodded; they'd burst in simultaneously from two points of vantage upon an unexpecting seven loot-excited men.

Torrance stepped softly, tiptoeing, toward one of the doors. Bill Yarbo went his lumbering way like an old bear toward the other. They had enough light to guide them and to see each other by, due to the two glass panels set over the two doors. Torrance began a slow opening of the door to which he had stepped, drawing it inward toward himself. Bill Yarbo turned a knob, had trouble because of a warped jamb, gave an impatient tug, found that his door opened the other way, shoved at it and—

Then of a sudden, as he remarked later, on regaining consciousness, it seemed like all hell busted loose. Certainly these three things happened simultaneously: the door flew open with a crack and a bang of a heavy panel striking against a wall; the toe of Bill Yarbo's boot caught on the threshold and Bill plunged headlong, sprawling on all fours into the living room —and from somewhere outside and nearby there came the rapid fire explosions of gunfire.

If every energy had been bent toward giving Bordereau full warning that an attack was bearing down on him, the thing couldn't have been better done.

As Bordereau knew his instant of consternation, so did both Torrance and Bill Yarbo; not one of them had the least certainty of what those shots outside meant.

But Sam Pepper knew!

Sam Pepper kept twisting his head this way and that like a little owl sitting on a post; he wanted to watch for happenings at the old house, and at the same time in desperate apprehension he kept watching the trail along which they had ridden. When all of a sudden he saw two men bulking big as they rode toward him his heart pounded, fluttered, threatened to stop for good and all, and the bones within him seemed to melt. He had been scared many a time in his life but never like this! He knew these oncomers for what they were: killers who'd make no more of Sam Pepper than a cat would make of a mouse at breakfast time.

HE wanted to scurry along to the house where Torrance and Yarbo were, but couldn't move. He saw the two men closer; there was enough light reflected from the white expanse to show him their bulky forms and, even more clearly, the horses they rode. They were Barty Evans and Butch Vorich, as sure as he was born, and if there were two more merciless brutes within a hundred miles of Sundown, he didn't know them. He began to wilt and slide down out of his saddle. As he slid he reached automatically for his belt gun just as it is said that a man will grasp at a straw.

Sam Pepper wore an old Colt forty-four that hadn't been fired for years; he wasn't even dead sure that it was loaded! It was a wonder that the thing could still shoot. Scared stiff and rigid as he was, still there were certain uncontrollable, spasmodic jerkings of his spare frame. A voice yelled at him, a gun roared and spat orange yellow flame; he was sure that he felt a lock of hair cut away.

His hands, despite the cold, were sweaty. That old gun of his got itself into his grip, he never quite knew how. A slippery finger slipped on the trigger. And, a wonder again, the bullet went on its way

as from a fresh cartridge. Finally, a thing that cannot altogether be explained, an act of fate if you like—just one of those things—that wild bullet took a man, none other than Barty Evans, square between the small crafty eyes.

And Sam's slippery finger kept on slipping.

His gun, blazing away as of its own accord, emptied itself—and a howl of pain shrilled through the air as the man riding neck and neck with Barty Evans pitched headlong from his saddle into the snow and lay there moaning and writhing and trying to get up and falling back and lying where he fell, a black formless blot on the white of the snow.

The gun slid out of Sam Pepper's hand. Sam himself balanced drunkenly as though he too had been shot, then melted from the saddle and slowly settled down into a snow bank. He didn't faint exactly, but for a few moments didn't quite know what it was all about or where he was or why. He felt sick.

He was only vaguely conscious of other shots being fired within the house, of wild yells and scurryings. He heard more clearly a man shouting, and recognized Steve Bordereau's voice: "Get the hell out of here! There's a mob after us!" He heard a roar from Bill Yarbo, a roar cut short off; he heard pistol shots until the world seemed to rock with them; he heard Steve Bordereau shout again, "The gold, dammit! Get the gold, Joe! Let's get the hell out of here!"

And here came men rushing toward him on horseback, a hundred men he would have sworn, though there were but half a dozen of them in all. He cowered deeper in the snow and watched them race past; he saw Barty Evans' body trampled, saw stricken Butch Vorich try to wriggle out of the way, screaming, and saw him, too, trampled, then lying a still black spot emphasizing the whiteness around him. They were gone, gone with a rush as they had come. And Sam Pepper, feeling more dead than alive, was alone.

After a while he picked himself up and slunk into deeper shadows. His brain began functioning again in its own peculiar way. He began wondering just what had happened there at the house—what about Jim Torrance? And Bill Yarbo? After Yarbo's shout there hadn't been a sound from them.

So once again Sam Pepper was torn two ways. He wanted to scramble up on his horse and get out of here on the dead run, get out and stay out for good. Also he did want with all his heart and soul to know what had happened at the house.

He began inching back into the trail.

XI

THREE men lay sprawled in the house from which Bordereau had fled so precipitately, all three looking to be dead. In fact one of them was beyond ever stirring again; that one chanced to be Turkey-trot Smith, shot close under the heart.

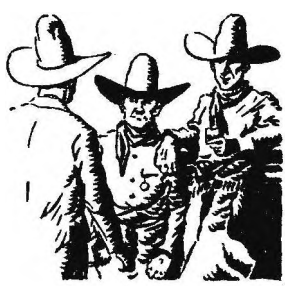
When, after no little reconnoitering, after many hesitancies and withdrawals, little Sam Pepper at last came inching into the room still lighted by three or four candle-ends and also by a flickering light which came from an adjoining room, he saw Bill Yarbo lying on his face across a threshold, his gun near his lax hand, and saw Jim Torrance lying half in and half out of another door, as still as the already dead Turkey-trot Smith. Sam Pepper thought in agony, "Oh, my God, they're both dead—and me, me, I'm alone up here!"

That flickering light from the next room impressed itself on him. He went tiptoeing to make out what it was, who was there. It was a lively young fire just getting well under way. Bordereau, as he ran out, had thrown a burning candle onto a heap of rubbish in a corner, meaning to let the house burn down behind him and thus to leave no definite knowledge to the

nosey ones whose bodies, burnt to cinders, lay on the living room floor, nor when and how they had expired. Sam Pepper, just in time, began stamping out the flames; he ran to the kitchen, found two buckets of water, doused the fire with them and so put it out. Then, slack-jawed in awe, he came back gingerly to the scene of the indoor battle.

Two minutes later he and his kind fate were crowning him hero. His emotions were like those of a young conquering monarch going to his coronal, or like those of a young girl being crowned Queen of the May. Most definitely little Sam Pepper was "Aces."

And he had his audience. For Jim Torrance reared up and took stock of things, and presently Bill Yarbo rolled over and groaned and made it emphatic that he too was still alive. Both men had been shot. Torrance once and Yarbo twice, yet neither was in any grave danger. Sam Pepper saw that immediately. Lying Bill, falling, had struck his head against the door jamb and was for some few moments out cold. Torrance, taking a bullet grooving along his skull, had been within a hair's breath of reaching the end of his earthly trail, yet would be as good as new in a few hours. He had lost blood, he had suffered shock, but otherwise he was unimpaired.



Both men, pulling themselves up into a sitting position, groped for their guns, then looked in a dazed and questioning way at Sam Pepper. Bill Yarbo, as soon as he was able to speak, began to curse the little man. That was because, most of all he knew that it was his own awkward blundering that had precipitated disaster, and the words were sweet on his tongue that strove to put all blame on Sam Pepper. Bill Yarbo said:

"Here me and Jim Torrance has been fighting, doing men's work, and you—you little run-away rat! If you'd stuck with us, if you'd done your part— Go get out of my sight! You make me sick."

"Here's a dead man," said Sam Pepper. "It's old Turkey-trot. He's been shot square through the heart, looks like. Must of shot himself, huh?"

"Why, damn you!" roared Bill Yarbo in weak thunder. "It was me that plugged him—else it was Jim. It was me, that's who. And you! Sticking your head in a snow bank!"

Sam Pepper inflated himself.

"If you two boys," he told them pompously, "had did your parts as well as I done mine, you wouldn't be laying here now for me to have to tend to. I guarded the trail, like I promised. When two fellers come storming in, Barty Evans and Butch Vorich they was, why I stopped 'em!"

"You stopped 'em? Oh, my eye!" groaned Yarbo. "You—"

"Sure," said Sam Pepper vainglorioously. "I kilt 'em. Both of 'em. They're laying out there in the trail; you can go see for yourself."

"Of all the liars I ever knew!" growled Bill Yarbo in disgust.

He managed to get to his feet and then would have toppled over in a dead faint if Sam Pepper hadn't run to him and helped ease the big bulky body down onto a bench before the fireplace. Jim Torrance looked at Pepper strangely; he had heard those shots outside and had wondered about them. He too pulled himself up, retrieved his fallen gun, and went staggering across the room and out through the front door. He went weaving along the porch, lurching down the steps, stumbling along the trail beaten through the snow by

several running horses, and came presently to the spot where Sam Pepper had experienced his great adventure. There, black blots in the pure white of the snow, lay two men. It was as Sam Pepper had said, and Jim Torrance, still swaying slightly though the clear cold outside night air was beginning to steady him, swore softly under his breath.

He stood there a while, leaning against a pine, breathing deep, getting his head clear and his unwilling muscles under control. Then he went on a few steps, just to make assurance doubly sure about Bordereau's departure. The trampled snow told the story; Bordereau and those with him had ridden on their spurs, going somewhere else.

It was Sam Pepper who stabled the horses in a wreck of a shed behind the house, and who brought their packs in and spread blankets before the fireplace and made a roaring fire of splintered boards that cluttered up the place. And it was Sam who made a sort of broth out of scraps from their provision stock, bacon mostly with beans mashed up in the concoction; and it was Sam who, despite his patient's curses, did the major job of binding up Lying Bill Yarbo's wounds. Yarbo hadn't said much until then; he had looked his questions at Jim Torrance and had said a bleak:

"Well? He was lying as usual, I suppose?"

TORRANCE leaned against the chimney and stared a long while at Sam Pepper, then shifted a penetrating gaze to Yarbo.

"It's the way Sam says, Bill," he said. "He shot the two men, one square between the eyes, the other close to the throat. Damn straight shooting, if you ask me, with what little light there was. I found his gun in the trail."

He tossed it to Sam.

"Looks like, after he'd emptied it, he'd thrown it in somebody's face. If he'd had another gun, likely he'd have got Bordereau and the whole crowd."

Sam Pepper blushed. Bill Yarbo began turning red; he had swallowed some unwanted pills in his life but never one harder to get down than this.

"What was happening in here, while I was heading the others off?" asked Sam, brisk again. He looked all about him wonderingly.

Torrance told him. Wider and wider did Pepper's eyes open.

"With all the noise outside," Torrance concluded, "Bordereau thought there was a posse bearing down on him. I guess he thought he'd done for Yarbo and me anyhow; he was burning down the house to make sure. And he got away with Sally Dawn's gold, enough of it, from the looks, to put her up on easy street again."

"Gosh, I'm a sick turkey," muttered Yarbo. "Bring me a bed and let me die in peace. After what's happened tonight—" His roaming eyes rested for an instant on Sam's perky face; then he shut them tight. "After what's just happened," he said faintly, "me, I'd ruther be dead anyhow."

They holed up there at the old King Cannon mountain house, and were grateful for its shelter. Sam Pepper was nurse, kitchen hand and general roustabout; he went down to Pocket Valley for more provisions and for odds and ends, he kept the fires burning, he ministered to Lying Bill Yarbo when that bull of a man was delirious and threatened to tear the house down. Torrance came and helped when Bill was at his worst, and gave Pepper a hand with his labors. The two of them at times talked, Sam doing most of the speculating, as they wondered whether Bordereau and his men were clean gone for good, King Cannon's gold along with him.

From Pocket Valley they sent a man secretly. Andy Stock's helper, to carry word to Mrs. Sam, who would pass it along to Sally Dawn, that all was well and

that they would be showing up before very long.

The women were to keep their mouths shut if possible; if Steve Bordereau liked to consider both Torrance and Yarbo wiped out of the picture, let him.

"He tried to play dead on us," said Jim Torrance. "If we sort of do the same for him, maybe he won't hurry out of the country. Maybe we can meet up with him again."

"How much in gold do you suppose there was? asked Sam, on edge. "A thousand? Ten thousand? Maybe a hundred thousand?"

It was Torrance who, when he could, went out and scooped shallow graves for Turkey-trot Smith and the two men Sam Pepper had brought to the end of their trails; Sam wouldn't go near them. Torrance got the job done of a windy afternoon with a storm threatening; it did snow that night but by morning cleared and a glorious blue sky hung over them. The sunlight, warm and golden, fell across Bill Yarbo's bed and heartened him.

"Hell's bells," he said, "I'll be up and around tomorrow sure." Then he glared at Sam who just then was departing in his chipper fashion toward the kitchen. "That is," he said confidentially to Torrance, but loud enough to make sure that Sam heard him, "I would if I was fed right instead of being shoveled out the stingy messes that lying little lizard feeds me."

"I'VE been thinking about things," said Torrance.

The three had made themselves as comfortable in the big living room as circumstances permitted. There was a genial fire going on the hearth, windows had been blanketed, some of the splintered floorboards replaced. Bill Yarbo lay in a corner on the bed they had made down for him, Sam Pepper squatted on the wreck of an old chair and Torrance had humped over on the bench at the side of the fireplace.

"Me, too, I been thinking!" spoke up Sam. "Gosh, if I only knew—"

"There are some things we do know," said Torrance. "Steve Bordereau came here by night, went out in the dark and hasn't come poking back; it's clear enough he's still playing dead and doesn't want it generally known that he was ever up this way. We know, too, that he's got quite a gang with him, and that seems sort of funny when you first think of it, since he is playing dead; and men do talk. Another thing is this—those two men that Sam stopped out in the trail were coming straight here; they were Bordereau men. It's a ten to one bet Murdo sent 'em racing with word and warning for Bordereau, and—"

"Sure," said Sam, and rubbed his hands, "That's why I kilt the son-a-guns!"

Bill Yarbo, who had given no sign of life, groaned. Torrance ignored both the little man's boastfulness and the big man's pain at having to swallow it.

"And so," Torrance continued. "even yet there's a chance Bordereau is pretty much in the dark about what's happened around Sundown while he was up here. He's not apt to know about his grave being opened and about the stir that made at the Stag Horn."

"That's likely, Jim," agreed Sam. And could not help adding, "Good thing I did stop them two messengers of Murdo's."

"What I'm getting at is this," said Torrance, frowning into the fire and speaking to himself as much as to the others, "what is Bordereau up to now? And why those several men with him? He's got King Cannon's gold, and it looked like a sizeable pot. Is he running out with it, skipping the country while the going is good?"

"No, he ain't," said Sam, and sounded cock-sure. "For one thing, you said you thought you nicked him last night before they downed you; well, that's two pretty

fresh wounds he's carting around. Another thing is like you say, he's got all those hard hombres along with him. It means that he plans, still playing dead and so playing safe, to do a bit more hell-raising before he drifts and, when he goes, to go with all his pockets full. He's been down in Mexico before; well, likely he's headed back there when he's made things too hot to hold him up here. Likely he'll buy him half the damn country and set himself up like a king. That's the sort Steve Bordereau is. One thing about him, Jim, he don't shoot nickels."

Torrance nodded.

"That's sort of the way I've been figuring it, Sam," he said. "But there's this, when he does find out about Doc Taylor being found in his grave, what then? It's going to look to most folks like Bordereau had a hand in that, huh? And I gather that Doc Taylor was pretty well liked. Bordereau might do some lively stepping out of here if a lot of the doc's friends started looking for him."

YES, there were a good many things to think about and in the silence which shut down, broken only by the faint crackle of the fire and a dull, rhythmic thumping of a board loose somewhere and flapping in the night wind, they were thoughtful and uncertain. Presently Sam, who could never be silent for long, started to say something, but he hadn't got out the first half dozen words before he leaped to his feet, his eyes goggling, and scurried into a shadowy corner of the chimney behind Torrance's bench.

"Oh, my gosh!" he gasped. "What's that!"

Bill Yarbo strove to rear up on an elbow in order to glare at him. He was in a good bit of pain and his voice was thick and faint, yet he managed to mutter scathingly:

"The brave little fighter and man-killer is scared out of his britches by the wind blowing! Of all the—"

"Shut up!" commanded Torrance in a whisper. "There is something—"

All Sam's terrors which had left him in peace for a few hours while he had gloated over his heroism of last night,

came back to clutch him by the throat so that he could scarcely get the whispered words out:

"It's s-somebody trying to break in! Somebody at the back door—t-trying to get in through the k-kitchen—"

Jim Torrance heard it too now and knew that Sam was right. He rose and, gun in hand, stepped softly toward the kitchen door.

XII

WHOEVER it was trying to get in at the rear door suddenly desisted; Sam Pepper had gone to infinite pains to make sure that all doors were barred, all windows fastened. There was a brief silence while Torrance cocked an ear against the slightest sound. Then he heard quiet voices, though he could not make out the words and after that there came a sharp rapping.

"Well?" demanded Torrance then. "Who's there?"

A voice answered quickly. "That you, Torrance?" And then another voice spoke up, giving him a start, saying eagerly, "Oh, Jim! Let us in!"

Sally Dawn's voice! And she should be safely out of all this, many a mile

away. He unbarred the door and jerked it open, and Sally Dawn hurried in, and with her came a young fellow, lean and lanky, whom Torrance didn't recognize at first but presently in a better light remembered as Dave Drennen, that upstanding young rancher who was neighbor and friend of the Cannons and, if the look in his eye meant anything, a pretty warm admirer of Sally Dawn.

"Jim!" she exclaimed. "Oh. I'm so glad! You're all right then?"

"Anyone else with you two?" he asked. And when she said, "No, just Dave and me," he shut and barred the door and led the way toward the other room. On his way he demanded, and didn't sound in the least glad about things as she had done, "What in thunder brings you here?"

"We got the message that Sam sent; that you and Bill Yarbo had been hurt. And did you think for one minute that I wouldn't come to try to help?"

"Why should you?" he asked curtly.

"After all you had done for me—did you think—"

"Here's company, boys," said Torrance.

Sam had already popped out of his corner and came hurrying, the most relieved looking man imaginable, and Bill Yarbo, also looking glad though his face was drawn with pain, again made his attempt to come up on his elbow.

"Howdy, Sally! Howdy!" cried Sam. And then, "Howdy, Dave! Say, this is great!"

Bill Yarbo muttered something. Sally Dawn, standing in the middle of the room, her hair wind-blown, her cheeks bright with the nip of the night air, her eyes shining, looked them all over. Longest of all did she study Jim Torrance; she saw that his dark lean face looked haggard; she saw that his eyes looked hard between their narrowed lids; but she saw too that he was not as badly hurt as she had feared. Then she hurried to Bill Yarbo and went down on her knees beside him.

"Poor old Bill," she said gently. "I'm here to doctor you, Bill."

"For which thank God!" said Bill Yarbo fervently. "Sam Pepper's been trying his damnedest to kill me."

SHE laughed at him and patted his hand and then held it tightly in her two. Bill Yarbo settled back with a long sigh. Torrance turned to Dave Drennen.

"Well, what's it all about?" he asked bluntly. "What are you two doing up here? What did you let this girl come for?

Drennen grinned.

"You try to stop her when she makes up her mind about anything she's got her heart set on. Try it sometime, Torrance."

"There's no sense she should go sticking her nose into any more danger than she has to."

"I'm safer right here than I'd be anywhere around Sundown," said Sally Dawn, and sounded triumphant.

"You are not," said Torrance angrily. "Steve Bordereau—"

"We know where Steve Bordereau is at this minute, Dave and I!" she said exultantly, and by way of telling Mr. Jim Torrance what she thought of him for the sort of welcome he had given her, she wrinkled up her nose and put out the tip of her tongue at him. "Don't we, Dave?" She fairly drenched young Drennen with a smile; let Jim Torrance take stock of that too.

"What's all this?" cried Sam Pepper, electrified. "What do you know about Bordereau? How do you know where he is? And does he know—"

"Let's have it," said Torrance.

"And," said Sally Dawn, still exultant and meaning to let Mr. Jim Torrance learn that she knew a thing or two that might interest him, "Steve Bordereau and the men with him have a lot of gold—some looking like it had just been dug out of the ground, some in what looked like

a lot of twenty dollar pieces! And I hope they get to quarreling over it—"

"Why, Sally Dawn!" yipped Sam Pepper. "That's your gold, every ounce of it! They—"

"What!" cried Sally Dawn, her eyes seeming to grow as big and round and bright as any of those twenty dollar gold pieces.

"We're not getting ahead very fast with anything," grunted Torrance. "Seems as though the more there is to be explained, the more words get poured out and the less gets said. Suppose, young lady, that you or Dave Drennen here tells us what you know about Bordereau and where he is?"

She drew a deep breath and pulled off her hat and pushed the tumbled hair back from her face. Then between them she and Drennen got their story told.

Immediately on getting word of a part of what had happened up here, of both Torrance and Yarbo being wounded, she had insisted on coming to do her part; if they were hurt it was in her quarrel, wasn't it? Drennen had done all that any mere man could to deter her, and that was nothing at all, so he had come along. They had taken the longer but more open way coming up through the Flats. It grew dark when they were several miles south of Pocket Valley. About a mile from the old abandoned mine road they had glimpsed a light through the trees; Dave Drennen knew the ranch with its clutter of tumble-down buildings and corrals—

"Turkey-trot Smith's place, I'll bet a hat!" put in Sam Pepper, and slapped his bony thigh. "It would be just the place—"

"We didn't see Turkey-trot, though," said Drennen.

"You wouldn't!" said Sam. "Jim shot him, and thereby saved Bill Yarbo's life!"

"Liar!" shouted Bill Yarbo, weak but not too weak to refute Sam's libel. "Me, I shot him and—"

"Dave told me about the place," Sally Dawn hurried on, "and how Turkey-trot was suspected of hiding stolen stock there, and how he and Steve Bordereau had been as thick as thieves—and we stopped and looked at the light and got to wondering. And just then we heard somebody coming up the trail behind us, riding hard, and we ducked into the timber and watched for him to go by. Only he didn't go by! He was coming up from Sundown-way the same as we were; at a dead run he swung into the side trail and went straight on to Turkey-trot's ranch. And we followed him!"

TORRANCE withdrew his eyes from her to glance accusingly at young Drennen. Drennen heaved up his shoulders.

"Me, I couldn't stop her," he muttered. "And anyhow, the way things worked out, it was all right."

The man whom they followed at a respectful distance, themselves making a cautious arc through the timber, proved to be a certain fox-faced, narrow-eyed youth whom Torrance remembered, a man named Brill, and he went straight to Bordereau. It seemed that Murdo had sent out two men the day before to warn Bordereau that trouble was afoot, to tell him of the discovery in the Sundown graveyard and all the rest of that night's events. When no report had come back to Murdo, he had sent Brill out, and Brill, taking the old road through the Flats, had seen the light at Turkey-trot Smith's and judged he'd get the the latest word of Bordereau there.

He had scarcely called out at the house and swung down and got himself admitted when Sally Dawn and Dave Drennen, their own horses hidden among the trees behind the barn, crept up to the rear of the house. They could peek through a crack in a warped old shutter, could see quite clearly what was going on inside and could even catch a few words.

"And we saw the gold," said Sally Dawn. "It was in a heap on a table. I

think Steve Bordereau was keeping nearly all of it for himself, but doling a little bit out to the others. What did Sam mean by saying it belonged to me?"

They told her and she said thoughtfully, "Daddy used to keep a good bit of gold on hand; he lost a lot in a bank that failed once, and after that he wouldn't have anything to do with banks. But we always thought he kept it down at home, on the ranch. And so now Steve Bordereau has that, too! Oh!"

"You say you heard part of what they were saying tonight?" Torrance prompted her.

"Yes. That was just after Pete Brill burst in on them. He was telling them that Murdo had sent him; he told them about you and me coming back to Sundown and how you knew he was alive and how you brought the body of Doc Taylor back to the Stag Horn and accused either him or Murdo or both of the murder. Steve Bordereau was limping up and down—he seemed to have been hurt in the thigh or side—and I never saw a man look so furious! He began yelling your name, Jim. And he seemed to blame me, too; he swore he'd get everything I had on earth and—" She shuddered—"and that he'd get me, too."

"And then?" asked Torrance coldly.

"That was about all we got to hear, wasn't it, Dave? The men were all excited and stirring about and one of them started toward a door and we ran back to our horses and hurried on here."

Torrance who had been leaning against the chimney moved toward the kitchen.

"Come ahead, Drennen," he said. "Let's take care of your horses."

"We brought some grain for them," said Sally Dawn, "and for your horses too. And we brought some food and some bandages and a bottle of whisky—"

TORRANCE kept on going and Dave Drennen followed him out. A few minutes later Drennen returned bringing the things Sally Dawn had mentioned. She was already busy with Bill Yarbo; she gave him a big shot of whiskey and in return he gave her such a look of gratitude as one doesn't see often. Drennen then went out again to lend further help to Torrance with the stock.

"He pretends his hurt don't amount to anything," he said from the door, "but it sort of looks to me he's riding on his nerve. He oughtn't to be out in the cold."

"Make him hurry back in, Dave," pleaded Sally Dawn.

But when again the door opened it was to admit Drennen again, returning alone.

"Torrance says to tell you, Sally, you better get back to your own home soon's you can, and you better stay there, being as after this you'll be safer near Sundown than anywhere else. And he says you get some friends of yours, men like Sam and Bill and me, about half a dozen good men, he says, to stick close night and day. And he says put 'em all on your payroll and you can pay 'em out of that gold when you get it back, and if you can't, he'll pay 'em himself. And he says—"

She sprang to her feet, exclaiming "Dave Drennen; What are you talking about? Why doesn't Jim——"

"He's gone," said Drennen. "Gone hell-for-leather!"

"Gone! Where?"

"How do I know? He didn't say. He just went."

"Why didn't you stop him?" she wailed.

"There you go," muttered Drennen. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "Torrance says why didn't I stop you—you say why didn't I stop him! You two

just try stopping each other, once, will you?"

BECAUSE the night was clear with frosty, glittering stars and because there were patches of snow where the side road turned off, Jim Torrance was enabled to hit upon the trampled trail of many horses leading through the woods to the Turkey-trot Smith place. Otherwise he must have passed it since there was no light in the house to guide him.

He rode, as Sally Dawn and young Drennen had ridden, in a wide arc through the timber and to a place behind the old barn. Like them still, he went forward on foot, but he did his first bit of reconnoitering at the barn itself; it was dead still, with never the sound of a stamping horse. He moved on to the house and stood listening; the silence remained unbroken save for the faint rustle of wind through the tree tops.

He went up the back steps and found the door open. After that he knew that already Steve Bordereau, perhaps because a new slant at things afforded by the news brought by Murdo's messenger, had led his men elsewhere. Still to be dead sure he stepped in through the open door. Again, after he had waited a long minute and heard never a sound, he moved forward; he didn't immeditely strike a match as he thought, "if any of them are here, the dark's all in my favor; they won't dare indulge in any wild shooting and there are no friends of mine here to stop a bullet!"

At last, however, he did strike a match; he had been on the verge of retreating without doing so but knew he'd never be quite satisfied that way. As the match flared up his first thought was, "Not a man here." And then he saw something, and whipped his gun over and thought, "There's one of 'em, sleeping on the floor."

The man's sleep was one that nothing on earth could ever break. Torrance stooped over him; he lay on his back, his arms outflung, his eyes glittering ceilingward in the flare of the match. Torrance didn't know the man by name but remembered his face well enough, one of Bordereau's followers, a burly, beetle-browed, heavy-jawed fellow who looked stubborn and sullen even in death. He had been shot through the head.

Torrance's match burnt out and he did not strike another. When he left the room he at least closed the door behind him, a thing that Bordereau hadn't troubled to do. He didn't worry himself greatly trying to figure out why this man had been killed. Bordereau's work no doubt, since Bordereau was undisputed leader over his wolf pack. Maybe Sally Dawn had been right when she sensed the likelihood of a quarrel over the division of King Cannon's gold; this man had the look of one who would speak up for himself. And if Bordereau had shot him in cold blood—well, those others who still clung to him would be apt to watch their steps.

IN THE saddle again he rode slowly, trying to pick up the trail of the riders who had so recently departed. He found it with little difficulty. They had cut straight back into the old road, then had turned south. That meant back down toward the Flats, toward Sundown.

But within three or four miles all tracks faded out because down here there had been little snow which had melted already, and there were many rocky ridges and slopes on which it would be hard to find tracks even by day. Bordereau might have ridden straight on, hammering out the miles to Sundown or to some hide-out near town, or just as conceivably could have turned aside somewhere along the way.

Jim Torrance didn't waste time looking for signs which he had such scant hope of finding, but pressed on toward his own place which he reached at that bright mo-

ment when all along the crests of the ridges creating the broken line of the eastern horizon, gleaming strips of red and gold were being spread as for a carpet for the advent of the new day. As the tip of a red sun came up he was rapping at Sam Pepper's door. Mrs. Sam, already up and dressed, came bustling to open for him.

"You," she exclaimed. "But—"

A couple of men, two of the party, who had officiated with him at the graveyard, both staunch friends of the Peppers as well as of Sally Dawn, pushed back chairs in an adjoining room and came to the door, as eager as Mrs. Sam. Torrance got a delectable whiff of breakfast, bacon and coffee floating out their fragrances on the sweet morning air.

After breaking off with a "But—," suspended in mid-air, Mrs. Sam invited warmly, "But come in, Mr. Torrance. Breakfast is ready and you can tell us over a cup of coffee. I'll bet you haven't had one yet!"

"Thank you, ma'am," said Jim Torrance.

Over the table he brought them the latest news. They heard him out in utter silence, faces tense. At the end, he said:

"Me, I've got a little of my own business to tend to. It would be a good idea if several of the boys went straight up to where Sam and Bill and Sally Dawn and Drennen are, just to be on hand. We've had one storm, we might get another and it would be tough on them, the way they are, if they got snowbound. I don't think you can drag Bill Yarbo out inside a week. I'll see you later."

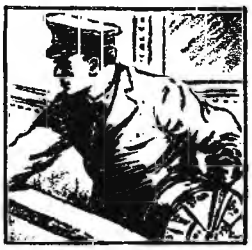
He went back to his own place and attended to his stock.

A couple of hours later the two men with Mrs. Sam insisting on going along, left for King Cannon's old mountain home. When they arrived about the first thing Sally Dawn said was. "Where's Jim Torrance?"

They didn't know. They had stopped at his house; they found a man there he had sent out from Sundown to care for the place. Mrs. Sam just shook her head and said, "Gone."

(*Part III in the next* SHORT STORIES)

A Hero Is Born



By B. E. COOK

Author of "Fight and Fight Alone," "The Strained Interlude," etc.

MIKE HALPIN seemed to shrink, that afternoon when the word came down to him. The *Nestleton* was barely tied to the wharf, the engine room telegraph still echoed its final good-by, the end of the trip. All the way up from the Gulf he had fought a running fight with a cranky boiler; it was time to rest.

But Mike Halpin was not through, his troubles had only started. For he knew all too well why the call had come so promptly; his younger son was in a jam. Another jam. Not big Tim, he'd never given Mike a worry. Out of school and into dungarees, that had been Tim. Today he was an oiler aboard the *Castleton* and studying for his Third Assistant's papers. Good boy, Tim.

But this Peter!

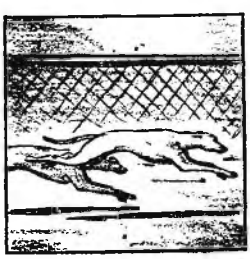
Second Assistant Engineer Halpin plodded all the way up from the stokehold entrance, up through the *Nestleton's* high vaulted engine room. For twenty-two years he had descended and climbed engine room stairways. For twenty-two years he had seen other men climb the iron flights from oiler to Third, to Second, and on up to chief engineer. Up the ladder to top rating, he had helped the present chief of the *Nestleton;* he had been oiler with Port Engineer Corson, no less. Mike was proud of the job he had done, proud of his record as Third Assistant and Second. He had made staunch friends in twenty-two years, had Mike Halpin.

He stepped out into the passageway wiping his grimy hands on a wad of waste, peering aft, then forward in the dim light, feeling the blast of cooler air on his short, slight figure drenched in sweat.

He saw a shadow out on the deck beyond the forward entrance to the passageway. It was long, it was smart and stylish looking, it reached up the side of the bunker hatch, clear-cut. That would be Peter and Mike scowled as he realized he'd be dealing with his troublesome son close to the chief's open porthole. Nevertheless he went on out—to confront a fretful young man of twenty-one, a wild-eyed, impatient, self-willed son. And Peter lost no time.

"Where the hell 'd they find you?" he demanded. "I've been cooking here for half an hour, watching gold braid go by eying me."

His bitterness over the contrast between officers in gold braid and his father in dungarees was too obvious. It was a bid for the usual battle of words. And, since Mike choked back those justifiable



Mike Was a Good Engineer, but One Heluva Father Was the Opinion

words, Peter snapped out boldly, "I gotta have money. I gotta have thirty-five bucks. Right away." He licked his slack young lips and stared furtively up the wharf as though the devil himself, up there, were giving him so many minutes and no more to produce the cash. Peter certainly was in a jam.

Mike surveyed his son's nobby haberdashery, his hands that refused to work as big Tim worked. But Mike's gaze was constantly drawn back to the newspaper in the coat pocket, folded with the dogtrack news handy on the outside. "Money, dogtrack, whippet races, Peter," thought Mike, and——

"I tell you I gotta have thirty-five bucks," Peter repeated in another hurried glance up the wharf.

Mike Halpin flushed under his coating of grease and sweat. Again he managed to swallow the wrath that impertinence had roused, and the chagrin to think he had ever started giving his earnings too liberally until now the kid was demanding his hard-earned money. Living on him, betting his money on dogs!

"Listen, pop, I gota hurry. I got fleeced by coupla guys, see? If I show up without the boodle—all right, a-a-all right, gimme the sermon. But they gota watch on me, they're clocking me. Come on, how do you draw your dough on this tub?"

MIKE scarcely heard, he was floundering. He had helped other men's sons, had quelled fights among them down there below; but this was his own son and Peter had him buffaloed.

"Peter," said he from the depth of his ruminations, "I don't owe your dogtrack cronies a cent. I don't like their breed. I don't fancy your loafing. You're wasting my money and your time!"

Peter's face screwed taut to the unexpected rebuff. Fierce fires blazed in his eyes. "Don't like hell!" he exploded. "I'm of age, lemme live my own life."

"Why in hell don't you stay to a job? You don't like ships, you say, so I got you a job in our company's office up-street. And another job, and anoth—I've landed you one job after another and you've jacked them all. I worked people I've known for years, just to give you work. But you don't want to work—"

Peter put on an impudent, mimicking sneer to finish the "sermon": "'But there's Tim. He's been a fine boy, he's a real man. He's going up. He'll be an engineer.' Yah, a dirty, greasy engineer in a dirty engine room in a dirty ship!"

So much "dirty" griped Mike Halpin. "Kid, I rate the best Second Assistant in this company, bar none. I've made a clean record and made me friends to boot."

"I've heard that gag a million times," Peter snapped back impatiently, "and after all those twenty-two years you rave about, where's it got you? Twenty-two years and you're still—look at yourself! I'd rather play the dogs and catch hell losing—"

"You'll go to the dogs the way you're heading. You think you're a regular guy, a big racetrack sport, don't you? You've got a fresh comeback for everything—" But Peter wasn't half listening, it was an old line; he watched a no-account, discharged, drink-thirsty stoker go down the ship's ladder to the wharf; watched him count his cash and head for the nearest bar.

"—like him, you'll be," Mike was saying, "you'll be like that bum—in time."

Peter snorted, "Aw no, not me. Shove my nose to a white hot fire. Lean on a scoop? Not me! That guy's a half-wit, I got all my wits. Easy money—"

"*My* money!" Mike shouted it, he lost his temper completely.

And Peter matched his ire. He shook his fist to yell back, "All right, your money. But you've rubbed it in all you're going to. I'm clearing out, see? All you've got for me is sermons, you talk a good—"

"But, Peter," in a quick change from wrath to appeal. "Peter, I've already overdrawn for you. Every time we dock here, you—you're bleeding me."

Peter headed for the ladder with finality. Mike, however, could not turn the kid away like that, not empty-handed. He followed the kid, caught at his arm and gave in. "I'll touch up the skipper for another advance. You wait here, I'll go for'd, he's in his cabin, he's got money."

A queer smile stole over Peter's face. He inspected his sleeve to see whether Mike had got grease on it. Then he glanced up the wharf and smiled; he'd pay those guys, then he'd be dead broke all over again. Within the hour, damn 'em!

But Mike was a long time forward. He had the kid on tenter hooks. The delay shook Peter's confidence. Presently he was moving toward the forward house himself, walking carefully, picking his way to avoid unnecessary contact with the dirty ship.

HE FOUND the captain's cabin at the starboard end of the cross alley above. He tiptoed to the door ajar and heard, "——have overdrawn to beat hell, Mike."

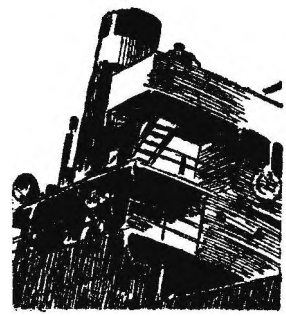
"Yes, I know. But, Cap'n, the kid depends on me, he's got to eat—and this time there's some sorta hellions waiting for him and his money. He daresn't go ashore without the money."

Captain Hudner's voice boomed, "And you tell me he's twenty-one? Playing around with people that are bleeding your hard-earned money out of him? Mike, you may be one splendid engineer but you're a helluva father. Put that lad to work!"

"I—I've tried that and failed. Aw, it's no use, Cap'n, I've got to have—"

"Sorry, Mike. I haven't got the money. Captain Hudner spoke with extraordinary fervor because he had caught a glimpse of Peter outside the door. He had measured the kid and had seen something more than Mike's over-fond eyes could recognize in his wastrel son.

"Peter," the captain shouted, "come in here." And as soon as Peter was in-



side he went on. "I understand you're the one wants Mike's money."

Peter set his lips in a stubborn line. The captain noted it and went on. "I've got no money for you, mister. But you can't go up the wharf without money. Right?"

Peter nodded slightly in a mildly bored way; this guy had a sermon, too, it seemed. "Sure. Those mugs'd beat hell outa me," he admitted.

"All right," boomed the skipper, "I need an ordinary sailor. You're it."

"I won't work, not on this dirty, lousy boat! I tell you—"

"Wait!" Mike couldn't allow such disrespect for the skipper. He turned to Captain Hudner and pleaded as he never would have pleaded for himslf. "Cap'n, just let me have this one more advance, this kid won't make a sailor; he'd be more bother than the work he'd do. Why, he hates ships and—and——"

Captain Hudner raised a huge, arresting hand. "Mike, go back aft. I'll attend to this myself."

Mike went. Slump-shouldered and beaten, he went. Mike Halpin had been shamed by his own son.

Sea captains have a way about them. They seldom mince words. They expect to carry off a situation and they nearly always succeed at it. Captain Hudner

gave the kid plenty of time to think, to come down to earth. Out of the tail of his eye, he watched the mental changes reveal themselves in Peter Halpin's face, he watched until he knew that the truculence had subsided. He then decided that he had been right from the start; Mike Halpin did not know his own son. This was a young man, but he was being handled as a child. A spoiled child, at that. There was good stuff, good sound manhood here, waiting only for somebody to bring it to the fore. "And I'm the somebody, by the looks of things," he murmured.

But to the kid he said, "If you go ashore with money, you'll be broke again before night. Is that right?"

"Yes," Peter admitted without emotion.

"If you don't have money, by the jumpin' Judas, you don't dare go ashore. Right?"

"I—yes."

"You can't have the money, so you've got to stay aboard us. That's plain. We don't carry passengers and you're of age, so you can be hired to work for the money you want. Now here's the ship's articles—"

"I got no clothes to work in."

"We'll scare up some dungarees and all, are you signing on or shall we turn you over to your pals up the wharf?"

There was no more to say. Captain Hudner laid a pen on the articles and considered other matters on his desk.

And Peter Halpin's name was added to the signatures of the *Nestleton's* sailors.

Without haste, without the slightest hint of triumph, the skipper finally rose to lead the way aft. In the doorway, however, he warned Peter. "You're a sailor in the deck department, you have no business with the engineering department on this ship. Keep away from your father."

"Don't worry!" Peter retorted.

That same evening a prowling stranger boarded the *Nestleton* and immediately ran afoul of the anchor watch. He was of the breed mislabeled "wise" and he demanded the way to a guy Peter Halpin. Before the watchman could make up his mind whether to hit him or run him headlong to the ladder, Captain Hudner appeared from nowhere and saved him the trouble.

MICHAEL HALPIN sat brooding on his swivel chair in the room labeled "2ND ASS'T ENGINEER." Not a muscle on his lean body moved. Mike looked old, this afternoon, after leaving Peter up forward in the skipper's hands. He looked unusually worn and glum to Chief Mayo standing outside his screen door.

Mike glanced up to his clock and discovered the chief out there. He watched the chief enter. "Anything wrong below, Chief?" he asked uneasily. "I—I had to cool off and—and think."

"Think what?" came the bluff, genial rejoinder. "Ah, Mike, these kids of ours give us plenty of worry, what?"

"I'm dam' sorry the Old Man's done this, Chief; the kid hates dirty work, he'll not earn his salt on here."

"Well, our bosun has a way about him."

"Listen, Chief, can you let me have thirty-five dollars?" It was an impulse, a fierce, desperate, last-minute attempt.

Chief Mayo took a long time to consider it; never before had Mike Halpin tried to touch him for money. Plainly, Mike was trying to free his kid from an unwelcome job. Mike had helped Mayo up the ladder to his top license, too, and Chief Mayo often had occasion to lean on him in pinches. Aye, Mike Halpin was the pinch-hitter in the *Nestleton's* after gang. But when is a favor not a favor to a misguided man?

In the end, the chief said thoughtfully, "No, Mike, I haven't got it. I'm sorry."

Mike groaned. "'Fore God, I'm sorry I asked it, Chief. I'm in one awful jam."

"I know, Mike, and nobody to blame but yourself."

Mike's eyes widened.

"You've spoiled that kid of yours," the

chief went on, "you have babied him into his twenties. You've never let him grow up. You say he doesn't take to dirty work. Mike, did you or Tim ever shy away from dirty work? Don't you do a lot of things you don't like to do, you and Tim both?"

"Yeah, but Tim and me are the same; Peter's different." Mike sat bolt upright, warming to his theme. "Y' see, Chief, Peter is a hero-worshipper. In high school he worshipped one of his teachers until it gave me the idea to put him through college. But the summer he got out of school, they opened up a dogtrack near home and he got him a job there. A clean job, understand. He was mixing with people that wear swell clothes, drive big cars, flash plenty of money and make a lot of it. Peter got the idea that the big money's made in clean jobs, see? He—why he went nuts about those smooth articles up there! Then, every time he sees me I'm all grease, wearing dungarees; and all I can give him is little dribbles of cash that look dam' small alongside what he's seeing at the track. To him I'm just a dirty laborer on a dirty ship, me and all the rest of us—except when he gets a look at you and the skipper in your dress uniforms. And that makes me an underdog in his eyes, see? His father's a man that's keeping right on doing dirty work for twenty-two years. Y' see, Chief, you don't understand the kid at all."

The chief heard him through. He let Mike get the load off his mind, it might relieve him, might do him good.

It did. Mike's eyes flashed again to the clock and his mind reverted to duty. "Say, Chief—to change the subject—we're out of those new-type plugs, the kind with the gaskets. You know. We can plug a leaky tube with that kind from the front of the boiler instead—"

"Of crawling in over a fire the length of the furnace to ram one of the old kind in at the back of the boiler, at the back tube sheet in the combustion chamber beyond the 'pork chops' bridge wall—what is this, an exam for Third's papers?" the chief laughed, ruffling Mike's hair the while in his bluff, kindly way.

"Ah, Mike," he joshed, "you're a great feller, what? But you worry too much. Too much. Y' know the Good Book says that Samuel ruled all Israel well but he couldn't manage his own sons."

"The portside number two boiler's an invalid—sa-ay, when do we go to machine-shop? We're three months overdue there and that boiler couldn't pass another inspection, I don't believe."

"Mike"—lighting his pipe—"business has piked up. Usually when we go to drydock the *Castleton* or the *Hazelton* takes over our run."

"Sure. I know."

"But they can't keep up with their own freights nowadays, let alone take on ours. You saw the *Castleton* the other night when she passed us off Hatteras?"

"Sure. Tim waved—"

"She was loaded to the guard, man. So we've got to keep going till fall and make our own repairs as they come along. So you can bet your life I'm ordering your gasketed plugs; we can't even put into a way port, we're that rushed."

"Yeah," Mike ruminated, "you'd better, Chief, for I can't see one solitary man we've got that's small enough built and got the guts—I mean the stamina—to crawl in over a fire and ram one of those old-style plugs into the right tube along the back sheet and get himself back out of the furnace alive. Those're dam' low domed, those furnaces. No, sir; not a man."

But the chief was already on his way to the door. "I'll make out the requisition for your plugs, Mike, and hand it to the skipper right away; he's going ashore."

ON HIS way forward he saw the kid. He looked tired, a good healthy tired. But he flashed a bitter glance at the chief and looked down. Peter Halpin wouldn't

have admitted his thoughts to his best friend as he sat there, knees hauled up to his chin, taking stock of life. All day he had sweated to chipping hammers and rust scrapers; all day long he had fought rust, dug chips from his eyes—and thought.

For the day had brought Peter Halpin's round of living to a grim and sudden pause. He had to think. All morning he had resented borrowed dungarees, the bosun driving him, the flying rust and paint chips. All afternoon he had dwelt upon the contrast between the neat dog-track and his present grime. All afternoon he had been sizing up other men, men doing regular work, men on regular pay, beholden to nobody for their money or how they spent it.

And now the results of the day were pounding in upon the kid's tired brain and he had flashed bitterness at the chief to hide them. For Peter Halpin had to admit to himself that he'd been a dupe. He realized what a sucker he was to entrust his puny bets to the sharks who had baited him for an easymark with oily promises, and maneuvered him into debt to them.

"Sure," he whispered, rising lamely to clean up for supper. "I oughta bet at the windows, but I bet only pin-money; I can't flash pin-money up there, somebody'd laugh."

He went below and edged past sailors in the fo'castle, getting into clean clothes, talking about money coming to them. Their money and no strings to it. He saw deep tan on rippling muscles. He was in the midst of the hooray of another day's work done.

Peter had overlooked the bosun leaning to a locker, however, until bose said, "That's the truth, Benny, a little hand of poker in the mess room's okay; we're all playing straight. But any guy that goes ashore and lays bets on them horses and dogs, he's a sucker. The birds that run them rackets never lose, and you 'nd me knows somebody's gotta lose. Get it?"

Peter Halpin did not risk a look around, but he got it whether the others did or not. And he could have grinned to think about the smart guys who had ordered him here to "nick yer ol' man for that kale, kid. Hustle up!"

And now he'd be having his own cash for his slaving aboard here—and no smart guys were going to get it!

Nevertheless, Peter was uneasy, he knew the dogged persistence of those vultures up ashore, waiting in relays for him. It was almost worth the grief here to give those rats the slip. Damn it, he was all washed up, done with them. Leeches, the lot o' them. When in their lives had they ever done an honest day's work for their money? "An honest day's work," Peter muttered to himself slowly, and he had the grace to admit that neither had he—not until today.

Relief! Peter was filled with relief when he saw the last box of cargo come aboard, the hatches sealed and the usual routine of a ship putting to sea. He could have shouted his relief when the lines were slacked off, when the gap between ship and wharf widened, when the engines took up their rhythmic drive. The engines—his dad down there in his greasy dungarees. The first genuine gratitude he had ever experienced swept over Peter Halpin; his dad and the engines under his hand were taking Peter to safety, taking him out of the reach of those guys who had the finger on him!

But Peter was no seaman. All seamen settle down to set routine quickly, they anticipate the wide ocean just outside. Instead, the kid was landbound still. He couldn't keep his eyes off the wharf now dwindling astern—and he alone saw that fellow who had run down between the sheds back there. He alone saw the fellow perch excitedly on the very stringpiece at the brink of the wharf, waving perilously, shouting his lungs out at the ship.

And Peter Halpin grinned. So those

guys had come after him the last minute, huh? He had escaped them.

DOG DAYS smothered the sea under a pea soup fog. All day long and on into the night, the *Nestleton* turned up seventy-eight r.p.m. and bleated her siren into the mists that you muffled the sound.

Mike Halpin stood under the shelf under the tallyboard. He swayed to the long, deep roll of the ship in an exceptionally heavy fog swell. His expert eyes shuttled from chalkings on the board overhead to the throttle at his hand to the fire room away beyond and below him.

Mike shifted his weight to muse. "Seventy-eight screw revolutions. Not full speed but close enough to it in this mull, and that cussed siren knocking steam indicators down with every blast, and firemen crowding number two boiler along with the others—dam' a fog! Better go below, see how things are going at the furnaces. Better have a man locate them new plugs and lay them handy."

Mike went down into the fire pit. He and a stoker hunted for the plugs the chief had requisitioned. They searched from bunker to bunker, searched in the dark space behind the ladder he had just come down. They even scoured the lathe room farther aft.

They found the old-style plugs neatly piled outside the port bunkers, but not a sign of the new ones.

Mike stood stock still. He wiped his brow and tried to believe that they had been overlooked, that he and the stoker might have—but he knew they had not. He swayed to the ladder and climbed back up in the engine room. Mike emerged, mouthing a silent prayer for number two boiler.

THAT was once Mike forgot his son in the fo'castle, forgot the kid in a mindful of boiler plugs he could not locate. His mind was so full, in fact, that he did not see the Kid's head coming up the companionway from the fo'castle. He missed the fear on Peter's face, the startled look in Peter's eyes at sight of his father making a bee line for the chief's room—in this fog!

For fog meant danger to Peter Halpin, and with reason. He had heard Big Tim's tales of near collisions, he had heard Mike match Tim's yarns. He was afraid of collisions and disaster tonight.

The whistle's blasts had kept him wide awake and scared; his watchmate abed in his clothes had doubled the scare. Now he was going outside, out of that trap of a fo'castle away down below. And he proposed to hear what his father wanted of the chief at this unearthly hour. He could listen in the foggy darkness outside the chief's forward porthole. It was always open.

He had scarcely got set, out there, when a big somebody or other suddenly breezed past him and hurried on forward.

"That's the chief!" Peter gasped.

His next thought was his dad. If the chief had gone forward, Mike— Peter stared into the light, in the chief's room, he stared and saw——

Mike Halpin sat alone in the chief's room. He had found "Firpo" Fernald, the First Assistant, awake in his room and had got the First to stand by for him awhile. Then he had come in here to report to the chief, the new plugs weren't to be found—and no fit man was to be found, either; nobody built slim enough and endowed with the stamina to go through a furnace, plug a leaky boiler tube and come out; not a man he'd want to take the risk.

Mike swayed to his feet. He walked the floor, rolling with the ship. He wondered how the kid was behaving at dirty work, now that he had been at it a few days. He had asked the kid about it the first day, out there on deck behind a chipping hammer and without goggles. The kid had turned away mouthing a curse on the man in grimy dungarees after twenty-two years in this lousy game. But was Peter sleeping tonight? Did the siren keep him awake? Did the fog make him uneasy? Or had the lad got his sea-legs under him? He couldn't yet have developed that disciplined faith that mariners put in the skipper, but—Mike's agile mind leaped to a brand new idea: Cap'n Hudner might become a sort of hero to Peter! Just what the kid needed to start him off on a new tack. And why not?

MIKE'S mind was back again to the plugs. The chief had gone forward, he'd been forward for ages, it seemed. Had the skipper forgotten to take the requisition ashore? Where in hell was the chief all this time? Where in hell could tube plugs be delivered aboard ship and not eventually land in the stockhold?

The chief found Mike pondering this when he returned.

"Mike, we're cornered," he exploded. "The skipper ordered 'em, but they weren't delivered. Strange thing, too. Dobbs & Sprague never failed us before and they promised they'd get them aboard."

"No—no plugs!" Mike swabbed his brow.

"Plugs? Yes," the chief shouted above the siren's blast, "plenty of plugs, old-style."

Mike caught his breath. He squinted down his nose and said, "Okay, Chief, say a prayer. I hope we don't have to use 'em."

Outside the porthole, Peter shrank away. That fellow who had come running down to the end of the wharf right after the ship had got away. Of course! That had been the man delivering those plugs. And Peter had thought he was one of his "smart guys" after him!

Peter shivered in a cloud of steam from the siren overhead. How much did those plugs mean here? Was there danger because he, Peter Halpin, had not reported that wild gesturing and vociferous shouting from the wharf-end?

The fog became suddenly cold upon the kid, he was shaking, the recurring blasts of the siren were deadening his reason. He was more afraid than he'd been below in the fo'castle, afraid and a bit ashamed. As soon as his father had left the chief's room, Peter skulked away to the stern and his face was set and serious.

MIKE HALPIN had no more time that night to stand under the tallyboard and look, no more time to think of his son. He entered the engine room and ran into big Firpo coming headlong.

"Number two," the First panted. "Tube gone!"

The Third came in, heard the cursed cry and went for the off watch, for firemen, oilers, all hands and the chief.

Mike and the First hurried below, met firemen running up through a cloud of steam into the engine room, escaping what they expected would have been a scalding.

"Back we go!" Mike shouted at them and he blocked the way. He turned to the First with, "Stand by up top for me, will you, Firp'? You're too bulky for this job."

The First was. He went back up to report into a speaking tube to the bridge, to cut the feed, to maintain contact with the deck crowd.

While Mike hurried below. He made sure that an oiler was isolating number two boiler. He had a coal passer couple a hose to a seacock; had firemen fetch out the old-fashioned plugs, damn 'em; had others bring the canvas, a plank, a heaving line. Oh, yes, Mike knew this job, he had been all through the ruckus too many

times in his twenty-two years. "Wheel those falls back away from yer uptakes. Gotta crawl in back!"

Suddenly Mike grunted in the steamy heat, in the ducking the coal passer accidentally gave him by turning on the hose in air instead of down into a bucket. Mike grunted a second time and it wasn't so sudden, it was long drawn out. It was serious. For he remembered now: who was he going to send into the hell of that left furnace under number two?

Mike Halpin was stalled for the moment, stalled amid the swish of the canvas going over the floor, the scrape of the plank, the hustle and sweat and steam and heat—until some one opened the door to that furnace and his eyes half closed to the white heat's brilliance.

That brought him out of the funk, awoke him all over again to the crisis. Hell, the very thing he had dreaded most was upon him, upon the chief, too, and Cap'n Hudner. Mike moved into the dark background, out of the way of scoops killing the fire, out of the way of the plank that two men were lining up to shove into that furnace. "Gangway!"

He brushed past the big tarp on its way, its wet and soggy way to the maw of that seething hole under number two. All the while he measured the size and breadth of men, the fighting spirit in them, the will to do and live. He saw them come tall and broad, saw them go short and thick of hip. Not one of them could he send into that heat-hole, not one who'd last all the way in, do the job at the back of the back tube sheet and have enough left in him to bring him out on his own. Not a man. And the preparations were going on, all hands were making ready for the ordeal. By whom?

Mike crackled his knuckles and glanced upward. He looked to the ladder, looked up that ladder and into the eyes of Chief Mayo. He was balanced and poised up there, overseeing the preparations and watching Mike for this very moment, watching for this impulsive glance upward that was part of Mike's make-up, his mannerism.

The chief's eyes bored Mike's very thoughts. Those eyes held an appeal, a mute appeal—and the light began to dawn upon Mike Halpin down there on the edge of the hullabaloo.

"Yeah—yeah," he muttered, "this is what he musta meant in his room. 'Yes,' he said, 'plenty o' plugs, old-style.' No wonder he's been looking at me so queer!"

Mike chanced to look upward again. When his eyes focussed in that haze above him, he saw a knot of sailors. And there stood his Peter, his own kid in dungarees, looking on!

But Mike couldn't see the kid's fists sweating tight in those dungaree pockets, he did not know that Peter had stood outside the chief's room, didn't know that Peter had seen the man shouting on the wharf-end.

Nor could he possibly glimpse that kid's feelings at this critical moment. But if only he could have! For, despite the crisis before the lad's greenhorn gaze, he was absorbing what big Tim must have absorbed. He was getting the first feel of his father's world, of Tim's world at sea. Big, powerful engines at his back, big boilers in front, power in steam and steel and heat.

It all swept into Peter standing up there looking down. It seemed to make the entire deck department, the steward's outfit, dependent and secondary to this world of power aft—and the dogtrack was receding, fading into the distance, a fading world of tinsel and precarious glamor.

Aye indeed. Mike's kid was growing up tonight, maturing in spite of his dad.

AND Chief Mayo was shouting orders with increasing tension. He was bossing the job, getting the planking and canvas in over the partly smothered fire—while Mike Halpin, down there, exclaimed, "Why of course!" For suddenly

he knew the job was going to be done, he knew who'd do it; hadn't he, Mike Halpin, always done the pinch-hitting? And had Mike Halpin ever once failed in a crisis aboard the *Nestleton*—or any other ship?

Mike looked himself all over carefully. He saw indeed that he was the only man for this cursed ordeal, the only one built for it, built right to inch in over that canvas covered plank for a length and a half or two and drive home the plug and—Mike set his teeth. To get back outside, that was going to be his fight; to get out before the punishment knocked him blank.

Up above stood Peter in horror-stricken incredulity. Was his father really going inside that hot furnace down there? Did these men around him up here know what they were talking about? How could any man get inside that low, small furnace front and come out of it alive? And why did it have to be—"my dad"?

Peter gripped a hairy arm at his elbow. "What the hell're they piking him for? They'll kill—"

"Somebody's gotta do it, somebody with guts and knows what to do after he gits in there. Them old plugs're hell."

Old plugs. And it was his fault, Mike's own son's fault, that the new ones had not come aboard. So Peter Halpin reasoned on the verge of yelling. For he was not large, he had long arms, small hips; but "somebody with guts that knows what to do after he gits in there." Guts, huh? Knows what to do. Sure, his dad was the best Second Assistant this company had; he'd know. And big Tim probably knew by now, he was learning—but what in God's name did he, Peter Halpin, know that was of the slightest use to himself or anybody else?

It was well that Mike's eyes did not turn the kid's way again. Somehow at this crucial moment he couldn't bring himself to match gazes with the boy who scorned his twenty-two years in this business. For he was the smallest man present, the grimiest man the lad could see down here, the least impressive looking from up above there in the stokehold entrance where Peter stood. Of course he was; there was nothing whatever to so much as hint of gold braid or trappings about Mike Halpin tonight.

Nor any thought of heroism when he parted men out of his way to the furnace. He just gaged his lean hips to the ship's roll and went to his ordeal.

"Bend your line to this ankle," he grunted. "Oiler, stand by the hose and don't douse me till you have to. Hand me the plug—and my tools are over there."

Now he was inside. He laid an ear to the canvas, opened one eye and saw a curving, corrugated dome close to his hair. It was red hot, almost white at the zenith. He hitched on. He wriggled and inched and snailed his way along until his toes were inside. Now for the stretch to the other end, up over the "pork chops," over the top of the bridge wall and down into the soot in the combustion chamber.

He coughed in a spiral of steam. He got his head to the far end of the canvas and sneezed. His head grazed the dome, hair singed, his scalp smarted, his eyes filled with tears, his nose ran.

Mike hauled up one knee cautiously, blindly; no greenhorn would have dared that, but Mike was a veteran, a license with years of renewal upon it and it was a First's license, at that. Mike Halpin with a First's papers that he had never talked about because he'd been satisfied with boosting along the climbers, making friends, holding onto the eight-to-twelve

watch he liked best; that, and becoming the accepted authority, the handy man in the pinches.

But his body was suffocating in heat, his mind was going over all these things, taking stock of himself because the suffering made him think. He had to in order to retain consciousness to go on, in order to hold his will to the job ahead of him.

And the job was all that he had anticipated. He squirmed on in over the far end of the planking—and set his feet in hot soot. It buried his feet, his ankles; half way to his knees he was roasting in soot.

But he stood to the tube sheet in that poisonous atmosphere of the combustion chamber, stood up under the crown sheet and located the tube.

He worked economically; not one motion did he waste or dare to waste. The *Nestleton* rocked him to a hot, curving wall, again she hove him to the "horse collar" and lurched him back and burned his flesh. And all the while, those seething, cooking legs!

Inhaling as little as possible, tasting the vile gases, Mike Halpin found the tube he sought and inserted the plug. Raining sweat and sniffling to the inrush of soot up his nose, he half closed his eyes and drove the thing home.

At last, he thought, but it wasn't the last of all this. Not by a long shot. The leak was plugged, but what about Mike Halpin? Could he last long enough to get back outside? Could he summon enough sheer grit and will power to back all the way through that hell the way he had come?

He set his feet to the canvas over the end of the planking, hoisted them up over the bridge wall—and saw two burned stumps where boots had been; not afire but brittle, crisp, flakey masses that had come in here as leather. His legs looked like black poles from which shreds of rag dropped, and bared sooty skin that throbbed in torture.

None the less, he managed to shove those blackened twins onto the canvas, managed somehow to get himself into position and start back along the planking.

But the line to his ankle had cooked away or untied or—he located it, a streak before his bloodshot eyes. He jerked the useless end of it free, left it in the soot, retied the frayed end to one leg and began the march back to safety.

March? It was a crawl, feet first; a slow race with death at either side, overhead, everywhere. And so close that he dared not even glimpse it on this trip back out. For his head was reeling. He saw twenty-two years go by in a lurid red, flaming hot pageant. He saw again that expectant, almost appealing look in the chief's face—or so he had interpreted it. He saw again Peter's stare at what was probably the first real crisis in his young experience. He kept seeing Peter's dungarees, they must have been loaned to him, they were too short. And had the kid really noticed his dad, identified him there in the fire room? Probably not, the light was uncertain and all hands had been in a hurry, all save Mike who had been waking up to this cursed ordeal in prospect—"Oof! My feet!"

On and on he inched toward the door. Would those awful, twin black blobs of pain never reach out into the cooler air? They had become living fires. They burned so fiercely that he had to have a look at them to see—sure! His feet were in flames!

The hose doused them. Water sprayed the canvas tarp, soaked part of it wet. Steam rose. It filled the damnable dome. It was stifling Mike at the moment when his head was at the middle, only half way out, only half way through hell!

NOW his mind kicked up. He remembered younger years, years of more stamina. He recalled years of decent living and demanded of himself the good results of twenty-two calendars of good

care, demanded the best of his will power. It was his only resort in the tight pinch he faced; only half way out and things were coming and going, his mind was indeed kicking up.

But he had to retain consciousness. He had to get out of that furnace on his own power; he had seen men take horrible burns by letting themselves be hauled out on the end of a line. They'd gone to hospital; Mike could not go to hospital, he had overdrawn his money to pay Peter for his follies. Mike absolutely had to go out on his own strength and stamina and will power. He had to go ab—so—lute—

He fainted on the canvas. His elbow lay close to his wet ribs, his head sank down, turned sidewise. He went completely limp.

Now he was back—because he was in motion. The line was jerking at him, hauling him! It roused him somewhat, but something else jolted him to full realization. It was his left arm. It had touched hot iron and sizzled. Mike opened his eyes to the shot of added pain. He kicked for slack on the line and the exertion nauseated him. Aye, the heat was conquering him after all. He was going to vomit —or faint again!

"Like hell!" he muttered thickly and spat a mouthful of saliva and bile. The ship rolled away down, his head went down with the planking, the bile hissed on the curved dome. He saw it. He caught himself before the ship's motion could quite lurch him over there where his spittle had struck.

Then he set his teeth, closed one eye and resumed his way. Coming and going, in and out of consciousness, he wriggled on. More uncertainly now, more weakly; but on, creeping on toward the door. He fought nausea, fought against the intense pain in his feet. He muttered in grunts, drank his own sweat and steamed in his own rags. Working, grunting, breathing foul fumes and steam, Mike Halpin kept going—going—going—

Without warning came a terrific shock. Somebody outside had gripped his ankles. The pain was too much for Mike in his condition. He howled. He protested. But his temper saved him from fainting again. Angry as a lynx, he kicked. With strength born of fury, he worked himself out of that furnace, took a blast from the hose in his face, and stumbled to the water bucket.

AND the thing that got Peter Halpin was the way that everything resumed the usual routine. Sailors went back to duty or to sleep, the chief to the upper engine, the stokers to reviving the fire at the left under number two boiler. What the hell ailed everybody?

Didn't they realize what his dad had done? Who among them all could have lived through that? And no to-do about it at all!

Peter was exasperated. He wanted to pound somebody on the back, to get a rise out of these dumb dolts. He wanted to cry out, "Look what that man's done for you. That's my dad. He's the toughest, nerviest man in the lot o' you! What the blooming hell?"

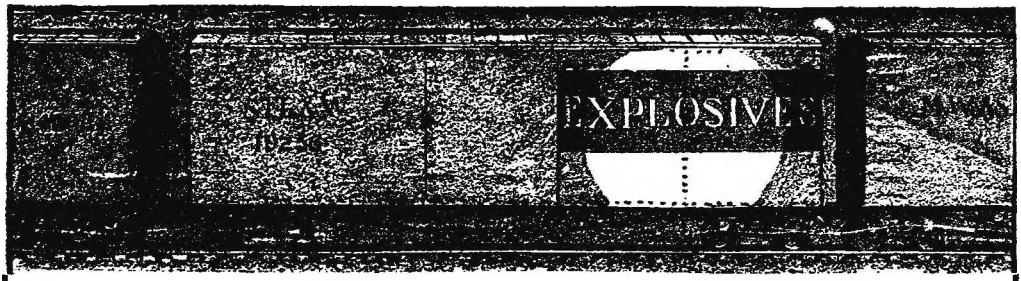
The fog made room for a night wind on the sea. The old *Nestleton* sliced her way through the departing whisps. The stars came out—the Pole Star, the "Bull's Eye," the Pleiades.

Captain Hudner noted them one by one, he also noted the solitary figure down there at the main deck rail.

And he wondered what was on that fellow's mind.

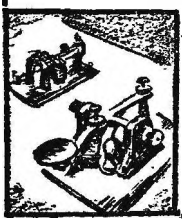
Long afterwards, Peter Halpin stood before the skipper.

"Captain Hudner," said he, "I've been thinking, sir. I don't think I'm cut out for the deck, not exactly. I came to ask you —do you s'pose, Captain, that maybe—that is, if one of those fellows aft there below should quit—s'pose you might let me have a job in the engineers' department, sir?"

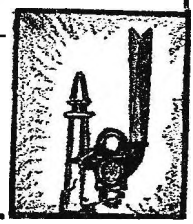


LITTLE JOE by CHARLES W. TYLER

Author of "Cassidy's Kid," "Railroad Romeo," etc.



Little Joe Got to the Point Where He Felt He Could Shoot the Works



"LITTLE JOE" hunched his bony shoulders against the wintry blasts that knifed from Canyon Pass, and pulled the collar of his threadbare coat tighter about him in a futile gesture for added warmth.

He huddled in the shadows, and speculated on ways and means of making the varnished rattler out of town. Now and then he slanted a wary eye in the direction of a trainman's lantern down the platform.

A few minutes before, a husky brakeman had pulled him from his frigid perch on the blind, with the growled admonition: "Listen, kid, if I catch you on this train again, I'll break your neck."

And Little Joe had rasped, "Gwan, ya big stiff," as he rummaged fruitlessly in the dark for a weapon. "I'll bean ya wit' a brick."

Gawd, how he hated railroad guys!

Ever since he had caught the grab irons of that fast freight in the Prison Point yards, back there in Boston, it had been an unceasing battle against shacks and railroad bulls and cold and hunger. And now, ditched on a hostile pike, he was met again by the eternal problem that belongs to all waifs of the smoky road.

Little Joe's disdainful eye canvassed the town beyond. There was a handful of sprawled buildings, huddled against the mountainside, and a few flickering lights. He looked at the train again, mindful of the warm glow from the windows of the big steel cars.

His eyes caught at the dining car. It was like a little bit of heaven, there behind those full-visioned windows. People were sitting at tables, and white-coated waiters moved back and forth.

It seemed that all of his life he had been looking through windows at good things to eat. There had been the bakery around the corner from Silver Street, back in "Southie," and Steubenhoff's delicatessen, and the guys in big white hats making flapjacks and butter cakes in the window at Childs in Newspaper Row.

A burly figure in a slouch hat was talking to the brakeman. Instinctively Little Joe recognized the fellow as a railroad dick. He huddled deeper into the shadows. These bulls out here were plenty tough. They didn't haul you before a beak for evading railroad fare—a cell and coarse food would have been more than welcome tonight—but they beat the hell out of a guy.

The door of the telegraph office opened

and the conductor came out. The quick mutter of telegraph instruments stirred something in the heart of Little Joe. They were like friendly voices. He'd been a Western Union trotter once, and he'd picked up Morse.

THE railroad cop started along the platform. He had a flashlight and was shooting its beam in questing exploration of pools of shadow.

The train was moving now; the slow roar of the exhausts of the two engines exploding savagely.

"Chee," muttered Little Joe, "if I don't con th' varnish, I'm stuck in th' sticks." He circled wide and made a run for the blind again, but he tripped and sprawled headlong.

At that moment the railroad cop's flashlight caught up with him. Before the little boy could regain his feet, the big man had collared him.

"Oh, no, you don't!" cried the officer. He shook the boy vindictively. "You ain't riding this job."

The door of the telegraph office opened, and a girl came out. She walked along the platform. She was carrying a lantern.

"What's the matter?"

"Another damn bum!" growled the big man.

Little Joe fought breathlessly, but the fingers that were twisted into his coat collar choked him into submission.

"Why, he's only a kid," the girl said.

"Yeah, and he's the kind that's looting freight cars and ganging brakemen," declared the other. "They're a no-good lot."

The girl said, "Yes; I know. I've got a kid brother, and he's somewhere out there." She made a little gesture at the blackness that lay over the rails. "I love him. Somebody loves this kid."

"Aw, no they don't," Little Joe said. "I ain't got noboddy. Me mudder's dead, an' me ol' man's down duck all th' time." He coughed, a brittle bark that racked his husk of a body.

"Where are you from?" The girl's voice was cool, soothing.

"Beantown, Miss."

"I'm from South Boston."

"You come from Southie? Chee-e!" There was a thin trace of home-hunger in the words.

"East Fourth Street—down near Farragut Road."

"Whatcha know. I lived in a dump on Silver Street."

THE girl's eyes widened a little. Silver Street! It was a dark gutter of a place, no wider than an alley, where dwelt poverty and wretchedness. It was a long step from the high Arizona mesas and the Sangre del Salvadors to Silver Street.

The girl smiled and held out her hand. "My name is Mary Donovan. What is yours?"

"Aw, th' guys call me Little Joe, 'cause I'm so scrawny." He rubbed the palm of a grimed paw on his pants leg before gingerly extending it. "Flaherty is th' rest o' th' moniker—if it makes any dif."

Mary Donovan's fingers exerted a firm, friendly pressure.

"I used to work for the Western Union back there—the old 'BY' office, and up in the 'main'."

"Didja, hones'? I uster shag f'r th' A. D. T. Geez!" Little Joe shuffled his feet and his eyes lighted.

"How did you happen to get out here, messenger boy?"

"I'm a lunger. Th' croaker that come t' see me mudder says I'm harfa stiff now, an' it's Arizona or curtons."

The girl looked at Finch, of the railroad police. He shrugged his shoulders. A bum was a bum, and these little rats were the toughest of the lot.

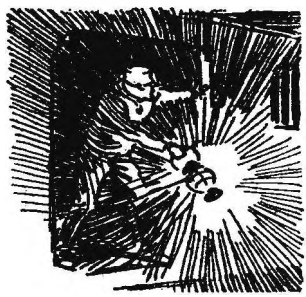
A freight crawled laboriously toward the depot. It had been standing down behind the Limited. The girl swung her lantern, and the first engine of the doubleheader cracked two blasts in acknowledgment.

The conductor swung from the steps of the leading engine. He was young, clean-cut, good looking. A soft hat, with four careless dents in its steeple crown and an upturned brim, sat his head like a jaunty crown.

He always rode into Paraje on the head end, for—if his train stopped there at all—it gave him a few precious added minutes with Mary in the telegraph office.

"Nothing on the board, so you swing us up anyway," he greeted the girl, grinning, "That's the way I like it."

"Hullo, Tom. No. 440 pulled a drawbar at Tie Siding a few minutes ago. They set the car off down at this end. If you go in the clear there for the live stock train, you'll have to back off."



"That cattle drag ain't ever going to catch us," the conductor said.

"Tom White," the girl said, "I want you to meet Joe Flaherty. He's from my old home town."

"Hullo, kid."

"I want you to see that he gets to Del Rosa," Mary went on. "Got anything to eat back there in the buggy?"

"Sure. But—say, listen. That damn trainmaster—"

"Tell them to take it easy"—indicating the panting engines with a movement of her head—"so he can catch the tail end."

Tom stared at Little Joe. The boy backed away. "Naw, I wouldn't ride wit' th' bloke."

Finch said, "The place for the young hellion is in the lockup. I'll take care of him."

"Us Irish have got to stick together," Mary said. Her eyes carried across the brief span of gloom something that made Tom's heart leap.

"All right, Mary."

The girl placed her hand on Little Joe's shoulder. "And when you get to Del Rosa, I want you to go and see Father Morriarty. He comes from Boston. Tell him that Mary Donovan sent you."

"Aw, cripe, Miss! He'll kill me. I ain't been t' Mass, or—or nuttin'—sinst me mudder died."

"Promise."

Little Joe's gaunt frame was convulsed by the racking cough again. "He—he'll try t' make a—a damn sissy outta me."

"Promise you will go and see him."

"Geez! Awright," reluctantly.

"It don't do any good—coddlin' bums," growled Finch.

"I'm only doing what I hope somebody would do for my own kid brother," the girl said.

FATHER MORRIARTY had been an Indian missionary, a chaplain in the Army, and a lay priest in the dock district. He knew all about converting savages.

A week later, Father Morriarty took Little Joe to see Godett, the roadmaster.

"How about a job for this boy on that construction job out in Canyon Pass?" the priest said.

"What can you do, kid?" asked Godett.

"I can handle me dukes—an' pound brass," declared Little Joe, swelling with importance.

"Telegraph operator, hey? Well, you don't look it. And we have plenty of birds who think they can fight. But I'll tell you, if you want to go out to Rag River as a water boy—well, that's something else."

The legend of Rag River Gorge has it that in the depths there are evil spirits, which the gods try to dislodge from time to time by throwing rocks at them.

Railroad men in the Canyon Division don't subscribe to mythical tales to any

extent, but they are agreed that Rag River is one hell of place when things begin to happen.

Ever since the first surveyor aimed a transit at those frowning crags, men have been trying to push the mountain back. They hewed a path and tacked thereon a piece of snaky steel, and then, in effect, said to the transportation end of it, "There's your damned right-of-way. God help you!"

And men pulled down their hats and spat on their horny hands, and began wheeling trains over the Sangre del Salvadors. And the best of them started acquiring gray hairs and saw-tooth dispositions.

With the demands for faster iron, construction engineers began driving smoky bores and building trestles in their efforts to take the kinks out of mountain steel at Rag River, and they were still doing it.

Little Joe sat on a tie end and stared hard at the towering peaks of the Sangre del Salvadors—and never saw them at all. The torturing pangs of homesickness tore relentlessly at the softer side of him. He had been bred to the tenements and paving stones and alleys. The blood of a street Arab was in his veins, and he longed for the old gang.

The high, clean mountain air was doing wonders for his bleeding lungs, but his heart was broken. The wind that roared down at night was a train on the elevated. Those high spires off toward Thunder Mountain were chimneys, sticking up like dirty fingers above sooty factories, and the clouds trailing over Canyon Pass were their smoke banners.

There was that terrible, smothering silence, broken only by the trains, and the distant rumble of the city that reached the ears of Little Joe alone.

Joe spent most of his leisure hours at the telegraph shack. Here, at least, were whispering tongues that breathed of life beyond the far horizons. The operator was an old Western Union man, a boomer whom booze had written off as rumdum.

He liked to talk to Little Joe of the old "main" at 109 State Street, and of the guys that hung around Maggie's eating joint. And they talked of Pie Alley and Spring Lane and Auston and Stone's and the old Howard. Geez!

Little Joe learned how to copy train orders and picked up the terse idiom of railroad Morse and all of the rest of it.

And then, one night, he climbed aboard an east-bound freight—headed home.

IT WAS in the yards at Caliente Junction, eastern terminus of the Canyon Division, that tragedy struck—struck swiftly, as it always does where there are trains and grinding wheels and treacherous footing.

A ragamuffin youngster about the age of Little Joe was running beside a west-bound train—a fast-moving freight. He lunged desperately for a grab-iron, barely caught it with one hand, as his foot missed the stirrup below the car sill.

Little Joe scampered from the shadows, where he had been waiting for an east-bound freight, and dragged the crumpled form away from the rolling wheels, but it was too late. The little vag had been mauled past all mending.

Little Joe held him in his arms. "Take it easy, kid," he soothed. "Take it easy. You're all right. That rattler was hikin' too fast for ya. Geez!"

There were shouts and dancing lanterns in answer to Joe's cry for help.

"What's ya moniker, kid?" Little Joe's voice was husky.

"M-Micky. Micky—Don'van."

"Chee, ya ain't Mary's brother, are ya? Mary, th' op at Paraje?"

Micky died in the hospital at Caliente Junction. Big-eyed, Little Joe watched the scene, there in that white corridor. Mary was crying softly in Tom White's arms.

"He was a swell kid," she sobbed. "He never wanted to be dependent on his big

sister; that was all. He thought he could take care of himself."

Tom tried to comfort her. The girl said, "You're all I have now. Don't ever let anything happen; I couldn't stand it."

"I wisht ya could kinda adopt me," Little Joe ventured, "t' sorta take his place. I—I ain't much good, but I'd try awful hard t' be like a brudder."

Mary threw her arms around Little Joe impulsively, and, to his consternation, kissed him. "That's a grand idea, Joe," she cried. And a wistful smile brightened her tears.

"I'll tell ya." Little Joe made the admission shamefacedly. "I was beatin' it back t' Southie. I was quittin'. See? That's how I happened t' be down in th' yards. Guess I'm yella all right—but, geez, I was homesick."

"It was God's will," the girl said softly. "If you hadn't been out there last night, Micky might have died alone, and without anyone knowing who he was."

Tom White patted Joe on the shoulder. "Our job is to look out for Mary, kid."

"That's th' surest t'ing ya know," Little Joe said. "You an' me, guy—from now on."

IT WAS spring on the high desert. Melting snow in the Sangre del Salvadors started the steep mountainsides slobbering murky rivulets. The sullen voice of Rag River grew in volume until it was like the dull roar of a distant train.

Men were driving hard toward completion of the new alignment. The big construction camp was a place of intense activity. Little Joe was a heater boy with a riveting gang—a gaunt, smooched, cigarette-smoking young terrier, who carried himself with a swagger and knew all of the biggest and best cuss words in three languages—U. S., Mexican and South Boston.

Little Joe had been in a crap game in a bunk house. He stood in the doorway now, squinting into the blackness. It was cold and raw, and the night was soggy with swirling veils that were half rain, half a mist.

Somewhere a door opened, giving briefly to the murky gloom the words of a Mexican song and the melody of a guitar. A freight was double-heading up the canyon, the staccato bark of the two exhausts a little out of step. Away in the mountains to the east a whistle screamed, a thin, plaintive wail.

In the background was the dull roar of the river and the sough of the wind. As his eyes became accustomed to it, gray shapes stood forth in the gloom—the low roofs of buildings, piles of steel, of ties, of lumber, and on a spur a number of cars; flats, gondolas, box cars.

Here and there were square patches of light. The window of the telegraph office painted a faint yellow rectangle. Little Joe shivered into his collar and started toward it, drawn there as straight as a moth to a lamp.

He'd listen to the stuff going over the wires and chew the fat with Bill Lane a while before going to bed. Maybe he'd get a chance to sneak in a "73" to Mary Donovan at Paraje. Mary and Tom were going to be married next month. That was swell.

Father Morriarty would read the service in that dinky old mud church at Del Rosa. He'd be at the wedding—Little Joe Flaherty, all dressed up in his monkey clothes. At a Mass, it would be, with the Mexicans an' Indians an' white people looking on.

Little Joe pushed open the door of the telegraph office, rain glistening on his face. The place was empty. Bill had probably gone over to the store; he hadn't been gone long. Rag River was not a night office. The operator was a day man, though inasmuch as the place served as living quarters, he was available usually in an emergency.

The train wire sounder was banging noisily, as the despatcher transmitted

a "31" order for some station over the Pass. A Western Union circuit was rapping out instructions for a wire test.

The two big engines on the freight roared past, shaking the telegraph office with the cannonading of their squat stacks.

Little Joe glanced at the battered alarm clock on the shelf. It was five minutes past ten.

The extra was on No. 3's time right now. It would head in at the siding east of the camp. That had been the Limited he'd heard whistling a couple of minutes ago.

Little Joe lighted a cigarette and dropped into the chair at the telegraph table. When that wire chief got through fussing around on the commercial wire, he'd call Mary and say "Hullo!"

Wagon Tire reported Extra 2642 east. But Wagon Tire did not then report that Death, King Rider of all roads, was on the train. That came later.

Mexican track laborer stood in the shadows of the building that housed the section hands and their families, there across the main iron and a hundred yards east of the depot. The soft light from an uncurtained window brushed the sides of the fast-moving cars.

Suddenly the swarthy figure came erect. *"Por Dios!"* he cried. And he stared after a swaying car loaded with bridge steel. It was a low-sided gondola, and one of the massive pieces had wrenched loose at the forward end of the car and was projecting past the side of the train.

The staring Mexican saw something else. Three cars back, a box car bore a red placard. *Explosivos!* Explosives!

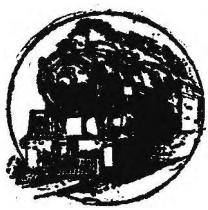
He screamed a torrent of Mexican at the caboose, as it rushed past him, but his shouts were lost in the tumult of trucks and pounding wheels. He started toward the depot on the dead run.

A few minutes later there exploded on the train wire the echoed warning of the breathless laborer who had lurched through the door of the telegraph office at Wagon Tire.

Jimmy Troutman jerked forward in his chair to hunch over the train sheet, every muscle tense, his ear snatching the report from the hot wire.

> Steel girder broken loose on Extra 2642. Dangerous overhang left side train. Explosives behind it.

Jimmy Troutman cried, "Merciful God, it would happen on a night like this, when a man can't see two car-length's through that soup out there!"



Clean and sharp his mind's eye drew a picture of the meet under Blue Slide. Extra 2642 in the siding. No. 3 batting down around the curve, with her headlights, dim and sickly in the murk, rubbing a blob of yellow on the outer bank of the arc.

No. 3 was a little late. Donaldson would be hitting her. The fireman would be on the deck with his scoop, firing up for the run through the sag. That ungodly hunk of steel would get them without warning. There'd be a terrible crash, with cars breaking up and fire being spilled—and that damned car of powder flung around in the middle of it all.

If that thing ever let go all of Blue Slide would be down on top of them—a mountain of shale, softening up in the rain.

No. 3 was by Carson's and Charley would be skidding her down for that meet at Rag River with her heels smoking. Rag River! The poorest bet in the world. Bill Lane would either be plastered and out like an empty lantern, or in a poker game around the camp somewhere.

There was no office at the Blue Slide

passing track. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. If there was only an engine at Wagon Tire—any kind of an engine—but there wasn't. The nearest thing was that double-header at San Marcos—over twenty miles away. Not a chance.

A section car at Wagon Tire. Not even a motor car—an old hand-car. A crew could pump hearts out, and they'd never make the climb to Blue Slide in time for anything but to help pick up the pieces.

Rag River, then. That was the key. One bet Rag River didn't answer. Two bets that No. 3 was by Rag River telegraph office.

JIMMY TROUTMAN, looking like a ghost in the little tent of light, grabbed for the key before Wagon Tire was half through the message, so fast had the despatcher's brain been working, but before he could box the switch open, Rag River was verifying his worst fears.

Rag River, supposedly sleeping in the black fastness of the sodden gorge, had picked the warning off the wire while it was still dripping fire. Rag River—and Little Joe.

"3 by!" cracked Rag River.

And the whole Canyon Division drew a deep breath and climbed onto the edge of their chairs for a front-row seat in a show that promised to leave them cold. Every sand-blasted desert telegraph office with a light; every mountain station in the Sangre del Salvadors. Mary Donovan, at Paraje. Men in the grimed terminals at Del Rosa and Caliente Junction, where even the voices of the wires were hushed. They were all listening, and most of them were praying.

No. 3 was by Rag River. And there wasn't even a speeder to chase her. The double-header was already chawing out of the passing track, up east of the camp, headed for the hump. Not a chance in a million for help there.

Jimmy Troutman rapped the Rag River call letters, but did not immediately receive an answer. If, however, at the moment the wire could have carried a reproduction of the sounds that broke above the incessant mutter of the river, the despatcher would have found the voice of Little Joe loudly overshadowing everything else.

Troutman got it from Bill Lane later, Troutman and the rest of the Canyon Division. They had to draw their own picture of what was really happening, and no matter to what extent their imagination ran away with it, they were still missing a lot, because there are limits governing the average human mind.

Little Joe came out of the old box car that served as telegraph office at Rag River like a slithering shadow. The red marker lights and ornate rear of No. 3 were not twenty feet from him, but they were going away. He had snatched up a lantern. He swung it back and forth, and screamed at the top of his lungs.

The rear brakeman had gone inside but a moment before. He heard nothing. It seemed a hopeless cause, but Little Joe never hesitated an instant. His eyes hit at the bulking shapes of a dozen freight cars in a spur just across the main iron from him. He lunged back into the telegraph office and snatched at a small loop of wire on a nail inside of the door. There was a switch key on it.

BILL LANE appeared, running, as Little Joe bolted breathlessly from the door.

"In God's name, Joe—what's up?"

"There's a drag at Blue Slide wit' a hunka steel stickin' over!" cried Little Joe. "They're haulin' powder. We gotta stop th' varnish shot."

"What th' hell—we can't do nothing!"

"Get Mike Igo, th' powder monkey." Little Joe's voice was shrill, like a woman's. He was moving away, sloshing through the water between the tracks at a trot. "He's in a crap game in Bunk House No. 1. Tell 'im t' tie up two-three

sticks of blastin' stuff, wit' caps an' fuses. I seen 'im fixin' some t'night. *Quick!"*

The switch light changed from green to red. Little Joe's lantern danced toward the d-rail; then moved toward the first car in the spur, a gondola loaded with sand.

All of his life, Little Joe had matched wits with adversity, from the rival gang on the corner to the last bitter struggle for a crust of bread. Out of the dregs of life, he had learned one thing. No matter how tough the going got—a guy never quit.

The Greek on the corner; the cop on the beat; the bloke at the gate—there was always one more alley to cross. Little Joe yanked at the coupling and kicked away the chock that had been set under the wheels. He scrambled up and tried the brake-wheel, but it had been set up with a club and he couldn't budge it.

He was down in a flash. There was a pickhandle beside the door of the telegraph shack. There were voices now, and a couple of lanterns bobbing toward the track. He saw the powder man with a little bundle wrapped in newspapers.

"Gi'me 'at stuff!" He snatched it from the hands of the dumbfounded hard rock man, and was gone. He climbed the iron rungs, and a moment later was jerking at the brake-wheel with the pick handle. The dog released.

The grade at that point was better than one and a half percent. Little Joe stuck out his foot and pushed against the end of the next car. The knuckles of the coupling opened slowly—like the unclasping of hands of friends reluctant to part.

"Hey, what do you think you're going to do?" a voice yelled. "You crazy young fool!"

"Catch th' varnish east of the switch," shouted Little Joe.

"You can't never brake 'er down," was the hoarse protestation. "It's like fallin' off a roof. That gon will be rollin' eighty —if it stays on the iron."

The big gondola was moving a little faster, moving with a kind of deceptive, lumbering stealth. Other figures were there in the rain now, yelling, gesticulating. Little Joe was screaming down at them.

"There's a lotta folks on that high iron job—guys an' skirts an' ol' codgers, an' somebody's gotta look out for 'em. Can't ya bohunks get it t'rough ya damn t'ick heads? 'N' there's me pal, Tommy White. He's th' con on that freight. I heard 'em sendin' his name on a train order. He's down under Blue Slide too."

BILL LANE was framed in the door of the telegraph office. His mouth was open; his jaw hung down. Behind him the telegraph instruments racketed hysterically. The shrill voice of Little Joe reached the operator.

"Tell Mary—Mary Donovan, over to Paraje—tell 'er everyt'ings Jake wit' th' world."

The gondola swayed across the switch, and suddenly it was not there any more.

Tight rain veils slapped at Little Joe with increasing viciousness, as he stood there, spindle-legged on the top of the carload of sand. The last eerie lights of Rag River winked out, washed away by the drenching mists.

The gondola had come to life. It was not a drifting, sluggish giant any more. It was an outraged, charging beast, gone berserk with fury. It rocked and teetered viciously. It cradled now, with gentle undulations, and now it reeled drunkenly off a tangent and lunged onto a curve.

In point of time, it seemed that No. 3 had too great a start. There was, however, that ten-mile-an-hour slow board at Muddy Bend. And again the passenger train would have to come to a stop east of the switch at Blue Slide, before proceeding on past the siding that held Extra 2642.

Little Joe cuddled the wrapped powder under his coat, and picked up the lantern

and fuses, which he had caught up back there in the telegraph office, and made his way to the forward end of the car. The pale rays of the lantern shone weakly on his face. His lips were tight; his eyes pinched into slits against the rain and rushing air. The battered visor of his cap was pulled low.

He seemed more like a scarecrow than a human being, a scarecrow, storm-whipped and forgotten on an autumn hill.

Little Joe knew this eight-mile piece of track along the Rag, knew every foot of it. He had thought that he could orient himself without difficulty, but suddenly he was confronted by the realization that every landmark had been wiped out. He was cast adrift in the bewildering blackness on a thunderbolt.

The Limited ought to be slowing for the east switch about the time that the gondola hit the first trestle on the reverse curve up around the bend from Blue Slide.

Little Joe huddled down in a corner, working feverishly. He protected the sticks of powder as best he could with his body. He unwrapped the coils of fuses and cut them off close to the detonating caps—murderously close.

Then he dug down to dry sand and buried them, with the fuses sticking up. These he covered with his cap.

Next he lighted the railroad fuses, and the flare of it painted the top of the car a smoky pink.

Little Joe crouched above his improvised mine—tense, trembling. Listening. His ears strained for every sound, for by sound alone could he determine his position in those flashing miles.

CHARLEY DONALDSON pinched the long train of Pullmans to a grinding stop on the curve east of Blue Slide. The rear brakeman came and stood on the back platform with his lanterns. The engineman looked expectantly across the cab. The curve broke away sharply to the left, and he could not see the siding.

The fireman said: "All right, Charley. They're down in there."

Donaldson released the brakes. He slipped his watch from the pocket in the bib of his overalls and held it to a gauge light. They were nearly ten minutes late. He'd have to hit 'em hard from here in. He reached for the throttle and opened the sander valves.

There was a roar from the stack. The slack began to rattle out, as the drawbars champed and groaned.

THE gondola's speed was frightful. It slanted down the grade, laved in a smoky blur, like an earth-bound meteor.

Suddenly the sound that whipped from under the wheels changed. There was a quick vibrant note. It was the second trestle east of Blue Slide.

Little Joe stiffened. His fingers tightened around the burning flare. The gondola was one mile from that east switch. A second short steel span hummed under the wildly racing car.

Little Joe's white lips moved. "Please God," he muttered. "I'm shootin' th' works. It's all up t' you now—"

He uncovered the fuses, held his sputtering red torch against them until they hissed with sudden viciousness. Then he stumbled back across the sand toward the far end of the rocking car, his arms thrown up in front of his face.

The rear brakeman on No. 3 thought he saw something. It was a vague, pinkish light, waving weirdly in the low-hanging mists. He stared at it, and suddenly, not a half a mile away, there was a violent explosion, tearing open the blackness, and the echoing impact of the concussion.

The brakeman reached for the signal cord, but already Charley Donaldson had shut off and applied the brakes.

The crew on Extra 2642 heard it, and thought it was the boiler of the locomotive on No. 3. Tom White dropped from the caboose and started ahead at a trot. And then he was swearing aloud, for the

rays of his lantern had revealed a great piece of steel, out-thrust from a car of his train, fair in the path of the Limited.

He saw the headlight and swung his lantern, but No. 3 had already stopped, and trainmen were climbing from gangway and open vestibules. They started back.

The flagman said, "There was something coming behind us. I got a glimpse of something red and then heard the explosion."

Men hurried up the track.

In the despatcher's office, Jimmy Troutman was watching the clock and drumming on the train-sheet with his fingers. His face was white, haggard.

At Paraje, Mary Donovan, regardless of all coded rules and regulations to the contrary, had left the key and gone out under the desert stars where she could be alone for a little with the God of the universe.

She knelt down on a little sanded hill, with the wet scent of sage in her nostrils and prayed, her rosary clutched tight in two white hands clasped at her bosom.

A train-load of passengers were riding into the valley of the shadow tonight—*now!* Her lover was there, standing face to face with death, under Blue Slide. And Little Joe—Little Joe Flaherty, the valiant, hurling himself into the breech, like a true warrior.

The kid from Southie, riding a big gondola ballasted with sand down the Rag River gorge in a mad race with No. 3.

There was a lump in her throat and tears on her cheeks. His last message had been for her. Bill Lane had flashed it over the dripping wires.

"Tell Mary everything is Jake with the world."

The Canyon Division, as has been pointed out, had a seat at ringside that night. Every click of the key fired its jabs of suspense, agony, hope over the far-flung desert distances, over the high world of the Sangre del Salvadors.

Fred Richards, conductor on No. 3, flashed the message in at last. But even before that, the Canyon Division knew that the Limited was safe. The operator at Wagon Tire burned it over the wire with a triumphant:

"Here comes No. 3!" when her headlight showed, there down the rail to the east.

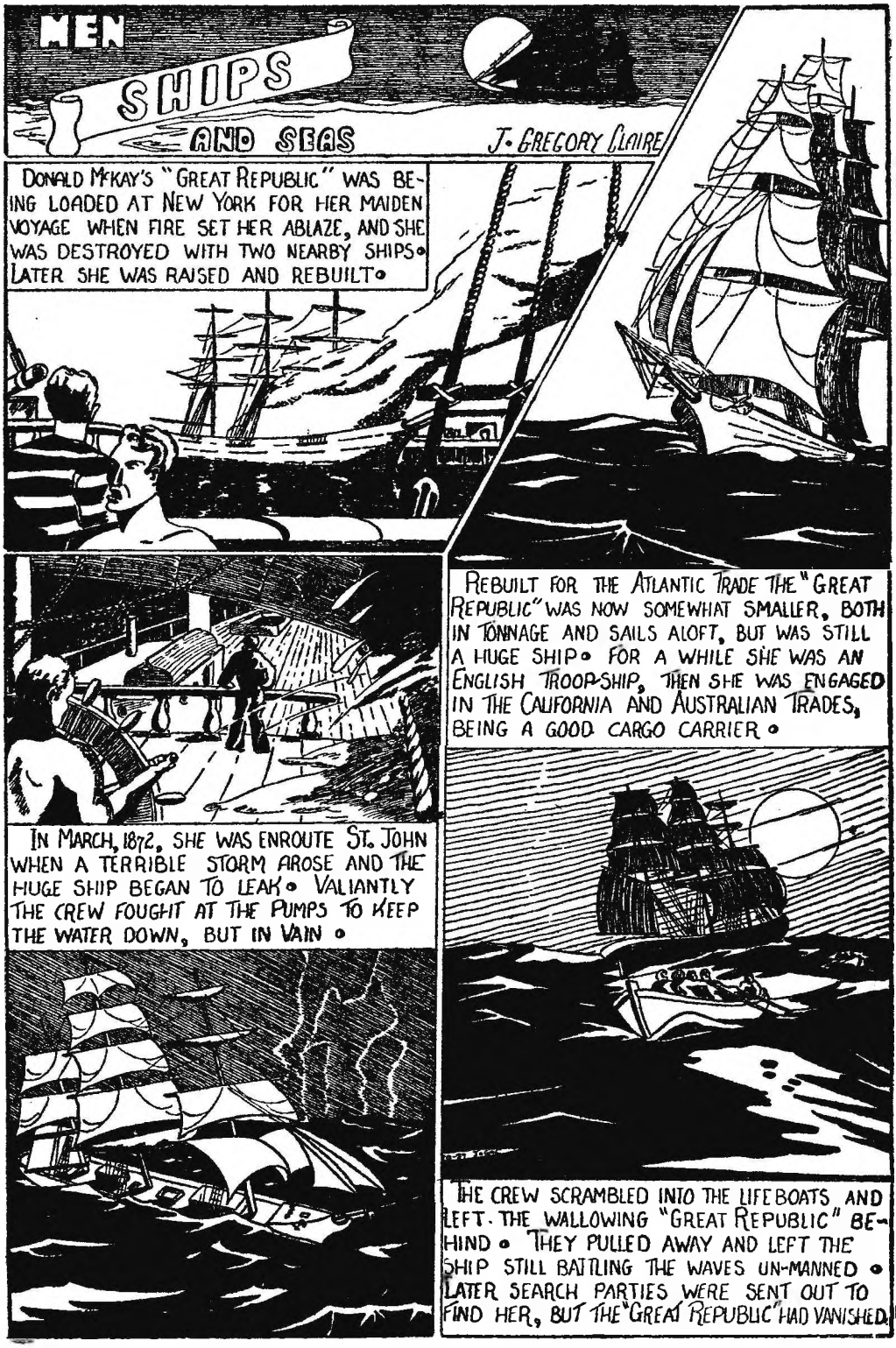
They will tell you that a lot of train order tissues got spattered, up and down the road, and that it wasn't from the rain.

Fred Richards, veteran in blue and gold, entertained some difficulty in getting the words down. But, with a husky clearing of his throat, he finally shoved the yellow message form at the operator. It read:

> Because of the heroism of one Little Joe, Train No. 3, this date, escaped what might have proved to be a frightful accident at Blue Slide. We were warned by an explosion which hurled a runaway gondola from the track. We are bringing home the body of Joseph Flaherty.
>
> (Signed) Richards, conductor.

Mary Donovan and Tom White were married by Father Morriarty in the tumbledown old mud church at Del Rosa. At a Mass, it was, with the Mexicans and the Indians and the white folks looking on.

Mary and Tom liked to think that Little Joe was there. They could almost see the impish grin of him—where the flickering candles shone the brightest.


MEN
SHIPS
AND SEAS
J. GREGORY CLAIRE
DONALD MCKAY'S "GREAT REPUBLIC" WAS BEING LOADED AT NEW YORK FOR HER MAIDEN VOYAGE WHEN FIRE SET HER ABLAZE, AND SHE WAS DESTROYED WITH TWO NEARBY SHIPS. LATER SHE WAS RAISED AND REBUILT.
REBUILT FOR THE ATLANTIC TRADE THE "GREAT REPUBLIC" WAS NOW SOMEWHAT SMALLER, BOTH IN TONNAGE AND SAILS ALOFT, BUT WAS STILL A HUGE SHIP. FOR A WHILE SHE WAS AN ENGLISH TROOP-SHIP, THEN SHE WAS ENGAGED IN THE CALIFORNIA AND AUSTRALIAN TRADES, BEING A GOOD CARGO CARRIER.
IN MARCH, 1872, SHE WAS ENROUTE ST. JOHN WHEN A TERRIBLE STORM AROSE AND THE HUGE SHIP BEGAN TO LEAK. VALIANTLY THE CREW FOUGHT AT THE PUMPS TO KEEP THE WATER DOWN, BUT IN VAIN.
THE CREW SCRAMBLED INTO THE LIFE BOATS AND LEFT THE WALLOWING "GREAT REPUBLIC" BEHIND. THEY PULLED AWAY AND LEFT THE SHIP STILL BATTLING THE WAVES UN-MANNED. LATER SEARCH PARTIES WERE SENT OUT TO FIND HER, BUT THE "GREAT REPUBLIC" HAD VANISHED.

Red Can Always Instruct Little Pardner as to What He Should Leave Alone in the Way of Sidewinders

A GOOD QUAIL GUN

By GENE VAN

Author of "The Shadow Hunter," etc.

"DO YUH see that scorpion, Little Pardner?" asked Red Harris, pointing at a scorpion which had just eluded the hoofs of the old cow pony.

"Uh-huh," grunted Little Pardner, but he was busy looking in the other direction.

Red shifted a little and looked over his right shoulder at Little Pardner who was sitting on the rump of the pony, one stubby hand grasping the rope around Red's waist which served as a belt. Little Pardner was four years old, short and stubby. He wore overalls, a blue shirt, and an old straw hat that sat on top of his blond head, held in place with a whang-leather string fastened under his chin.

"Say, I'm talkin' to you," snapped Red.

Little Pardner turned his head and looked at Red with his big blue eyes.

"Uh-huh," he nodded his head.

"Dang yuh, why don't yuh pay some attention to me! I'm tryin' to show yuh just what bugs to leave alone."

"Bad for baby?" asked Little Pardner.

"Yo're doggone right. They'll bite yuh," replied Red.

He turned back and gave the pony a boot in the ribs, sending it along while he searched the ground. Red Harris was just past fifteen, but looked younger because of his slight build. His face was bony and freckled with a top of flaming red hair.

His blue eyes roamed the landscape. He wore overalls and a gray shirt. Inside his waist band was a Bolt .45. Red always wanted to be ready in case of trouble.

Red had been an orphan until Spike Haslam, Little Pardner's father, and Sheriff of Ocotillo City, had adopted him after he had saved Little Pardner's life. Haslam's wife had died when Little Pardner was yet a baby, so Spike welcomed Red as a guardian over the baby. Right now Red was taking Little Pardner on an education tour.

It was the baby's habit to pick up any creeping thing that captured his eye; every night Red had to go through Little Pardner's pockets and empty all the bugs that had been stored in them during the day.

"Big worm," grunted Little Pardner.

"Where?" asked Red, turning to see where Little Pardner was looking. "Giddy-up," he snapped on seeing a baby sidewinder.

"That's another thing yuh got to let alone," said Red when they were away from the snake.

"Uh-huh," replied Little Pardner, a bit disappointed that they hadn't stopped.

"Are yuh gettin' tired?" asked Red.

"No. Lottsa fun," replied the baby, changing hands on Red's rope belt.

"See there," exclaimed Red, pointing to their left. "See those tarantulas?"

"Uh-huh. Big spiders," replied Little Pardner.

"Big spiders? Yeah, only don't pick 'em up. They're bad medicine."

"I like 'em."

"Maybe so, but don't pick 'em up," Red warned.

"Sure," grunted the baby.

RED was busy searching the ground and didn't see the man appear from behind a mesquite and halt the pony. When the pony stopped, Red looked up to see what was wrong. Directly in front of him stood a medium-sized Mexican, with face and body covered with partly dried blood. He was stripped to the waist. He wore a pair of battered chaps and a pair of worn-out shoes. In his left hand he carried a gun, pointed right at Red.

Without speaking a word, he pulled the trigger. The bullet hit Red, sending him sprawling into the mesquite by the trail. Little Pardner went off with Red, but he fell down into a dry wash. As Red lay on the sand, the Mexican walked over to him and looked him over, a grim smile on his lips. He stepped over, grabbed the hackamore, jumped on the pony's back, jabbed his heels into its ribs and away they went.

After the Mexican was gone, Little Pardner crawled up the side of the wash, his overalls dusty, his straw hat dangling down his back. He went over to Red.

"Red," he cried.

Red began to move a little, so Little Pardner squatted on his heels and waited to see what Red was going to do. Red opened his eyes and looked around.

"What—what happened?" he asked weakly.

"Man go bang," replied Little Pardner.

Red began to feel himself. All at once he began to laugh. He discovered that the bullet had hit the handle of his Colt, just knocking the wind out of him. He pulled out the gun and rubbed his waist a little as he sat up.

"Did he take the pony?" he asked.

"Uh-huh. He go away," replied Little Pardner, pulling his straw hat back on his head.

"Swell," grunted Red Harris. "Looks like we'll have a nice long walk home."

"Uh-huh," grunted Little Pardner, looking off in the direction of Ocotillo City.

Red got slowly to his feet and took several deep breaths. The only sore spot was where the bullet had hit the gun. He patted the Colt and then slipped it inside his waist on the left side.

"Might as well get goin'," he sighed.

"Sure," nodded Little Pardner, as they started off on their long walk home.

Every now and then, Red had to pick up Little Pardner to keep him from picking up some crawling bug. It took all of Red's strength to carry the baby and still keep on walking.

"I guess you'll never learn," he grunted, as he knocked a horned toad out of Little Pardner's hands.

THEY were a dusty looking pair when they came down the main street of Ocotillo City. Red had Little Pardner by the hand as they turned into their yard. The sweat was rolling off both their dusty faces. It took Red a long time to get Little Pardner cleaned up. He was busy changing his own clothes when he heard the youngster talking to someone. With his shirt unbuttoned, and just tying the rope around his waist, Red hurried out to the front porch.

Little Pardner was sitting on the top step talking to a tall, lanky, middle-aged man dressed in range clothes with a big star pinned on the right side of his faded purple vest. Against the porch rested an old lever action ten gauge Winchester shotgun. His tanned face broke into a smile when he saw Red. His huge mustache jerked up and down.

"What happened to you two scallywags? Little Pardner says somethin' about someone goin' bang."

"I'll say someone went bang," snorted Red, buttoning up his shirt as he sat down on the steps. "Some crazy Mexican shot at me, Geography, and for no reason

at all." Red opened his shirt and showed Geography a big black and blue spot.

"A crazy Mexican, eh?" grunted Geography Jones, Haslam's deputy. "He dang near got yuh, Red. Tell me about it."

Red went ahead and told Geography all about their encounter while Little Pardner sat there and nodded. Presently he got tired, so he slipped away while Red was too busy to watch him. Geography stroked his mustache, a twinkle in his gray eyes. When Red finished, he cleared his throat.

"Didn't have a horse, eh?"

"Nope. He was on foot. He took our pony, though."

"Well, that musta been our much sought friend, Wolf Aliso," grunted Geography.

"Who's he?" asked Red.

"An escaped convict," explained the deputy. "He got tired of prison, so he thought he'd carry out his threat. Came pretty close to doin' it, only we got word about his escape and then another notice about him killin' a Mexican a few miles south of the prison and stealin' a horse and shotgun."

"What was the threat?" interrupted Red eagerly.

"Well, it was a long time ago, Red. This here Wolf shot a Mexican in a saloon here in town and then he tried to give Spike a gun battle, only Spike shot him in the right hand, captured him and sent him up fer twenty years. He always threatened to come back and settle scores with Spike fer ruinin' his right hand. We had a reception party waitin' fer him, but he sneaked in an alley and when we shot at him he beat it out in the desert. Spike's out there now with a posse."

"Can't he use his right hand?" asked Red.

"Nope. That's the reason he used a shotgun. When we opened on him, he dropped it and went hightailin' it outa here, but we figured his horse was wounded."

"Gee," grunted Red, "I'm glad that he couldn't use his left hand very good. Maybe I'd be an angel."

"Say," snorted Geography, "are yuh still wantin' to go quail huntin'?"

"Yeah, only I need—"

"I've got one fer yuh," interrupted the deputy, getting to his feet and limping down the steps, where he picked up the shotgun and handed it to Red.

"Here's a shotgun fer yuh. Wolf Aliso left it, so I figured you might be able to use it. 'Course it ain't new, but I'm sure it'll work," grinned the deputy.

"Gee wiz, Geography," exclaimed Red, looking the gun over. "It's a dandy. Now for a quail dinner."

JUST then they heard a shout coming from behind the house. Red placed the shotgun on the porch and raced around the house. There he found Little Pardner with his two pals, Glub and Fitt, a mongrel pup and a cat. They were on each side of the baby looking at him with a queer expression on their faces while Little Pardner held a baby sidewinder in his stubby right fist and was waving it in the air. Red grabbed the sidewinder and threw it off in the brush. He yanked Little Pardner to his feet and dragged him around the house.

Geography Jones had watched the scene and was chuckling as he followed them around to the porch. Red put Little Pardner up on the porch and sat down on the step so he couldn't get down unless he passed Red.

"What a lad," grinned Geography.

"Yeah," admitted Red, rather dryly.

"Just what's the matter, Red?"

"I wish he'd learn somethin'. Why don't you try to teach him somethin', Geography?"

"He's too young yet, Red. Don't give up. You're doin' a fine job of watchin' him."

"Sometimes I get so darn mad at him, and then when he looks up at you with those blue eyes I just can't help lovin' him."

"Well, guess I'll be driftin' back to the office. Dunno when Spike and the posse'll be back. Maybe you'd better go ahead and fix supper fer you and Little Pardner. I'll grab a bite uptown."

"Okay," replied Red.

Geography Jones got up and limped up the street. He had been shot in the right leg and it still bothered him. Being unable to ride, he hadn't gone with the posse.

"You stay here on the porch, and don't leave it," warned Red, as he got to his feet and went into the house. When he saw that it was too early to start supper, he secured an old rag and put it in his hip pocket. When he came back outside, Little Pardner had moved off the porch and was on the ground at the foot of the steps. Red gave him a sharp look, picked up his shotgun and sat down on the steps.

RED slowly turned the gun over, looking expertly at it, a smile on his freckled face. At last he had a shotgun of his own. He opened it up and tested the action. Closed it and pulled the trigger. Lifted it to his shoulder and made believe that he was out hunting.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "See my gun, Little Pardner?"

"Uh-huh," replied the baby. "Red go bang?"

"Yo're doggone right I'll go bang. I'll get all the quail that live around here. We'll have plenty to eat."

"Good," said Little Pardner.

Red secured a kerosene can, and with the rag he proceeded to try and remove the accumulation of rust from the barrel and the action of the old shotgun. He had always wanted a shotgun. Quail and rabbit were plentiful, and he knew a water-hole, where ducks dropped in during the winter. Red had visions of some big feeds, as he scrubbed at the old gun.

The inside of that barrel was a problem. Opening the action he placed a piece of paper into the breech and squinted down the bore. It was as sooty as an old stove-pipe. Securing a piece of dried willow to use as a cleaning rod, he soaked a rag in kerosene, and proceeded to ram the rag into the bore. It stuck about halfway down, refused to budge any further, and to further annoy Red the rod broke off in the barrel.

But Red knew where there was a metal rod, with which to force out the obstruction. He examined the cartridges. Faint markings on the top-wads indicated that they were loaded with buckshot. Not exactly adapted to quail shooting. But Red knew that Spike Haslam would furnish the proper ammunition.

From behind the house he heard Little Pardner's voice lifted in shrill argument. He put the gun and ammunition in the house and went through the kitchen to see what was going on.

HE FOUND Little Pardner leaning against the house, holding Glub by the nape of the neck in his right hand, and in his left he was shaking a chuckwalla in front of the pup's face.

"Bad for doggy," he explained to Glub. "Bite you."

Red stood in the doorway, a smile on his face. So Little Pardner had learned something at that and now he was trying to impart his knowledge to the poor pup. Glub tried to wiggle his way loose from the baby, but he couldn't.

"You stay here!" said Little Pardner, shaking the pup.

He tossed the chuckwalla down and

watched it crawl away while Glub continued his wiggling.

"You leave 'em alone," ordered Little Pardner.

"Holdin' school?" asked Red.

"Uh-huh," replied Little Pardner, turning and looking up at Red.

"That's fine," grinned Red. "Now supposin' you let Glub go."

Little Pardner released Glub and the pup trotted away.

"Glub good doggy," said Little Pardner.

"Yeah. Where's Fitt?"

"Under house," answered the baby.

"Got away from yuh, eh?"

"Uh-huh. Fitt no like to learn."

"Are yuh gettin' hungry?" asked Red.

"Uh-huh," replied Little Pardner.

"Good, I could eat too. Come on and get cleaned up."

Little Pardner scampered up the steps where he slashed a few dippers of water into a battered wash-basin.

"You get washed up while I get it ready," said Red.

He began to warm up the things that Haslam had set on the stove. Red wasn't much of a cook. Spike always prepared the meal for them; so all Red had to do was to light the fire and heat the food. He dished up the supper, got Little Pardner fixed up and then they both went to work on the meal. They were pretty hungry after all their experiences during the day.

After supper, Red sent Little Pardner into the living room while he did the dishes.

When he finished, he took a book and sat down to read. It was eight o'clock when Red decided that it was time for Little Pardner to go to bed. The baby was across the room playing with some home-made blocks.

"Time for yuh to hit the hay," said Red.

"Uh-huh," replied Little Pardner, getting up and following Red into the bedroom. He watched Red turn down the bed and then Red helped him change into his nightgown.

"There yuh are, yuh little bug-hunter," grinned Red, as he tucked the little towhead into bed.

"Good night," said Little Pardner.

"Good night, and pleasant dreams."

Red left the room and partly closed the door. Then he went to his chair, got his book, and went into his own bedroom, leaving a lighted lamp in the living room. His room was small. There was only a bed, a crude dresser, and a home-made table in the room. Red lighted a small oil lamp by his bed, propped up the pillow and lay down to read and wait until Haslam returned.

RED was busy reading when he heard a door open and shut. He laid his book down and got to his feet, thinking it was probably Little Pardner going for a drink. He went to the door and looked out. The first thing he saw was that Little Pardner's door was still half-closed. He stepped into the room and he almost bumped into a man. For a second Red thought it was Spike, but on second look, he recognized the crazy Mexican that had shot at him out in the desert. It was Wolf Aliso.

"What do you want?" demanded Red, as the Mexican pointed his gun at Red's middle.

"Ees de sheriff in?" he asked.

"No. He's out lookin' for you," replied Red.

Wolf laughed at this remark.

"I'm goin' to keel heem."

"I bet yuh don't. He'll get you first."

"I'm too damn smart for heem," leered Wolf. Red noted that Wolf held the gun in his left hand. "I'm keel you too, so sit down," he warned.

Red sat down. He didn't trust this wild Mexican.

"I'm foolin' de sheriff and hees men," he laughed. "I'm know my horse she no good after bein' shot. I'm takin' your

pony, but she no can carry me far, so I come back 'ere. Damn smart, eh?"

Wolf Aliso was not a pleasant sight. His black hair was unkempt, the blood was still streaked over his face and upper part of his body. He glared at Red as he sat down near the table in the center of the room, his gun trained on Red.

"Where is de baby?" he asked.

"He's in bed. Don't you touch him," snapped Red, moving a little to be more comfortable.

"Don' move, or I'm shoot you," warned Wolf.

"Gosh, Wolf, I'm tryin' to get comfortable."

"I'm don' care 'bout you," he growled.

His small beady eyes wandered over the room. Across the room sitting on a shelf he spotted a bottle of liquor. Slowly he licked his lips. Red saw what he was looking at and grinned.

"Want a drink, Wolf?" he asked.

Wolf gave Red a sharp look, slowly got to his feet and edged his way over to the shelf. He kept one eye trained on Red while he managed to hold the bottle by the neck with his crippled right hand and slowly he returned to his seat, a smile of satisfaction on his dirty face.

"Wolf Aliso geets w'at he wants," he replied.

"Yeah. I see yuh got a bum right hand for tryin' to get what yuh wanted," said Red dryly.

"Madre de Dios!" he snapped. "I'm goin' to even eet up. He got me first, but I'm come back like I said. Can't fool with me, Wolf Aliso. My right hand no good any more. I'm keel heem for doin' it to me."

He opened the bottle, and took a deep drink. He then placed the bottle between his legs and wiped his mouth on his dirty arm.

"That's good stuff," said Red. "We've got a lot more of it." He hoped to get Aliso too drunk to remember what he wanted to do.

Wolf looked at Red, a grin on his face.

"Maybe I need more soon," he said.

"I'll get it for yuh," said Red, starting to get up.

"Seet still," warned Wolf, raising his gun. "I'm not so dumb as I'm lookin'."

"Say," said Red, trying to change the subject. "How long's it been since you went away from here?"

"W'at you care?" he growled.

"Oh, I was just wonderin'."

"I'm one tough guy," boasted Wolf after taking another drink. "I'm 'fraid of no one."

"I bet yuh are tough," replied Red.

"Sure," grinned Wolf, shifting nervously in the chair. *"Por Dios!"* he grunted, getting to his feet. "W'ere you get those gun?" He was pointing at Red's shotgun.

"A friend of mine gave it to me. It's the one you dropped today," said Red.

WOLF watched Red as he stepped over to the wall, picked up the gun, a grin on his dirty face. He looked around and saw some cartridges on the table. He put them in his pocket and returned to his chair. After another drink in which he emptied the bottle, he tossed it across the room. He filled the shotgun magazine and levered a cartridge into the chamber. Then he slipped his Colt inside his waist band.

"Now, I'm keel the sheriff—bimeby," he said, fingering the gun.

"Gosh!" groaned Red as he watched Aliso. "Do yuh want some more to drink?"

"Well, I'm still dry," he replied.

"I'll get it for yuh," offered Red.

"You seet still, or I'm keel you."

"Sure," grunted Red. "But I know where it is; you don't."

"Don' you worry. Wolf Aliso weel find eet."

"Aw-right, yuh dumb Mexican," Red snapped hotly.

"W'at was that?" asked Wolf, getting to his feet.

"You heard me," replied Red.

"Don't get smart, Rad Head. I'm thinkin' to myself that I'm goin' keel you too."

"Yeah, you'll be sorry yuh ever came back here," said Red, slowly getting to his feet.

"Bah! You cause me *mucho* trouble. I'm gettin' mad." Wolf got up and stepped toward Red, shotgun clenched in his hands.

Red jumped to his feet.

"Wait a minute, Wolf. Don't get so angry," he pleaded.

"Wait for w'at?"

"I haven't done anythin' to you. Why should you shoot me?"

"Yo're sheriff's boy," mused Wolf. "I'm no like heem, so I'm not likin' you." As he was talking, he moved toward Red, shotgun leveled.

"Listen!" snapped Red. "Somebody's comin'."

Wolf stopped, cocked his head to listen. He heard something, so he whirled on his heels, leveling his gun at the front door. Like a flash, Red jumped on his back, locking his arms around Wolf's neck. He managed to get his legs wrapped around Wolf's arms, forcing him to drop the shotgun.

Wolf shook himself and charged around the room, trying to loosen Red's hold, but Red hung on like a cowboy riding a bucking bronc. Panting and swearing, Wolf stopped and tried to bend over, in hope of forcing Red off his neck, but soon he found out that the boy meant to stay on. Wolf let out a snarl, backed toward the wall and with all his might, he heaved himself against it. Red's head hit the wall with a bang, causing him to let go. In a flash, Wolf shook him off, turned and knocked Red to the floor.

RED sat there, eyes a bit blurry, a trickle of blood running from the corner of his mouth, as he watched Wolf pick up the shotgun. Just then he heard a noise at the front door.

The latch was slowly lifting, as though someone was trying to open the door quietly as possible. Wolf Aliso was watching, the muzzle of the big shotgun leveled on the center of the door. Red could see the Mexican's trigger finger tighten. Red wanted to scream a warning, but only a sob came from his tortured throat.

The door was opening. Aliso breathed a curse. But it swung open, disclosing the little white-clad Little Pardner, his arms wrapped around Glub. Slowly Wolf Aliso relaxed, the muzzle lowered.

"Damn baby!" he muttered huskily.

"Little Pardner!" gasped Red. "Where you been?"

"Pardner 'fraid," replied Little Pardner. "Climb out window and find Glub."

Wolf Aliso laughed, as he backed over and latched the door. Little Pardner toddled across the room to Red.

"Fine!" applauded Aliso. "I'm keel two bird with one shot."

Red put both arms around Little Pardner, drew him close.

"Don't you hurt this baby," said Red.

"Shotgun not hurt," leered Wolf. "Damn queek die."

It was evident that Aliso meant business this time. His lips drew back in a snarl as he lifted the heavy gun.

Red heard the rattle of hoofs outside, tried to yell a warning, but realized the futility of changing Aliso's mind now. Red whirled around, with Little Pardner in his arms, his body between the baby and that murderous shotgun. A voice called sharply from outside but was drowned in the terrific blast from the shotgun.

Red's legs collapsed and he fell against the wall, but felt no pain. Little Pardner whimpered, but it was only from fright. Red heard the door crash open, the thudding of feet, the rasping of spurs. Then Spike Haslam's voice. "My God! Red—Little Pardner!"

Red turned around, still clutching Little Pardner. The room was full of men. Spike Haslam, his face gray in the lamplight, had his hands on Red's shoulders. Smoke eddied around the lamp.

"It's Wolf Aliso all right," stated a cowboy, "but yuh never could tell except by that crippled hand. That shotgun blew the whole works back into his face. Must have killed him instantly."

"Spike, he must have been layin' fer yuh," said Geography Jones.

Spike had Little Pardner in his arms. Glub peered from under an overturned chair.

"Can yuh tell us what happened, Red?" asked the sheriff.

"Well, he came here to kill you," replied Red weakly, trying to smile. "Then he decided to kill me and Little Pardner —so—"

"So you turned your back—figurin' on takin' the whole load yourself," finished Spike Haslam huskily.

"I—I wasn't sure—about that gun," faltered Red. "Yuh see, I tried to clean it, but the rag stuck—and a piece of the ramrod—and I forgot about it, until Wolf Aliso came—"

"And," said Spike Haslam, "yuh wasn't sure what would happen, if he fired it—so yuh was goin' to take it in the back—to save the Kid, eh?"

"Aw, gosh!" gasped Red, staring at the ruined shotgun which Geography was holding in his hands. "And I thought I had a quail gun."

"Quail gun?" queried Haslam. "Red, there's a reward of a thousand dollars for Wolf Aliso—dead or alive. That will buy plenty shotguns."

"Daddy!" exclaimed Little Pardner. "Bad man go bang!"

"They most always do, Son," replied the sheriff gravely.

What Might Happen Now and Again When the Wrong Man Has the Password

HOLT SAILS THE "SAN HING"

By CARL JACOBI

SINGORA looked what it was—a third rate coastal town of the Unfederated Malay States. The narrow cobblestone street was deserted to the afternoon heat, and Holt, striding up from the waterfront, felt strangely friendless and alone.

He knew of course that Singora's gambling holes-in-the-walls, undisciplined by overlord or government, would not open up till night. But even now it was the worst possible place for a man who was admittedly on the beach.

Tall, lithe-limbed, he followed the street to its ends, turned into a smaller side-alley and drew up before a faded sign:

PON MOY TRADING COMPANY
JEROME KINDAIR, AGENT

Holt knocked the ashes from his pipe and smiled grimly. He too was beginning to look what he was. His duck suit, washed thin, and his faded blue cap, clean but obviously land-stained, spoke plainly of a seaman down on his uppers. Even with the best of luck the Pon Moy Trading Company would have little if anything to offer. But it was his last chance.

He pushed through the door. Inside was half-darkness, a faint smell of camphor, and an American-made roll top desk.

Behind that desk sat a florid faced man, wearing horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Mr. Kindair?"

"That's my name."

Holt drew a long breath and plunged into his appeal.

"John Holt. Master's papers in steam," he began tersely. "Skipper of the *Rogenta.* You heard about her, I suppose. Ran into a typhoon two days out of Saigon and broke her steering gear. Limped into Pattani and found every blessed plate strained, though she was only eight years old. The insurance people had an agent in Pattani, and he condemned her. Then Old Man Jardin, of the owners, Jardin and Peigh, died in S'porte, and I was left high and dry. I'm looking for a ship."

The man behind the desk did an odd thing. He leaned back in his chair and laughed softly as though he had been expecting just such a story and as though he didn't believe a word of it.

"Can I see your watch, Mister Holt?" he said.

"My watch?" With a puzzled frown Holt hesitated, then reached in his pocket and drew forth his timepiece, an engraved Swiss repeater, which he had bought just before his last cruise. He unhooked it from its chain and handed it across.

JEROME KINDAIR took the watch, turned it over and over in his hands and studied it closely. Then he returned it and drew from a pigeon-hole of the desk, a large manila envelope.

"You'll find your instructions here," he said. "Obey them implicitly, and you'll receive your money when you reach your destination. The *San Hing* is at the wharf with a crew aboard. Talk to no one. Get going."

Bewilderment seized Holt. He gaped. "But I——"

And then, as he stood there, it happened. Behind him a step sounded, and the street door banged open. Pivoting, Holt saw a man leaning comfortably against the door frame, a revolver in one hand. Clad in dirty whites, his face was hidden by the yellowed puggree cloth that hung down from his sun helmet.

Even as Holt realized what it meant, the man fired. The trading agent crashed to the floor. The man with the gun looked at Holt, then turned and ran.

Rigid for a startled instant, Holt saw that the bullet had struck Kindair squarely between the eyes, killing him instantly. He yanked out his Browning, ripped open the door and lunged in pursuit.

Down the street he raced. Ahead the fleeing figure ran in long, leaping strides, did not look back. Holt fired twice, aiming over the runaway's head.

"Stop!" he yelled.

The man was heading for the waterfront. Two natives shambled from a doorway into his path. Like a juggernaut, he bowled into them, sent them spinning to the cobblestones. Twisting, he sent a single shot screaming past Holt and dived into the shadows between two buildings.

With slackening pace; Holt followed. But when he reached the narrow, refuse-strewn passage he found it deserted. He climbed over a fence, mounted a low hut. Twenty yards beyond the jungle began abruptly.

A man could elude a regiment there.

SLOWLY Holt returned to the street. What did it all mean? What sort of a mess had he stumbled upon? Only one fact in the swift movement of events stood out with any clarity. The agent who had been killed had first mistaken him for someone else.

The street before him was still steeped in silence. A half-dozen Malays stood in a huddled group just beyond. But there was no evidence of excitement. Pistol shots apparently were a common enough occurrence in Singora.

He halted in the glaring sunlight and took stock of the situation. These were the Unfederated States, yes, but there

must be a British official in the vicinity, and British officials had a way of being obstinate. It struck the ex-skipper forcibly that when the dead agent was found, his story, that a third man had done the killing and fled, would sound pretty thin. In the eyes of the law he—Holt—was a man on the beach with no particular reason for his presence.

He remembered the letter then, still gripped in his left hand. The envelope was blank, and the flap unsealed. Holt pulled out the paper and began to read slowly:

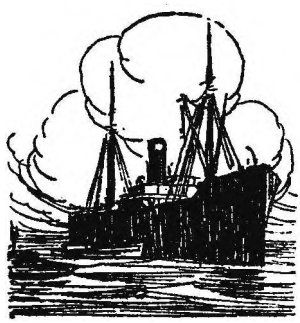
> This letter will give you complete authority as master of the "San Hing." You will proceed down coast at once to Saiburi where you will pick up 200 bundles seedling sugar cane consigned care of Pon Moy Trading Company to Palembang, Sumatra. You will sign on man named Saja Marak as supercargo at Saiburi. Marak will wear a piece of red string around his left wrist. *San Hing* must reach Palembang no later than 25th.

A wave of exultation swept over Holt. He had a ship at last. For a full minute he stood there, lean incisive face alternately lighting and clouding. Then he swung about and headed at a brisk pace for the waterfront. Mistake or not, Lady Luck had smiled at him at last, and he wasn't going to disappoint her.

The *San Hing* was a frowsy-looking hooker, sadly in need of paint. Holt went up the gang-plank, pushed past a knot of Malay seamen who eyed him curiously and looked around. An old tub, as he had expected. These Chinese let a thing run to wrack and ruin fast. Decks needed a good scrubbing. Boats sunblistered and probably leaked like sieves.

But he found the captain's cabin snug enough. There were shelves of books, some comfortable furniture and the papers were in order. The *San Hing* was a two thousand tonner out of Shanghai under Chinese registry. She carried no wireless.

Holt descended to the engine room, and here he drew up short in surprise. Diesels! The *San Hing* was faster and more powerful than she appeared. As for the crew



Holt had not seen a white man in the lot. Lascars and Straits-Chinese, they accepted his presence without comment.

Not until he sounded a call to pipe all hands on deck did he sight the white officers. Two men slouched up to him then, one tall and heavy set with an olive complexion, the other red-haired with small, beady eyes.

"I'm Melrose," the dark man said. "Acting first. Barwin here is second. We don't carry a third. I'll see your identification, if you don't mind."

Holt surveyed the two men narrowly. He handed over the manila envelope. Melrose extracted the paper, read it. A long time passed before he looked up, nodded.

"All right," he said, "we clear for Saiburi immediately, I suppose. Your name is—?"

"Holt. Signal to start the engines, Melrose."

The lines were cast off, and a gong clanged. The *San Hing* slid slowly out into the Gulf of Siam. Holt, gazing shoreward, realized he had acted without a moment to spare. A red-faced man, in the immaculate whites of a British official, came running down to the beach. His hand was aloft, and he was shouting something.

When the man realized the *San Hing* was out of voice range, he jerked a revolver from his pocket and sent two shots echoing over the water.

Grimly Holt turned and made his way to the bridge.

SAIBURI lay farther down the Malayan coast, the last port in the Unfederated District. Though he knew these waters, Holt studied the chart and laid out a course with care. He then looked at the sky, glanced at the barometer and frowned thoughtfully. The glass was dropping.

Alone in his cabin Holt let his thoughts run wild. Who had killed Jerome Kindair, the trading company agent? Was there any connection between his death and the manila envelope? Why was the *San Hing* equipped with Diesels when by outward appearances she was just another Chinese-owned, coastwise tub?

He was tamping tobacco in his pipe when he heard a sudden stealthy footstep in the outer passage. Quickly he drew his Browning, paced noiselessly to the door. He inched it open, looked out.

Four cabins opened onto the passage. The door of the last was slowly swinging shut.

Something sounded a warning in Holt's brain. He moved forward warily. He had reached the door and was pushing it open, when he suddenly realized he had been tricked. A board squeaked behind him. A terrific blow crashed down on his head.

Reeling, he twisted about, swiveled the Browning. He fired twice. Then a fist ground into his jaw, and another seemed to rip open his skull. He slumped to the floor.

As in a dream he felt himself lifted bodily, carried into the cabin and thrown to the floor. The door slammed shut.

HOW long he lay there he didn't know. His vision cleared at length, and he stumbled to his feet. Waves of pain pulsed through his head. He moved across to a water basin, soaked a cloth and pressed it gently against his scalp.

"Nice," he muttered. "I get conked on the head, and I don't even know who hit me."

Then, and not until then, did he see the dead man. He was lying in a bunk bracketed to the farther bulkhead, and his eyes were open, staring. Protruding from his chest was a short, black-handled knife.

Dead! Holt stepped closer and stared down into the waxen face, controlling himself with difficulty. There was something strangely familiar about those features, something that stirred a faint sense of recognition far back in his brain.

He bent down, ran his hands through the dead man's pockets. They were empty of anything of value save a few coins and a watch.

The watch was a duplicate of his own!

Pieces of the puzzle were dropping into their respective slots now. His thoughts rushed back to that night months ago when he had walked along the Singapore waterfront. He had wandered into a dingy jewelry store run by a slant-eyed Eurasian, and he had browsed through the shop idly while a customer already there bought a watch.

The watch the man had finally chosen had caught Holt's eye. After the customer left, Holt had laid his wallet on the counter and demanded one just like it.

The rest wasn't clear, but the skipper thought he could see the answer. The dead man here and the man who had bought the watch were one and the same. He recognized him by the clipped bristle mustache, and the small mole on the left cheek.

In some way that watch was to have identified this man as the new skipper of the *San Hing*. For—why else would the Pon Moy agent have demanded to look at Holt's timepiece? The *San Hing's* present mission—whatever it was—had necessitated hiring the new captain in secret.

When Holt had displayed a similar watch, the agent had mistaken him for this man. It was mixed up, but it made sense.

HOLT replaced the watch in the dead man's pocket, then moved across to the door. It was locked. He turned and sank into a chair.

"Funny," he muttered, "they must have waylaid this poor Johnny and murdered him to get that manila envelope and sailing instructions. When they found he didn't have them, they figured Kindair was pulling a fast one, and they went to get him. They probably thought that after the agent was dead they could ransack his office when things had quieted down. Something must have been damn valuable that——"

A key rasped in the lock, and the door swung open. Melrose entered, an automatic in one hand.

"Awake, eh?" he said. "I thought you'd be. There's a blow coming up. You're going to take charge."

The man was even more ruthless-looking than he had appeared on deck. There was a raw blemish on the side of his neck which spoke of an old knife scar, and his eyes under bushy brows were dry and glittery.

"Charge," he repeated. "That means you're going to have full run of the navigation. But if you try anything funny you'll wish you hadn't."

An inch at a time Holt let his right hand slip toward his coat pocket. Melrose, sighting the movement, only gave a short laugh.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" he said. "Your gun's topside. Get going."

With the automatic prodding his spine, Holt marched out of the cabin, up the companionway, to the deck.

"On the bridge," Melrose snarled.

They went up the port ladder, strode into the wheelhouse. Barwin, the second, stood at the wheel, a whitish cheroot hanging limply from his lips.

"She's getting dark quick," he commented.

Holt had already noted the sky. An ugly mass of black nimbus was climbing out of the east. The water was dark green.

Melrose fingered his automatic. "All right, Holt," he said. "Listen close. We're taking this hooker down the coast to Saiburi. There we pick up two hundred bundles of sugar cane. We also pick up a native named Saja Marak. We——"

"I know all that," Holt said lightly.

Melrose scowled. "Here's something you don't know. Saja Marak is more than just a native. His real name is Rajah Mahmud Lahar, and he's a native prince, rich as sin, in the Unfederated District. He's traveling incognito for a definite reason. The natives Rajah Mahmud rules have been threatening a mutiny for a long time. Taxes too high, they said, but Mahmud is forced to impose those taxes by the British government. Couple of months ago they killed five of his personal bodyguard, rose up in revolt.

"Rajah Mahmud knew his goose was cooked. So he figured he'd skip the country. He looked around, and the Dutch in Sumatra offered him protection. Mahmud then made arrangements with the Pon Moy Trading Company, chartered the *San Hing* to take him secretly to Sumatra along with the shipment of sugar cane."

"But——" Holt's eyes slowly widened.

"Until we had that envelope we didn't know what port he was going to sail from," Melrose went on. "But for a native he was pretty clever. We know that that sugar cane will look like ordinary seedling sticks for experimental planting. Actually, hidden in each bundle will be the Rajah's royal jewels, rubies, emeralds, diamonds, amounting to five hundred thousand dollars.

FOR a long moment Holt stood motionless, digesting this information. He regarded Melrose quietly, got out his pipe and began to pack it.

"Just where do I come into the deal?"

Melrose smiled. "I'm laying my cards flat on the table," he said. "Neither Barwin here nor I know a damn about navigation. When we came aboard we chucked the native first and second officers overboard. We can read a compass, but that's about all.

"All you have to do is run this ship to Saiburi, pick up Rajah Mahmud and his sugar cane, and we'll take care of the rest. We divide the stuff three ways, and you get a sixth. What say?"

Blunt anger rose within Holt. Barratry, was it, not to mention murder? And then his eyes narrowed, and his anger gave way to cunning. He nodded slowly.

"I don't want any part of the jewels," he said. "But as for the rest, I suppose I can't help myself."

Barwin laughed, and Melrose said, "That's the stuff, Cap'n. Now how about this storm?"

"Batten down the hatches," Holt said. "See that everything is tight."

SWINGING on his heel, he left the bridge, went down to the mess cabin. His head still ached, and there was a tight, empty feeling in his stomach. But after the Chinese steward had served him food, he felt better.

For once in his life, he hoped the storm would strike soon and hard. He didn't know how, but he felt sure that in the confusion of a typhoon he could get the upper hand. Malay deckhands paraded down the passage, as he sat there, returned a moment later, carrying the body of the dead man with the watch. Holt's fists clenched.

His meal finished, he went back up to the chart room, took another look at the chart. South of Saiburi the map showed Kuala Mang, a tiny port in the Federated area. If he could manage to pass Saiburi he would be off strictly-enforced British territory, protected by colonial courts of law. Then——

Outside there was a sudden drone of wind, and the *San Hing* heeled over under its impact. A deluge of rain detonated against the charthouse.

Holt ran out, headed for the wheelhouse. The wind was terrific. Breathless, soaked to the skin, he ripped open the door, found Barwin, nervously gripping the wheel.

"Ain't we got any quartermasters for this job?" Barwin whined. "It's thicker'n bloody hell out there."

Like a well-oiled machine Holt acted, taking the renegade by complete surprise. His left arm coiled around Barwin's throat. He twisted the man around, sent him reeling to the wall. Then his right hand smashed outward.

Barwin took the blow full on the jaw, and slumped in a heap. Quickly Holt spun the wheel two points to the left, set the automatic steering gear.

"One," he muttered. "Now for Melrose."

THE *San Hing* was wallowing like a drunken thing now. Huge waves rolled over her well decks. The wind and the rain were a deafening roar.

He found Melrose on the bridge wing, clawing at a life preserver, lashed to the rail. The first officer spun about, face streaming water.

"Do something!" he yelled. "This damned tub will sink and——"

"I'll do something," replied Holt, and swung. His fist buried itself in Melrose's face. But the man was not to be taken as Barwin had. He reeled backward, and came at Holt like a madman.

Back and forth they struggled. Pressed hard, Holt slowed his attack, placed each blow where it would count most. A cruel kick caught him in the shins. Melrose stiff-armed him over the heart, aimed a swinging haymaker at his left ear.

Buffetted by the storm, they exchanged blows. Melrose was no coward, but he was a dirty fighter, and he did not hesi-

tate to hit foul. Then Holt saw his chance. He drove in hard.

But he got only halfway. Behind him a revolver crashed. A stab of agony lanced into the skipper's life arm, slammed him against the rail.

He saw Barwin standing there, holding the gun. The second's jaw was bloody where he had hit him.

Melrose staggered forward, slapped an open palm across Holt's jaw.

"Try that again," he snarled, "and I'll do for you. If I didn't think I needed you, I'd kill you now."

Holt was left alone on the bridge wing, his arm bleeding profusely. Five minutes he remained there, fighting to gather his strength. Then he left the support of the rail and stumbled below. In the captain's cabin he found a medicine cabinet, disinfected and bound his arm and drank a pannikin of rum. Lowering himself on a settee, he lit his pipe and sat staring into space.

He had failed this time. As for the storm, they must have passed through the tail end of it, for the glass on the wall was already rising.

Melrose and Barwin had laid their plans well. They had only to let events take their natural course, and the loot would be theirs. They would force Holt to navigate them across to Saigon, and when near enough to the Indo-China coast, they would do the same to him and to Rajah Mahmud as they had done to the *San Hing's* original first and second officers.

A glance at the compass screwed to the bulkhead showed him the ship had been moved back on its course.

SAIBURI drifted out of the morning mist, a ramshackle settlement with a couple of copra godowns and a sprawling collection of shacks with corrugated-iron roofs.

Half an hour later the fore and aft lines were twisted around the bollards. Melrose went ashore with a triumphant stride. He was gone twenty minutes. Presently a line of sarong-clad natives came padding down the wharf, each carrying two bundles of cane stalks. Holt was a prisoner in the wheelhouse. Opposite him Barwin sat on the settee, smoked a chain of cigarettes, and said, "Don't move, Cap'n. We can take care of this ourselves."

One by one the cane bundles were brought aboard. Melrose reappeared and oversaw their transportation to a spare cabin amidships, which, fitted with a steel door, served as a strong room. Then a thin dark-faced man in colored sarong and singlet walked across the plank. Rajah Mahmud.

An hour later the Malayan coast was a smudge in the distance. The *San Hing* headed north by east toward Cape Cambodia.

Released by Barwin from the wheelhouse, Holt headed below. Halfway down the companionway he heard a thud and a groan. Quickly he singled out the one possible cabin, open the door. On the threshold he stopped rigid.

Rajah Mahmud lay on the floor, blood trickling from a cut under his eye. Over him stood Melrose, swaying on the balls of his feet.

"He tried to get funny," Melrose said. "Wouldn't tell me which of the bundles has the stuff. Well, it won't take long to go through them."

The first officer turned and strode out the door.

When he had gone, Holt helped the half-conscious Malay to his feet, propped

him into a chair. He took a bottle from a locker, poured whiskey down the dark man's throat. Then he stepped across and shut the door.

"Listen," he said, "we're in a bad way. But it's two against two now that you're here. I'm your friend. If we join forces maybe we can fight them."

Rajah Mahmud nodded his head weakly. "With the aid of Allah," he said.

AFTER that life on the *San Hing* centered down to routine. Through force of habit Holt filled out the rough log, and once he shot the sun. At four bells, the end of the second dog watch, Melrose took the wheel. The *San Hing* was running through a choppy sea at a brisk eighteen knots.

Several times Holt thought he was going to be locked in his cabin. But Melrose, although he knew enough navigation to keep the ship on its course, evidentally depended on the skipper for any emergency that might arise. More than that, he apparently assumed that with his attempt at escape ending in failure, Holt must now be resigned to the situation.

Through the night the *San Hing* drove on, her deck lights off, her riding lights in darkness.

Midnight came and went, and Holt sat in his cabin, thinking hard. There were a number of things he might do. He might raid the ship's locker, send up a Very light. But the single flare would probably bring little result, and either Melrose or one of the crew would get him before he could light a second. He might run up the international distress signal flags, N and C. But here again chance of escaping discovery was thin.

"Looks pretty black," Holt admitted. "I'd hate to write my own ticket of insurance right now."

Sheer weariness overwhelmed him at length, and he fell asleep in his chair.

When he awoke the electric lights in his cabin were out, but through the open port was visible a faint gray of coming dawn. A strange, ringing silence lay all about him.

He sat still a moment, then bounded from his chair. The engines were stopped. The *San Hing* was wallowing without steerageway.

Even as he leaped across the cabin, the door opened and Rajah Mahmud entered. There was an ugly bruise on the Malay's cheek, but his eyes gleamed in triumph.

"What happened?" Holt snapped. "What——?"

The Malay silenced him with a finger to his lips. "I have stopped the engines," he said. "I did not have time to damage them greatly. But there will be a delay before they are repaired."

"You—?" Surprise and a sudden admiration claimed Holt's voice. "How in blazes——?"

"I have been to England and studied engineering," Rajah Mahmud explained simply.

"And the Chink engineers?"

"Two were asleep. I managed to overcome the third after a short struggle."

It was a moment, Holt realized, for action, but what action? Within a few minutes Melrose and Barwin would be aware of what had happened. As it was, no watch had probably been kept, for the simple reason that the two renegades didn't know what a watch was. Barwin undoubtedly was at the wheel and had fallen asleep.

"I have been in the forecastle, talking with the crew," the Malay went on. "Half of them are my own people and are willing to help us. The other half is Straits-Chinese and all for Melrose. There is also in my luggage something I've been intending to tell you about. Two pistols that——"

"Pistols!" Holt's eyes suddenly opened wide. "Why the devil didn't you say so?"

"Wait," the Malay continued quietly. "They are pistols, but in appearance only. Two gold mounted dueling pistols in a

walnut case given me as a gift in England. They are fired with powder and ball."

Holt's hopes died, then suddenly leaped again. Topside he heard a shout, Melrose shouting profanity.

"Listen," Holt snapped. "Get those pistols, give me one of them. There'll be plenty of confusion below decks until those engines are repaired. See how many of the Malay deckhands you can organize and send them up to the bridge in five minutes. Tell 'em to bring knives, anything they can lay their hands on. Soon as the engines are started, you drift below and keep those Diesels going. Shoot anyone that attempts to go below the grating. Got that?"

A glitter showed in Rajah Mahmud's dark eyes. He nodded, smiled, and led the way out into the passage.

Five minutes later, gripping a carved and gilded weapon Holt, with the Malay following, climbed the companionway cautiously to the main deck, went up the port ladder and lay flat in the shadows of the port wing.

SO FAR their presence had passed unnoticed. Below, they could hear Melrose's raging orders to the Chinese engineers repairing the Diesels. In the wheelhouse Barwin's figure was visible against the light of the rising dawn. The second officer was evidently holding his post, awaiting instructions from his companion.

Five minutes dragged into ten, into a quarter of an hour. And then suddenly the familiar vibration began anew and the propeller spun. The *San Hing* was again under way.

With a nod Rajah Mahmud moved forward and melted down the ladder. Holt counted sixty seconds five times, then eased himself onto the bridge and headed for the wheelhouse.

Dueling pistol primed and ready, Holt was halfway across the bridge when he was seen. The house door banged open then and Barwin emerged.

For a space of seconds neither man moved. Then Barwin clawed forth his gun and yanked at the trigger. Holt made a desperate lunge to the side even as thought struck him that he must not waste the single shot he had in return. He followed the roar by throwing himself forward in a spinning tackle.

The impact of his body carried Barwin's feet out from under him. The renegade's revolver jumped from his hand, clattered to the deck.

In and out Holt pumped his fists, striving to end matters as fast as he could. He was treading on counted time. A fist jacknifed against his cheek bone, bludgeoned his head against the wheelhouse door. He retaliated with a right and a left and another left. Suddenly Barwin leaped to his feet and came at him with a rush.

Erect, Holt leaped nimbly aside and drove out his fist with all the speed and precision he could call to arm. The second pitched forward on his face.

Panting, the skipper bent down, and scooped up Barwin's gun. He saw then that Rajah Mahmud had not failed him. Swarming up the two ladders came the Malay deckhands, lips split in eager grins, armed with knives and krisses.

"Hold the ladders!" Holt commanded. "Don't let anyone up. Where's Melrose?"

As if in reply a hoarse voice hailed him from the fo'ard well deck.

"Holt, you damned sneaking rat, I'm coming up there. I want to talk to you."

THE skipper strode to the rail and looked down. Daylight was about him now. A red ball of fire was climbing out of the east.

"Stay where you are, Melrose," he said quietly. "I'm armed, and I've got eight men up here. I'm heading this hooker straight back down the coast to S'pore where I'm going to hand you over to the authorities. You can't stop me. I've got a man below decks, and if you or anyone else gets in his way you won't live long."

It took a moment for the significance of his words to reach their mark. Holt could see the expression of rage and surprise that swept the first officer's face. The skipper grinned in spite of himself. Fight, was it? Well, so far he had taken all they had to offer. And now——

How long he could last, there was no telling. Melrose was armed. Beside that he had probably confiscated the ship's arms. The odds were pretty high.

Even as he stood there a gun roared, and a slug tore through the canvas weather cloth of the bridge. Deliberately Holt fired at Melrose, aiming low for the legs. He missed, but he came close enough to send the first officer darting for cover.

Sinster silence dropped down on the *San Hing.* And then with a rush the Straits-Chinese tried to take the bridge. Up the ladder they came. Revolvers crashed. A lascar screamed and fell.

Holt was at the port ladder, clubbing yellow heads as fast as they appeared. Below Melrose fired three times in quick succession. The last shot tore through Holt's coat. Native knives were driving in and out. But above the uproar Holt voiced a taunting laugh.

"Come on, you yellow devils," he panted. "Come and get me."

His gray eyes were dancing with eager excitement. At a command from Melrose the Chinese abruptly fell back, and the firing stopped. Melrose's voice rose up at him.

"Holt! How about a truce for a minute? Will you call those rats off and hold fire if I come up?"

Holt chuckled grimly. "Come ahead," he responded. "But I won't promise anything."

He motioned the lascars away from the ladder and backstepped to the break of the bridge. He slid a cold pipe between his teeth and waited. Presently Melrose stood before him.

"Keep your gun down," the skipper ordered crisply. "And stand where you are. What do you want?"

The renegade first officer ran his eyes about him, saw the unconscious figure of Barwin, took the situation in at a glance.

"You're a double-damned fool, Holt." he snarled. "All this won't get you any place. Come on down to the cabin, and we'll talk things over."

"I'll stay where I am, thank you," said Holt. "You'd better throw down your gun."

"But, you fool, I told you I'd give you a sixth. I'll make it better than that. Barwin's out anyway, so we'll split it two ways. There's five hundred thousand dollars worth of jewels down there, and——"

"Those jewels are consigned care of the Pon Moy Trading Company to Palembang, Sumatra," Holt replied evenly. "I intend to see they get there. Throw down your gun."

A smile of cunning crossed Melrose's lips. He let his gun fall heavily to the planking, crossed his arms and stood as in defeat. Holt kept his own weapon leveled and began to pace forward. But if the renegade thought his actions had tricked the skipper he was wrong. Below decks Holt heard a muffled shot and a scream. The engine room gong clanged twice. Mahmud——

With a lurch Melrose dropped to one knee, retrieved his weapon and jerked the weapon to quick aim. He fired.

The slug seared across the calf of Holt's leg, but the skipper had been expecting that very play. His gun exploded

even as Melrose made ready for a second shot. Up went the first officer's hands. He staggered and pitched forward on his face.

Holt shouted an order in Malay to the lascars. Then with the eight of them at his heels he leaped down the ladder straight into the massed Chinese on the deck.

It was open hell here. Pistols roared around him, and the Chinese screamed as they fought. Below decks Holt could hear bangings and thumpings and intermittent yells. Mahmud then was taking care of his end. Holt slammed his fist into another yellow face and grinned.

TWO nights later the lookout of the Dutch K. P. M. ship, *Rannswark*, Saigon to Batavia, sighted the masthead light of a Chinese freighter off the port bow. The freighter was passing on an even keel at full speed, but she drew up when the *Rennswark* signaled her with the Morse light from the bridge semaphore.

"Who are you?" the *Rannswark* signaled.

"'Sang Hing' out of Singora for Palembang," came the winking reply.

The Dutch skipper stared.

"For where?"

"Palembang, Sumatra."

"Aren't you off your course?"

Up on the bridge of the *San Hing* Skipper Holt chuckled as he smoked his pipe and rattled the contact key.

"Was off," he flashed. *"On now. Had a little trouble aboard. Mutiny. First and second officers in irons. Three members of crew dead. Everything under control."*

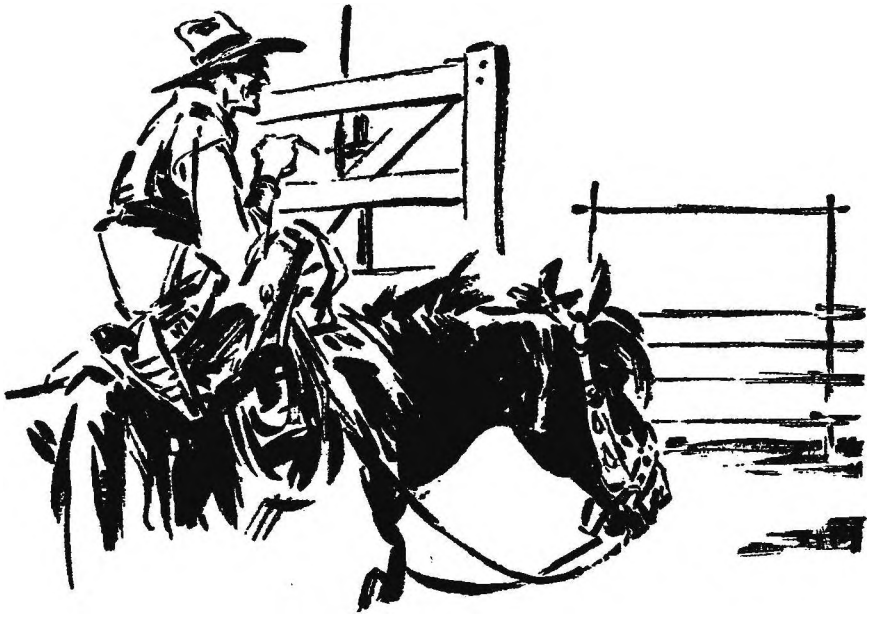
The captain of the Dutch ship was horrified.

"Do you want any help?"

"No thanks. Everything okay. So long."

And with that Holt left the key and made his way to the wheelhouse where Rajah Mahmud Lahar, bandaged but smiling, was for the first time in his life, minding helm.

Even Two-Gun Waddies Shouldn't Be Above Using Their Brains Occasionally



THE CARTRIDGE KID

By KERRY O'NEIL

Author of "Six Guns on Spyglass," etc.

I

DESERT RIM stood on the spot where the sands touched the foot of the Solomon range; it was colored with that dry, desert blue with which Arizona stories her scenery so often, and had but one street that was of any consequence. And in that street was the "So and So" Saloon.

Montana Jones didn't like Desert Rim; as a matter of fact he didn't like Arizona; so he sat at a table in the "So and So," and brooded. When Montana brooded to any extent he had to have liquor to help him; and liquor was beside him.

When he'd entered the "So and So" one hour before there had been a poker game going at a table quite near to where he sat; there had been two slick-looking gentlemen in the game, and a young cowpuncher. The two slick-looking gentlemen were now gone; and as far as Montana could surmise they had taken what money there'd been in the game with them, for the young cowpuncher was glooming in his chair, his spurs hooked into its rungs and his big fists under his chin; and his expression was as despondent as Montana's own.

"Hey, you cowpoke," said Montana, "what say if you take a drink with me?"

"Brother," said the youth, "I'll take one with you, or with anybody else; for just now my spirits are low, and I plumb need a little bracing-up." He moved his chair until he was facing Montana, then he pulled it forward until he was breast-

ing the same table. "When I busted into this here establishment a couple of hours ago I had one thousand bucks in bank notes in my pocket, and now I ain't got enough to get me a bed."

"Them two parties you were playing cards with were mighty hard-working boys," said Montana. "I've seen them before, here and there."

"They didn't know each other," said the young cowpoke. "I had to introduce them."

"Everybody has to do that for them," said Montana. "It's what you call team work."

The youth's eyes gleamed. He drank off the liquid which Montana had ordered, and hooked his thumbs in his belt.

"Do you reckon I've been shook loose from my money?" he said.

"Wouldn't doubt it," said Montana. "That's generally what them there jaspers aim to do with folks."

The cowpuncher took out a .45 Colt, threw out the big dirty looking slugs, and put them back again; he holstered the gun, and got up.

"Excuse me," he said. "I've got to step down to the Bronco a little. Seems like there's something I ought to do."

He went out at the flap-doors with a long striding step; and Montana saw his high crowned Stetson nod by the window.

"Got any idea who that young fellah is?" Montana asked the barkeeper.

The bottle and glass man seemed surprised.

"You must be a stranger in these parts," he said. "That young gunnie's the Cartridge Kid."

"That so?" said Montana. "A shootin' guy, eh?"

"He's awful handy with a hog-leg," said the man behind the bar; "but that ain't the only thing he can do. That boy can do a job of riding that'd make anybody sit right down and go to watching. He comes from the Pecos country and I've heard tell he wrestles some, and goes through most of the didos you hear about."

"Must be quite a progressing kid," said Montana. "And the parties he's gone looking for'll maybe have quite a time with him."

"I stand back here and I serves drinks to them that asks for them," said the barkeeper, "and I don't consider it my business to point out anybody to anybody else. But if the Kid had asked me about them two slickers I could have said something in reply. Them jaspers were waitin' for him.

"They had it all fixed and ready. From the minute he sat down at that table with them I knew he was took."

MONTANA lingered in the "So and So" for a space, and then he went across the street to an eating place and sat up at the bar. A fat woman was at a little desk; she had a good many rings on her fingers, and bracelets on her arms. She nodded when she noticed Montana looking at her.

"Eloise got back yet?" he asked.

She smiled, and shook her head. And she seemed pleased about something.

"No," she said. "She is not come back. Eloise, I think, will never come back."

"That's what I think, too," said Montana, gloomily. He ate a cut of fried ham and four eggs; also some toast and two cups of coffee. And he had rice pudding with raisins in it. But, for all he stowed it away with steady dispatch, he didn't seem happy about it.

"I don't mind her going away," he told the woman at the desk. "Fact is Eloise could go any place and at any time, and I'd never lift an eyebrow. But her taking Big Baby with her is the sore point with me."

"You are mistake," the woman told him, "Eloise didn't take the Baby; it is Baby took her."

"Anyway," said Montana, with no joy

in his voice. "Baby's gone. And that leaves me stuck."

He paid for his meal, and went back to the "So and So" for more consolation. And he found the Cartridge Kid leaning against the bar.

"Have some more refreshments," said Montana, putting a silver dollar on the bar. "And I didn't hear no shootin'," he said.

The Kid smiled. He had a nice smile. It wasn't only his mouth, and the muscles of his face; it was also his eyes, and his expression.

"I never did catch up with them parties," he said. "The man at the livery across from the Bronco told me they'd saddled up and left."

"Yeah," said Montana. "So they would. Boys like them always use time pretty close."

"What I'm interested in most of all," said the Kid, "is that the barkeep tells me they were seen around with Dick Spangler the last couple of days and had much private talk going on between them."

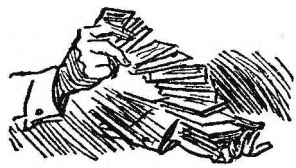
"Well," said Montana, "Spangler don't look like pickin's for no card sharps."

The Kid fingered his glass thoughtfully. Montana noticed that he had supple, long fingers; his hand looked sensitive and fast; a deadly hand for a draw.

"No," he said, "them parties wasn't thinking of taking him over at poker. Anyway, I don't think so. My idea is that they had something else on their minds." He leaned further toward Montana. "Listen to this," he said; "I came down here to Desert Rim with a thousand dollars buttoned up and safe in my pocket. That thousand dollars was given to me to pay down to Dick Spangler; and I was to get back a paper about some property that belongs to a friend of mine."

Montana passed his glass under his nose and inhaled the fragrance of the rye. He'd always had the idea that this little ceremony made him think better. And just now he was thinking.

"What I consider your conversation's aimin' at, fellah-me-lad," he said, "is that Dick Spangler has a paper; one thousand dollars is owing on it. You came to town to pay the money down, and to pack the paper away with you. For some reason Spangler don't want the money paid. He



wants to keep the paper. So he imports two card-fingerers into town to trim you. And they've done it. And now you can't pay."

The Kid looked at Montana admiringly.

"Friend," he said, "you are one party that can handle the old head. You said that better than I could say it myself. It's just so. I'm ashamed to say it, but it's just so. That paper means more to the girl that gave me that money to pay than anything else I could put a name to. And I've plumb lost it to two hombres that pick me up in a saloon." He looked at Montana somberly. "Gambling is my weakness; and I guess Spangler heard about it."

Montana ordered more drinks; he put his elbows on the table; and he shook his head at the Kid.

"I'm not blaming you any," he said. "Not any at all. You've got one of these unsuspecting natures same as I have. You never think wrong of anybody, and consequence is every once in a while somebody puts the foot out and you fall over it. Me, I came to this town to do some business same as you. I'm a sports promotor; just now boxing is my big ace. I make a match for Big Baby down here at Pueblo Cordova on the day of the rodeo. And, Kid, listen close to this: the man the Baby was matched with is managed by this same guy Spangler. I put up two thousand dollars in good money as a guarantee that I'd have my man here and

ready to fight; so I had, but when my back was turned he run away with a female dish-washer named Eloise from that eating place across the street."

THE Cartridge Kid grinned. "Holy Jo!" he said. "You don't mean to say that was a move of Spangler's?"

"Kid, the more I think of it, the surer I am that it was. For if my boy ain't on hand and ready to jump into the ring on the afternoon of the day, my money is handed over to Spangler; and that's not only the last I'll ever see of it, but it's the last I've got."

"Spangler seems to be quite a boy," ruminated the Kid. "He likes money and he's got ways of his own of getting it." He glowered at the empty glass in front of him. "I think I'll forget these two gents that took me over awhile ago, and go looking for Spangler. And when I meet him like as not I'll burn him down to the knees."

The new drinks had arrived and Montant inhaled the fragrance of his; and he was still thinking.

"Pay attention," he said to the Cartridge Kid; "here's something that maybe is better than that. I ain't saying," he told the Kid, "that heating up a gun ain't a whole lot of satisfaction; but it ain't always the best way out. I'd like to save my two thousand dollars and you'd like to get back what them two table-workers took from you. With Spangler all laid out at an undertaker's this couldn't be done. What we must do is keep him alive. For awhile anyway."

"If I can get back that wad of money," said the Kid, "he can go on living to a nice old age as far as I'm concerned."

The aroma of the rye was greatly to Montana's fancy, he hung over it, and visions began to build up in his mind.

"I've had news," he said to the Kid, "that you are an athlete of some parts."

"I can do pretty well," said the Cartridge Kid. "But shootin's my best line."

"Ever box any?" asked Montana.

"Yeah. At the Spot B. I used to go through the waddies some. One time I rode into Phoenix and put the sign on a big boy that was thought to be champion of Arizona."

This was said quietly; it was as though it was a statement of fact; it had none of the color of boasting.

"Sounds good," said Montana. "And now let's talk serious. This Spangler brave's got a dog-fighter that's half Mex and the other half what-have you. What weight are you?"

"One seventy," said the Kid.

"That's right smart weight," said Montana. "I wouldn't have thought it. But the Mex'd have twenty pounds on you at that."

"What do you mean?" asked the Kid.

Montana looked him over with a favoring eye.

"If you had a chance to get that one thousand dinero back," he said, "would you hop into the ring with this party at Pueblo Cordova?"

"For that money," said the Kid, "I'd jump into any place with anything."

Montana drank his whiskey.

"It's fixed," he said. "All but me looking into your capabilities a little. Come on."

HE led the way out of the "So and So," and down the street to an adobe building from the roof of which fluttered much wash on lines.

"This place," said Montana, "was engaged for Big Baby to finish his training in. He used it about twice before he slipped away with Eloise."

He told the Kid to take off his belt, his gun and his shirt; he did the same. They then put on the boxing gloves which Montana took out of a saddle roll; and they faced each other.

"One five minute round," said Montana. "And keep your guard high, because I'm going to tear into you."

There was a swift passage, and then Montana struck the floor with both shoulders; he got up and grinned.

"Nice left hook," he said. "I didn't think there was anything like that West of the Solomons."

Again they set; and again Montana went down; and this time, when he arose, he began taking off the gloves.

"Your right's got a good bit in it, too," he said. "Heavy and fast. If you ever lay it across that spick's jaws he'll not bite into any tough beef for a month afterwards."

"What about some training?" said the Kid. "There's only three days, and I ought to do some work."

"You don't need any sparring," said Montana, carefully. "But lay off the liquor and the cigarettes; do some shadow boxing, and some road work. That'll make you just about right."

The Cartridge Kid began this next day; and being young and sound he responded to it immediately. On the morning of the fight they rode to Pueblo Cordova. Dick Spangler was managing the rodeo; and he had a small office on the plaza where he transacted its business.

"Listen," said Montana to the Kid, "hitch yourself to the rail here while I go in for some talk. If I need you I'll call."

He crossed the street and went into Spangler's office. The big-stomached manager sat at a desk talking to some people who stood about the room. And among these people Montana saw the two card-sharpers who had eased the thousand dollars away from the Kid. Spangler was smilling as Montana entered; and at once the smile broadened.

"Well, well!" beamed he. "Montana Jones. I knew you'd get here po'dner. And I said you would in spite of what some said to the contrary." He shook Montana's hand with much heartiness, and laughed. "A couple of them said you'd not come because your fighter had run out on you."

Montana also laughed.

"That's one of those little rumors," he said. "You know, Dick, they pick up rumors every place, and about anything; people like to talk."

The laugh died on Spangler's face; he sat back in his chair and looked at Montana with gathering coldness.

"What do you mean rumor?" he said. Then realizing he was assuming the wrong attitude he permitted a weak grin to show itself. "Oh, sure, of course," he said. "Rumor. Yes, that's what I said it was. But some of the boys from Desert Rim said Big Baby had run away with a plate walloper at some eating house."

Montana tucked his hands in his pockets and laughed more than ever.

"Yeah," he said, "I heard that, too. But there ain't anything in it. The fellah that did that little trick was the Baby's sparring po'dner."

"What!" said Spangler. And he got up.

"I always introduced that party around as the Baby," said Montana. "It saved the real boy from having crowds following him, and things like that. The fellah that shoved off with Eloise," said Montana genially, "was a Swede. Sparred with the Baby and rubbed him."

"Look here," said Spangler, his jaw set. "Are you trying to make a monkey out of me? Have you got your man here to go on with this contest, or not?"

MONTANA pointed out at the window to where the Kid, his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt, was lounging.

"Take a look," he said. "There's the regular genuine Kid himself, over there. Trained to the minute, and ready to tear your man right down to the ring floor."

Dick Spangler went to the window and gazed at the Cartridge Kid, speculation in his eyes.

"I thought your fellah was different from that."

"If he was different he wouldn't be real," grinned Montana.

Spangler turned away from the window and as he did so his eyes met those of the two card-flippers; he gave a slight jerk of the head in the Kid's direction, and received a wink in return. And then he sat down.

"O.K.," he said to Montana. "The fight goes on at four o'clock. Get there at three; and have your man ready. Don't forget, if he's not there your money is forfeited."

Montana waved a hand, good humoredly.

"He'll be there; I'm a great party at tossing them into the ring," he said. "And," he added, "sometimes I've had to drag them out. But not often." He looked down at Spangler. "I thought I'd drop in and let you know I'd got into town."

"Glad you did," said the manager. He gave Montana a bleak smile. "A little tip like that sometimes does good."

Montana left the office and crossed the street. As he strolled along with the Kid he said:

"Spangler was surprised. Also," and he nodded at the Kid, "he had them two parties in there that stole your money."

The Kid stopped.

"I'm going back," he said.

"Wait a minute," said Montana, "maybe you'll not have to." He steered the Kid around the corner. "I saw Spangler give them a sign when he found out you were the genuine Baby; and I think they'll be starting out after you." He got one eye around the corner. "Yes," he said, "here they come."

The Kid smiled a thin-lipped smile.

"Montana," he said, "I want to meet up with them two gents."

"It's all right with me," said Montana. "I want to see you do it. But, not now, and not here. This evenin' maybe you'll be all set right, and with nothing else on your mind." He pushed the Kid along by the shoulder. "Just now we're going to the hotel; and you're going to stay there until three o'clock, with me outside your door."

It was just three o'clock when the two reached the grounds where the roping was in full swing; and Montana rushed the Kid straight through to the tent that was to be his dressing room.

Montana saw a freckle-faced, red-headed youth in a huge Stetson, sitting in the shade and spitting through a vacant place in his teeth.

"O.K., Two-Gallon," said Montana, "hurry along."

"Old-timer, I'm here," said the redhead, getting up.

"The boy's here," said Montana. "This is Two-Gallon Files," he said to the Kid. "A good boy to work with." Then, once more, to Two-Gallon, "Keep walking around the tent. If anybody comes near it let me know."

"Don't drink any of that water," said Montana, to the Kid inside the tent, "I'll get some."

He went out with a couple of leather saddle-bottles; after about ten minutes he returned with them filled, and bringing news.

"I saw Spangler's fighter," he said. "Big neck, and legs like trees. They call him the Steerbreaker."

"Holy Jo!" said the Kid with a grin. "Now there's a gent I'll take a lot of pleasure in bustin' up."

The Kid took his clothes off and Montana kneaded his muscles.

"Grand condition!" said Montana. "Just grand! If I'd had you in hand for a month you wouldn't be better."

"Somebody comin'!" said Two-Gallon, outside the tent.

It was Spangler, and with him was a stylish looking personage in a white linen suit, white shoes, and a spotless straw hat.

"All here and ready, eh?" said Spangler.

"Just roarin'," said Montana.

"This is Mr. Cross," said Spangler. "Mr. Douglas Cross of Santa Fe. My partner in these exhibitions."

Montana nodded to Cross, going on with the rubbing.

"Hope the gate's good," said he. "Nice weather we're havin, anyway."

BUT Cross didn't give much of his attention to Montana; he seemed especially interested in the Cartridge Kid.

"Not from Arizona?" he said.

"No; down around the Pecos."

"Come all the way here to fight, did you?"

"That and some other things," said the Kid, looking steadily into the face that bent over him.

"What other things?"

"Listen," said Montana. "This is my fighter, and this is the zero hour. So the less conversation the better."

"What's the matter," said Spangler, sneeringly, "getting nervous about him?"

"I've got my own ideas," said Montana, "and you can't tell me anything about them. So don't let's git in a sweat."

"This business of having a ring-fight at a rodeo is my suggestion," said Spangler, "and I want to try and show Mr. Cross that I'm not making a mistake."

"You ain't," said Montana. "Not unless this spick of yours has a rabbit heart."

Cross gestured to Spangler, and they went toward the tent-flap.

"Just so things are going right," said Cross. "You know what I mean?"

"Sure," said Montana. "Sure."

"Ready at four o'clock," said Spangler, looking at his watch.

The Cartridge Kid put his hands behind his head and lay gazing up at Montana, after the two had gone.

"Name's Cross, eh," he said. "I wonder if he's any relation to old Double Cross."

"Wouldn't wonder," grinned Montana. "But, here's how it is Kid: just now you're not thinking of anything but the fight. Everything else is for later. See what I mean?"

"You betcha!" said the Kid.

At three-forty the portable ring had been fitted together; the white canvas floor covering was tightly stretched, the stools were in the corners, a paper box, containing the gloves, was in the middle of the ring. At four o'clock, the Steerbreaker appeared in one of the aisles with his handlers. He was swarthy and rippled with muscles; he had long, ape-like arms; he showed a flattened nose, swollen ears, and projecting brows that were battered and scarred.

"Looks slow," commented the Kid as he stood with Montana at the far end of another aisle.

"Like as not he is," said Montana. "But he can sock."

Montana held the Kid in check until the Steerbreaker had selected a corner, and the applause had subsided; then they went down the aisle with quick steps, a big towel covering the shoulders of the Kid, the Two-Gallon carrying the bottles and pails. As the Kid passed, Cross stepped out, into the aisle, and put one hand on the arm of Montana.

"You're this man's manager, I think," he said, softly, and with a sly, confident look in his eye.

"Yeah," said Montana, pulling aside from the engaging hand. "And I'm his friend, too."

"I see," said Cross. He watched them go down the aisle; and there was a cold smile upon his face as he finally turned away.

Montana did all the small things thought to be needed by a boxer about to

engage; Two-Gallon was excited and full of advice.

"Listen, cowboy," he said to the Kid. "Guard your jaw! See what I mean? I've seen this hombre fight. He's got a right that feels like having the end of a plank stuck in your face. Hold your guard high."

"O.K.," said the Kid.

"And keep expecting a right uppercut. He's got a nasty one. Once he hits you with that we might as well start for home."

"When," grinned the Kid, "do you think I ought to take a chance and start something myself?"

"Maybe about the eighth round, or so, if you're feeling pert enough," said Montana, "you might take a slap or two at him. Just on the chance you might hit him, you know." And he looked acidly at Two-Gallon. "Put a brake on the talk," he said. "I'll tell him what I think he ought to know."

The announcements made, the men introduced, the instructions given, the crowd sat back in silence awaiting the bell.

"This fellah looks like he's trained on gin," said the Kid, as Montana bent over him for a last word. "Seems to me I can knock him over quick if I go after him."

"Kid," said Montana, "if you've got it in either hand to drop him quick, do it."

"Won't make any difference in the money?"

"Not a dollar."

With that the gong rang; Montana turned and climbed down the short set of steps, seeing at the same time that Two-Gallon had got the pail and other things out of the ring. His back was still turned when there came the quick stepping and padding of feet, the solid impact of blows, and a sudden deafening roar. He whirled; the Steerbreaker was flat on his face with the referee counting over him; and the Kid was leaning over the ropes, speaking to him, gloved hands held at each side of his month. Montana could make out the name "Spangler"—also "office," and "money," and when he saw the referee stop the count, make a sweeping gesture with both hands and then lift the Kid's right in token of victory, he understood.

"Take care of the stuff," he said to Two-Gallon, "and stick with the Kid."

And with that he dashed up one of the filling aisles where he'd seen Cross and Spangler just a little while before.

II

MONTANA could not locate Spangler nor Cross; he sent a message to the Kid that he'd be at the office, and went there at once. The place was filled with rodeo riders and ropers; and by the time the needs of all these had been seen to, the Kid, with Two-Gallon at his heels, arrived.

"No chance yet," said Montana. "A couple of more minutes."

"Listen," said the Kid, "them two parties that fixed the cards on me at Desert Rim are outside. I spotted them as I came along."

"Maybe," said Montana, "you'll have a chance to go to work on them."

The Kid grinned.

"Old-timer," he said, "I'm going to do that right soon."

Spangler looked at Montana.

"Well," he said, "what's your worry?"

"Two thousand dollars," said Montana. "That's the money deposited for appearance. Also, I'm looking for twenty-five hundred as per contract for the fight."

"You're plumb crazy!" said Spangler. "That fight didn't last but twenty seconds. Do you think I'm giving you twenty-five hundred dollars for that?"

"The twenty-five," said Montana, "was for a fight—long or short the contract doesn't state. If you were set on having it longer why didn't you pick out a party that could get up after he was hit?"

Spangler argued for a space; but Montana suggested that the sheriff's office was

only a half block away, and that it would be the effort of only a few minutes to have an attachment slapped on the show; and then Spangler opened the safe. The man counted out twenty-five hundred dollars, for which Montana gave him a receipt. Then he produced an envelope in which there was twenty one hundred-dollar bills. Montana gave him a receipt for that, also.

"Now," said Montana, to the Cartridge Kid, "I hand you half the dinero I get for the fight; which is twelve-fifty in hundreds."

He counted down the money on Spangler's desk; and the Kid, as he picked it up, said to the showman:

"Brother, that paper I was talking to you about the other day, which I wanted to pay for and take off your hands, and which you said I'd better talk to you about next day, suppose we fix that up right now?"

Spangler leaned back in his chair, and bored at him with cold eyes.

"That paper," he said, "is in the safe of the town bank. See what I mean? And the bank's closed for the day. Shove around here about noon tomorrow, and we'll talk."

"You spoke a piece something like that the other time," said the Cartridge Kid, "and when tomorrow came around my money was gone."

"Well," said Spangler, "what have I got to do with that?"

The Kid grinned. There was a double shadow lying across the sidewalk outside the window; the shadows of two men. He'd been watching these out of the tail of his eye for some minutes.

"I don't know," said the Kid, "except you were mighty friendly with the hombres that took me. But," he said, "just now, we'll let that go." He nodded to Montana. "All ready?"

But Spangler lifted a hand.

"Just a minute," he said to Montana. "I've got a little business to talk with you. A little private business," with a look at the Kid.

"I'll be at the hotel when you get there," said the Kid to Montana. "On the porch somewhere, with a little drink."

He went out, Two-Gallon with him. There were no longer any shadows upon the sidewalk; the late rays of the sun were in unobstructed possession.

"Listen careful," said the Kid to the red-head, "you got a gun?"

Two-Gallon nodded.

"A thirty-eight," he said. "Down in my britches."

"All right," the Kid said to him. "See this hardware store a little way ahead? Remember the alley on the other side of it that we came through awhile ago?"

"Yeah," said Two-Gallon.

"Well, I'm going down that. But you go straight on. When you get a little way, take a peep back somehow and see if two hombres follow me. If they do, step back. But don't let 'em see you."

"You'll be needin' me?" asked Two-Gallon.

"Maybe."

"I'll be back," said Two-Gallon. "You bet."

WHEN they came to the alley, the Cartridge Kid spoke to the red-head, and waved his hand in a good-by. Two-Gallon replied in kind, and went on his way down the street. There was a bend in the alley; the Kid remembered this as he went into it; and when he'd turned this bend, he stopped, and drew

his heavy six-gun. In a few moments he heard steps; and he grinned bleakly as he waited. The two card-sharps when they rounded the angle found themselves looking into the wide bore of the Colt.

"Put 'em up!" said the Kid. "High! And keep 'em up!"

"What's this?" asked the foremost of the two. "What you aimin' to do, po'dner?"

"This ain't the first time you've trailed me, fellah," said the Cartridge Kid, the gun staring at them steadily. "And now I'm having a little talk with you."

"Always pleased to have conversation with anybody that acts any way reasonable," said the second man. "What's on your mind?"

"It's a matter of money, in the first place," said the Kid. "One thousand dollars. And you two cut it loose from me the other day at Desert Rim."

"That was a fair game," said the first man. "You don't mean to say you're squealin' about—"

The Colt exploded; the man cried out and clapped his hand to his ear.

"Keep 'em up!" said the Kid, stonily. "High up!" The man lifted his hands once more, the blood trickling down the side of his neck. "I always mark 'em when they do anything to me and then tell me a lie."

There was the sound of hastening feet, and Two-Gallon appeared behind the two men, gun in hand.

"Slip their smoke-poles away from them," said the Kid to the red-head.

Two-Gallon did this with celerity; and he looked at the bleeding ear of the one who had been bullet-nicked.

"Nice ear you got there, friend," he said. "And you're likely to have it for quite a spell."

"See what they got on them," said the Cartridge Kid. "And keep behind them while you're doing it."

Two-Gallon went through the two with dexterity.

"Nice lot of money," he said at length. "Clean bills; just like they were new made."

"How much?" asked the Kid, his frowning eye fixed upon the gamblers.

Two-Gallon ran through the bills.

"Little more than seven hundred dollars," he said.

"There ought to be a thousand," said the Cartridge Kid, his look, as it bored into the two sharpers, as frigid as ice.

"We played you a square game," said the second man. "You lost your money—"

Again the Colt spoke, and again a hand was clapped to a bleeding ear.

"I got you both marked now," said the Cartridge Kid. "And I'll sure know you when I see you again." He motioned for them to turn; and as they did so, he added, "But don't let me see you soon. This is a quick-spoken gun I've got; and the next sight of you might bring on regular trouble. Get going."

Two-Gallon watched the men around the bend as they tramped down the alley, trying to stop the flow of blood; then he turned to the Kid with a grin.

"All gone, Kid," he said. "Didn't even look back."

The Kid was sitting on the porch of the hotel some time later when Montana came along; and he told him what had happened.

"I got to wondering while Spangler was talking," said Montana, "if they didn't have some little thing cooking for you. Him wanting me to stay and talk business, and me in a little while feeling he was only killing time. When he heard that first shot he started to grin, as I looked at him I could see he was feeling mighty pleasant. But when the second one followed a little while later, he looked kind of puzzled. I guess that didn't sound so good, somehow."

"I've been wondering if I oughtn't go see the sheriff and tell him what's been going on," said the Kid.

BUT Montana didn't think this was a good idea.

"Them two'll not complain," he said. "They'll not want to get on no witness stand and have a lawyer asking them questions. There're too many things that might be dug up."

They had a drink; and then they went down the street to the telegraph office.

"The two thousand dollars I deposited with Spangler," said Montana, "was borrowed money; and I promised to return it, pronto. Five hundred more goes to St. Louis to pay a debt long overdue." He dispatched the money and paid the charges. "There's a hundred or two I owe in Desert Rim," he told the Kid, "and that'll pare me down quite considerable."

"Don't forget," said the Kid, "I'm packing a right smart bit of dinero. If you care to dip into it at anytime—you know what I mean?"

"Good Kid!" said Montana. "I'll remember that."

They ate in the hotel dining room; and then they smoked a cigar on the porch. About eleven o'clock the Kid left Montana engaged with a tall, cold drink and went to his room. The day's doings had tired him out, and as soon as he touched the pillow he began to doze. But there came a knock upon the door that brought him back instantly.

"Hello!" he said.

"It's Douglas Cross," said a voice. "I'd like to talk a little with you, if you don't mind."

The Kid got up and opened the door; also he turned on the light. Cross came in, as immaculate as ever, and he sat in the chair the Kid indicated.

"A little late," he said. "But as I'm leaving town in an hour I thought I'd better see you."

"Why not?" said the Kid, as he rolled a cigarette.

"Sometimes," said Cross, easily, as he tipped back in the chair, "it's just as well to go slow in matters that don't concern us personally. For one thing it might be more profitable; for another thing it might not be as dangerous."

"I can see what you might mean," said the Kid. He lighted the cigarette. "But I'm not sure. Suppose you go a little further, po'dner."

"This land title of the Drevener's," said Cross. "Let's start by saying it's no real business of yours."

"Anything's my business that I engage to do," said the Cartridge Kid. "And I engaged to ride to Desert Rim and get that paper."

"Old Huddleston Drevener was a bad egg," said Cross. "A gambler, a gunnie and a rip-roarer. If you knew how the property that document represents came into his hands maybe you'd not be so anxious to get it."

"I've heard of him," said the Cartridge Kid. "But I never saw him. I've seen his daughter, though," with a narrowing of the eyes, "and she's right enough for me.

"The old man's dead; and anything that was his now belongs partly to her. And it's for her I want this paper."

"You get about twenty-five dollars a month riding herd on a cattle spread," said Cross, as he examined the Kid, his face calm, his gaze unruffled. "And that's not much. I don't mind saying," he added, "that this Apache River claim is interesting to me, and I'd like to keep possession of it."

"Claim, eh?" The Cartridge Kid drew thoughtfully at his cigarette. "I didn't know it was a mine."

For a moment or two there was a silence; the face of Cross had hardened. The word had been a slip, and the Kid, careless though he seemed, saw that the man was cursing himself for making it.

"It's not a mine," said the man. "It's a section of hill country that the river runs through. There's a tumble-down house on it, and it was once used for

sheep. I'm used to mining property," he added, "that's why I said claim."

There was unbelief in the Kid's eyes, but he said nothing. He smoked the cigarette, and watched Cross.

"Everybody," said Cross, "has to look out for himself, and that's what I take it you're doing. If you're not you're a sight dumber than you look." He paused for a space, and then said. "The time limit for the taking up of this paper is in about two months more. Suppose there was a delay, and you got in a little late? Suppose you lost the money? Suppose any one of a dozen things happened to you?"

"Well, suppose they did?" asked the Kid.

This seemed a reply that Cross had not expected. He considered a moment, then smiled, and nodded his head.

"I don't think you mean to take the thing up, anyway. What I mean is, I don't think you can. That was quite a sum of money you sent off early this evening by wire. You can't have much left."

The Kid pulled open the drawer of a little table beside his bed, and took out a thick bundle of bills.

"This looks all right to me, po'dner," he said. "Nothing lame about this kind of stuff. It'll carry me wherever I want to go. And if you'd asked more information at the telegraph office you'd found it was Montana's money that was wired, not mine."

Cross laughed. He watched the Kid put the wad of bills back in the drawer and close it; then he said:

"What say if you talk to Spangler for a few minutes? He's down at his office and that's only a few steps away."

THE Cartridge Kid arose. He was interested, and wanted to hear more. So he pulled on his clothes and buckled on his belt and gun, and told Cross he was ready.

They walked to Spangler's office; and the Kid noticed as they went along that Cross was in very good humor. The man walked with a light step; he twirled his cane; he laughed at almost everything that was said. And, strangely enough, Spangler, after they'd exchanged a few remarks, was in the same high spirits.

"So that was Montana's money that was wired?" he said. "Well, well, just think of that! I thought it was yours."

They talked about the Apache River country; at least the Kid talked about it; but he found Spangler rather tight mouthed, for all his good humor.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," said Spangler, "it's kind of late, and we'll let it go till tomorrow. Say about noon. Then you come in with your money, and we'll go to work."

"From what Cross said," the Kid told him, "you've got a proposition to make."

Spangler put his locked hands across his big stomach, and laughed.

"We'll let that go till tomorrow, too," he said. "This has been a big day, and we'll not put any more into it."

As the Cartridge Kid walked down the street, he heard peals of laughter coming through the open office door and he frowned.

"Almighty funny," he said to himself, "what's tickling them two jaspers that a'way?"

When he reached the hotel he saw Montana at the bar; and he ranged himself alongside of him. The barkeeper was talking.

"As soon as ever I see that ornery cuss come into the place," said the barkeeper, "I point at him and tell him to get. Arizona's a man's state," he said, "and we

only have man's carryings on. If a stage, or a train is held up, it's all right with me.

"If someone steals a horse, well, that's happened before. If a few dozen beeves are rustled some place, that's a job for the sheriff. But a sneak-thief! A pickpocket!" The man gestured his disgust. "That's something I can't stand."

THE Cartridge Kid poured himself out a drink; and there was an uneasy feeling in his mind.

"What's been going on?" he asked.

Montana grinned.

"Seems like the East has been getting shut of some of its vice and sending it out to the free and unsoiled West," he said. "In Pueblo Cordova they have a hombre called the Puddle Duck, who picks pockets, and gets into hotel rooms while the boarders are away. As soon as he's seen in any place, they toss him out."

"Was he in here tonight?" asked the Kid, his ears up.

"Just awhile ago," said the barkeeper. "Looked to me, too, as if he'd just come down the stairs."

"Stay where you are," said the Kid to Montana; and he headed up to his room in long leaps. In a few minutes he came down in equally long ones. "Come on," he said to Montana. "Up on your toes, po'dner; we're going some place."

Montana hustled after him into the street.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "No secrets, Kid."

"A little while ago," said the Cartridge Kid, as they stepped along, "Cross came in to see me. In my room. He got a-talking. And he found out I had my money in a table drawer."

"How'd he find that out?" asked Montana.

"I told him," admitted the Kid. "And more'n that, I showed him."

Montana groaned.

"Some of us never learn anything at all!" he said.

"I know now, I don't know anything," said the Kid. "I ain't making no concealment of it, either. He got me to go out with him. Up to Spangler's place. And all the time they talked they laughed. And for why? While I was there this Puddle Duck jasper was in my room getting a-holt of them bills. When I went up to look just now they were gone."

"They framed you, Kid," said Montana, pulling his holster around so the six-gun it held would be more handy. "Cross and Spangler."

"Sure enough," said the Kid. "That much I know, though, as I said a minute ago, I'm terrible dumb." They cut across the street as they saw a bar of light streaming from Spangler's office window. There was a two wheeled cart, tipped back, with its shafts sticking up in the air, standing opposite the office and they paused behind it.

"What I'm thinking of," said the Kid, "is that this Puddle Duck wouldn't come straight here; he'd put a crooked trail behind him; and, so, he's not here yet."

"Don't seem to be," said Montana, his eyes on the brightly lit interior of the office.

"They're waiting for him," said the Kid, his wrathful eyes upon the lounging figures of Cross and Spangler. "I can tell by the way they sit. If the job was finished and done they'd act different."

THE street was deserted, and very few lights were burning; the rodeo had worn the edge off Pueblo Cordova, and her citizens had not lingered in the streets much after hours.

"Our play is to neck the Duck as he comes along to make delivery," said Montana. "In some dark place; and we'll give him a gun over his head to make sure he'll do no squeaking. A good way to do would be for you to drop

down the street a little, and take him if he comes that way. I'll be waiting if he comes from the other direction."

But the Kid's hand was on Montana's arm.

"Look!" he said. "They hear something."

Both Spangler and Cross had turned in their chairs; Spangler got up and went into a rear room; in a few moments he returned and with him was a narrow-shouldered, rat-like man who grinned and accepted the drink that was poured out for him.

"Most likely the Duck," said the Kid. "And they've got a back door."

The three in the office talked for a space; and Spangler and Cross looked well pleased when the Puddle Duck took a paper wrapped package from his pocket. Spangler examined the contents of this, and amid much laughter put it in the safe and whirled the dial.

"My dinero!" said the Kid. "What say, Montana, if we step in on 'em and stick 'em up?"

"Hell, no," said Montana. "It was all right for you to work that trick on them other two hombres awhile ago; but these two are different parties. They'd have the sheriff after us in an hour."

There were a few more drinks in the office; the Puddle Duck grinned as Spangler counted out some bills to him; and he put them in his pocket.

"Gettin' paid-off," growled the Kid. "For laying hold of my money."

"Don't worry," said Montana. "Hold yourself together, Kid. I got a plan."

"I sure hope it's a good one," said the Cartridge Kid. "And I hope it's got something to do with chucking a little lead into them three jaspers."

"First," said Montana, "you want to get the money. The lead'll come in afterwards."

The Puddle Duck left the office and started down the street. He had only gone a half dozen steps when he stopped; cat-footed he came back; at one side of the office window he peered in as though taking a second and reassuring look at the way the place was laid out. Then, with a grin of derision upon his face, plain in the light from the window, he turned and went quietly away.

"That party is thinking of something," said Montana. "He's got some kind of an idea in his mind."

"You bet you he has," said the Kid, "and I know what it is. He's going to double-cross these other two. What'd that barkeeper say about this Puddle Duck? He said he was a crook, operating in people's rooms when they weren't there. That means offices, too. He's coming back when Cross and Spangler have gone. And he's going to play games with that safe."

"Cripes!" said Montana, "Kid you've got it right. That's just what he's going to do."

IN a very little while Spangler turned off the lights, and he and Cross left the office, and went on their way to the hotel.

"In a minute," said the Kid, "we'll see the Duck. And, we'll let him go in. Then me at the back door and you at the front. And as soon as he pops out, whichever door he uses, one of us'll neck him."

"Good!" said Montana.

The Kid slipped from behind the cart; now that the office light had been turned off, the shadows were thick; and in a moment or two the Kid was at the rear of the office in a wide alley that ran between the rows of buildings. He'd barely got settled when he saw a movement in the shadows; then there was a sound of cautious feet, and a whispering.

"More than one," said the Kid to himself, his hand upon his gun. "The Duck's got a pal."

The men separated, one went around to the front, a second fell back into the deeper shadows; another began operating

on the rear door of Spangler's office. There were three!

The Kid grinned. The gun came out of the holster, and he edged softly toward the spot where he figured the look-out to be watching. He spotted him within a dozen feet of where he himself had been standing. He waited for a space, then he heard a snapping sound, and the creak of hinges. The Duck had forced the door, and was inside!

The Kid took a soundless step forward and the weight of the heavy Colt fell upon the head of the look-out. The Kid caught him as he dropped, and lowered him to the ground. And then, the gun still in his hand, he stepped to the forced door, and was inside. The back room was dark; but there was a dim illumination in the office. The Kid looked in at the communicating doorway. He saw the Puddle Duck squatted before the safe turning the knob, the long fingers of his left hand resting against the lock. The sensitive tips of these were gauging the fall of the tumblers. The Kid heard him chuckle.

"A can!" he said. "No more trouble than a baby's bank."

In a moment the safe door was swung open; the Duck reached a greedy hand into the interior, and took out the paper wrapped parcel he'd given to Spangler a short time before. Like a cat the Kid stepped into the office and grasped the money.

"Excuse me, po'dner," he said, and shoved the muzzle of the big Colt against the back of the Puddle Duck's neck, "that little bundle of money happens to belong to me."

The thief shoved up his hands, and began to whine.

"Listen," he said, "this ain't my job. I was told—"

A gun crashed outside; there was a splintering of glass; the Kid staggered and fell. In an instant the Puddle Duck was on his feet, had grabbed the money and was through the back door. The Kid lifted himself to his knees. There was a trickling of blood down his face. A second gun crashed outside; there was an outcry, and a man fell. Then came a rush of feet. The Kid staggered up, and into the back room.

He heard a voice. Montana's voice, and he heard Montana's quick step!

"Come out," Montana was saying. "I know you're there. Come, or I'll blast you into bits."

THERE was a silence; and through this the Kid heard a kind of chattering. It was a laugh. The Puddle Duck was there; and in the chattering the Kid caught the hard sound of a gun being cocked. The Puddle Duck was there, and he was laughing as Montana advanced upon him in the darkness. He had a cocked gun in his hand; another instant might mean Montana's death. Without a second's hesitation the Cartridge Kid hurled himself toward the sound; he grappled with what he found there, his right fist smashing in blows. And then things went dark.

When he came to, he was in a shadowy place, and Montana was beside him. There was a flare of lights somewhere close at hand, and the sound of excited people talking.

"How's it going?" Montana asked him.

"Head feels kind of hurtin'," answered the Kid.

"You had a slug knocking against it when that fellah fired at you through the window," said Montana. "But I cut him down. Then I see this Duck jasper grab the money and scamper out at the back. I kind of figure he was fixin' to shoot me when you jumped him."

"Listen," said the Kid; "where's the money?"

"I split that package in two," said Montana, "and I got one split in each boot. When I heard all them people coming, I carried you over here where

you wouldn't be seen. Do you reckon you can walk now?"

The Kid got to his feet.

"Kind of weak," he said. "But when I get a bandage around this hurt, and get some sleep, I'll be all right."

III

THE Cartridge Kid passed through the hands of the eye-glassed doctor, who saw to the ills of the folk of Pueblo Cordova; and the doctor said that while his wound was not a serious one it was the kind of thing that needed looking after.

"A week in bed," said the doctor, beaming through his lenses, "and you'll be all ready to shoot again."

The Kid grinned at this; and when the doctor had gone away he said to Montana:

"Come morning, take one thousand dollars, and go up and see Spangler. Get that paper from him, and pay him. I'm not easy in my mind while that hombre's got hold of it."

In the morning Montana took the money as requested, and strolled up the street to Spangler's office. In about a half hour he came back.

"What was the proceedings?" asked the Kid, his head swathed in bandages, and resting back on a number of pillows.

"He was considerable riled," said Montana. "Sat looking at his busted safe, and talked about how nobody could trust nobody any more. When I mentioned about the paper, and told him I had the money to pay down, he roused up. He wanted to know where you got the money; he said right away it was you that broke into the safe. I said he was talking like somebody that had been drinking too frequent; and that the money was the same that you'd won by lambastin' his fighter. And what did he mean saying that money had been in his safe.

"'Not since you took it out of it yesterday afternoon to pay off,' I says to him. 'And if that money ever got back there again after that,' I says, 'it's mighty funny; and I wonder,' I says, 'who put it there.'

"He quieted down after that, seeing he'd gone a mite too far. But he wouldn't give me the paper."

"He wouldn't!" said the Kid, and began to reach for his clothes.

"He said that business was with you. He'd been written to, to turn the paper over to you, and no one else, and that's what he was going to do, he said."

"I'm going up there," said the Kid. "Pronto! If that jasper talks back to me I'll shoot him right down to the ankle bones."

"You're going to stay in bed and get better of them hurts," Montana told him, grimly. "So settle back. That writing's got some time before it's in any danger; and you can go rearin' in at him when you're fit and well." After he'd got the Kid in a state of quietness, he sat down on the edge of the bed and rolled a cigarette. "I viewed the remains of the party that shot in the window at you," he told the Kid. "And who should it turn out to be but one of the card-flippers who made your acquaintance at Desert Rim. The other one, which I take to be the one you knocked in the head, is in the town jail; but I ain't heard no word of the Puddle Duck at all."

"I couldn't have hit him very hard," said the Kid. "Just about that time I was feeling as if I hadn't much left to do anything with. And I guess when you were lugging me away, he slipped through the alley."

NEXT day Montana had to go riding into Santa Rita, there to get a train for Phoenix where he had some business of a sporting character to attend to.

"Back in about four days, Kid," he said as he shook hands with the bandaged youth in the bed. "You'll be moving around by then."

It was about mid-afternoon of that same day, and the Kid was in a doze when there came a knock on the door, and Eddie Drevener came in.

"Hi-yoh," said Eddie. "What's all this I hear about you being shooted?"

The Kid shook hands with him, but not with any warmth. Eddie was brother to the finest girl that ever stepped, but he wasn't much like her. The Cartridge Kid had three classes for the people he knew; good, pretty good, and tin-horn. And Eddie Drevener was only pretty good.

"How come I see you in a far off place like Pueblo Cordova?" asked the Kid. "Thought you were sashayin' around New Orleans."

Eddie pulled up a chair, and lighted a cigarette.

"I've been working around St. Louis since then," he said. "Horses." He waved the hand that held the cigarette. "Breeding 'em and selling 'em's all right; but, brother, racing 'em is the real thing to do with 'em."

The Kid looked at him with speculative eyes.

"You racin' hosses now?" he asked.

"I've got one or two," Eddie said. "Mighty nice, too. They got me some money at St. Louis. I'm on my way to the coast with them now, and am working a few stops. It just happens," said Eddie, "that I've a match race on with a party named Cross at Santa Rita, and while I was talking to him he told me you were here, on that business of Margot's."

"Yeah," said the Kid. "She asked me to attend to that for her."

Eddie Drevener had an ugly look in his eyes.

"That's one thing about Margot," he said. "She always turns things over to other people. Me, I'm nobody." He forced a laugh. "Well, let it go," he said. "Maybe she knows what she means, though I will say, I don't."

The Kid made no reply to this. Eddie shook the ashes from the cigarette.

"Not," he said, "that I got anything against you, old scout. Nor her, for that matter. But, I am her brother, and when there's family business you'd think I'd get the call." Still the Kid said nothing; and after a moment Eddie went on. "But we'll let it go, as I've just said. When Cross told me you were here," said Eddie, "I thought I'd step in. Especially as somebody had bounced a slug off you; but at the same time," said he, with a sly smile, "to see how you were fixed."

"You mean in dinero?" asked the Kid.

"Yeah. You know it costs a good bit to carry horses around, and shipping these on from San Antone, my last stop's got me down to gravel."

"How much do you have to get?" asked the Kid.

"Let's see," said Eddie. "About fifteen hundred'd do. That'd carry me over until I'd run a horse or two and had Cross' shirt and shoe laces. Then I'd pay you right back."

THE Kid regarded him, steadily.

"There ain't fifteen hundred in the roll," the Kid said. "What about half that much?"

Eddie frowned; he tossed the cigarette end through the open window.

"It's not much," he said. "I've got bills to pay, bets to get down."

The Kid counted on his fingers.

"Let's say nine hundred," he offered. "I've got a little more than that, but as I'm laid up, I'll have to keep some on hand."

Eddie reluctantly accepted this. The Kid got the hotel manager to take his money out of the safe and bring it up. He counted off nine hundred, and the remainder was locked up once more. Eddie pocketed the money easily, smoked another cigarette, then shook hands and departed.

Two-Gallon came in during the afternoon to see if there was anything the Kid wanted.

"What's this hoss racin' I hear about at Santa Rita?" the Kid asked.

Two-Gallon balanced on the window sill, his huge hat in his hands.

"There's some goin's on like that," he said. "Tomorrow and the next day. Cross' hosses are going to run. And there's a fellah from New Orleans with some new stock, so I'm told."

TWO-GALLON and the Kid were playing old sledge on a board laid accross the bed next night, when there was a knock on the door, and Eddie Drevener came in, dusty, and rather excited.

"What's up?" asked the Kid. "You look like somebody's been shoving you around."

Eddie sat down; he mopped his face with a loud handkerchief and fanned himself with his hat.

"I've just rode in from Santa Rita," he said. "I've had lots of bad luck there."

"That so?" said the Kid.

"This taking horses around the country in box cars don't do them any good," said Eddie. "It stiffens their legs and takes the jump out of them. That horse of mine today wasn't ready to run."

"It lost, eh?" said the Cartridge Kid.

"That horse of Cross' wouldn't have had a chance," said Eddie, "if mine had only been limbered up."

"Well," said the Kid, "a hoss is only a hoss. You're supposed to do the thinkin'."

"Listen," said Eddie Drevener. "I've been doing some of that. Cross got to laughing at my runners, and I told him while they were a little shabby just now because of traveling around, if he'd give me a week for exercising I'd make anything he had look sick." Eddie went on fanning himself with his hat. "So I made a match with him."

"Yeah?" said the Kid, and looked at him, steadily.

"One thousand in real money," said Eddie, exultantly; "and he's covering it with three. Three thousand to one that no horse I've got'll do a mile in two fifty.

"He's crazy! Any horse I've got'll do that. If I could stay around this country long enough and all the horse owners were like him, I'd make a fortune."

"What," said the Kid, "are you going to do for dinero—to met your end of the bet?"

"You know," said Eddie, "I figured it out that after I'd told you how easy this was, and shown you—"

"Wait," said the Kid. "You ain't by any chance thinking to get that money from me?"

Eddie looked astonished.

"Sure I am," he said. "Why, Kid, this thing is so sure—"

"Hold it!" said the Cartridge Kid. "And wait till I tell you. I put that nine hundred down to you because it was mine and being mine I could do what I like with it. But this other money ain't mine. It belongs to Margot. It's to pay for the Apache River title. So that's out. You nor nobody else is going to have no stiff-legged old hoss runnin' for that money."

Eddie got up. He dusted off his shining boots with the handkerchief.

"What you mean is," he said, "you don't intend to help me out?"

"As far as I can go, I have helped you," answered the Cartridge Kid. "I've helped you nine hundred dollars worth."

"That thousand dollars Margot handed over to you," said Eddie, "is Drevener money. I'm a Drevener, and I'm asking you to fork it over."

The Kid smiled.

"Don't amuse me too much," he said. "When I get to laughing right out my head hurts."

"If Margot was here," said Eddie, "she'd give the money to me. She knows what a good thing is, even if you don't."

"If she was here," said the Kid, "she could do what she liked. But she ain't, so I hold on to the money until I can get out. Then I'm going to do what she told me to do."

Eddie Drevener put the handkerchief in his pocket and the hat on his head.

"All right," he said. "If that's your last word, I'll say no more. But I'm not done with this. Don't think it. I'll be back again; maybe tonight."

When Eddie had left the room, Two-Gallon said:

"That there boy ain't fitten to be matchin' himself against Douglas Cross. Nor yet Dick Spangler. They'll take the hide off his back."

"Have you heard anything about the racin' that's been goin' on today at Santa Rita?" asked the Kid.

"Nothin' had come in when I was on the street," said Two-Gallon. "But what say if I go out and pick somethin' up?"

"Go ahead," said the Kid.

Two-Gallon was back in an hour; he chewed a toothpick, and sat on a chair at the Kid's bedside.

"After races, and fights," he said, "or after a rodeo, or anything at all that-a-way, if you want news, go into eatin' places. After them kind of things, people always want to eat; and while they're eatin' they talk. So I went into Amado's chilli joint, thinkin' I'd meet up with someone I knew. Amado's," said Two-Gallon, "is across the street from the telegraph office; and while I was sitting up at the bar I see this party that was just in talking to you writing off a telegram, and sending it."

"Did you?" said the Kid, and he looked gloomy.

"After a bit Amado's son, Jose, came in. He's a rodeo rider, and he used to ride races until he got too heavy. I rode against him lots of times," said Two-Gallon, "and he was good. Well, he was at Santa Rita today, and he saw this party's hoss run. He said it was scan'lous. He said that hoss hadn't no more go in it than it would if it was rubber legged and had its feet crossed."

"Maybe," said the Kid, "the other hosses Eddie's got are better."

"Jose said Cross was using that there young party like a sucker," said Two-Gallon. "He said everybody was noticing it."

NEXT day Eddie Drevener came in to see the Kid.

"Just to get things straight," he said, "I wired Margot last night. And this morning I got this."

He took a telegram out of his pocket, and handed it to the Kid. It read:

> Edward Drevener,
> Pueblo Cordova, Arizona.
> By all means have the Kid give you the money you need. Stop. Tell him I said so. Stop. Other money will be sent him, if needed.
>
> Margot.

The Kid threw the telegram down on the bedspread.

"Well," he said, "I didn't expect it, but if that's the way she thinks about it, all right. When do you have to put up the money?"

"Today. The horse will run day after tomorrow."

The one thousand dollars were taken out of the office safe and paid down to Eddie; and he stuffed the bills away, pleased and excited.

"Listen," he said, "you don't need to be feeling blue about this. I know what I'm doing. I'm a horseman. And these animals of mine can bust that much time all to bits."

But, a little while after Eddie had gone, the Kid's uneasiness grew until he could stand it no longer. So, when Two-Gallon came in, he set himself to write a telegram of his own.

Montana Jones,
Covington Hotel,
Phoenix, Arizona.
Hustle back soon as possible. Things look bad.

Cartridge Kid.

This dispatched, the Kid felt relieved. He had a drink, he ate his lunch; he, to Two-Gallon's surprise, put on his clothes; and he went down into the barber shop and was shaved. While this latter operation was going on, a big man in the next chair spoke to him. It was Spangler.

"I see," said Spangler, "you got your head laid open."

"Yeah," said the Kid. "Being tied up this way, people get to notice it."

"As far as I can make out," said Spangler, "it was opened the same night somebody opened my safe."

The Kid grinned.

"Montana told me you was mighty unfortunate one night," he said. "You must have lost a sight of dinero."

"If I'd been around," said Spangler, "I'd squirted some lead."

"I wouldn't wonder," said the Kid. "Fact is anybody would, in defence of the bank stuff you had locked up there. Whether it belonged to them or somebody else."

In spite of the lather covering his face, Spangler managed to look vicious. But a moment later he began to chuckle loudly.

"Oh, well," he said, "what's the difference. It comes and goes. Sometimes it's easy, sometimes not; if a man cracks a safe open, he might lose the proceeds on a horse race." He stretched out in the chair, and the soap bubbled around his lips as he laughed. "It's a queer world," he said; "but we often get some fun out of it. Only for that, maybe it wouldn't be worth while."

"I've often thought of that," said the Kid. "Me likin' plenty of comic things myself."

"I hear," said Spangler, "Eddie Drevener's in this section, with his racehorses."

"Yeah," said the Kid. "Run a hoss race with that po'dner of yours, Cross, yesterday. And I hear he blamed near won it, too."

SPANGLER billowed with laughter at this.

"He's got some fine animals," he said, chokingly. "If you want them to keep on their feet all you got to do is brace 'em up a little bit. I've never seen but the one of 'em go. And that one must have run a mighty nice race when he was younger."

When Spangler got out of his chair, the Kid said to him:

"Now that I'm able to be on my feet again, I'll be around to finish up with you."

"You mean about the Apache River thing?" Spangler seemed to be enjoying himself immensely. "All right. Come

on around any time you have the mind. I'm always willing to do business."

Montana got into Pueblo Cordova that night.

"It just happened," he said, "I'd finished up all I had to do, and there was a train inside a half hour."

He sat down while the Kid told him of the appearance of Eddie Drevener on the scene, and what had followed.

"I can see," said Montana when the story was finished, "that the boys are playing around again; and this time the football is Eddie."

"If it was only Eddie," said the Kid, "they could have a plumb fine time if they wanted to and I'd never stop them."

"Right enough," said Montana, soberly. "It's you, too; and it's the girl." He arose and walked up and down. "Where is this young squirt stopping?" he said.

"Right here," said the Kid; "in this hotel."

They found that Eddie was in Room 20; and Montana said:

"Go up and talk to him; I'll be along in a little while."

A half hour later, the Kid was in Eddie's room listening to his stories of speed and races and of his stable of horses in particular, when Montana knocked on the door.

"A friend of mine, Montana Jones," said the Kid to Eddie. "Montana's an old horseman. Awhile ago I was telling him about your stock, and about the bet you've made."

Eddie laughed.

"A mile in 2.50!" he said. "With stuff like mine! Why they'd walk it in that time."

Montana sat astride a chair.

"I remember when you bought those horses," he said. "I didn't know who you were, but I knew Doc. Savery who sold them to you. There were four of them; half-bred, or maybe quarter-bred, for Savery was a hombre you never could follow close enough to be sure of what he was doing. He liked mixing bloods to see what'd come out of it. And in the end he had a lot of mongrels. Some of them," admitted Montana, "could sprint but none of them could stand up under punishment."

"These horses of mine," said Eddie offended, "are derned good runners."

"Pilot Six," said Montana, "Jerry Boy, Axemon, and Alfalfa. I know all about them. None of them ever could run more than a little. It was Alfalfa you put against one of Cross' horses at Santa Rita; and I know he never had a chance."

"Friend," said Eddie, agitated, "maybe you're a horseman as the Kid says; but you don't know my stock. Them horses of mine can—"

"Lemme talk," said Montana; "we'll get somewhere, sooner. I know your horses and I know Cross' and I know when you laid that money of the Kid's to win, you were just being drug around by the coat tails."

EDDIE got up, angry and excited.

"Look-it here," he said, "you can't come in my room this way and tell me I'm a half-wit."

"I ain't interested in anything but one thing," said Montana, "and that's the thing I'm going to say right now. Cross' been making a fool out of you He told you the Kid was here, and he told you the Kid had some money. And he knew you'd try to borrow that money. Also he knew that, because of your sister, the Kid'd lend it to you."

"You're a liar," said Eddie Drevener.

"Wait a minute," said Montana. "You lost the money to Cross, and then they started to rib you. They got you mad. And then, just as they knowed you'd do, you busted in on the Kid again. And this time you tried to get the money your sister had give him to get that Apache River paper. He wouldn't give it. And then," said Montana, "you wired

your sister at St. Louis and she said no."

Eddie, in a fury, his hands clinched, trembling, shouted:

"She said yes; I showed her answer to the Kid."

"She said no," said Montana. "I was down at the telegraph office a little while ago, and I got a look at a copy of her telegram. She said 'no.' And then you took a blank and typed a false wire yourself on the machine downstairs in the hotel office. The clerk saw you do it."

Eddie Drevener aimed a blow at Montana, but that gentleman drew back his head; also he gripped the youth by the wrist.

"And listen," said Montana, "we ain't going to have anything like that. You faked that wire; you showed it to the Kid and fooled him with it. And you put that dinero down bettin' that one of your nags could do a mile in 2.50. You might as well have laid your money on the proposition that it could go hell-peltin' around the moon."

"I'm going to run Jerry Boy for that money," said Eddie. "And he'll get it for me."

"Jerry Boy could never do 2.50. Not even when Doc. Savery had him; and now he's four years older." Montana got up. "But tomorrow I'm going to ride along down to Santa Rita and look at them hosses; and if they're what I think they are I'm going to lock that stable door and then tell you what you're going to do."

"You're goin' to tell me," yelled Eddie. "Say, old party, who do you think you are?"

"I'm the fellah that's goin' to try and dig you out of the hole your danged foolishness has got you into," said Montana, quietly.

"I'm not asking any help from you!" said Eddie, heatedly. "You nor nobody eles. And you stay away from them horses. You're not going to put a hand on them."

"All I want to do is see them run a little," said Montana.

"You'll see nothing," stormed the youth. "I know what I'm doing, and you're going to keep out of it."

Montana grabbed him by the shirt front and shoved him against the wall.

"NOW, look here," said Montana. "You're a dirty little whelp; you've been crooked and sneaking in this thing, and that being so I hate to listen to you talk. From now on," he said, "keep shut up. Do you realize what that little trick of the faked telegram'd do for you? It'd get you about five years in the state can."

Eddie was frightened by this; but he tried to hide it.

"I had to have the money. And anyhow it was family money. And, outside that, the Kid here wouldn't make a charge against me, I know."

"I know it, too," said Montana. "But besides that, I know the telegraph company would. And, remember, these big boys in business play rough. So if you've got any sense you'll do what your friends think best." Montana released him. "Think you're all right for a little ride in the morning," said Montana to the Kid.

"Yeah," said the Kid.

"All right. Early. And," looking at Eddie, "you too. Six o'clock."

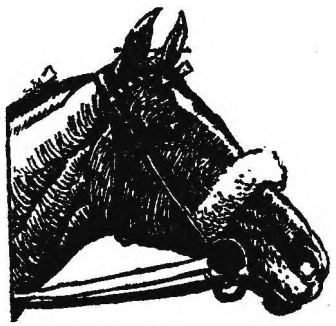
Eddie swore bitterly after Montana had gone out of the room. The Kid who had kept silent during the interview said to him:

"You're in trouble. And you've got me in trouble. So keep quiet. These people have got us roped, Eddie; but Montana's a wise old bird. Don't fight him, and maybe he'll get us loose."

They saddled up and left Pueblo Cordova next day. In the early afternoon they were at the race track at Santa Rita. One after the other the Drevener horses were brought out of the stable,

long legged, spare-looking beasts; they were saddled and ridden by Two-Gallon around the track.

"You must have been terrible excited when they talked you into that bet," said Montana, as he turned away.



"Why, you didn't time one of them," said Eddie. "How can you tell—"

But Montana stopped him.

"Why waste talk," he said. "Son, I didn't even have to see them run. They were foaled poor, and they've stayed poor. If you're going to save that money you've got to think of a way out. If you can't do that, then you've got to be helped."

"I can't welsh on a bet!" said Eddie. "And, anyhow, the money's up, and I couldn't if I wanted to. I've got to run one of these horses against 2.50 in time, and that's all there is to it."

Montana watched the stablemen leading the four horses away; he scratched his chin, and seemed to meditate.

"Pity," he said, "you ain't got another horse." Then as Eddie looked at him, he added, "I mean a good fast horse." There was an old Mexican sitting on a rail a little distance away. He had a huge straw hat upon his head and he was smoking a husk cigarette. "Friend," said Montana, "you don't happen to have a runnin' hoss you could sell at a reasonable price?"

The old Mexican grinned.

"*Si*, señor. She's a good, too, cheap."

"What kind of money are you asking for this animal of yours?" asked Montana.

"She's price ten dollar," said the old man, still grinning. "Nice run. She's name's Buscadero."

"Give him ten dollars," said Montana to Eddie.

"Fools," said Eddie, his face very red, "have you gone plumb insane? Or do you think I have?"

"Give him ten dollars for Buscadero," said Montana. "You need help and I'm showing you how to get it. That little hoss'll run the best ten dollars worth you ever saw."

Eddie looked at the Cartridge Kid, who shrugged his shoulders.

"If Montana says do it, do it," the Kid told Eddie. "He must think there's something in it, or he wouldn't tell you about it."

TWO-GALLON edged up nearer to Eddie.

"Po'dner," said Two-Gallon, in a low tone, "that Buscadero can run; he's three-quarters Mexican cayuse, and the other quarter's just plain hell. I've seen tracks he's run on that had hoof-prints burned into 'em a whole season afterwards."

Eddie, angry and muttering, took out a ten dollar note and gave it to the Mexican. In return the man handed him a paper.

"Bill o' sale," said Montana. "Shove it in your pocket; here comes Spangler."

Spangler bulked along good humoredly, smoking a large cigar.

"You boys are out mighty early," he said.

"Yeah," said Montana. "Eddie here wanted to clock his hoss, and thought he'd better have a couple other opinions."

"What was the time?" asked Spangler, greatly entertained. "Pretty nice I guess. For this Drevener stock's right good I know."

"Pretty hard to tell what a real fast hoss can do, on a track like this," said Montana. "Timin' only gives you an idea.

We only sent Buscadero around once; but that was enough to show the kind of way he picks 'em up and puts 'em down."

Spangler had stopped smiling.

"Buscadero," he said to Eddie Drevener. "You've got Alfalfa, Jerry Boy, Pilot Six, and Axemon; but you don't own a horse named Buscadero."

Eddie looked at Montana, who winked at him, encouragingly.

"Since when," demanded Eddie, "have you started to tell me what I've got and what I ain't got?"

"You've got four hosses," insisted Spangler, "and you ain't never had but four."

"Well," interrupted Montana, "there's no use wearin' out a lot of words about nothin' at all. The boy ought to know what hosses he owns; and, knowin' he owns them, who's going to say he don't."

"You think you're a smart hombre, don't you?" said Spangler. "Well, let me tell you this; you're not going to do any more monkeyshines down here. I've been having an eye on you, and I'm going to keep it on you."

"It's all right with me, brother," said Montana. "But I wouldn't let that eye go without winkin' too long if I was you. You might do it an almighty lot of damage."

"We made you an even bet," said Spangler to Eddie, "that none of your four horses could—"

"Nothin was said about how many hosses there were," said Eddie, nervously. "Your bet was that none of my stock could do a mile on this track in 2.50."

"Is that came down on paper?" asked Montana. "In that way?"

"Yes; and in the stakeholder's hands."

"Well what more's to be said?" asked Montana. "Just as I says a minute ago, there's no use wearin' out a lot of words about nothin'," he added to Spangler.

All the good humor had gone out of Spangler's face; his look was cold, his eyes had a steely stare.

"Don't forget," he said, "I gave you warnin'. I've heard here and there you got the idea you're fast with a gun; but if you try any clever work, po'dner, you're going to need all your speed."

"That's mighty square, givin' me notice like that," said Montana. "I'm obliged to you."

"Down here in Arizona we got a way of not letting people take room that don't belong to them," said Spangler. "So be careful, friend; that's all I got to say."

AT Santa Rita there was an adobe hotel called the Longhorn; there was a wide veranda with sun blinds and little tables; and the four sat at one of these and drank iced drinks.

Eddie Drevener was not easy in his mind.

"This whole thing has got me kind of worked up," he said. "Here I got a ten dollar hoss entered in a thousand dollar race.

"And a hoss I ain't ever seen. And the people I'm racing with have started to think I'm putting up a job on them."

"So you are," said Montana. "With our help, so you are. And why not? Here's a set of jaspers that have laid out plans to trim you down to the bones. They're as crooked as a twisted rope. They laughed you into this thousand dollars belonging to your sister; they expected you to get hold of it one way or another, and you did. You got hold of it dirty—"

"Now, listen!" said Eddie, jumping up; but the Cartridge Kid pulled him down.

"Shut up!" said the Kid. "You got it coming; take it."

"They wanted the money so they wouldn't have to give up the title to that Apache River tract, and you've played right into their hands. So us being, in a way of speakin', friends of yours, we step in and show you how to whip them in their crookedness. Buscadero's goin' to pull you out of this jam," said Montana.

"Your own hoss, that you bought with money."

Eddie's lip curled. He said:

"Here you are preaching to me because I faked a telegram when I was desperate; and, at the same time you're trying to get me into something just as dirty. Or maybe worse."

"We're not trying to get you into it," said Montana. "You *are* in it. And let me tell you, son, if you don't like the smell of it, keep it in your mind next time you feel like monkeying with what belongs to somebody else. You've been to college I understand; anyway you got that thing they call education. Well, I ain't been to college, and the kind of learnin' I've got is the kind you pick up in cow camps and around the edges of gamblin' houses. But there's one thing I've got fixed tight in my mind; when some jasper tries to rob me, I rob him back. Maybe that ain't Sunday school law, but it's the kind that's practiced along this Southwest border."

Next day Montana and the Kid went down to the track about half an hour before the horse was to run; Two-Gallon was at the stable saddling up.

"Here's Spangler," said the Cartridge Kid, as he leaned against the rail, his thumbs in his gun-belt, "and some friends."

"Mighty sharp lookin' hombres, too," said Montana, his eye upon the advancing group. "And each with his smoke-pole well displayed."

SPANGLER wore a gun-belt with a six-shooter in a holster, pulled forward so as to be plainly seen. Cross bore him company. The Kid saw no sign of arms on Cross; but that proved nothing; if they thought there was any occasion for guns it was certain he had one. There were four others in the party, swaggering, rough-looking men who might be cowpokes, or outlaws, or any one of a half dozen things.

"Whatever they are," said Montana to the Cartridge Kid, "they are plenty tough. So play them careful Kid; and don't miss a trick."

"Hi-yoh," greeted Spangler. "Some friends of ours who are interested in seein' that things are right," indicating the four gun men. "They thought they might as well ride out and look."

"Speakin' for the owner of Buscadero who is absent for a few minutes, seein' that same hoss gets saddled proper, I bids you welcome, gents," said Montana, with a wave of the hand.

The Cartridge Kid saw Eddie heading for them, coming from the stable. There was haste in the youth's movements, and agitation in his manner; so the Kid slipped away to meet him.

"That friend of yours, is crazy," said Eddie.

"I just saw the horse he's going to send out to win my bet." He gesticulated, angrily. "That thing ain't a horse at all," he declared, "it's more like some kind of a centipede. I'll not let it run. I told that fellah not to bring it out. I'd be laughed clean out of Arizona if anybody ever saw it on a track, and knew I had anything to do with it."

"Listen," said the Kid, soothingly: "I thought that was all settled? Montana says this hoss is to run, and it's goin' to run."

Eddie ripped out an oath, and started for where Montana was standing; but the Kid caught him by the arm, and jerked him back.

"You've done all the hurt you're goin' to do," the Kid told him. "So fold your hands and shut your mouth. Montana's took over the job of savin' this money, and all you're goin' to do is to look on."

Judge Helmsly, a dignitary of Santa Rita, and several other important gentlemen of the border town had appeared by this time.

"As three o'clock was the hour named, and as I see the persons interested are present," said Judge Helmsly, "suppose

we have the horse on the track and get him started."

Two-Gallon was watching at the stable door; Montana waved a hand to him; Two-Gallon disappeared for a moment and then led a saddled horse out on the track and up to the place where the officials were standing. The horse had a worn look; its hoofs were big, its joints were ugly and enlarged, it had an uncouth looking head, and a rat tail. Judge Helmsly looked at the animal in surprise.

"What's this?" he said. Then to Two-Gallon. "Get that old beast off the track, there's going to be some running."

"Just a moment," said Montana. He looked at Spangler and Cross, then at Helmsly and the others. "Gents," he said, "this is Buscadero; he's the property of Eddie Drevener, and'll do the runnin' for this stake."

"You mean to say," Spangler asked, amazed, that this old sack-of-bones is going to run? That he's the hoss Drevener's picked?"

"I mean to say just that." Spangler and Cross roared with laughter; their followers grinned and winked at each other. "Buscadero is a good hoss," said Montana. "I advised Eddie to buy him. There's sales papers, and all the rest of the things. Want to see 'em?"

BUT Spangler waved a hand, still laughing.

"I don't want to see but one thing," he said, "and that thing is that old bundle of hide trying to run."

"A while ago," said Montana, "you objected to this hoss."

"I withdraw all objections," said Spangler. "All I got to say is if Eddie Drevener bought that nag, he's crazy; and if he lets it run, he's a sight crazier than that again."

"All right, son," said Montana to Two-Gallon. "Hop up."

Two-Gallon got into the saddle; and it looked for a moment as though Buscadero was going to break in two under his weight. The old horse's rump stuck up at one end, and his long, thin neck and misshapen head lifted at the other; he mumbled at the bit and slobbered; and he winked a dim but knowing old eye. There were hoots of derision, and shouts of laughter. Eddie strove to get away from the Kid's clutch; he tried to shout a protest. But the Kid held him fast, and stopped his mouth with a hand.

"The bet is for three thousand dollars to one thousand that Drevener's horse can't run a mile in 2.50," said Judge Helmsly. Montana nodded. The Judge looked puzzled at the whole proceeding,

but lifted a hand. "Take your place," he said to Two-Gallon. "At the gun you go."

Two-Gallon wheeled the old horse away from the mark; the animal did this awkwardly, the grotesque hoofs kicking up clouds of dust. Several times Two-Gallon charged at the mark, Buscadero's hoofs thundering and seeming to be thrown from all directions. Then in the midst of another uncouth rush, the gun sounded, and the horse was off. Two-Gallon, sitting well forward, disappeared in a cloud of dust. Slowly the cloud in the shape of a tall pillar rounded the half mile circle.

"Looks like another pro-cession to Boothill," chuckled Spangler. "That old hoss is somethin' like fate; it advances, but mighty slow."

"Seems like Buscadero's havin' some trouble gettin' started," said Montana. "But wait a bit; Two-Gallon'll get him unlimbered in the third quarter."

There was a laugh at this; and as the horse reached the half mile there was a

chorus of mock cheers and burlesque advice, as it went by.

"I make it 1.39," said Cross, his eye on his watch.

Spangler guffawed.

"He'll do the second half in about 3.00 flat," jeered he. "That is, if he finishes at all."

But Cross gave him a swift look.

"That a hoss like that can do a half mile in 1.39 is kind of a surprise to me," he said. "And the rider, as far as I can make out, ain't been shoving him any."

Buscadero disappeared in the dust of the third quarter going like a freight engine on a badly ballasted road. When the pillar of dust reached the three-quarter mark, Montana snapped his watch shut.

"The old boy's limbering up," he said. "He did that quarter in .29."

"What!" said Spangler, "that plug couldn't do a quarter mile in twenty-nine seconds if he—"

But Cross interrupted him.

"The time for the third quarter was .29," he said slowly.

"Buscadero's a good hoss," said Montana. "Not much for looks, but a real jolt of lightnin' when he once gets them feet going."

With increasing swiftness, the pillar of dust came on around the track. Then, through the thick of it, Buscadero could be seen, coming with the speed and uproar of a landslide; his thin old neck was outstretched, his ill-shaped head was pointed forward like a wedge, the play of the knotted, big-jointed legs was both tremendous and wonderful. With Two-Gallon crouched far forward in the saddle, as though whispering in the old horse's ear they went thundering over the line.

Judge Helmsly put his watch in his pocket.

"Time 2.34," he said with a smile. "And quite a remarkable performance."

Cross turned away, a bitter look in his face; but not so Spangler. He faced Montana Jones, the four gun bearers at his back.

"That," said Spangler, "was as dirty a piece of work as I ever see anywhere. A doctored-up hoss; one that don't belong to Drevener; a hoss that—"

"You passed him," said Montana. "The Judge here heard you withdraw your objections, you wouldn't look at the sale papers when they was offered."

"Sharp hombre!" said Spangler, "but smart as you are you ain't goin' to collect that money."

"The money," said Judge Helmsly, as he took the stakes from the breast-pocket of his coat, "belongs to Mr. Drevener." He handed the bills to Eddie who had approached, a dazed look on his face. "There should be four thousand dollars. Will you count them, please."

Eddie did so.

"All right, Judge," he said, stuffing the money in his pocket, "and many thanks."

As he spoke Spangler gripped him by the shoulder.

"You dirty double-crosser!" said the man, "give me that—"

But Montana Jones struck him upon the side of the head, turning him around; the gunmen with the practised trickery of their trade went for their Colts; but from behind them came the voice of the Cartridge Kid:

"Don't bear down, gents. Play it careful. One shot in any direction, and I'll cut each one of your spines in two pieces."

MONTANA had his six-shooter out, and Two-Gallon came running up, unlimbering his Colt. Spangler, fury in his eyes, was about to speak, but Cross stopped him.

"Maybe," Cross said, coldly, "you don't know when you're licked. But I do. Stack the shooters, gentlemen." He gave the Kid and Montana a tight smile as Spangler and his henchmen moved away, surly and with sidelong looks. "A nice afternoon," he said. "And a surprising one.

Adios, but don't forget, we'll be seeing you again."

When they had gone, Montana looked at Two-Gallon.

"What'd you do with Buscadero?" he asked.

"The old Mex is got him."

"All right, said Montana. He took out a ten-dollar bill and handed it to Eddie. "Here you are," he said, "and let's have that bill of sale."

While Eddie was doing this, he said: "Is that horse yours?"

"Yeah. Nice animal to have, too. I generally take him around with me. He brings in many a dollar. And now," with a look at the Cartridge Kid, "let's see that money split up. You're handin' the Kid nineteen hundred of those dollars; and then things'll be all on the square once again."

IV

THE Cartridge Kid and Montana Jones stopped at Spangler's office next day, and found he'd broken camp. A typed notice stuck upon the door said:

"All the remaining business of Cross & Spangler will be attended to by Senor Alfredo di Zavedo, Plaza Ignatius."

"Huh," said the Kid; "are these jaspers framing another little merry-go-round, do you think?"

"We'll see," said Montana, grimly. "First let's interview Zavedo, and then we'll make up our minds."

At the Plaza Ignatius they found the house of Senor Alfredo di Zavedo; and on a wide porch, in a cane chair, smoking a cigarette in a long holder was the senor himself.

He smiled when they made themselves known; and he waved them to other cane chairs, and saw to it that they were provided with iced drinks. He was a small man and old; his shoulders were stooped, his face was deeply lined; but he had sharp eyes that seemed to see everything.

"I am pleased, Senors," he said. "I have been told you would be here."

"I was plumb astonished to find Spangler had pulled out," said the Kid, "knowin' as he did that there was business between us that hadn't been finished."

Senor Alfredo di Zavedo smiled; he waved his cigarette.

"Most of his business at Pueblo Cordova is done; his office was but a hired one while the rodeo lasted and for a little afterwards. What remains of his affairs," and he looked from one to the other of them, "I am to attend to."

"You know about the title to that Drevener land on the Apache River?"

"I know, Senor," said old Zavedo. "One thousand dollars is to be paid and the paper is to be turned over to one known as the Cartridge Kid, who is agent for Margot Drevener."

"Correct," said the Kid. He took out a roll of bills and counted down one thousand dollars on the table. "If you don't object, Senor, we'll settle that right now."

Zavedo smiled; he clapped his hands, and a half-breed servant appeared. Receiving his instructions, the man brought out a metal box which he placed upon the table; and Zavedo opened it with a key which hung with others upon a chain around his neck. He took a folded paper out of the box, a crackling, ancient parchment lettered in the Spanish script of long ago; there were illuminated capitals, certain words were written in blue, or red, or black.

The thin, old hands of Zavedo fumbled with this; the sharp eyes were filled with covetousness.

"Senors," he said, "I have a great admiration for things like this, old illuminated documents of the Spanish time in this country. I do not know what value is put upon this land upon the Apache River, but if this paper were mine I would not give it for ten times the value."

The Cartridge Kid grinned good-humoredly.

"Yeah," he said, "I've heard of people who had that kind of liking for such things."

He carelessly pushed the money toward the old man; but when Zavedo passed the title to him it was with a shaking, reluctant hand.

"Quick, Senor!" said the old man, appealingly. "Into your pocket with it. I can not bear seeing it leave me."

And in a little while the two bade Senor Zavedo good day and left. And they went back to the hotel and had some rye with water and ice.

"Well," said Montana, "that's a job finished. And one that gave a right smart of trouble, too."

"I would have thought," said the Cartridge Kid, "that Spangler, seein' he wanted this tract of land so almighty bad, would have stayed and put up some kind of a last play for it."

"That hoss race must have kind of broke him down," said Montana. "Funny how a fellah's chock-full of fight, and does some mighty nice strugglin', and then goes limp, just when you think he'll be pullin' himself together for a few extra licks."

THEY were sitting in a quiet corner of the porch, and the latticed blinds were so drawn as to keep out the sun. After a drink or two more, Montana went into the hotel office to write some letters, and a little later a waiter came out upon the porch.

"She is a lady," he said. "And much she will like to speak to you."

"What kind of a lady?" asked the Kid.

"She's a beautiful lady," said the boy. "And ver' much she'd talk."

There was a rustle of skirts, and a sweet voice said, pleadingly:

"Senor, if you will be so kind! One moment, it is so important. I am so anxious."

The Kid got up. She was indeed a beautiful lady. And young. And her eyes were large, and dark, and Spanish; her hair was shining and black, and wound in great coils about her head.

"You want to speak to me?" said the Kid, amazed at the girl's appearance.

"If you please, Senor." She smiled as she looked at him, but there was something sad in the smile, something that touched him. He placed a chair for her, but she did not sit down. "I shall be but a minute," she told him. "I can not stay more, because I will be missed if I do. I am Rosa di Zavedo; and I have come to you because of a visit you made to my father about an hour ago."

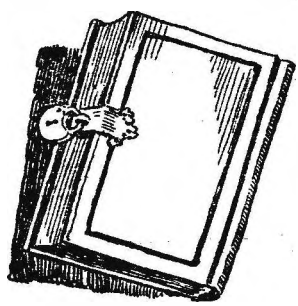
"Oh, yes," said the Kid, and looked at her inquiringly.

"Senor, it is hard to say. It is not a thing a girl should speak against her father. Do you see? Especially when that father is such a good one as mine." She touched her eyes with a small white handkerchief; and the Kid, uneasy, saw the tears upon her cheeks.

"Take it easy," he said. "Whatever it is, don't let it get you to crying."

She tried to smile.

"I thank you, Senor," she said. "You are kind. But it is this I have come to say to you. My father is a man who loves the memory of the old Spanish times; all the things having to do with those times hold tightly to him. I have known him to



pay large sums for small things that others would think worth nothing at all. I have seen him," and here her voice broke a little, "so wanting to own something which he could not buy that he stole it—a seal, an old document, a book. Where such

things are concerned he is—shall I say it? —he is mad. He is not himself. In all other things he is perfect—in this one there are times, Senor, when he is dishonest."

"I know what you mean," said the Kid in a quiet voice. "Seems to me I've heard of things like that before—about other people."

"When the Senor Spangler gave my father the paper of the Apache River tract last night, the sight of it overpowered him. I have never seen anything affect him so. He was awake half the night, poring over it. Studying each word, each letter. He said again and again that he'd never seen anything like it."

SHE paused, her hand upon her heart, her breath short and quick.

"It is my fear because he wanted it so for himself that he has been tempted; that he has kept the true paper, and gave you something else instead."

The Kid, alarmed, snatched the document from his pocket, and searched it with his eyes.

"Fact is," he said, at last. "I can't tell if it's the paper I was sent to get, or not. I only know a little of any kind of Spanish; and this old writing is outside my workings altogether."

"Senor," and the white hand was outstretched, "if you would let me see."

"Sure," said the Kid. He gave her the paper. Her eyes went over it, eagerly.

"I think," she said, "I think it is the right one. The seal, Senor! That will tell." She took a small magnifying glass from a silken bag which hung from her belt. "With this," she said, "and the better light, I can be sure." She turned. There was a place where the slatted sun blind did not carry, and the full light of mid-day fell upon the veranda. She went to this, placed the glass to her eye and studied certain things in the paper intently. Then she sighed; he saw her head bow as though in a prayer of thankfulness. She folded the paper carefully, put the glass back into the bag, and then turned.

"Senor," she said, "I am glad! It is the same. It is the paper you desired. My heart is full of joy to know that no matter how great the temptation, my father is an honest man." She handed the paper to him. "You have been kind. I thank you, and will remember you always."

After she had gone, the Kid ordered another drink, with plenty of ice; and he was sitting over it when Montana appeared on the veranda, a number of newly written letters in his hands.

"Do you know, Kid," he said, "sometimes I get the notion this sport promoting ain't what I used to think it was. Traveling around the West, getting up boxing, and wrestling and hoss racing and cow-tying and all that? The kind of a life for a man when he ain't young any more is to be doing something useful. Just now in the office I was talking to old Zavedo. He'd just come in; had to meet somebody. And he got to telling things about the Southwest I'd never heard before. Spends his own money looking things up, lives alone except for just a fellah to cook for him and clean up."

"Not alone," said the Kid, "there's his daughter."

"He ain't got no daughter," said Montana.

"Sure he has. She was in here only a while ago. I was talking to her."

Montana looked at the Kid; then he took out the makings and rolled himself a cigarette.

"Was, eh?" he said. "Well, you know, that plumb knocks me. I thought that old jasper was on the level."

"From what she told me," said the Kid, "he ain't, all the time. He goes a little crooked sometimes about old books and old seals and papers, she said."

"Yeah?" said Montana, and he looked at the Kid with steady eye.

"She didn't know but what he liked

that old Apache River paper so much that maybe he shoved something else over on me. But when she looked at it, she said it was all right."

Montana had rolled the cigarette with great care while the Cartridge Kid was talking; but he didn't light it. He threw it away, and got up.

"Just a minute," he said.

HE WENT into the office, the Kid looked after him, uneasily. When Montana returned he sat down without saying anything, took out his makings once more and rolled himself another smoke. He lighted it, and said.

"Zavedo ain't got a daughter. I asked the proprietor of the hotel; he says he's been knowing Zavedo ever since he came to Pueblo Cordova, and that's four years ago. He didn't have a daughter then; and he ain't got one now."

"Sufferin' Joe!" said the Cartridge Kid, sitting up straight. "Why, she said—"

"Never mind what she said," spoke Montana. "Let's see if she's done anything. Gimme the details."

The Kid told him what had passed, and while he was doing so, Montana smoked and puckered his brows, and questioned him.

"Let's see the paper," he said. The Kid took it out of his pocket and passed it over. After a brief inspection, Montana handed it back. "She took a glass out of a bag hangin' at her belt, you say; and she turned her back on you so's she could get more light to read by. Then she put the glass back in the bag and turned around and gave you the paper."

"Yes," said the Kid. "What's the matter? Ain't it all right?"

"All except she didn't give you back the same paper. That one you've got there is a page, taken out of an old Spanish book showin' you how to make wine."

The Kid got up. He glowered like an angry cat. "This is another job, eh!" He pulled his gun around, and his grip hovered above it. "I've been played again. I'm the biggest whahoo in this Arizona, and there ain't no doubt about it. They took me at gamblin', they robbed me here in this hotel; they framed me in Drevener's hoss race and now they send a woman to outstep me. What I want, now, Montana," he said, "is a chance to sling this gun. Lemme get them where there's lead amovin', and I'll show them they've been pickin' on the wrong party."

"Where's the boy who brought the girl in—the waiter?" asked Montana.

THIS youth was found, and questioned. He was alarmed at the looks of both the Kid and Montana; he gestured and stuttered and rolled his eyes. But he could only tell them that the girl had been there, that she'd asked for the Kid, that she'd followed him out on the veranda to where the Kid had been sitting. When the two, excited and exasperated, finally went into the barroom, they found Two-Gallon, his back to the bar, drinking cold beer out of a tall glass.

"What name of woman is this one you want?" he asked, for he'd heard something of their talk with the waiter.

"Don't know," said the Kid; "she left a name, but it wasn't the right one."

"The only woman I've seen around here this morning that didn't belong here was that black-haired wife of Tony Chevez," said Two-Gallon. "Tony and a couple of his spick po'dners were outside while I was sitting on the edge of the plaza; one of the spicks was holdin' a spare hoss. And Tony's wife came out of here—"

"In a hurry?" asked Montana.

"Seemed like it. She hopped up on the empty hoss, and they started off, right away. And each one of them fellahs had a rifle—in their hands," said Two-Gallon. "Like as if they expected somethin' might happen."

"Is this Tony's wife a right good looker?" asked the Kid.

"Bo'," said Two-Gallon, "one gaze at her, and any man of the right disposition would start dreamin' right away."

The Kid tightened his belt.

"Who's Tony Chevez?" he asked Montana.

"He's the gent that runs the faro layout at Desert Rim," said Montana. And then he looked at Two-Gallon. "Get out the hosses," he said. "We're goin' to do some ridin'."

Three horses were brought around to the front of the hotel in a little while; and Montana and the Kid, each with a pair of guns at their hips, and their belts glittering with cartridge tops, came out.

"The trail to Desert Rim is mighty straight and only twenty miles long," said Montana, as the Kid headed in that direction; "but, boy, oh boy, we're not goin' that way. We're aimin' away from that place."

"What's that for?" said the Kid.

"Well, these jaspers are so full of little tricks," said Montana, "that they might be watching; and if they see us headin' in the direction of Desert Rim they'll like as not sus-pect we found out about the change in the papers, and are on our way to see about it. Thinkin' that, they'd get word on ahead, and we'd have a reception committee waiting for us when we got there."

"All right," said the Kid. The horses were headed west; and as they rode along down the street, Two-Gallon said:

"There's Cross. On the steps of Gage's store. He was inside, and a fellah went in and told him we were comin'."

Cross, immaculate in his white linen suit and spotless buckskin shoes, smiled and waved a hand as they rode up to where he stood.

"Well, gentlemen; on the move?" he asked.

"Yeah," said the Kid; "we figured we'd get along out of this country."

"The Kid havin' settled his business with Spangler, we ain't got nothin' else to keep us; so we'll be ridin' on to the next place."

Cross continued to smile; and he waved his hand once more.

"Good luck," he said. "You're right sharp workers," he added. "Not too sharp," with a laugh, "but you'll get along if the opposition ain't too strong."

"Of course," said Montana, "we don't aim to go up against anything first-class. We know our weaknesses. But we figure on takin' a few tricks just as we've always done."

There was a mockery in the face of Cross as they rode down the street that the Kid didn't like.

"That gamblin' coot thinks he's somebody special!" he grumbled. "What I'd like to do is turn around and burn him right down."

Montana grinned.

"I know how you feel," he said. "But he ain't our game just now, Kid. We've got our minds fixed on other things."

THEY held the trail west out of Pueblo Cordova for two or three miles; then they made a broad half circle away among the hills, and another hour found them to the east of the town and riding fast.

"This Tony Chevez," said Two-Gallon, "is reckoned a nice party with a gun. I've heard tell he practices a draw for a half an hour every morning before he shaves."

"Well," said the Kid, grimly, "that bein' so, we'll not be feelin' we're takin' advantage of anybody.

They'd stuck to the side trails, thinking it better not to take chances of being seen on the much used one between the two towns; now and then they'd see a rider at a distance. At about mid-afternoon they'd entered a canyon, with towering rocky walls; the horses, having smelled water, were pressing forward, when there came a flat "chug" of a distant rifle, and a slug flattened itself against a rock almost at the Kid's side.

In an instant they were all three off their horses and behind the boulders with which the canyon floor was strewn.

"Reckonin' from the sound, that jasper's a good distance over our heads," said the Kid.

"And he's got a high-powered rifle," said Two-Gallon. "That chunk of lead came a long way, and it came fast."

With a dry stick Montana shook a bush to the right of him. Almost at once there was a second shot, and they heard the lament of the bullet as it went by.

"Good eye for distance," said Montana, "but maybe not such a good shot, at that. Anybody see where that came from?"

The Kid pointed to a heavily wooded spot up the side of the canyon.

"Somewhere about there," he said. "I saw the smoke drifting though I can't tell the exact spot where the shooter's hidin'."

"It just goes to show that a man shouldn't ever go ten yards from home without a rifle," said Montana. "If we had one here we could feel that jasper out, and maybe get him."

Their horses had gone on down into the canyon toward the water; and now all three men, crouching among the boulders, followed them. A little stream crept through a tree shadowed, protected place. The Kid studied the steep wall from this hideaway, and after a time he said:

"I think he's changed his spot; he's lost us and is moving around to see if he can't get somewhere where he can splash some lucky lead."

AFTER a little more searching of the canyon side, the Kid continued, pointing through the bush: "See how those boulders lie on the way up there; and see that scrub that grows all along the line of them? Somebody who was mighty careful could follow that to almost the place where this chunk thrower's planted."

"Yeah?" said Montana, looking at him.

"I'm always mighty careful," grinned the Kid, "but as we can't let that jasper hold us here all day, I'm going up after him."

"Don't breathe too often after you get started," said Montana. "These shootin' fellahs that squat behind rocks have always got good hearin'."

The Cartridge Kid took off his heavy belt, pulled one of his Colts from its holster, and put a couple of rounds of cartridges in his shirt pocket. And he tossed his Stetson beside the belt.

"Stay here till you hear the shootin', then hop on the hosses and get up there as soon as you can."

He crept away, slowly, and silently, behind the stones and brush. Montana watched but he saw no stir, no sign of the Kid's progress.

"He goes along like a 'Pache trailer," said Two-Gallon; "wouldn't surprise me at all if he didn't break up that party's little game."

The Kid toiled along, carefully; he touched none of the growth, he placed his feet only where he knew the rocks were firm. An hour went by and he was coming nearer and nearer to the spot where he'd located the rifleman after the second shot. Then, just below him, he heard a movement; a few small stones rattled down the incline for a space and then stopped.

Cautiously he lifted his head above the boulders in front of him; squatted at a small opening between two rocks, he saw a man holding a Winchester between his knees, his head lowered as though he

were searching the canyon bed. The Kid lifted the heavy Colt; and as he did so, a voice from above him on the wall, said:

"Drop that po'dner, and lift them hands high!"

The Kid's knees slackened instantly and he fell; and as he was falling his body twisted around. He saw a rifle; he saw a head; and his Colt roared. The man lifted from behind the rock; the rifle dropped, he tried to steady himself and then fell face down. But the Kid did not wait to see him fall; he was up on his knees, the Colt bellowing over the rocks at the man below. He saw the rifle lift, and he fired again; the man settled back, holding his arm.

"I'm out of the fight, fellah," said the man. "So close down on the shootin'."

IN a moment the Cartridge Kid had taken the rifle, and jerked the gun from his holster; then driving the man before him he went back to where the man lay who'd been downed by his first fire.

"No use worrying about old Sand," said the wounded man. "When they lay flat that way they're always dead."

"Seems to me," said the Kid, as he rested back on his heels, "I've seen you before. Also, it seems to me it was yesterday at the Santa Rita race track."

"Couldn't say," said the man, holding his wounded arm, his brutal face tight with pain. "I been so many places, po'dner, I can't keep track of them all."

The Kid grinned.

"You came along in with Spangler and Cross," he said. "There were four of you. Shouldn't wonder," nodding toward the fallen man, "if this hombre wasn't one of the others."

"Sand, he's been lots of places, too," said the man. "But Spangler and Cross are parties I don't know."

"I think you do, cowboy," said the Kid. "Who else planted you back here in this canyon to wham the daylights out of us if it wasn't them two parties? And Tony Chevez?"

"Tony, I know," said the man; "but he deals cards, friend; he don't make no play along the trails. The cause of us shootin'," he added, "is, we thought you was some hombres that we had trouble with, and—"

"Shut up," said the Kid. "You missed me with them slugs, fellah, and you're still missin' when you start tellin' how it happened. What I want you to do is a little talkin'. Do you see what I mean? Who paid you to gun us? Was it Spangler? Was it Chevez? And where are they now?"

"Don't call to mind no Spangler," said the man, stolidly.

"All right. We'll just wait a little till my buddies get here; and then we'll make up our minds what to do about you."

In a little while Montana and Two-Gallon rode up, leading the Kid's horse.

"Looks like you've been havin' a little ruckus," said Montana, as he got off his horse.

"One down," said the Kid; and looking at a nearby tree-limb, he added. "Seems like the other'll go up."

"Not talkin'?" said Montana. He looked at Two-Gallon. "The gent's not talkin'," he said.

"Gosh," said Two-Gallon, "that's the very worst thing he can do." He dismounted and took a rope from his saddle. "People that shoot and then won't talk are awful likely to get into aplenty trouble."

Montana noosed the rope, and threw it over the gunman's head. He and Two-Gallon jerked the man to his feet.

"Now, let's have plenty of conversation," said Montana. "Pronto talk; or it'll all be locked up in your chest and you'll never get to use any of it again."

THERE was something in the three faces that weakened the gunman's resolution.

"Come to think of it," he said, "this hombre you call Spangler must be the one I saw at Pueblo Cordova last night. I just got a glimpse of him and—"

"Don't make faces at us," said Montana. He shoved his big fist under the man's nose. "Talk."

"Spangler was afraid that you'd follow him," said the man. "So he put two men on the mail trail, and two here in the canyon, knowin' if you came at all you'd come either of them two ways."

"Where's Spangler now?" asked the Kid. The man hesitated; his shifty eyes told of a hurried groping for an evasion.

"Talk," said the Cartridge Kid; his hands drew the noose tight. "Where's Spangler?"

"At Desert Rim," said the man, hurriedly. "At Tony's place. Cross is to see him there tomorrow and they're goin' away somewhere—some kind of a job they've got on hand."

"All right," said the Kid. "We'll take you into Desert Rim with us and check up on those few words. If they're all right we'll let you run, if they're not, po'dner, what you'll take, you'll not have time to think about."

The man's horse was found, and he was helped upon it; then they started down the canyon, and headed toward Desert Rim. Some distance outside the town they tied the man to a tree.

"Listen, you hombres," he said, "here I am with a hurt arm and need a doctor to look at me, and you're tying me up out here."

"Fellah," said Two-Gallon, "you're almighty lucky you ain't all huddled up like that po'dner of yours is back there. Here you go slapping lead at us unexpected, and then ask to be treated like as if you were one of our best friends." He had a gag in his hand and he pushed it forward as he said: "Open your trap, and let me stop you up. You ain't goin' to make any noise if I can help it."

After they had the man fastened and gagged, they rode into Desert Rim. They tied their horses at the rail in front of the "So and So" Saloon, and went in.

"Hi-yoh," said the barkeeper. "A couple of days no see."

"Been fightin' and racin' hosses and such little matters," said Montana. "How's all the neighbors?"

"Nobody complainin'," said the barkeeper. "And none of them's feeling mighty fine."

The Kid paused, his drink halfway to his mouth.

"For instance?" he said.

"Tony Chevez. Tony's wife. Dick Spangler. Aplenty of their friends. Tony and the missus and a couple of others rode into town a few hours ago, mighty well worked up and laughing. Since then Tony's place has been goin' full speed."

The Kid tossed down the drink.

"Let's get started," he said. "There can't be all that fun, and us gettin' none of it."

THEY left the "So and So" and proceeded down the street. Sure enough the dance hall and gambling place of Tony Chevez was roaring with noise; they pushed their way in through the swinging doors and took places at the end of the bar.

"Whiskey," said Montana. "Three." He caught the eye of the proprietor, and saluted, "Hi-yoh, Tony," he said. "Was ahoping to see you."

Tony Chevez—dark, handsome, with glittering eyes and milk white teeth—smiled. Out of the corner of his mouth he spoke to a man at his side; silently the man backed away and disappeared in the crowd.

"We were also hoping to see Spangler," said the Kid. "And likewise we get that hope, too; for there is that very gent."

He grinned at Spangler, who sat upon the edge of a table talking with a dark, handsome girl.

"And not only Spangler," said the Kid, "but the nice lookin' daughter of Senor Zavedo who came in to see me in that nice way this mornin', all anxious about her father."

He laughed and moved toward them.

"Drop back toward the door," said Montana in a low tone to Two-Gallon. "And watch the windows, too. I'll take care of Chevez."

For a moment Dick Spangler was taken aback; and then his full front began to shake.

"What's the matter?" he said, to the Kid. "You ain't mad about anything are you?"

"No," said the Kid, easily. "What for? It ain't everybody that gets a chance to have a little talk with a girl as good lookin' as the senor's kid. She plumb stopped me; I've been sorry about the way her old man is, ever since."

The girl laughed.

"Oh, these serious young strangers!" she said, sweetly. "But senor, I don't know what you mean."

"Me, either," said the Cartridge Kid. He gazed at her, good humoredly. "And what's more," he said, "I don't know why I'm saying it. If you took a paper from me, princess, talk'll never get it back." Like lightning he whipped his left hand across and caught Spangler on the jaw; while the man rocked dazedly, the Kid steadied him with his right, tore open his coat, and ripped a paper from his breast pocket.

"Is this for another kind of wine?" he said, his Colt now in his hand, and holding the paper out to Montana. "Or is it the real Apache River article?"

"All bright and shinin', Kid," said Montana, after a glance. He stuffed the document into his pocket; and just then Chevez stepped forward, the smile still upon his face, but a cold threat in his eyes.

"This," he said, "is a public place; and all are welcome." His voice was quiet, his manner polite. His wife, suddenly white, the laughter gone from her face, shrank away, one hand upon her breast. "But a hold-up is something I can't—"

THE Cartridge Kid thrust out his chin.

"Po'dner," he said. "I'm tired of people puttin' on acts. You know why you and your wife and some friends were in Pueblo Cordova this morning; you know why we're here, now. And you know what I just took from this jasper—don't make it a hold-up. I can't rob anybody of something that already belongs to me."

The gambler still smiled; his eyes were still cold, the death message was still staring out of the ice.

"You are accusing me of something," he said. "No one accuses Tony Chevez of anything and keeps on his feet long."

The Kid laughed.

"I hear you were out at the hitch-rail with your killers, rifles in your hands, while your wife was in telling me she was Zavedo's daughter, and coaxing that paper out of me. If you are the hombre you say you are, why didn't you come in yourself and not have a woman do your dirty work for you."

Dick Spangler had been holding to the edge of a table, dazed by the Kid's blow, and trying to collect his senses. And now he burst out, roaring with anger, and a Colt appeared in his hand.

The gun of Montana sounded, and Spangler staggered back. Then a man showed at a window, bringing a rifle to a level; a shot from Two-Gallon took him sharply out. But while this was happening Chevez acted; his hand went to an inside holster, like the dart of a dragon-fly, and he fired at the Kid. But the Kid was stepping swiftly and his own gun sounded as he stepped. A scream came from the beautiful wife of the gambler; she threw herself forward, her arms about him as he was about to fall.

"Tony!" she cried.

The gun fell from the man's hand, he tried to speak.

"Look out!" came the voice of Two-Gallon. Two men had appeared in the doorway, guns blazing in their hands; several more were at windows, making a cross fire. Montana vaulted over the bar, the Kid following; Two-Gallon flattened himself against the front wall. The Kid threw two swift shots at the doorway; Montana and Two-Gallon swept the windows until they were empty of guns.

"You've killed him," said the wife of Tony Chevez, in the sudden lull that had followed the sudden storm. "And I loved him."

"No fear, lady," said Montana. He had come from behind the bar and looked down into the drawn face of Chevez; "that slug only spotted him. A hombre like that don't die easy. He'll live to give you many a day's trouble yet."

Spangler was squatted in a chair, arm hanging, and the heavy blood dripping from his finger tips.

"Some of these days I'll get you two," he said, glowering at them.

"Why put it all on us?" said Montana. "There's Two-Gallon over there loadin' his six-gun. He done a right-smart bit of shootin'."

Two-Gallon grinned. He popped his red head out of the door, and drew it back again.

"All clear, if we aim to get started," he said.

The three left the place and walked down the street to where they'd left their horses. They were in their saddles when Montana passed the Apache River title over to the Kid.

"And listen," he said. "This time keep ahold of it. No matter how good looking the woman is, or whose daughter she says she is, don't give anything up."

They were just turning away when there came a clatter of hoofs in the single street.

It was a mounted messenger that rode between Pueblo Cordova, Desert Rim and Santa Rita each day; and he was waving something in his hand.

"A telegram," he said to the Kid as he rode up. "The operator asked me to take it out with me, and see if I could catch up with you anywhere."

The Kid opened it; and Montana and Two-Gallon exchanged looks at the expression on his face.

"It's from Margot," he said. "She's on her way to Phoenix to get the title." He put the telegram in his pocket. "Holy Joe!" he said, "ain't I lucky to have it. Come on, po'dners. Let's get going!"

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

Much That's East of Suez

THIS is Carl Jacobi's first appearance in SHORT STORIES and he writes us about his story *"Holt Sails the 'San Hing'"* that John Holt is more or less typical of those resourceful skippers who sail the Eastern seas—Bangkok to Port Moresby. "Be they American, British or Dutch," goes on Mr. Jacobi, "they usually have a yarn to spin, or a yarn for someone else to spin. The *San Hing* story is fiction, although there was a case, several years back of a Malay potentate chartering a vessel and signing on as a member of the crew to hide the fact that he carried valuables with him. He ran into plenty of trouble before he reached his destination.

"As for me, after graduating from the University of Minnesota, I served the usual newspaper apprenticeship as reporter and re-write man on. *The Minneapolis Star.* Fooled about with telegraphy, both wireless and Morse, for a spell, traveled for another spell, then turned to writing fiction. I've written for most of the all-fiction magazines and some of the popular publications of Canada.

"Most of my yarns have had Malaysia for a setting, either the F.M.S. or Borneo and occasionally Papua. And there's a reason. I still have a lot of friends down in that part of the world, and they're good enough friends to remember me by writing. Their letters usually contain something that serves as a story germ. One chap, for example, is now in-country from Kuala Lumpur, on what he calls 'a vacation.' Another is Assistant District Officer of Ambunti, a police outpost, 230 miles up the Sepik in the mandated territory of North East New Guinea. There are two white men stationed at Ambunti, the D.O. and himself, and he spends his time collecting head tax from controlled villages, checking tribal fighting and shooting 'natnats (mosquitoes).

"'About eight miles upstream,' he writes, 'is the village of Yambon, three miles downstream, Malu. Both are large villages, able to muster over a hundred fighting men. Malu on many occasions has threatened to wipe out Ambunti. The tragedy of it is that they could do it any time they wanted. When the men of Ambunti are asleep, for instance; they can't keep guards posted all the time.

"'About three years ago they stood within three feet of the man who was in charge here at the time while he had a smoke. They were waiting for him to go to bed. Instead he went down to the village on another mission, and in a scuffle a police boy shot a kanaka. The natives thought their plan was known and let their planned attack fall through.'

"Occasionally, too, I hear from Captain W. P. Roodenburg, R.N.E.A., the commanding officer of Long Nawang, which is just about the world's jumping-off spot. Long Nawang is a Dutch garrison in the *onderafdeeling* of Apo Kayan, Dutch Borneo, a district which is marked on

your maps as 'Unexplored.' It takes two months for mail to reach the post from Tandjong-Selor on the east coast, traveling up the Kayan River by native dugout canoe.

"Going back to myself. I haven't touched thirty yet, though I'm only a few months away. Hobbies at the present, writing: saving old tobacco tins and fishing at my cabin at Red Cedar Point, Lake Minnewashta. I built that cabin two years ago, and it's a pretty handy place to be when you need quiet to help you march characters across a typewritten page.

"Carl Jacobi."

Fishes That Change Their Sex

WE HAVE told lots of fish stories in SHORT STORIES, but John H. Spicer writes us that among some varieties of fish the ladies need never waste any time envying their brothers or wishing that they had been born boys. They are not fated to remain ladies all their lives but can actually change themselves into males and so get the chance to try both ways of living. Perhaps the best known of these is the scorpion fish from the undersea gardens around Madeira. This brilliant scarlet fish is a bit over fifteen inches long and is covered with spines. After having raised three or four families the females change permanently into males and live the rest of their lives that way. The same ability is also possessed by a small Mexican fish called the Fresh-water Swordtail fish. A similar transformation has also been observed at least once among the Siamese fighting fish. A pair in a British aquarium had been living up to their name by fighting almost continually but when the female got the worst of it, she surprised fish experts by changing over into a male, perhaps to be able to continue the fight on more even terms. Among both the scorpion fish and the Mexican swordtail fish the number of females born always greatly outnumbers the males and this seems to be Nature's way of evening things up afterwards.

OUTLANDS AND AIRWAYS

Strange facts about far places and perilous air trails. Send in yours.

Baltimore's Air Port

IN YEARS to come says *Air Service Magazine,* very major city on the Atlantic Coast of the United States will have an airport at tidewater, just as now there are docks and railroad facilities; but the inauguration of air service to Bermuda, followed by experimental flights over the Atlantic, took most of our cities unawares. Even New York City was only partly prepared.

But the City of Baltimore evidently saw the writing on the wall first—at least it was the first to do something definite about it; it spent some $5,000,000 for the first and only tidewater airport on the Atlantic Coast where modern airplanes from both land and sea may alight. As a result both Pan-

American and the British Imperial Airways have shifted their Bermuda service from New York to Baltimore; Pan-American taking along its maintenance and repair shops.

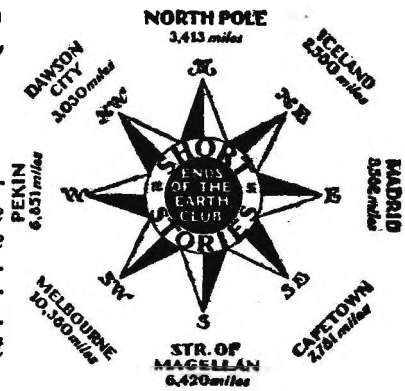
The new airport is located five miles by motorboat and six miles by main highway from the heart of the city, on 360 acres of land reclaimed from Baltimore harbor by building bulkheads and pouring 15,000,000 cubic yards of fill into the area. The average temperature of the water at the port is given as 57.9 degrees F., and being salt water, ice seldom forms.

Baltimore is justly proud to be first in this great new venture. Baltimore was first in the days of the sailing Clipper, had the country's first railroad, the Baltimore and Ohio, and thus led on sea and land, so now it rightfully may claim the same distinction in air transportation.

Taboo To Women

MAIWATCHIN, on the borders of Russia, is the only city in the world peopled by men only. The Chinese women of that part of the country are not only forbidden to live on this territory, but even to pass the great wall of Kalkan and enter into Mongolia. All the Chinese of this border city are exclusively traders.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, c/o Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

Pen pals, here's a chance for some interesting Brazilian correspondence —how about it?

Dear Secretary:

I think that I am the first Brazilian who demands his enrollment in the Ends of the Earth Club. The English language is not very much read in Brazil, because in this country eighty percent of the inhabitants cannot read their own language—Portuguese. So, only at coast we find a few people who understand English.

I'm very fond of reading, especially adventure and political stories. In our country we have very strange and curious experiences in wild hinterland, of which a very large part is not known yet. I shall be very glad to tell them to my friends of SHORT STORIES, with the difficulty, however, of ignoring the enough English to write, which you may see by this letter.

Yours truly,

Wilson Velloso

157, Gomes Freire Avenue, 157
Rio-De-Janeiro,
Brazil

A first-hand knowledge of Cuban life and experience in the revolutionary army is what this reader has. Who's going to write?

Dear Secretary:

I have been a reader of SHORT STORIES for a long time, and I wish to become a

member of the Ends of the Earth Club. I have very interesting things to say about Cuban inside life. I have been in the revolutionary army and in the uprising of 1933 against Machado's regime.

I would like to hear from friends all over the world, but especially from outposts. I will exchange old coins, stamps and post-cards. Hoping to hear from somebody soon, I remain

Yours very truly,
Armando Perez Otero

Care of Mrs. Lester Corcoran,
Cuba St. No. 24 (Apt. No. 15),
Havana,
Cuba

▼▼▼

SAVE THESE LISTS!

WITH hundreds of letters from new members coming in every day, it is obviously impossible to print all of them in the columns of the magazine. The editors do the best they can, but naturally most readers buy* SHORT STORIES *because of the fiction that it contains. Below are more names and addresses of Ends of the Earth Club members. Most of these members will be eager to hear from you, should you care to correspond with them, and will be glad to reply. Save these lists, if you are interested in writing to other members. Names and addresses will appear only once.

E. S. Agomou, Government School, P. O. Box 42, Aba, Nigeria, W. C. Africa
A. O. Anoliefo, c/o T. J. Emeh, African Hospital, Jos, N. P., Nigeria, Africa
E. E. A. Anyalenkeya, St. Michael's School, Aba, Nigeria, Africa
Al. Arispe, Company 901, C.C.C., Pine Valley, California
Frank Austrin, 320 Goodman Street, Kosciusko, Mississippi
Larry Babgy, 4004 East Florence Avenue, Bell, California
C. E. Barnes, Box 1214, Fort Clayton, Canal Zone
Clair Barrymore, 1387 Hayes Street, San Francisco, California
J. Franklyn Beckham, 71 Belmont Avenue, Jersey City, New Jersey
Edward Biolozenaki, Quartermaster Detachment, Schofield Barracks, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii
Wilfred Boudreaux, 40 Grover Street, Entredale, Rhode Island
Robert Boudreaux, Lutcher, Louisiana
James Bracken, Box 94, Wickenburg, Arizona
Larry Bram, 2525 Aqueduct Avenue, Bronx, New York City, New York
Norman M. Briggs, Steamboat T. S., Glide, Oregon
Eddie Brown, Jr., Gramercy, Louisiana
William R. Burns, 3310 Rutger Street, St. Louis, Missouri
James Hugh Carithers, Bentonville, Arkansas
Tom Carmical, 680 Roscoe Street, Chicago, Illinois
Patrick Carroll, Box 349, Billings, Montana
Larry Carson, Box 752, McCamey, Texas
Leonard P. Chandler, Kindale Mine, Duclos, Quebec, Canada
John F. Charnley, 78 Walnut Street, Manchester, New Hampshire
J. S. Chowdhury, S.S. Alipore, P. & O. S. N. Company, Bombay, India
Richard Cohen, Box 289, Santos, Brazil, South America
Preston M. Conner, 7030 Torresdale Avenue, Tacony, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
G. Cookey, U. A. C. Ltd., c/o Etinan Post Office, via Uyo, Nigeria, West Africa
George L. Copeland, Headquarters Special Troops, Hawaiian Division, Schofield Barracks, Territory of Hawaii
Willard M. Cox, Walter Reed Hospital, Washington, District of Columbia
Richard J. F. De Pagnier, 26 Wall Street, Trenton, New Jersey
Yres Dessureault, 1 Van Horn, Grand Mere, Province of Quebec, Canada
Joseph Disperiza, C.C.C. Camp S-54, Butler, New Jersey
Robert Wilson Dodge, 28 Capital Street, Auburn, New York
Cecil M Doubleday, Company 3880, C.C.C., Wheelers Hot Springs, California
David Dowd, 31 Aroona Road, Kilkenny, South Australia
Silvanus T. Edsin, B.C.M. School, Abonema, Nigeria, West Africa
Carl Essen, Jr., 42 Sullivan Street, Forty Fort, Pennsylvania
Joe Franklin, 1508 Arthur Street, Louisville, Kentucky
Boyed Fritz, Box 835, Three Forks, Montana
George E. Fry, 62 Vaughan Road, Camberwell, London S. E. 5, England
M. Clay Garoutte, Rural Route 1, Mount Vernon, Missouri
William Germain, San Francisco Hospital, Ward 24, San Francisco, California
Francis O. George c/o Paul, Oguoma, Loco Run, Shed, Enuga, Africa
F. J. Gordon, 3624 Montrose Avenue, Chicago, Illinois
John C. Gorman, 2718 Edmonson Avenue, Baltimore, Maryland
Harvel Green, U. S. S. Nokomis, c/o Postmaster, New York City, New York
Harry W. Greensill-Barnard, "Iowa," 42 Raff Street, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia
Edward C. Halloman, Company C, 5th Engineers, Fort Belvior, Virginia
Howard Halperin, Company 649 C.C.C., Camp Bloomington, Bloomington, Wisconsin
Gordon S. Harray, Phillips Alberta, Canada
Edward Henry, 1559 St. Andree, Montreal, Canada
Merton M. Hiatt, Box 7, Dryden, Washington
David Hintzer, Carlos, Minnesota
Clifford Holder, 231 East 85th Street, New York City, New York
Jack Holifield, Tiptonville, Tennessee
Grover Hunsick, 4004 East Florence Avenue, Bell, California
L. S. Jaja, Divisional Treasury, District Office, Opobo, Africa
Jaime Jaramillo, 2624 San Diego Street, El Paso, Texas
Charles Jester, 580 Broadway, Laguna Beach, California
Ellwood Joseph, 30½ South Main Street, Harrisonburg, Virginia
Frank Jordan, Bartonville Post Office, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
Michael Jordan, 53 Cottage Street, Stamford, Connecticut
Gordon R. Jost, 901 Chancellor Avenue, Irvington, New Jersey
John J. Kabay, A Battery, 64th Coast Artillery, Fort Shafter, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii
George Kam, 1722 Young Street, Honolulu, Territory of Hawaii
Harry Kirby, 3613 Maiden Avenue, Baltimore, Maryland
John Charles Krato, 3528 Greenwood Boulevard, Maplewood, Missouri
Sherman Kraus, 488 Curry Avenue, Englewood, New Jersey
Edmond Lachapelle, 2321 Hampton Avenue, N.D.G., Montreal, Province of Quebec, Canada
John Laffard, c/o Keefe's Camp, Lambert Lake, Maine

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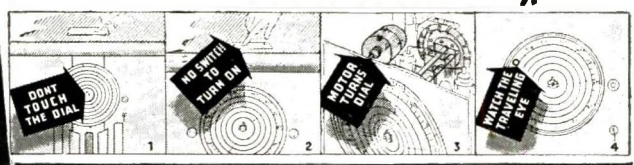

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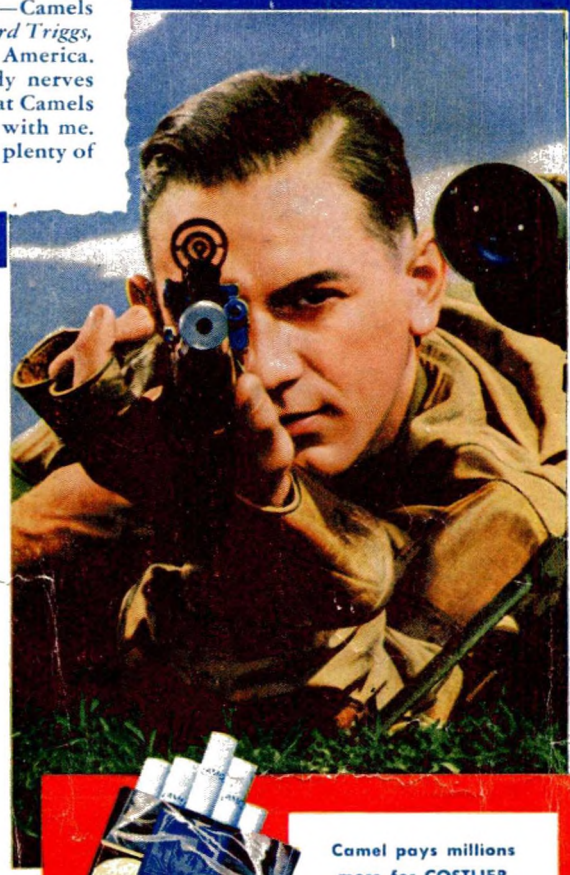

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