A Hashknife story—"Lightnin' Luck"—W. C. TUTTLE

Short Stories

Month

January 25th

25c

...earls—and a chance to clean up before the war ended . . . . . .

"Red Are the Pearls"—a novelette—H. BEDFORD-JONES

Colds? Sore Throat?

Let LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC *get after the germs that go with them!*

The delightful Listerine Antiseptic gargle taken early and often may spare you a nasty siege of trouble. Here is why:

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Isn't that something to remember when you feel a cold coming on?

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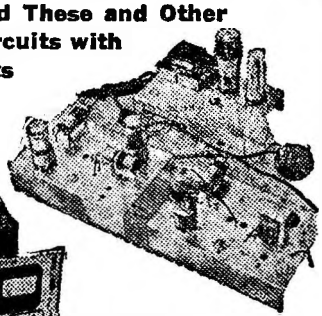

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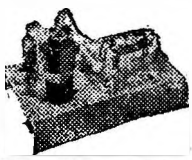

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M. DELANEY, *Secretary.*

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BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints

JANUARY 25th, 1945

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

The Story Tellers' Circle

Fight—Ring and Gridiron Style

WE ASKED Bill Cox to send us some more of his interesting sidelines on the fight game or other "matters sports" about the time we were lining up his leather pushing character Tough Tom, from the story of the same name in this issue of SHORT STORIES.

What we got back was a commentary on fight all right, but the gridiron variety. We heard from Bill just before the Army-Navy game and his thoughts were more on football than the prize ring.

Incidentally, we must confess that we were inclined to agree with him in leaning a bit toward the underdog Navy eleven in pre-game figuring. Like Bill Cox, we still had ample faith in the single wing and we couldn't see anybody going far against the fine Middy line (at least they looked fine to us the time we saw them play last fall).

Wasn't it the immortal Knute Rockne who said: "With a good line in front of them the backs should pay to get into the ball park." It's still true that most games are won up front. And along with a lot of the "smart" opinion, which proved to be not-so-smart, we thought Navy had the line.

Two plays after Navy's All-American tackle Whitmire was helped off the field—his first injury in four years of play, which shows how the Cadets were hitting—the Midshipmen no longer had the line, West Point scored its first TD and was on the way. Navy's traps up the middle didn't work and Army began to gain between the tackles. In addition, Jenkins, the other Annapolis All-American was kicked in the head, couldn't remember the signals and played very little, also depressing the Blue and Gold cause.

The truth of the matter is, though, that West Point had the better team, possibly the greatest eleven in Cadet history. Army rightfully earned a long-overdue victory against its traditional foe.

But here's Bill Cox on more football:

"This story about 'Tough Tom' started out to be a story about the place called The Dirty Shame, which truly exists in fact, or did exist until wartime conditions killed it in the small Texas town where it was located. I love the idea of a jook called The Dirty Shame.

"But of course the auctorial mind (if I know what I mean) is entirely undependable and the locale got to be Miami and things happened and there had to be a plot and here we are—The Dirty Shame is just a reminiscent theme in back of it all.

"Strangely, while I was in New York I did not get to see a fight, mainly because there were none of any consequence. I hit a bad time in the New York fight business. But I saw the pro Giants a couple of times and there was some good fight in those games. Those veterans, Mel Hein, Len Younce, Vic Carroll and Ward Cuff and above all, Ken Strong, deserve a world of credit for the way they are playing for Steve Owen this year. It is amazing that they can stay in there, at their age, playing almost as good ball as they did years back. While Hank Soar was with the club they were terrific.

"The Eagles, with younger players, working as a unit without a star other than Roy Zimmerman, a good T quarterback, looked the best team and I was amazed when the Bears beat them so badly. Lex

(*Concluded on page* 6)

The Story Tellers' Circle

(*Concluded from page* 4)

Thompson must be proud of his reorganized club. Those stocky guards and giant tackles made a perfect front wall behind which Zimmerman and a flock of good backs operated very smoothly the day I saw them against the Giants.

"Howie Livingston will come along, take it from me. Against the Packers he proved able to handle Hutson. . . . Given experience he will match Paschal, and what a pair of running backs they will make! Like the old Baugh-Battles combination, minus the passing threat, unless Paschal can sharpen up his aim, of course.

"Remember the day when Baugh and Battles ruined the Giants team which had Danowski tossing them but good? On that day, for that game, Cliff Battles was the greatest running back I ever saw, including Grange at Philly against Penn (I never saw Red in his Midwest escapades, nor Harmon in latter years.) Cliff could not do wrong that afternoon against a tough, rugged gang of Giants.

"Well, the Army-Navy game will be over by the time this sees print, but right now that is all you hear. I took 15-10 on Navy and am currently trying to get someone to give me 18 points. I am a great sucker for revealing this, as you will all know that Cox is not an expert but just an old-timey bum who likes to maunder on, believing he knows something about tough lines in football. Somehow I cannot conceive of the greatest of backs running freely through a line which is three deep in good material. . . .

"Harking back to Cliff Battles that day, while he outran his blockers in broken fields, time and again, he had to get started and Turk Edwards plus other behemoths moved the Giants just enough to let Cliff break over tackle when he needed to. We always used to say, "Watch the lines on the first plays of each quarter. The one which gives under the charge will be on the losing team."

"But that was back in another day, when the T was the only formation we knew, except the long and short punt, and a forward pass was a risky proposition, or a desperate last moment gamble. Dobie was operating behind big tackles up at Cornell, using the double wing, I believe, but we knew little of that. We had a spread formation on our high school and sandlot pro teams called the (Short B), after Walter Short, who coached Rahway into a State championship, and what a screwball thing that was, but it often became a touchdown play by sheer virtue of its worthlessness and unexpectedness. . . .

"I still think the single wing combined with the short punt develops the most power and variety of plays and that the T is only as good as its performers and worthless without men trained in it for months. . . . It can be stopped by a quick-charging smart line which refuses to be fooled by the back in motion. And I mean stopped cold. . . .

"That is all I know about Tough Tom and the fight business at present, about which I think I have said enough. . . ."

William R. Cox.

Editor, SHORT STORIES:

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Thanks for a good book.

G. R. Brock.

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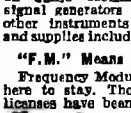

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The Old Days Were Gone Forever, But Some of the Old Pearlers Yet Remained to Rove the Island Reefs

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

I

SOME queer things happened around the former pearling seas, in those days when the flood-tide of Nippon barbarity had been hammered back whence it came. The war was still continuing, and the ringtails were still holding most of the Dutch islands, but their tentacles had been nipped off and the seven seas were getting freer every day.

Law and property were not what they had been in pre-war days. Murder still stalked the islands and the hidden ports. Money was not what it had been, either, but men had begun their savage chase of it anew.

Only one thing still endured, changeless and eternal in beauty and value—pearls, the same now and tomorrow as in ancient ages. Pearling had ceased during the war, of course, and now all the circumstances of the industry had changed. The old days were gone forever. But some of the old pearlers remained. Rawlins was one of them.

Four years, he had been out of the game, piloting various craft—the latest a Destroyer Escort—around Jap-held islands. He was barely turned thirty. A Jap shell at Saipan had put him out of uniform and into hospital at Sydney. Now he was out, minus a couple of fingers on his left hand—a mere nothing—and with impaired eyesight, but out, on his own deck once more, thrusting in among the islands and cleaning up a fortune!

Cap'n John Rawlins actually had a fortune in pearls under the cabin floor, but he valued it less than he did the *Spindrift*. He had laid her up at the beginning of 1941, and during four years had longed for her, craved her, anguished for her. Now, beautifully outfitted and painted, she was once more flitting down the island seas under his feet, and he was the happiest man in the world. He loved that schooner like a woman.

This cruise, he had garnered an amazing amount of pearls, both by trade and by fishing. The beds had been untouched these four years, except by natives, and pearls had come out of hiding everywhere in the islands. The first men in the field were having a rich haul, and Rawlins was among them—not the first, however. Others were already at work, here and there.

Now he was hauling up for the lonely Mackilray reefs and hoping no one had got ahead of him, to finish this fat cruise with a burst of glory. Virgin beds of pearl-oysters had been found there just before the war stopped everything. Perhaps the Japs had stripped them, more likely not. The Mackilrays were off from everywhere and few people knew of the discovery.

The day they picked up the boat, the seas were huge and slow and heavy—tre-


RED ARE THE PEARLS

mendous seas, following a week of storm. But everything was shipshape aboard the *Spindrift,* and Rawlins looked down the slanting deck with the delight of one who has attained perfection. He himself was rather gaunt, flat-lined, hard, with quick blue eyes in a brown bony face. His mate, Tomsing—originally Tom Sing—was a halfcaste from Gunning Api, where the Chinese have forgotten their own language; a big, slow, glorious seaman, Tomsing was well liked by everybody, and looked Dutch rather than Chinese.

The eight men forward were good men. Ili the cook and Rau the steward were Kanakas, the other six were white. Old Benson, Grimes, Forester, Atlee, Dorn and Pocock, with their varying amounts of war service and wounds and pearling, all fine steady men in their way. It was Dorn, at the helm, who sighted the boat. They ran her down rapidly.

Rawlins took the helm himself; in his hands the schooner was a witch. The tremendous seas precluded lowering a boat. Instead, he rounded neatly to windward, and the drifting wreckage came down to him. One person was erect, and caught a line. Two men lay sprawled forward. Both had been shot and were dead—had been dead too long. The boat was badly smashed, apparently by bullets; once she had been a fine whaleboat.

THE one survivor was hauled aboard, toppled over, and was carried below. Rawlins took for granted the figure, lashed in oilskins, was that of a man, but presently the steward Rau came to him, eyes bulging.

"Cap'n! You better come quick. It's a woman."

"Damn!" said Rawlins. Before the war, he had received an unhappy jilting, which made him bitter toward women. "Is she hurt?"

"Shot," said the steward. "Hungry."

"Fix her up something. I'll see to her presently."

He sensed from Rau's manner that she must be a white woman, but asked no questions. When the schooner was once more on her course, he swore gently to himself and went below. It was his job, he must do it.

She lay in the tiny spare cabin, sipping the tea Rau had brought her. The oilskins were removed. She looked up silently at Rawlins. He saw only that she had strong, high-boned features and fine steady eyes, framed in salt-encrusted brown hair, cut short. Her garments were rough, ragged, nondescript, mere tatters.

"Glad we picked you up, ma'am," said Rawlins, and gave his name.

A slight smile touched her lips. "I am Margot van Kline," she said. Her voice was low and soft, pleasant to hear. "Will you look at my right leg, please? The wound has had no attention, and I think needs some. I was shot two days ago."

"Dutch?" said Rawlins, aware of her slight accent. She smiled again, but made no response. When he gave her another look her eyes were closed; she had fainted.

RAWLINS went to work. The wound was above the knee—a bad flesh-tear six inches in length, entirely neglected, but no great damage had been done. She had fine skin like golden bronze silk; a lithe, hard, evenly muscled woman, burned brown by sun and sea. When he had bandaged and covered her, he left her to come around by herself, and told Rau to keep her supplied with food. On deck again, he came to Tomsing, by the quarter rail.

"Dutch woman," he said. "Name of van Kline. Can't talk yet."

"Those dead men in the boat," said Tomsing, "looked like Javanese. Maybe got away from the Japs somewhere"?

Rawlins merely shrugged. He wasted few words. And getting a woman aboard disturbed him; he had become used to freedom from restraints. Now things were different.

"Pass the word," he told the mate, "for all hands to watch their talk and actions. Shorts to be worn at all times in hot weather, when tubbing or washing."

He saw her again that night, after turning the deck over to Tomsing. A light was burning in the spare cabin, and he looked in. She was awake and smiling.

"How are you feeling?"

"Good, very good, thanks to you," she said. "Where bound, Cap'n?"

"Well, at present I'm reaching up for a place called Mackilray Reefs," he said. "Just a lot of surface coral with a couple of tiny islets."

"You'd better not," she replied, alarm flashing in her eyes. "You'd better not!"

That was no way to talk to John Rawlins. He looked down at her, and his harsh features softened. He was not a grinner, and smiles came seldom to him, but now his face warmed and a smile touched his eyes.

"Feel like talking?" he asked.

SHE nodded. "Sit down, please. I must tell you much! You cannot go there. I have just come from there."

Rawlins concealed his astonishment. He took a seat and fumbled with his pipe.

"Smoke," she said. "Have you any cigarettes?"

He nodded, broke open a pack, and she took one. He filled his pipe, and waited for her to speak.

"That tastes so good!" she exclaimed. "I have not smoked for a year. You are an island trading schooner?"

"Not exactly," said Rawlins. "Pearling. I'm my own master. Sorry we haven't much accommodations aboard for women; it's pretty rough."

"Rough! You don't know what rough is," she answered. "My father, Anton van Kline, had many ships. We got away in one little one, from the south of Java, when the Japs came. They bombed us and strafed us; storm kept us from making Australia. We hid on one of the eastern islands and repaired the ship. They came there, too. We were driven on. At last we reached the Mackilray Reefs—that was well over two years ago. We've been there ever since."

"Impossible!" said Rawlins. "Why the biggest islet there is no more than a bit of sand and coral!"

She nodded. "Thirty feet above the water. Yes. But we found a spring, so there was water. Our little ship was wrecked on the reefs, but did not break up. We took plenty of food ashore. There were only my father and I and three of our men, Javanese sailors. We stayed there, and built a small boat from wreckage. You are going there for pearls?"

"Correct, miss," said Rawlins.

His incredulity wore away, as he perceived what an exceptional sort of person she was—how well poised, how quietly controlled.

He perceived this the more strongly when she went on to tell of her father's death, or rather murder. She displayed no emotion, except the look in her eyes—the look of sadness and anger and unuttered grief.

"Four days ago, a dirty schooner, a lugger they called her, appeared," she said. "It was the first ship we had seen. One man, Berg, was Dutch. The other, Howard, was an Australian—oh! You know him?"

The eyes of Rawlins darkened. "Heard of him, and no good either. Go ahead."

"We had fished for pearls and found many," she said. "We did not think these men were enemies. Their crew were all Malays. My father showed them our box of pearls, and what happened? They killed him and tried to kill us all. They took the pearls. I got off in the boat with two of our men—they shot at us, but there is often much fog around the reefs and we escaped. Both our men died. Our sail was no good and blew away. We had almost no food aboard. I thought it meant death. Then I saw your sail. That is all."

RAWLINS could guess at all that was unsaid—the agonies, the grief, the decisive action, behind those brief words

"How many Malays aboard that craft?" he asked.

"I think seven or eight—I'm not sure. You see, you must not go there. They have guns; they can use them, too. And besides the Malays, they have three divers."

"Guns!" Rawlins exploded in a laugh. "Guns! What d'ye think I've got aboard here? When there's no more law, when we're liable to meet Jap refugees anywhere, when anything's likely to happen at any time, d'ye think I'd take no chances without guns? I've got guns and depth charges and grenades and God knows what else, and I'm the man to use 'em. Would I let a lousy nor'-west coast lugger and a pack o' Malay thugs keep me from going where I choose? Not likely."

He did not speak boastingly, but in a low, quiet voice, after that first laugh, much as though he were talking to himself. The gaze of Margot van Kline dilated upon him.

"See here," he went on, "don't you want to walk back in there and see those rats get their deserts for murdering your father?"

"Oh!" Color rushed up her cheeks, her eyes sparkled, coruscating like two brown

zircons. "Oh! Of course, of course I do! But this little ship of yours, this boat—"

The vanity of Rawlins was touched instantly.

"This little ship, young woman, was bound for the Mackilrays before you came along, and is still headed there. How old are you?"

"Twenty-three." She came to one elbow, anxiety in her eyes and voice. "But you don't understand! Please listen! It is not just those men. They are expecting others. I heard them talking. They expect another ship to meet them there, a ship named the *Benbow,* I think was the name—"

"Oh!" The eyes of Rawlins lit up. "The *Admiral Benbow*—was that it?"

"Yes!"

"That's interesting, too. Cap'n Giles Frazer and the *Admiral Benbow.*"

"You know him?"

"Of course. Frazer did good war service, but he's a bad 'un. Those other two are just rats. Frazer has brains, all twisted in the wrong direction. Lucky for you it wasn't him jumped your island refuge; you wouldn't have got away, Margot. Oh, I know him, right! And he knows me, to his sorrow. Now wait a minute."

HE jumped up, slid out the door and after a minute was back, unrolling a big chart. He spread it out on her knees, holding it before her eyes.

"Information," he said. "You spoke of fog; why? Where's any anchorage? You must know the place, after your time there. Show me, show me! This is going to be a campaign, and the man who has the most knowledge of the ground, and the most brains, and is the quickest hitter, is going to win!"

Wonder touched her eyes, watching his intent, eager face.

"You—with six men—you're going there?"

"Aye, Margot. Six men—not like the usual pearling gang. And a skipper who's not like ordinary skippers—and a ship that can outsail the whole damned pearling fleet—aye, we're going in!" Rawlins laughed, shortly, quickly, eagerly. "We'll get your pearls back, and with interest! Now talk. Tell me everything!"

She obeyed.

II

NEXT day, while the *Spindrift* drove eastward under clearing skies and a steady half-gale that left half her canvas dark with spray, Rawlins and Tomsing hunched over the chart-table where the chart of the reefs was pegged out flat. Rawlins was passing on the information gained—invaluable information, because the Mackilrays had never been charted very thoroughly.

He no longer cursed the luck that had brought Margot van Kline aboard. It had saved him from getting badly nipped. And secretly he had come to admire her more than a little. He liked her cool, level head, her capability; she was the rare type of person one could depend upon in a pinch.

Tomsing, hearing of the situation, nodded at the name of Howard.

"I know him and his lugger," he reported. "He's a dirty rat—not like Frazer, who may be bad but is a real man. Howard's just plain thief. His lugger, however, is something worthwhile. An extra fancy teak-built Thursday Island craft originally. He's done pearl poaching in her and could run the legs off a gunboat. Before the war, of course. Maybe she's rotten now."

"Teak built? Not likely," said Rawlins, interested. "Well, she's there, and Frazer coming up—probably not there yet. Let's figure on that. Now, then, look at these cursed reefs and you'll see how the thing is laid out for us."

Like most of these outlying south Pacific "harbors", so-called, which might be a hundred miles across, the Mackilray atoll was a little world all to itself, twenty-five miles long and fifteen across at the widest. The reefs were all living coral, not dead. This series of reefs that formed the atoll was mostly under water at high tide, with two exceptions, both on the south side.

One was an islet half a mile long, bare coral rock and sand, so low that it was wave-swept during typhoons; three miles from it was a rock two acres in extent, sticking up sixty feet from the water. Everything else was submerged at high tide, largely laid bare at low tide. Within this coral circlet lay both deep and shallow water.

"The northern part runs to fifteen fathom," said Rawlins. "The oyster beds are in the center and south—they can't exist in

coral mud beyond eight fathom, you know —but shell may be struck anywhere in the atoll, according to her."

"What kind o' shell?" queried Tomsing shrewdly.

"She's no expert, but from her story it must be Macassar shell, silver-edged, number one prime, running to ten or twelve pounds."

Tomsing rolled his eyes to heaven. "You don't find Macassar shell at fifty feet."

"No. But there's no mud at greater depths. Just coral forest, she says."

"Cripes! It's a fortune, Cap'n!"

"All of that, and worth a fight. Now, she says they had a house, of a sort, here on the one island, and found a spring there. It's sure that we'll find Berg and Howard camped there, with their small boats, fishing or opening shell."

"Not the lugger, huh?"

"No. First, like the Hermes and other reefs, there's a lot of fog around this place. No sheltered anchorage inside, and so damned much coral outside that it's all dangerous." Rawlins slid his pencil around to the western reefs. "At this monsoon, here's the best possible anchorage, outside these reefs, fairly sheltered except in bad weather. Twelve, fourteen miles, from the island."

Tomsing nodded comprehension, his sharp little black eyes darting about the chart.

"Might be worse," he observed. "If we strike fog, it'll be bad."

"Now pay attention," said Rawlins. "The probability is that Howard's lugger will be moored here on the west side of the reefs. We're approaching from the south. Now, here on the northwest side there's an entrance into the lagoon; not charted, unknown, only safe at high water. Get the picture? Howard's lugger to the west'ard."

"Got you, Cap'n."

Rawlins penciled a point on the south of the atoll, near the island.

"I get off here with four men in a whaleboat," said he. "That leaves you two men and Miss Margot. There'll be not above two or three men aboard Howard's lugger, probably Malays. If you see any boats, sheer off —it might be Howard back from the island with more men. If you see no boats, take the lugger. Can do?"

"Oh, sure," said Tomsing, his eyes glittering. "But four of us can't sail both craft."

"Take the *Spindrift* in through the reef passage and moor her fore and aft, then go back in the boat and fetch the lugger in after her. It's a job."

Tomsing nodded. A job, sure enough. First, he would have to eliminate any Malays guarding the lugger; that did not worry him, because there is no love lost between Chinese and Malays, as a rule.

"Where'll you be?" he asked, looking at Rawlins.

"Oh, visiting around with Howard and Berg. The point is, I'll want to know where to find you."

"Okay, Cap'n. We ought to raise the reefs tomorrow, maybe tonight."

Rawlins nodded, and the mate went on deck.

THIS main cabin, small as it was, put pride in the eye of Rawlins, as he glanced around. It was all paneled in teak, fine red teak, and trimmed with black teak; the panels were small. In one corner was set a wall safe. Rawlins ignored this, and went to the center panel on the port or bulkhead side; his fingers pressed the edge, and the panel opened out like a little door. Rawlins took out a small steel box, and closed the panel.

From a chair he scooped up some garments, took the box and went to the spare cabin.

He knocked, and entered at Margot's command. She was sitting up in the berth.

"I brought you some clothes," he said. "Take your choice. No women's duds aboard, unfortunately."

"Oh, lovely!" she rejoined, thanking him. "I'll be on my feet today, then!"

"Wait till morning," he said, and put down the box beside her. "Take a look at these if you want to see something."

He held a match to his pipe and watched her, as she dipped into the box and opened the little rolls of cotton wool. Pearls are fragile things, and, curiously, are ruined by salt water. Her face changed as she saw them, and her eyes warmed, but not with greed.

"Beautiful, beautiful!" she said softly. "What glorious large ones!"

"Up to fifty grains, and that's some-

thing," commented Rawlins. "Were the ones you lost as good as these?"

"I don't know so much about them," she confessed. "Some were larger than any here. Some much smaller. But I think there were more of them."

"Mr. Howard got a haul, then. I'll get 'em back for you, and if I do any fishing myself, will split the take with you. Satisfactory?"

Her eyes lifted to him. "You saved my life—"

"You saved my ship and my skin by your warning," cut in Rawlins, "which makes it even. I'll deal with these murderers, trust me. They won't dream you're alive. Where in the lagoon did you find the biggest shell? At the south end?"

"No. Up in deeper water. One of our men was a diver, but we had no equipment so he could not go too deep."

HE had deftly turned aside her glowing gratitude with his casual words. Briefly, he told her what he intended to do, and she listened anxiously.

"Why do you want to take their lugger?"

"Set 'em afoot and they're done."

"But it's dangerous, and more dangerous for you to visit them."

"No," said Rawlins with decision, flatly. "The real danger comes from Frazer, mind that! If he's here already, we're out of luck. I'm gambling he won't be. And now, you mind something else, Margot. Don't interfere with my orders—not in the slightest degree! It might cost us all our lives. I'm planning ahead. I know what I'm doing. Understand?"

"Yes," she assented quietly, and put the pearls back as they had been, with care. He liked that. "Tell me, Cap'n Rawlins. You have a fortune here in these pearls. Why will you bother with any fishing at the Mackilrays?"

His shadowy smile was briefly visible.

"Because, for one thing, I started to do it. Second, it's the dream of every pearler to find a virgin bed with huge shell, and looks like I've found it, so I intend to have my fun. Third, I don't mean to knuckle down to a gang of murderers and sea-scavengers like this scum. Do I make it clear?"

She laughed a little. "You do."

"And with your help, which I'll need," he said, picking up the steel box, "we'll see it through. Can I depend on you?"

"Absolutely," she said. He nodded and left her alone.

III

THEY raised the reef-points in the sunset —the island and the high rock, all there was to see. Rawlins brought in the upper canvas, lest they be seen, and went down into the cabin with Tomsing.

Here he went to one of the forward panels, pressed it, and it opened to reveal a high, shallow locker. From this Rawlins took out three .30 carbines—the M1 carbine developed by the Marines in the southern Pacific, with fifteen-cartridge clips.

"They should be all you'll need," he observed. The mate nodded. "But I've got a change of orders for you. I'll get off in one of the boats before midnight. You sail on, double around the reefs, and you should be aboard the lugger at dawn. The boat will land me and leave me, and go on north across the lagoon to meet you and help with the job. Then send the boat back for me. Be sure to have four men aboard—may have to use the oars."

Tomsing reflected on this.

"Provided all goes well, then," he said, "you can expect the boat back for you by sunset at latest."

"It's your job to see that all goes well," said Rawlins.

In the last dying fires of sunset, Margot came on deck for sight of the horizon-specks that meant the Mackilrays. She knew how to hold the deck; she knew boats. In the clean whites, hair brushed back from her face, she looked a different person, trim and curved in the right places; the men opened their eyes as they saw her. So did Rawlins. He made her known to them all, made them known, listened to her thanks to them, and knew that all was well. She would do.

A little before midnight he got off in the whaleboat with Dorn, Pocock, Atlee and old gray-haired Benson. Rawlins took the tiller, a compass between his feet. The wind was light, but it was dead behind them, and steering a whaleboat before the wind is a tricky business at best. The compass was vitally needed, both now and later—from a small boat the horizon is limited to three

miles or so. The skies were clear, the stars were out; a farewell chorus of voices, and Rawlins watched the schooner heel and go tearing away. His heart sank a little. He had no weapon of any kind in the boat.

Until dawn, they worked up close and closer to the islet, passed her, and in the dawn approached a passage that would take them into the lagoon. The tide had turned and was on the flood, as he had carefully figured. The sun came up, the breeze freshened, and with old Benson craning over the bow to watch for coral ahead, they slipped in through the passage, entering the lagoon without incident. Rawlins tacked to make the islet, now well to eastward.

THE lagoon, shallow at this southern end and protected by the long miles of outflung coral, was almost glassy; the new sun struck down with level rays. South Island, as their destination had been tentatively named. edged the horizon ahead, a low hump of coral without a tree to break the sky. So far as the rest of the far-spreading atoll was concerned, they might have been in the open sea—the coral was submerged now, with the tide coming up, except for the one little high point of rock westward.

Rawlins studied the little island as the whaleboat slipped down toward it; binoculars made up for his poor vision. It was just as Margot had described it. There was a little low house, hardly more than a hut, made of irregular coral blocks, and so blending into the white rock as to be almost invisible. On a curving slope of snowy coral sand were drawn up two ship's boats, and overturned, covered with tarpaulins. Boxes of stores stood about. A low, wide tent of canvas on upended oars, no more than a sunshade, stood at one side. But not a living soul was in sight.

The nostrils of Rawlins caught a smell he had not known for years. Pocock wrinkled up his face, Dorn looked at the skipper and winked cheerfully.

"Shell!" said he.

Rawlins searched and found it, off along the shore to the east of the house. Masses of shell stretched there, oysters laid out to rot in the sunlight; a big pile of shell stood off to one side. So the murderers had been fishing merrily away! The cheapest and easiest method to get possible pearls without injuring them was to let them rot thus, but the effluvia was far from esthetic.

"You boys shove off quickly," said Rawlins, "and mind you, Pocock, follow the exact course I laid out."

"But there's nobody here!" said Pocock.

Rawlins sheathed his glasses. "They're all here. We're covered by half a dozen rifles right now. So look out."

As though to emphasize his words, a man came out of the house, rifle in hand, and walked down toward the tent, and stood there watching the boat as it came in. From the talk of Margot, Rawlins knew this must be the man Howard—a smallish, skinny, sunburned man in dirty pajamas, with a bald head fringed by sandy hair. Berg, by her tell, was a fat swine of a half-caste, slobbery and vicious.

Rawlins waved a hand. Howard waved a hand in response but said nothing. The sail was taken in, flapping. Two oars were put out; the whaleboat came about and was backed in. Rawlins stood up, and stepped over when she touched, splashing in the shallows. He straightened up and spoke to the men.

"All right, boys. Go on back and get aboard. When you've found a passage into the atoll, moor the schooner and come for me. No hurry." After a moment he added, raising his voice, as they worked the whaleboat out, "When you come back, put a case of schnapps aboard!"

"Aye, sir," came response. The sail lifted, and the oars came in. Rawlins faced about to the man with the rifle.

"I expect you don't mind a visitor? If I'd known anyone was here, I'd have come with gifts. John Rawlins is my name."

"Be damned!" exclaimed Howard in amazement. "Cap'n John Rawlins! I've heard of you, of course. I'm Billy Howard."

"And I've heard of you, too! Glad to meet you, Cap'n Howard."

"I s'pose you smelled this shell clear down to Thursday Island, huh?" Howard waved his hand toward the rotting shell, and grinned. "You got a nose for shell, all right. Where did you leave your lugger?"

"Poking about for a passage into the atoll," said Rawlins.

"What's your notion?" Howard asked, openly suspicious.

"I'm not particular," Rawlins replied eas-

ily. "Anything you say, Cap'n. Must be plenty here for two, eh? I'd sooner be friends than enemies."

"Fair enough." Howard's face cleared. He laid his rifle aside. "Hey, Berg! It's all right. This is Cap'n John Rawlins. Lembing! Get your boys out and go to work."

The place was suddenly acrawl with life. Berg, ponderous, sulky, thick-lipped, came striding from the house. Malays came out from under the two boats, grinning little dish-faced brown men. Berg nodded to Rawlins but did not speak; he just stared from muddy eyes. In no time at all a primus stove was going and breakfast was being prepared. Rawlins, invited to the house, accompanied the other two whites there.

A queer, pitiful place built of coral blocks and wreckage, eloquent of its past; it put him into a savage humor, but he gave no sign of it. Two rooms, no more. A refuge from the sun for Van Kline and his daughter. Howard lied about it cheerfully, eloquently.

In his casual, careless way, Rawlins had noted the men. Five Malays, three black islanders, divers who looked like savage Malaita boys, fuzzy of head. So then, two or three Malays were off aboard the lugger. Scum, all of them, top to bottom—scum!

He chatted pleasantly, accepted tea and biscuit, and made himself coolly amiable. His hosts said nothing about Frazer being expected. They were wary.

"Left our lugger off the western reefs," Berg said. He spoke good English. "Fair shelter there."

"I'll take the lagoon, if we can get in," said Rawlins. "I don't aim to interfere with your beds."

"I suppose you want to see our take?" asked Howard, and shifted an ugly glance to Berg. "If you don't, Berg does."

"I'm not interested in your property," Rawlins said. Berg just growled in his throat.

"You're no fool," Howard told him. "You expected to find nobody here."

"And you'd like to cut our throats, maybe, huh?" said Berg.

Rawlins looked at the half-caste for a moment, slowly, critically, steadily. Berg grew angry under the cool regard.

"Why?" said Rawlins. "You want to pick a fight?"

Howard kicked his partner. "Shut up, you fool! We want no trouble, Rawlins."

"Nor do I." Rawlins stuffed his pipe. "Look here, you chaps. I don't see any gear in sight."

"We have none. We're doing skin diving, with our Malaita boys," said Howard.

Rawlins nodded to this. He saw what was forward. Frazer was coming with the diving gear that these ruffians could not afford to own. The war had sent the prices of gear out of sight.

"Well," he said, "I'm not interested in that. I've no divers aboard—natives, I mean. I'm after deep-water shell."

"You got gear?" blurted out Berg, surprised.

"Certainly," said Rawlins, puffing away at his pipe. "Suppose we share the beds that way? You keep to the shallows, I'll take the deep."

"That's fair enough," Howard replied promptly. "The north end of the atoll is deep—too damned deep for soundings with what equipment we've got. Most of it lies around thirty fathom, some far deeper."

"Then suppose I take that and be satisfied," said Rawlins. "Looks like a small fortune in shell alone, by the looks of what you have here—shell prices have gone sky high, with the war and all. This prime shell should bring fifteen hundred a ton."

"More," said Berg.

They sat silent, drinking tea, smoking, reflecting.

NOW, it takes time for shell to rot in the sun. Rawlings knew, just as though they had told him, what the situation was. Their black divers had brought up quantities of shell, but it was only a few days since the murder of Van Kline. The rotted shell here was what the Dutchman had brought up.

Howard and Berg were working their way through that lot, while the men fetched up more. A slow business. They would not want the men knowing what their take was. Rawlins could read faces and looks; he saw with cynical satisfaction bad blood between the two men. Almost at once, this was confirmed.

"Better get the men started to work, Berg," said Howard.

"How 'bout you doing it?" growled Berg, then rose sullenly and went out. A low oath

escaped Howard. Rawlins affected to see nothing.

"Having much luck with the take?" he asked idly. "What's the percentage?"

"Pretty near ten per cent," said Howard.

"Whew!" Rawlins was amazed, unfeignedly. The average percentage was one pearl to every thousand shell; this was, obviously, a virgin bed. Suddenly Howard erupted in oaths and went dashing outside. His voice rose angrily, furiously.

Rawlins followed, unhurried, and witnessed a violent quarrel. Berg had made some wrong move in getting the men off to work, and Cap'n Howard cursed him into furiously reply. Rawlins chuckled to himself, and held his peace.

The uproar quieted. The men all piled into one of the boats, took the other in tow, and rowed off, taking along food and water. Evidently they were gone for the day. In reply to a question, Howard pointed off to the northeast.

"They're working a bed about four miles over yonder."

"Been here quite a while, haven't you?"

"Only a couple months. Last season we found the place and built these quarters."

The man could lie fluently and without effort. Rawlins found it amusing.

IV

IT BECAME hot as blazes here on the lagoon in the course of the morning. Rawlins shed his jacket, the sweaty lines of his shirt plainly revealing that he was unarmed. His presence was now accepted by the other two without suspicion, almost without reserve. He swung off for a walk along the seaward side of the islet, pipe in mouth. The two boats were now somewhere out of sight among the reefs.

Seaward, the monsoon breeze was cool and refreshing, and Rawlins, with time to kill, enjoyed it. He thought of the years Margot van Kline had spent in this tiny place. He thought of the capable Dutch father who had escaped from hell with her and a few men, who had come here and found a fortune to repay him, and treachery at the end. He must, he reflected, learn where they had buried Van Kline.

It was nearly noon when he turned back, drank at the tiny spring, and arrived at the house. Berg and Howard were at the shell patch. They had been opening shell, and came to join him, leaving their big case-knives beside the water buckets; their voices, their looks told of furious recrimination. On closer approach, they became silent. Rawlins met them cheerfully. Howard went on down to the water to wash the stink of rotting pearl from his hands and arms. Berg, who apparently never washed, lighted a cigarette, vacantly mumbling something about eating.

"So you've been opening shell," Rawlins said to him softly. "If he doesn't split up even with you, you can make him. You know plenty of things he wouldn't want told to the authorities."

HAVING planted this idea in the brute's head, a new idea by Berg's startled look, he went down to the water and dabbled his hands beside Howard.

"You haven't tried for any deep-water shell, I suppose?" he asked.

"No," Howard grunted. "Tried it yesterday. The boys went down once and quit."

"Why?"

"You know those Malaita boys—notional. They talked about evil spirits that ate the oysters."

"Hm!" Rawlins looked out over the sparkling waters. "Octopi eat oysters. Giant squid, too."

"Is it true," asked the other, "that in the breeding season huge octopusses come up from the deep waters in pairs, to shallower depths? I've heard about it."

Rawlins nodded. He had done quite a bit of diving himself, in the old days.

"So the natives say. Never saw any myself, never want to. Over at Nares Harbor I saw a piece of dead octopus that must have been forty feet across in the body alone."

"You couldn't get me to go down in deep water, not for a thousand quid!"

"Don't blame you. A man has to be born to it."

Ratty bald coward—a thief is always a coward, he thought with contempt.

The three of them lunched on cold grub. Berg was sullen, silent, brooding. The meal over, Rawlins went back with the other two, who were savagely intent upon opening shell. Howard offered him a knife, but he refused, laughing.

"No. It's not my property—I don't like the job, thanks!"

They attacked the rotted, gaping oysters, whose opening valves had long since been contracted by the hot sun. The huge, keen knives slashed down, splitting the shell wide; then each half was washed in the water bucket while eager fingers felt the rotten pulp, felt the lips, and tossed the shell into a growing pile.

The two men went at it fiercely. They might have spread a canvas overhead for sun-shelter, but did not. They were mad with avid lust, and no wonder, for the shell produced more pearls in an hour than most shell would produce in days. It was hot, heavy work, dumping the rotten flesh and getting clean water, handling the barnacled shell—and all the while exchanging sultry looks and muttered words. Rawlins perceived what must come, and gave it full chance.

"I'm off for a bit of a nap," he said yawning. "See you chaps later. Wake me up if my boat returns."

He went over to the tent and stretched out under the canvas, where he could get a view of the pair through the gaping rents.

He dozed a little, jerked awake, kept an eye on the shell patch. He could see it coming, knowing these men as he did. That hint dropped in Berg's muddy brain had done the work, had set the needed spark. It made him laugh to himself, but he did not laugh at thought of Frazer. When Giles Frazer showed up, it would be something different. These two sea-rats were just thieves and murderers; Frazer was all that too, but was a man to boot, and no coward. An enemy—that went without saying, because he hated Rawlins on many a count, but an open enemy, not a sneak.

The afternoon wore on. Twice Rawlins thought it had come; twice the two men came near to blows, but each time they held off. Howard had too much sense. He needed this big, hulking brute as a worker. A shrewd fellow, Cap'n Howard; or was he shrewd?

Rifles were to hand. Rawlins could have taken one and killed both of them, but he was not that kind. They knew it, and he knew it. Killing was the last thing he would turn his hand to—only if forced. He had some queer ideas, John Rawlins had; he believed that causes would usually bring about their own results—with perhaps a little urging—and that if events were left to themselves they would—usually—require no direct action on his own part. No, he was not a shrewd man, but in some ways he was wise, even when dealing with murderers.

When it did come, he was astonished, for he had not expected it. The afternoon was on the wane. Northward, far across the lagoon, he caught a speck of sail, probably his boat coming back.

BERG and Howard did not see it, because they were intent upon each other. Something had been found—a big baroque pearl, as it proved. The two squabbled over it; Captain Howard was laughing, and apparently taunting the other man. Howard wore a cap over his bald head, but the cap was not enough. He was, it seemed, quite sure that Berg would not dare attack him.

But Berg did attack him—suddenly, unexpectedly, smashing at him with a jagged lump of coral. Howard squirmed aside but Berg was on top of him, smashing at him again, and this time cracked him over the head. Howard lashed out with his big case-knife, and from Berg came an ugly bawling scream as the steel went into him. None the less, he struck once more, and Howard, struck over the head for the second time, collapsed. Berg stood looking down at him, then fell all in a huddle, the knife still sticking through his ribs.

Rawlins moved, then, came out from under the shelter, and walked over to the spot.

The whaleboat, his own boat, was tacking down the lagoon, reaching for the island, but he paid it no attention. Berg, he saw, was dead; that heavy knife had sliced between fat ribs to heart. Captain Howard's bald head was bloody, but his heart was going, he was alive—knocked out for a while, but alive.

Rawlins stooped, knelt, and searched. He knew his men, and first went carefully over Howard. From beneath the pearler's clothes he drew out a cloth money-belt, it's compartments well stuffed. He investigated. There was gold, Dutch gold, with banknotes, and two fat sections revealed pearls carefully packed—pearls whose lustre made his eyes glitter.

"All Kline loot," he muttered. "Goes to her."

Berg's body yielded a little leather bag with some pearls, not many. Thoughtfully, Rawlins dumped these into a compartment of the belt. For this loot Kline had been murdered. It's unequal division had caused the hatred between Howard and Berg. In a big shell near the water-buckets lay the day's take of pearls. Rawlins pocketed these for himself. Then he stood up, filling his pipe, and squinted at the approaching whaleboat and the horizon. No sign of Howard's two boats returning.

In the whaleboat was Tomsing, his mate, with Dorn, Pocock, Grimes and old Benson. Rawlins waved to them and walked down the sand beach to meet the boat as it came in. He carried the belt. He climbed in beside Tomsing, pushing off as he did so.

"What luck?" he asked.

"The lugger's moored near the *Spindrift,* Cap'n," Tomsing responded, and motioned to the men. The oars came in and were stowed. The sail filled, the whaleboat heeled a bit and slipped through the water.

"Any Malays aboard her?"

"There were three," said Tomsing. "None now. And here?"

"All off fishing to the nor'east. Berg's dead; Howard killed him. Howard has a bashed head. I have what belongs to Miss Margot." Rawlins tapped the belt as he spoke. Tomsing and the men grinned. "Nobody hurt taking the lugger?"

"Sorry," said Tomsing apologetically. "Forester's gone."

Rawlins puffed at his pipe and eyed the horizon, his face clouded. He was tempted then and there to run down on Howard's boats and clean out the whole lot of those Malays. That would make sense. But, looking along the boat, he saw that Tomsing had fetched no weapons; and those Malays had rifles. So he let the chance slip, regretfully, not by choice but by force. By the time he got back to the schooner, the two boats would have returned to the island.

He knew what would happen. A boat would go at once to the lugger; Howard would go, find the lugger gone, would know he had been euchred out of pearls and lugger to boot. And then? He would wait for Cap'n Giles Frazer to arrive; he could do nothing else.

It would be sense to come back down here to the island and clean out the gang; but that meant war and blood. Rawlins wanted to avoid both. He had no interest in bringing punishment, or in taking vengeance for Van Kline's murder. He hated to see his own men killed; he had liked Forester. No, better to sit tight, he resolved.

Darkness was falling when they came aboard. He had a glimpse of Howard's lugger, moored nearby. Despite her dirt, her unkempt appearance, he knew at once what she was, for her lines betrayed it. She was one of the famed craft, quite legendary these days, built in the Moluccas by the Kei islanders, most noted shipwrights of the Pacific; not speedy, but safe to last forever, the native woods of her hull impervious to worm and stout enough to laugh at a coral scratch that would tear the bottom out of any other craft.

He went aboard his own ship and Margot met him.

"We've been worried," she said. "Supper's ready. I'm glad you're safe."

"I'm glad you're here," said he, with more than one meaning in the words. He gave her the belt. "This belongs to you, also the lugger yonder. A matter of restitution from Cap'n Howard."

Her eyes questioned him. "There was shooting aboard that lugger. I could not stop your men."

"Jolly good thing you couldn't," said Rawlins. "There wasn't any at the island, but Berg was killed by Howard. Take the belt below and see what's in it."

SHE disappeared. He saw no more of her until, fully satisfied as to the mooring of both vessels, he came down to supper, and faced her under the swinging lamp as Rau served an excellent meal. He was hungry, but the look in her eyes checked him.

"I looked at it, Cap'n Rawlins," she said. "I don't want to take it. Money can't make up for—"

"Easy, now!" he intervened. "First, Margot, we're partners. Only passengers would call me Cap'n. My name's John. As to the belt, that's yours to face the world with, and you'll need it. Stow it away. I've plenty of my own."

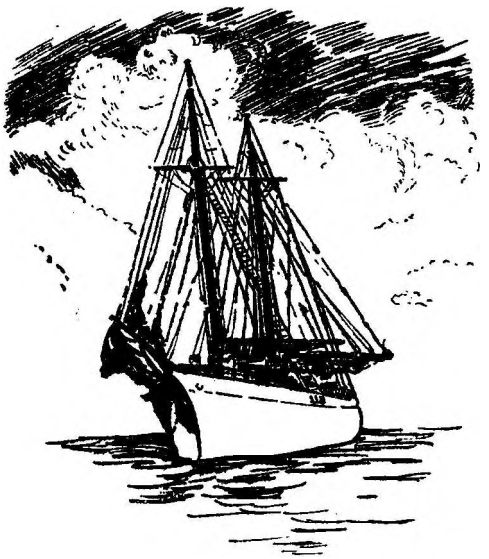
She smiled and put her hand across the table.

"Thank you, then. What are you going to do next?"

"Fish," said Rawlins.

V

THE *Spindrift* rocked in the slow lagoon swell; she crept down the water, away from the anchored lugger—a half mile, a mile away, searching the depths and the bottom, and then came to rest in a trifle under thirty fathom. That is a long way down—a hundred and eighty feet. It shelved to



twenty fathom at a little distance, but here was what Rawlins wanted.

He was an insider. He had fish eyes. He knew that divers scoff at the idea of finding pearl shell any deeper than twenty fathom; none will admit it, therefore none will have to seek it at greater depths—a matter of professional protection, as it were. But Rawlins knew that the enormous Macassar bivalve is found to thirty fathom, and he was not a hired diver. He did his own diving.

They lay there for three full days; preparation was a slow business. All this while a good watch was kept, day and night. Grimes and Dorn went over each night and remained aboard the lugger, making sure all was well there. No scrap of sail, no spar or blur of hull, broke the horizon. They were alone in the world of ocean, apparently.

Margot took a keen interest in every bit of preparation; she could dive, and had been down after pearls—but this depth was not for skin-divers. From the hold came up air-tanks and timbers; these, coupled together, made a solid, buoyant catamaran to hold the pumps and divers. Up came the solid oaken chests stowed away during the war years. The pumps were rigged and tested. The fifty-foot sections of air-hose were tested and patched; every bit of the equipment was gone over slowly and with utmost care, the long shark-knives were honed to razor edge.

Rawlins showed her the scaphanders, the half-length suits, so different from the full diving suits ordinarily used.

"These," he said, "are plenty good for this depth, and far less bulky than a full suit. But you'll notice that the suits and hose and lines are extra-heavy. I take no chances on something cutting loose at these depths. That coral forest down below holds death in a thousand forms—giant clams, moray eels, things that have come up from the lower depths, anything from octopi to shark, or giant squid forty foot long with ten thirty-foot arms. That's what one risks to get twelve-pound shell and rose pearls."

"I want to go down, you know," she said.

"Not likely," said Rawlins. "No job for a woman."

She faced him angrily. "Am I a pampered softie, or a partner?"

Rawlins looked at her for a moment. "I value you too much to risk you. When I'm down there, I'm cut off from the world. I want to know that someone up here is in competent charge of things. My life depends on everything going right here."

"You have Tomsing for that," she said. "And the men are good men."

"True." He had no answer to her argument and was too honest to pretend otherwise. "Very well. If I think it safe, go down at will; otherwise not."

"Fair enough, and done with you," she said, laughing. But he was grave and businesslike, for this was with him no idle play but serious, life-risking earnest.

"At this depth, one can stay down no longer than twenty minutes at a stretch," he said. "Every minute of that is a risk, down below and up above. Gathering shell isn't like picking flowers—as you know. And there's danger, I don't know what; How-

ard's divers are afraid of this lagoon. Just some sixth sense that may be well founded in fact. Now look here and I'll show you something new. It was developed during the war."

He unlocked and opened a fine new chest, to expose a queer contraption, in general shape like a rifle, but several times as massive in size, bulky and cumbersome.

"Water-tight," he said. "A compressed air gun, good for five shots before being recharged. The bullets are like tiny grenades, touched off by the discharge, set for three seconds. Because of depth pressure and water resistance, no contact shell could be used. It has a range of barely twenty feet—that's a lot, down on the bottom."

"Are you the only diver," she asked, "the only one here who can use all this?"

He nodded, his eyes somber. "Yes. Forester came along for this work; he's gone now. Old Benson used to be a diver, but the bends finished him for that work; he'll handle the pumps and watch the lines. He's thoroughly dependable."

Rawlins made two experimental dives, testing the equipment and handling and trying the ground. All was well; that third afternoon he brought up several huge bivalves, the ground promised well, Tomsing watched the lines like a hawk and knew the signals, Benson handled the pumps like a veteran.

YET, all the while, Rawlins kept an eye on the empty horizon, and his thought was reaching over the horizon. He was not worried over Cap'n Howard and his Malays and black islanders; it was the coming of Frazer that kept him uneasy. With two of his men aboard the lugger of nights, he had only Tomsing, Benson, Atlee, Pocock and the two Kanakas here. When he was on the bottom, he was cut off. His lifelines could not be cut, as they held a strand of copper wire; but he could not be jerked up like a fish—the ascent had to be made by careful stages, for fear of cramps, the dreaded bends. He kicked himself now that he had no telephonic connections in the helmets.

Next morning old Benson, grinning, brought him a gift—two of the shark knives firmly lashed into six-foot bamboos, ugly and terrible weapons.

"You'll feel safer, maybe, with one o' them to hand," said the old diver. "There's lead weights in the bamboos."

Rawlins nodded and hefted the spear with satisfaction. It was odd, he reflected, how afraid he felt; within himself.

Down on the float, he was in his jacket, the helmet was screwed on, the straps made fast between his legs, and he went down the short ladder, the spear in one hand, the net and its line in the other—a close-meshed net for the shell. When he had been down before, the water had been roiled along the bottom, leaving little to see. Clearer today, maybe.

He stepped off and the descent began.

Curious, he thought, how little it would take to kill a man far down. He remembered Dick Onlee, one of the best divers he had ever known, who died in the Moluccas because a fly had been inside the helmet when it was screwed on. And take Bill Jersey, a careful man if ever there was one, caught in a current at thirty fathom and thrown on his face, so the thick glass in his helmet struck the coral and broke; he had been "squeezed" in two seconds by the pressure, with his lungs sticking out of the broken glass when they pulled him up. A man was a fool to risk his life at this depth.

On and on, ever deeper. The sun was high and its shimmering reflections made the water look like a dust-storm. Now and again came one inquiring tug on his lifeline, which he answered in kind; all right. The first fronds and coral branches appeared below. Then he was among them, then down on the bottom; he signaled, got his balance, and then adjusted the weights at his breast.

Here was fairyland for sure, rippling with color and fantasy. Above, for twenty or thirty feet, stretched huge waving fans and pinnacles of coral, grotesque fish darting among the branches, everything a coruscation of blazing hues. This coral forest stretched off to his left, surmounted by a regular gothic cathedral of live coral, reaching up in fantastic formations for thirty, forty feet; some day, ages hence, it would reach the top and become an island. Now it was filled with gaping crevices and channels and caves.

On past this, almost clear of weed, stretched the great flat open bed at whose edge he stood—the shell patch, with others

dimly visible within his foreshortened horizon. He examined everything within sight very carefully. He knew how an octopus could be unseen within a dozen feet, taking on the coloration and shape of the bottom; he knew how the curious thing could propel itself at lightning speed for fifty or a hundred feet by its internal hydraulic-pressure apparatus. He wanted to know exactly what was around him.

Over at the foot of the coral cathedral he saw two gaping, empty tridacna shells—the giant clams weighing a ton or more. These were dead; a diver who stepped into one of those live monsters was done for, unless he cut off his foot. These were dead—there might be others alive—and what had killed these? He examined the iridescent shell, lifting and falling to the currents, curiously. Not long dead, for black shreds of lip and valve still clung to the shells.

He steadied. Nothing perilous in sight—to work, then! He began to put oysters into the net, spreading it out, weighting it with them, dumping them into it. He picked only the big fellows, leaving everything six inches or under, and worked steadily and swiftly. He had a good pile of shell at last, and gave the three tugs at the line fast to the net. It drew up, the corners came together, and the big bundle of shell went up and out of sight. Almost at once, came the warning signal on his life-line—time was up.

He signaled, and was lifted. All the beauty below him fell out of sight.

Curious—he no longer felt the least trace of fear! He realized this when he was up at last and lying on the float in the sunlight. The men were marveling at the immense shell—all number one, silver-edged Macassar shell. Margot sat smiling at him. Old Benson came over to them, as Rawlins got his pipe alight.

"Saw a small shark fin a while ago," he said.

"That's no danger," said Rawlins, nor was it. A shark was common enough.

"He gets attracted by the air bubbles—might cut your hose," said the old man. "See anything bad down below?"

"Not a thing. A couple of dead clams—tridacnæ. May be live one about. And a gorgeous coral cathedral, looked like. Full of caves."

Benson nodded, screwing up his old eyes. "Watch out for that; might find morays there, or octopus. And—say! I've heard tell only one thing can get them giant clam—a big hundred-fathom octopus who comes up and squats on 'em and forces 'em open."

Rawlins actually laughed. He felt afraid of nothing, now.

"Stop the nonsense, Benson! That's all eye-wash—oh, it may be true enough, but there's nothing out of the way here."

"Hm! Well, you watch careful," said the old man. "There's big deeps around here, and an octopus ain't nobody's joke, Cap'n. Not if he comes up from a hundred fathom hole. They do come up, too—in pairs, mostly. Breeding season."

Meeting the eye of Rawlins, Margot nodded at him.

"Then I can go down safely, eh? When you go back? I can fill nets, too, and make myself of use."

"As you like," said Rawlins.

So she went down, and no sooner was she on the bottom than the shark came playfully around, drawn by the air-bubbles. He was a small shark; Rawlins threatened him with a spear and he turned tail and romped off—for all the world like a frightened puppy, said Margot afterward. Nor did he come back, for a while.

Danger? There was none. They each filled two nets on that descent, and looked at the big dead tridacnæ, and the lovely coral cathedral, and Margot picked some remarkably colored coral fans—all white and lifeless up in the sunlight. She was enthusiastic when they removed their suits, or rather half-suits.

"Tomorrow? If you like; why not?" said Rawlins, amused by her eagerness and delight. "Looks safe enough; but mind, vigilance is the price of safety! If we could spend a month here, we'd have a fortune in shell alone, let alone any pearls. A few days of it will be enough for me, however."

The shell raised thus far was loaded into a boat and Rawlins took it over to the lugger, chucking it into her forehold for the present. It was his first sight of Howard's craft, and he looked her over with interest. She needed a new suit of canvas and a clean-up, but otherwise was well found, and sound as a dollar. Still, to anyone who had a schooner like the *Spindrift,* this craft was just another ship.

One thing he found aboard her, however, would have hardened his heart had there been need. This was a very handsome chronometer made in Leyden, and upon it a silver plate engraved with the name of Van Kline. Howard must have found it in the house ashore and taken it to the lugger as precious loot—which it was. Rawlins said nothing of it to Margot, as yet. That chronometer was evidence enough to hang Howard in any Admiralty court. He began to regret, now, that he had left the bald-headed man alive.

Next day he and Margot put in much time on the bottom, making a full day of it and sending over a couple of boatloads of shell. Rawlins was the happiest man alive; here was an old dream, the dream of every pearler, coming true—he was cleaning up a virgin bed of shell, of the very finest shell! It would not keep up forever, he knew, and for this reason he was putting it all into the forehold of the lugger. A week, he told himself—just a week, and he would be satisfied.

The presence of Margot, her companionship, intensified his delight. He liked her. She was reliable, cheerful, she liked him—and she was a woman. Further, he did not hide from himself—or from her—that she was such a woman as he had dreamed of these many years. More than one dream was coming true; perhaps.

Captain Giles Frazer arrived the following morning.

VI

BREAKFAST was just over when the lookout reported a whaleboat bearing down on them from the south. With the glasses, Rawlins mounted the shrouds and recognized Frazer at once, with four brown men, probably Malays or islanders, in the boat.

No weapons visible. He spoke to Tomsing, who was on the float preparing for the days work.

"Aboard, there! Drop the catamaran abaft the gangway and make her fast. Watch those brown fellas like hawks; don't let 'em aboard. Rifles out of sight. Who's on the lugger?"

Grimes and Dorn were there, had not yet come aboard. They had carbines; the lugger was safe. Margot appeared, and Rawlins turned to her.

"Here's Frazer, coming aboard. Stay out of sight till he gets down in the cabin with me, then join us. We'll give him a jolt he'll remember."

Frazer greeted the schooner, and the figure of Rawlins, with a vigorous breezy hail, and came straight for the gangway—Rawlins abominated the slouchiness of a Jacob's ladder. He was a brawny, vigorous man with a clipped square beard, bold and hearty eyes, and a deceptive air of joviality. He was not really jovial at all, being grasping and cruel and inordinately tricky. He had a great eye for women, and him with a wife or maybe two, regardless of color, in every port. But, like everyone else, he had been killing Japs the past few years and was extra good at it.

He came up the ladder and thrust out his hand at Rawlins, who did not hesitate to accept it with a hard grip. It meant nothing; it was part of the game.

"Hello, cap'n! No more uniforms, eh? And thank the Lord for that," said he, showing long white teeth in a wide laugh. "And Tomsing's back with you after the wars—h'are, mister! A bit surprised to see me turn up, cap'n?"

"Mildly, mildly," said Rawlins. "Come below."

"Aye. But where's your shell?" Frazer glanced about the immaculate decks. "Fishing, and no shell?"

"Plenty," said Rawlins. "Aboard my partner's lugger, yonder."

"Your partner? That's a surprise," said Frazer, and followed down the companionway. Rau was setting gin and ginger-beer on the table, with glasses.

Rawlins took ginger-beer, Frazer took both; they filled, struck glasses, gulped. Neither man liked the other, but you would not have guessed it from their cordiality.

"And what brought you?" Rawlins asked. The other grinned.

"Same as brought you—rumors. Any luck?"

"Yes." Rawlins nodded. "The best."

"You know Cap'n Howard, or heard of him? I hoped to meet him here. Thought that might be his lugger over yonder."

"Belongs to my partner," said Rawlins. "Been to the island at the south end?"

"Just come from there. No sign of anyone about; good water at the spring, though. Good looking shell in sight."

Knowing that Frazer was lying and had undoubtedly taken Howard aboard his own craft ere this, Rawlins chuckled to himself. The jolt was going to be a hot one, he reflected; and so it was. Margot came in. Frazer stared up at her and he rose, astonished.

"My partner, cap'n," said Rawlins. "Miss van Kline, this is Cap'n Giles Frazer."

It was almost ludicrous to see the way the whole truth rushed into Frazer's alert mind. He had, of course, learned what Howard knew; now he had the explanation of Rawlins and the looted Howard. He comprehended everything, and it was unpleasant.

"Honored to meet you, miss," he said. "Upon my word, Rawlins, I'm as glad that Howard hasn't come! I'd prefer throwing in with you folks."

"Three's a crowd," said Rawlins laconically. "Howard was here. I think he's gone to sea."

Margot slid into a chair and kept her tongue between her teeth. Frazer, who was not supposed to know of Howard's evil doing, managed himself very well.

"You ran him off, did you? Well, Rawlins, you and me haven't made a dinkum fit of it in the past, but no hard feelin's, I say. The atoll's a big one. If I don't touch the bed you're working, you've no objections?"

"None at all," Rawlins answered. "There's too much shell in sight for one man to grab it all. I expect to stay here two or three months myself. We're pirating government waters, of course; nobody cares, these days. It's a chance to clean up before the war ends and things revert to normal."

"Spoken like a gentleman!" cried Frazer admiringly. "Blow me if we ain't going to make a go of it, the three of us! Well, you're here, so there must be a passage through the reef, but there's none charted."

"Right you are," said Rawlins, and stopped there. Frazer looked at him for a moment and frowned.

"What? You know I can't do deepwater fishing without having my lugger here," he said. "Mean to say you wouldn't show it to me? Don't you trust me?"

"No," replied Rawlins. "Find it, same as I did."

"Why, mate, you sound almost unfriendly!" exclaimed Frazer. "Sorry to hear that, I am. Of course, I can take my boats and work around the reef and finally locate the passage, but I'd like to be at the shell, in the deep water."

"No doubt," Rawlins assented. "Cap'n Frazer is a real pearler, Miss van Kline. He's after the big stuff—same as we are. Nobody knows pearls better, either."

Margot smiled. "I'm sure it's nice to be efficient, Cap'n Frazer! I'm just learning the business, myself. I think it's fascinating to go down."

Frazer was trying hard not to let on that he knew about the murder of Van Kline and all the rest of it. He jumped at the chance to change the subject.

"And you let her go down in this depth, Rawlins? Must be all o' twenty fathom here."

"Thirty," said Rawlins.

"Ain't safe to let a woman work at that depth—"

"Bosh!"

Frazer reddened slightly, and laughed to cover his anger. He finished his drink.

"Well," he said, "if that's the way you feel, no use argufying. Nothing unfriendly, I hope?"

"It's up to you," Rawlins said indifferently. "I'm not trying to run you off. Help yourself and welcome, Frazer."

"Thanks. You ain't got too many of a crew, have you?"

"Six here, eight more opening shell aboard the lugger," said Rawlins. That took Frazer aback, too. He rose.

"Then I'll be getting back—got a long way to go, over the west side of the atoll. Drop over and visit any time you feel like it, miss."

"Thanks, indeed," said Margot, beaming at him.

Frazer took his leave rather gruffly and went down into his boat, and she headed away. Rawlins watched her go and saw that she was angling off in a wide tack that would take her within a few hundred yards of the lugger. He touched Margot's arm and pointed.

"Look—see how he's heading. See how the breeze comes? He'll pass close enough

to the lugger to smell her if shell is being opened as I said. There won't be any smell. He'll know, then, that I lied about having so many men aboard her. He'll see the two there, no more. One very smart man, Frazer is."

"He's pleasant, in a forceful way," she commented. "Did you note how he kept glancing around the cabin?"

"Sure." Rawlins chuckled softly. "He knows me. He'd give his right arm to have this schooner of mine. Well, if you're going to fish, let's get at it and waste no more time."

"You think we're through with him?"

"For the moment, yes. After he talks with Howard, they'll cook up some deviltry. He won't find that reef-passage in a hurry, though."

Still, Frazer knew just where he was, and where the lugger was; a disturbing thought. Rawlins put all that behind him, however; the boat came over from the lugger, and he made ready to go down.

"The little shark is back," said old Benson, as they donned the half-suits. "Better take the spears. Knives, also."

Shark, and small shark at that, was something Rawlins feared not at all.

They went down, with weighted nets and lines, and began the harvest anew. They had worked well along the bed, and now were approaching that gorgeous cathedral of coral whose spires cut the shimmering water with elfin traceries. Rawlins eyed it with care, but found nothing amiss; familiarity had lessened his sense of peril.

They completed their time and were drawn up. It was still early; they could make a second descent before knocking off for mess, so presently they were down again. But this time something happened.

Rawlins thought that he sighted the shark. He was standing almost against a hummock of coral, with Margot in front of him filling a net, and as he stared up and around, a sudden bursting current of water struck them both. Margot was knocked back against him, but the coral hummock saved them from a fall. The water boiled and tore at them; as he supported Margot, Rawlins looked around in vain.

But he knew what had caused that sudden commotion, and his heart stood still. Only one thing could have caused it—the tremendous hydraulic propulsion of a giant octopus, leaping almost faster than the eye could see. He waited for the roiled water to clear; he looked; and looked in vain, for any monster. But now they both saw the shark.

It was opposite them, just over the coral cathedral. Apparently the shark had gone stark mad. It was cutting wild, convulsive gyrations in the water—back and forth, up and down, snapping at nothing, dashing at nothing, swirling through the water in crazed dashes, as though trying to catch its own tail.

Rawlins knew all to well what this meant. The shark knew itself in the presence of its deadly enemy, an octopus, and had gone insane with fury; a savage, vicious hatred exists between the two creatures. Even as Rawlins reached for the lines, something moved midway in the mass of the coral cathedral, stretching out into the water. Something long, sinuous, rippling with motion, like a huge snake—but it was no snake. Frantic, acute fear in his heart, Rawlins gave the emergency signal on both lines.

IN that final instant, he saw the shark swoop, turn, snap like a mad dog. Part of that reaching tentacle—some ten feet of it—was severed, and a thin bluish haze obscured the water. That was all he saw, all he wanted to see. They were up and going, leaving the half-filled nets to follow. Tomsing was watching the lines, right enough.

The bottom dropped out of sight.

Fear, real fear—Rawlins did not deny it, even when he was up above and out of his suit. He turned to Tomsing.

"Put a buoy at this exact spot, and kedge us away at least a hundred feet. We're going to drop an ashcan here. Pick the three best oarsmen to handle the boat with you."

Old Benson, who was loosening Margot's gear, flung him a quick look.

"As bad as that, sir?"

"That coral cathedral I told you about, down there, has a lodger. A bad one. That shark cut off a piece of a tentacle that must have been all of ten feet long. Just a bit of it."

"There'll be another one close by," said the old man.

"The ashcan will take care of 'em," Rawlins rejoined. "You'll see; the pieces will

come to the surface after the explosion. It'll be worth seeing."

Old Benson shook his head. "No. Even when dead, the suckers grip the rocks."

The old man had a mind of his own, anyhow.

Margot, who had heard all this, said nothing but watched Rawlins, who was figuring away with a compass, getting the exact situation of that coral cathedral; he knew just how many steps it was, he could recall its exact position down below—he had to coordinate that with this. The others had left them, Tomsing buoying the spot while the second boat was lowered, the first being half loaded with shell. Speed was needed ahead.

"Look," she said quietly, when he had finished and was loading his pipe, "give it up, Cap'n. Let's drop everything and go away from here. I'm afraid."

He looked at her for a moment, then nodded.

"So am I. But wait; you'll see. We'll destroy everything down there at one crack. By tomorrow, the water will be clear. One full day of shell fishing, one more, and we're done. Then we'll make tracks."

"I'd sooner go now."

"I wasn't made to run," Rawlins said slowly. "Got my mind set on this thing, Margot. We have everything to do it with. This is the one chance in a lifetime to make a big haul, and I mean to make it."

"You're not going back down there—again?"

"Yes. It will be quite safe."

"All right. If you go, I go too," she said, almost angrily. He nodded, and a shadowy smile touched his eyes.

"No reason why you shouldn't. I think it'll be safe. I can take the gun, just in case. If we missed this chance, we'll regret it all our lives."

She studied his face, a certain wonder in her eyes; but in the end his strength, his assurance, prevailed, and she smiled.

VII

A LOOKOUT was kept at all times, but nothing broke the line of the horizon.

The schooner was kedged a safe distance from the buoy, the eased moorings were taken up, the clink of the capstan-pauls ceased. A depth charge was brought up from the hold and put into the boat. While the men rowed, Rawlins carefully set the trigger for twenty-five fathom.

They came to the buoy, and, compass between his feet, he directed the four men at the oars. He wanted to get as precisely over that coral cathedral as possible.

"Way enough!" he said at last. "We're taking a chance, lads. Lay hard on the oars and don't miss a stroke, Tomsing, or we're swamped and done for. Over!"

The ashcan went over, and the men worked the long oars like mad, lifting the boat and driving her. They were nearly to the schooner when it came—the huge thunderous burst and lift of the water in a black mass, the pull and suck of the surface—and it nearly got them. The boat whirled and tossed. She was half swamped, but she came clear of it.

"That's done it," said Rawlins, later, as they stood on the schooner's deck and watched the dead fish floating about. "By morning, everything will be peaceful down there and we can buckle down to work."

"I smell fog, Cap'n," said old Benson, coming close. Rawlins gave him an incredulous glance. Sparkling sunlight, a fresh breeze, the horizon clear—

"Fog? You're crazy!"

"No, sir. You'll see. When the tide's at ebb and a fog is making around reefs like these, I can always smell it. Maybe it ain't due right now, but it'll come before tomorrow night, sure."

"If it does," put in Margot, "it'll spoil our fishing. When fog does come here, it stays a long time—days, perhaps."

"Nonsense! This breeze will blow it away if it does come," Rawlins countered.

"Perhaps," said the girl slowly, "it is not meant for us to do any more fishing."

"Don't be a fool!" he snapped. "Tomsing! Let's take that shell over to the lugger I want to look her over carefully. Want to take a look at your ship, Margot?"

She did. They went in the shell-loaded whaleboat.

Just the same, Rawlins remembered her slow words. Was she, perhaps, right? One side of his brain said she was, that fate was against him here, that to go on fighting against it was useless. He had pulled her out of a bad jam, he was in no need of money; to go on filling his pockets was a

bad thing; he had her, and plenty besides. One thing after another was combatting him, even to the monsters of the deep.

The other and practical side of his brain rebelled savagely against this argument. Quit, just after he had smashed all difficulties? It was absurd. If he backed out now in front of Frazer, he would lose face.

"Be damned to it! I'm no quitter," he muttered. "One more day of fishing the bed —that's what I said, and I'll stick to it. Of course, if fog comes up and stays, it'll play the devil with us."

So he settled it with himself, after a fashion; but he had misgivings.

They investigated the lugger with care. Cabin stores, supplies of all kinds, were abundant; Howard had been well found himself, and had shipped much of his loot from Van Kline's place aboard. Even with the few men he had, Rawlins decided that it would be possible to work both the lugger and the schooner, until he could get a few more hands. The ownership of the lugger could be settled by the courts after Margot's story was told.

"It's a valuable property," he told her, after they returned to the schooner and were discussing plans, dinner over. "Now and after the war, such bottoms will be sky high in price—"

"But I don't want a ship!" protested the girl. "Those pearls we—or you—recovered will more than take care of me. I don't want that lugger and won't have her."

"Oh!" said Rawlins, seeing that she meant her words. "Very well, then. I'll clean everything out of her and sink her. Howard shan't have her again, that's certain."

"Do as you like," she rejoined. "I'm honest about it. I don't want her. I wouldn't know what to do with her!"

That gave Rawlins something more to think about. To destroy a ship went against the grain—to hand her back to Howard was even worse.

With morning, Margot was set on going down with him. He refused to permit it.

"I'll go down first and take a look around; no telling what I may find," he said. "If it's all clear, then come along, on my second trip down."

To this she agreed, after some argument. It was a fine morning, with no indication of fog, and Rawlins was in good spirits. Old Benson stuck to it stubbornly that fog would come, but Rawlins laughed at him and got into his half-suit. A lookout was posted aloft, as usual, but reported the horizon all clear.

So, feeling that all his doubts and misgivings had been so much eyewash, Rawlins stepped off and was lowered away.

UPON reaching bottom, he was appalled by the scene that greeted him. In the coral forest had been blown an enormous gaping hole, and the gothic cathedral was clear gone, only a huge pile of fragments remaining at one side. The whole shattered place seemed empty of life; even half the shell bed had been blasted into nothing. The sense of desolation was terrible; it was precisely as if one were amid bomb-blasted ruins of a city on dry land.

Fear struck into Rawlins. Fear of what? He could not say; there was no cause. All was quiet. He forced himself to gather shell, going along the deeper stretches of the bed to the length of his air-hose, and all the while his fear increased. This angered him. He filled the net, sent it up, and after a last vain search around, followed.

"Nerves, dammit," he told himself furiously. "You've gone to bits like a puling child you fool!"

The sunlight banished all these insensate fears; the sound of voices, after those silent depths, restored him instantly to himself, and he laughed to hear Benson marveling at the size of the shell just sent up. He looked at Margot, and replied to her eager question with a nod and a smile.

"Yes; no reason against it. All's quiet down there. A lot of damage done, but no sign of anything amiss. Go down if you like; wait for me, though."

He beckoned old Benson aboard the schooner, took him to the cabin, and showed him the submarine gun.

"After I'm down, send this down to me. I don't want Miss Kline to see it now. There may be no danger at all, but—"

"I know," Benson said, as he paused. "You feel something. Like me smelling fog; ain't no reason in it, but there it is. And fog will come. I've been on bottom too much not to know how you feel, Cap'n."

Rawlins eyed him and nodded. "Like a warning," he said slowly. "A warning;

maybe it is. I'm going to fish today, and no more. Fill both boats, and we're done. Send down that gun and leave it in case of need, just as a precaution."

Again he was sent down, and Margot followed. Company! That was it. Everything was different, with her here; he felt quite all right. The gun was lowered; it hung by its own weight, and he left it.

Together they began to fill the net-baskets, stripping the edges of the deeper beds and working about the great pile of ruins that had been the coral cathedral. Rawlins kept a vigilant eye on the depths and saw nothing to cause the slightest alarm. Twice they sent up the nets, filled to capacity, before their time was up; then followed. Rawlins left the gun hanging where it was, a few feet off the bottom.

Later, after lunch, they went down again, and again the nets of giant shell came up, and they followed for an hour's rest. They would have two boats full loaded after another session—the last, said Rawlins.

Old Benson shook his head. "Don't say that, Cap'n. Bad luck to say that next time is the last."

"Luck? I don't believe in it," said Rawlins. "A man makes his own luck. Where's that fog of yours?"

"Coming," said Benson, and pointed to the horizon southwards. It thinned out there to a grayish white—possibly fog, possibly not. Rawlins shrugged.

"There's a fortune going aboard the lugger, before sunset. A week from now, she'll stink like hell—but we'll have a take of pearls to make your eyes bug out!"

"I think I'll stay aboard her tonight," said Margot, smiling at them. "Just for luck—the luck you deny."

"As you like," said Rawlins indifferently. "As safe there as here."

When he was readying to go down, for the last time, he was laughing at his own past fears. Already he was casting ahead in mind. Before dark the equipment would be boxed and stowed, the pumps in the hold, the catamaran apart and under hatches. Then, with morning, to get out of the atoll, out to sea and away!

He came down to the coral forest, landed, signalled all well and adjusted the weights at his breast. Presently Margot came down at his side. He steadied her as she landed, and he glimpsed her laughing face through the thick helmet glasses. They took the weighted nets and moved off, side by side.

The click of the pumps came steadily, evenly; the exhaust bubbles trailed aloft.

Suddenly the water swirled around them, the coral fronds waved in the mad suction, Margot was knocked off balance but a hand saved her from falling flat. On that instant, the whole world changed for Rawlins. He threw himself forward, caught and lifted her, and gripping her life-line, gave four emergency tugs.

Off to their right, a whole section of the sea-floor was in motion—but it was not the sea-floor. It was a grayish, indistinct mass thirty feet across.

The girl's figure moved, left the bottom, was drawn upward. Rawlins saw something whip-like dart forward at her. Luckily, he still held his spear. He reached out with it, and the keen razor edge sheered through the pulpy tentacle. Through the bluish haze, he saw the writhing stump of the arm fold about his life-line and hose. It began to pull.

Too late now to signal. No power above could draw him up now. Nor any need to signal; Tomsing would know the worst, from that steady, deadly pull.

VIII

HIS brain was paralyzed by horror, yet he remained cool.

If he was pulled off his feet, he was lost indeed. But, just behind him, remained the submarine gun. He reached back, hooked the line with his spear, drew it toward him and grasped it, releasing it from the line.

Then, to keep his feet and balance, he was forced to walk forward toward the Thing that had gripped him. His fingers fumbled with the gun-catch.

The creature lifted, drew itself together in a huge rounded mass, the great eyes staring at him. It was standing now upon its other seven arms, ready for the death-leap upon its prey. Rawlins had dropped the spear, but had one of the long knives at his belt. He reached for it, slid it out, holding the gun in his left hand, and daring everything, leaped upward—slashing at the tentacle that held and pulled him. He dared not miss, he could not miss.

The one slash went through the arm and severed it for the second time.

Landing on his feet, Rawlins halted. The enormous mass of the octopus sank down a trifle, and another arm stole forth, reaching for him. Desperately, he lifted his weapon; it had no certain aim, currents or coral might deflect the missiles. He aimed between those platter-eyes, and pressed the trigger.

As he did so, he was jerked upward by those on the life-lines above. The shot missed. But the writhing tentacle curled and looped around his left foot. He was being tugged at from above and from below, and his knife had fallen. It lay there in front of him. . . .

He had four shots left, and perhaps ten seconds before he would be thrown off balance. He pumped them out. This time, none of them missed. Each one of them plumped smack into that pulpy mass around the beaky nose and the round eyes; he could see them cutting through the water, not fast but surely. The four explosions came almost as one.

There was a frightful convulsion; he was flung forward, and while saving his helmet glass from the coral, got hand on knife. The gun, of course, was gone. Everything turned black as the octopus emptied its ink-sacs—and with maddening horror, Rawlins knew that the shattered creature was almost on top of him.

He reached blindly, slashing for the arm holding his ankle. His helmet bumped coral, he felt an enormous weight grind him down against the bottom—and that was all he remembered.

He did not waken until he was lying on the catamaran, the sunlight above him, Margot and the men grouped close. Benson's voice reached him dimly.

"A miracle, that's what! Look at them bits of octopus-arm we cut off him—he was a goner, sure! Helmet ain't broke. No harm done. I reckon he's just scared, miss, like any of us would be. Knocked out by fright. Nobody can get nipped by one of them things and not be scared stiff. He's coming around, miss—"

Rawlins opened his eyes.

"Thanks, lads," he said. "You'd better get the gear all stowed. We're done here."

He caught Tomsing's hand and sat up. Some of them laughed, some of them swore, all of them watched him with glad eyes. But Margot fell on her knees beside him.

"You sent me up—you sent me up first!" she said softly. "I'll never forget that. I owe you everything—"

"You owe me nothing at all," said Rawlins. He was himself again and he detested any show of emotion before the men. "Come on, let's get out o' this. I won't feel safe till I'm up yonder on deck."

Once there, however, he settled down with his pipe and sat quiet; he was cut and bruised, and so badly shaken in spirit that it was hard to get a grip on himself. Margot sat beside him.

"You'll go now, won't you?" she said anxiously. "You'll leave here?"

"Aye," he assented. "Sorry if I was rude, a bit ago."

"Never mind. I understand."

"You always understand," he said, and fell silent. The words carried a lot of meaning; she reached out and took his hand, and patted it gently, and said nothing.

After a bit Rau brought them hot tea, and Rawlins roused himself with this, and was able to oversee the work. He was himself once more, now.

THE two boatloads of shell floated beside the gangway. Rawlins remembered them when, looking out toward the lugger in the sunset, he was startled to note her blurred lines, and shifted his gaze to the horizon. Old Benson's prediction had come true—mist was setting in. Fortunately, most of the gear was in and packed now, and the sections of the catamaran were being swung down the hatchway.

"We'll have to get those boats over there and emptied, Tomsing!" he exclaimed. "A job for all hands. We can eat later."

Tomsing nodded and assented, and quickened the work.

Including the mate and the two Kanakas, Rawlins had eight men to work both boats, not to mention both schooner and lugger. It could be done at a pinch. But it would take smart handling, with such skeleton crews, to get both craft through the passage and out to sea; also, the thought of Frazer worried him. Silence, total silence, on the part of Howard and Giles Frazer, was a bad sign.

"I'd give a lot for three or four extra hands," he said to Margot. They were on

their way to the lugger with one boat, Tomsing was bringing the other. Everything was stowed and they still had half an hour of daylight. The mist was still quite thin, blowing in with a fresh breeze from the south, but might thicken during the night.

"Give up the lugger," she said. "Leave it here, and go with your schooner."

"With all this shell aboard her? Not much," he replied. "Later we may have to give her up, but first I mean to open the shell. By the way, where are you keeping that belt with your pearls and stuff?"

She smiled. "You don't expect me to wear that heavy thing? It's hanging up in my cabin."

"Good Lord, girl! Better let me put it away for you! I can stow it safe."

"If you like," she replied. "At the moment, it's not important."

"Safest place is around one's waist," said he. "Only, I have places aboard the *Spindrift* that are better hidden."

"I don't know," she commented. "I was watching Frazer as he sat there. The way his eyes were probing about, I wouldn't be too sure."

"Maybe," said Rawlins, uneasily. "Maybe. He might have heard things."

This worried him. Also, the men were dog-weary after the heavy rush work of getting the gear all stowed, and there had been no supper as yet. Ili and Rau could get a meal ready aboard the lugger while the shell was being put below. What a stink that lugger would be in a week or ten days from now, thought Rawlins; but a rich haul of rose pearls would be worth a smell or two.

They came to the lugger, whose Jacob's ladder dangled emptily, and all hands poured up topside. Rawlins paused, by force of habit sending a glance around the horizon.

A quick exclamation broke from him. He leaped to the rail and went up the shrouds and paused there, gazing southward into the mist.

"Look there, Tom!" he cried. Tomsing was on the rail and looking.

A whaleboat was standing for them. She showed a patch of sail but low in the water; in her stern stood a figure handling the steering-oar; no one else in sight.

"Now watch out for squalls!" said Rawlins savagely. "May be Frazer. May be men lying hidden under a tarp. You've got better eyes than I, Tom. What d'ye make?"

"Looks like a Malay," said Tomsing. "Boat's taking in water. Something wrong with her bows."

"Keep an eye on her while we get the shell up and stowed."

The two Kanakas departed to the galley. Tomsing remained where he was. Everyone else pitched in getting the shell aboard and down into the hold, which was already letting off a fine strong effluvia.

When it was finished, the boat swung from her course for the *Spindrift* and headed up for the lugger; the Malay had seen them aboard here. He handled her with great skill, half awash as she was. Those island and coast Malays have been seamen for centuries. This man was short, stocky, apparently very powerful. He was naked to the waist. A bandage, stained with blood, was about his chest.

"The dogface is wounded," said Tomsing. "But look at the boat—look at her!"

Not hard to see what he meant. The mist, spreading up the sky, was thin and puffy in the breeze, giving no sign of growing thicker. And the boat was now close. One could see that her upthrust bow was a blackened mass, all the upper part gone, and the port gunwhale was all charred.

"Fire," said Rawlins. "Something's happened down yonder. With a boat half burned and a man wounded, isn't likely to be a trick."

"He's one of the men who was here with Frazer," said Tomsing. "I remember the others called him a *nakoda,* or captain; he's a native skipper himself. Looks to be about at the last gasp."

He did indeed. The brown body was rimed with salt from dried spray; the features were set and strained and contorted. As the wind brought him down at the lugger, he let the sheet loose, let the scrap of canvas flap free, heading for the two boats at the ladder. Suddenly his knees buckled and gave way; he fell back into the sternsheets, sitting there, unable to move. Safety at hand, his body had failed him.

Atlee and Pocock jumped down into one of the boats and caught hold of the soggy craft as it drifted upon them. No one else was in it; the oars were awash, mingled with bits of blackened fire-scarred wood.

The two seamen aided the Malay to the ladder. He tried to climb, but it was utterly impossible. He gripped a line let down from above and was hauled up.

They gathered around him as he lay on the deck. Tomsing, who spoke fluent Malay, did the questioning; Rawlins and most of the others knew the language and could follow. Supper was nearly ready, and Rau came along with pannikins of tea. One was given the Malay, who gulped it thankfully. There was still some sunset light in the west.

"I am Sembing, *nakoda* or sailing master for Rais Frazer," said he. "When I left, he was dying. He sent me. He said you would take us off. Four of our men are there, on the island at the south end of the atoll."

He gulped more tea, gathering strength. Rawlins waited grimly. If the man spoke of Howard, well and good; if he concealed any knowledge of Howard, as Frazer had done, he was lying. The man's eyes rolled at those around.

"Allah will reward you. Have pity!" he said.

"Tell your story," snapped Tomsing. "Tell us what happened."

"It was Tuan Howard," said Sembing. "He and his men. There were three divers, black infidels, Malaita men. They came aboard us, off the western reefs. Rais Frazer was trying to find a passage for the ship, into the lagoon. Tuan Howard and Rais Frazer were in the cabin. I do not know what happened. They came out on deck and they were very angry. I think they were drinking liquor. Tuan Howard had no hair and his head was scarred. Rais Frazer ordered Tuan Howard to take his men and go ashore. Tuan Howard did not want to go. He talked and they went back to the cabin. They made much angry talk and began to fight. The Malaita men said Rais Frazer was killing Tuan Howard, but we looked and Tuan Howard had shot Rais Frazer, so we killed Tuan Howard's men. That took some time. Then we heard Rais Frazer shout for help. He had killed Tuan Howard but the cabin was afire and before we could stop the fire it had spread. It spread very quickly. The lines of Tuan Howard's boats burned and they drifted away, and finally we got away in one of the boats that had begun to burn—you can see for yourself."

Sembing, the Scarred One, got out this long speech by fits and starts, between gulps of tea.

"Do you mean you are the only one left alive?" demanded Tomsing.

"No, praise be to Allah!" the Malay responded. "Four other men but they are burned and hurt. Rais Frazer too, but he will not live long; he was shot through the bowels. I was the least hurt, so I came for help. They are on the south island where the house is."

This said, Sembing collapsed. Margot looked down at him compassionately.

"I'd better see to his wounds," she began. Rawlins grunted.

"It's well bandaged; leave it alone," he said, and later remembered the words with regret. "Two of you carry him for'ard and put him in a bunk. Where's something to eat?"

Rau came with supper; they ate it grouped about the coaming of the forward hatch, all together. To Rawlins, the man's story had the ring of truth, and Tomsing agreed with this. Darkness was coming down.

"Leave 'em be," old Benson said sourly. "The more rats kill each other off, the better! Why should we bother our heads about Malays?"

"Aye," said Tomsing. "Let 'em starve, or live on fish."

Rawlins looked around the circle of faces. Dorn alone dissented.

"After all, they're sailors. This guy got here; he was a good man to do it. I'm for giving 'em a hand."

"It's common humanity to do it!" said Margot indignantly.

"Can't trust 'em, miss," Benson put in.

Rawlins laughed. "You forget, lads, that we could use a few more hands. Hurt as they are, they'll be able to stand a trick at the wheel in a pinch. And this Sembing did a good job, as Dorn says. I'm not the man to say no to that kind of appeal."

"You'll run down there with the schooner?" Tomsing asked.

"No. Leave both craft safe moored," said Rawlins. "You, Margot, stay aboard here if you like; I'll leave Rau and Ili with you, and the two carbines already here. Tomsing, I'll put you and Benson aboard the schooner. That leaves Grimes, Dorn, Atlee and Pocock to come with me in the whaleboat, which will have ample room for those Malays."

"When?" asked Tomsing.

"Now. Soon as we finish eating. Howard had seven Malays and three divers. Frazer must have had as many aboard his craft. What a killing!"

"You seem almost glad of it," Margot put in. Rawlins chuckled.

"I am. I'm tickled pink, if you want to know. I've worried my heart out about Cap'n Frazer. Now everything's quiet, as should be. His tricks are ended."

"Isn't safe to tackle the atoll at night," said Benson. He was always croaking about something. "Too many coral heads, Cap'n."

"All in close to the reefs," Rawlins said. "I'll tack down to the south end, keep to the center; I know where those shoals are. Don't worry. Back at sunrise."

He had the chart of the atoll in his mind's eye. With this southerly breeze, he knew where every tack would bring him; he knew the shoals, the coral heads, even the racing currents, as though he had been here years instead of days. A proper seaman, Cap'n John Rawlins.

IX

THE wind blew fresh, the fog blew thin. To Margot, this presence of wind and fog together was no miracle. She had lived on these reefs long enough to know that what some said was impossible, actually was quite common.

She stayed for a long while on deck. The lugger tugged gently at her moorings; her masthead light and that of the schooner were lit. Rawlins, on departing, had said that he meant to get that belt and keep it safe; he had stopped aboard the schooner briefly, no doubt to do this and to leave the mate and Benson there.

The two Kanakas were worn out. She told them to go forward and turn in—she meant to watch until late, and could waken them any time. There was no need to watch, she well knew, for no danger of any kind was to be feared now. She would not leave the lugger unwatched, however. Gazing at the *Spindrift's* light, dim in the mist, she wondered whether Tomsing and old Benson were keeping watch or had dropped like weary dogs to rest. Not that it mattered.

She went below, lighted the cabin lamp, and gazed around in dismay. Cap'n Howard had decidedly not been a good housekeeper. The place was heaped with everything from gin bottles to charts; here, also, were the two carbines.

She set in to give the place a thorough cleaning, glad of the occupation. And it kept her occupied a long time. When, with a weary sigh—it had been a long, hard day even for her—she regarded everything with a satisfied air and found it shipshape, she was startled to find that it was past eleven. She lit a cigarette at the lamp; as she did so, she was certain that she heard the soft pad-pad of naked feet on the deck above.

Were the Kanakas awake? If so, she would put them on watch instead of waiting till midnight. She left the light going, since it lit the passage and companionway, and ascended the ladder to the deck, puffing at her cigarette. The wind had dropped to a whisper, the spars rocked idly against the stars. She called Rau and had no answer, but she thought something moved forward. She headed that way, her eyes becoming used to the obscurity, and saw someone sitting on the fore-hatch. She approached, and recognized the bandaged figure of the Malay, Sembing.

"I cannot sleep down there; it is too soft," he answered submissively. "Besides, the wound pains. This is better here."

"Where are the men?" she asked.

"Asleep," he replied. "Is it your desire that I waken them?"

She turned away. "No. Let them sleep until midnight."

Going back below, she put away her cleaning things. She looked at the glass of the transom, used for ventilation in tropic seas; it needed cleaning, but she decided to let it go. As she looked, she caught the dim reflection from a beam of light, apparently, and stared in wonder. Distant lightning, perhaps? It came again. She went back to the deck, tossed her cigarette over the rail, and watched the skies. They were blank, except for pale stars peeping through the mist.

Uneasiness took her, and she determined to put the Kanakas on watch and herself seek some sleep. She started forward, looking about for Sembing, but saw nothing of him. The fog had thickened appreciably; as the lugger swung lazily to the slow seas, the Jacob's ladder rattled against the side.

She came to the forecastle hatch, whose door was slid back, and called Rau. There was no answer.

This was certainly strange. She called again, impatiently, to waken the men. No response came. She hesitated, then started down the steep ladder. Everything here was in darkness. A singularly unpleasant odor assailed her; it was the odor of blood, but she did not recognize it.

It was a tiny place, with bunks crowded

in. She reached the bunks and felt about, angrily demanding some response from Rau and Ili. Her hand touched a body; she shook the man, then desisted abruptly. Her hand encountered something wet and warm, the body remained limp. Then, suddenly, she knew the fluid for blood.

A cry escaped her. It was answered by a harsh laugh from the deck. She swung about to the hatchway and as she did so, a beam of light struck down upon her. A figure stood up above. The dazzling light was shut off. The Malay was standing laughing. There was no bandage now about his body, there was no wound.

As she put her foot on the ladder, the door above was slid shut and the bolt was shot home.

CAP'N JOHN RAWLINS, meanwhile, tacked down toward South Island, his four men sprawled out and snoring. He was weary enough, but wanted no sleep as yet. With Tomsing and old Benson left aboard the *Spindrift,* all was secure behind him. He had left them at the schooner and had slung carbines down into the whaleboat, with extra clips, for his men just in case anything went wrong. He liked to be prepared.

At the last minute, recollecting Margot's money-belt, he slipped down to her cabin and caught it up. He did not want to delay putting it in safety; safer still if he buckled it about his waist, he thought, and so did, over his clothes. The gold coins lumped in two of the compartments made it very heavy, but he did not mind this.

They made very good time on the run to the island, reaching there slightly before midnight. The fog was not thick, being no more than a mist. Rawlins stirred the men up and ran into the beach where he had previously landed, before the house.

Not a soul was, or had been recently, on the island.

They did not wait any too long to make sure of this; the frightful possibility struck Rawlins that he had been tricked, and five minutes later he had the men in the whaleboat and was putting off. And now, slowly but surely, the fresh breeze dropped and the fog began to thicken.

He did not share in the oaths and fury of the men; he sat stone-cold. He remembered, now, that the wound of Sembing had not been examined; perhaps there had been no wound at all; perhaps the whole story of the Malay had been a lie, to get him away from the ships. One of Frazer's tricks. Howard had had seven Malays and three Malaita boys, Frazer would have about the same number—a goodly force. A boat, two boats, might have come over after leaving a few men aboard Frazer's schooner—over where? To the schooner and the lugger, of course. To attack. To seize both craft.

The thought made Rawlins writhe. He cursed himself bitterly for having suspected nothing.

The breeze became fitful—coming now in puffs, now falling almost to nothing, so it was very difficult to estimate the whaleboat's speed. Rawlins had the exact bearings between the two craft and the island, of course, but when a craft is irregular in its motion even the most exact bearings cannot be held. Besides, the atoll was full of currents. This was why he had ordered the masthead lights of both vessels be kept alight. The thought made him writhe anew, for those lights would serve to guide Frazer, naturally.

"Who's up there in the bow?" Rawlins asked suddenly. "You, Dorn? Is there a tarp in the boat?"

"Aye, sir. The canvas cover is folded under the thwarts."

Rawlins lit his pipe and said no more as the fog came in more thickly and the whaleboat held on her slow way. Slow as it was, the pace beat that of oars. He crushed down his impatience—his certainty. It was hard to keep quiet and silent, but he did it. He was already thinking ahead, on the assumption that the worst must have happened.

At worst, Frazer and Howard would each have come over to the two vessels in a boat—two boats, fifteen men—catching them by surprise, wiping out Tomsing, Benson and the two Kanakas. Of Margot, he preferred not to think at all. He had to keep cool. At the worst, he would find himself with four men, both vessels lost, Margot dead or captive. Frazer would know no halfway measures; pearl pirates had to go the whole hog—dead men tell no tales. And he, in a whaleboat with four men! But the weight around his waist reminded him. In Howard's mind, at least, that money-belt would bulk large.

Might it, somehow, serve a purpose? It might—it must! His brain reached ahead desperately to what would happen when he came back.

"Keep those carbines covered against the damp," he ordered. "Shove 'em under the tarp and pocket the clips. Better put a clip in place first—have 'em all ready to use in a pinch."

The men obeyed. Those were deadly weapons, more deadly than rifles; they had cleaned the Japs out of many a jungle strip. He had schooled his men in their use, too.

Through the hours, the whaleboat held on. The fog was even more thick as morning approached. The men, and Rawlins himself, were on the alert to pick up the masthead lights when the first grayness of dawn seeped through the fog overhead. Rawlins was worried. Day was coming up, and even at this slow pace he should have reached the two vessels ere now.

A hoarse cry broke from Dorn, in the bow.

"Ahoy, Skipper! I smell reef—sounds like breakers, too!"

Rawlins loosed the sheet, and the canvas flapped listlessly. Assent came from the other men. With the tide at ebb, the exposed reefs would smell. Breakers—no doubt of it! Rawlins came around on the starboard tack and the canvas filled. He knew instantly what had happened. He had overshot the two vessels, had passed them, and had come to the reefs beyond.

Therefore the masthead lights had been extinguished. The worst had happened.

"Stretch out, now," he ordered. "All four of you on the bottom, under the thwarts, lying flat. Pass the tarp along so it'll cover you but will be under the thwarts. Careful with the carbines. Grimes, you lay close aft here so you can get any word from me and pass it forward to the others."

Four men can lose themselves handily in a seven-oared whaleboat. When it was done, he helped arrange the tarpaulin above them. The day was graying fast, but the fog held thick as a gray wet blanket. His gaze probed it right and left.

Then direction came to him—red flashes, pistol-barks, the ringing crack of rifles, all in a burst of sound and sight, to port. A volley of yells arose, and were silent. Two more shots, then silence.

"Half an hour earlier, and we'd have been back in time," he voiced the heartsick words to the hidden men. "Got off my course. I can see the masthead lights, now."

The pinpricks of light glimmered faintly in the grayness. He headed for them, and as the whaleboat slid through the water, he hailed in a repeated shout.

His one chance, his only chance now, was to trust to the unexpected.

X

THE whaleboat was bearing down on the two vessels when a sudden puff of wind blew the fog thin momentarily, and daylight struck down upon the water like a sword.

Fairly close to him, within hailing distance, lay the lugger. The *Spindrift* was of course farther to the south; a boat from her was just coming to the lugger, and he fancied he could recognize Frazer in her.

"Ahoy, Rawlins!" This was Frazer, sure enough, bawling at him from the boat. "Come aboard and be damned to you!"

He saw several men on the lugger, and a boat trailed under her ladder; all Malayas, apparently, no sign of Howard's bald head. Where was he, then? Not in the boat with Frazer. But Frazer had taken the *Spindrift,* his schooner, had just come from there!

"Careful, Grimes," said Rawlins to the man under the tarpaulin, almost at his feet. "If I get aboard, you lads use your heads. Follow when you get the chance and come shooting."

He meant to say, aboard the schooner; his whole thought was to get to her and get aboard by hook or crook. He loved that schooner like a woman. The thought of her in Malay hands was maddening.

But, abruptly, the memory of Margot struck him like a blow. She must be aboard the lugger. Decision wrenched at him; he was bewildered, frightened, hesitant. Could he pass her by and make for his own craft?

The whaleboat was barely moving as the puff of wind died out and the fog returned. He watched closely, intently; Fraser's boat was alongside the lugger. Frazer was going up the ladder. After him climbed a shape he recognized—Tomsing. Upon reaching the deck, the big mate was surrounded by Malays and disappeared, evidently a captive. Frazer mounted the rail and stood gazing out at the whaleboat.

"Head in here, Rawlins, head in!" he shouted. "Come and take it, you dog!"

One of the Malays lifted a rifle and fired. The bullet whistled close to Rawlins. Frazer swung around and knocked the rifle from the man's hands, then straightened up once more and waved.

"All right—just a mistake, cap'n. Where are your men?"

"Left 'em on the island to open shell," replied Rawlins. "Didn't expect to find you here."

Frazer bellowed laughter.

"Come along," he rejoined, "and don't try any shooting or you'll be riddled."

"Haven't got a gun," replied Rawlins.

The whaleboat slowly glided along toward the lugger. Suddenly the voice of Tomsing lifted hoarsely.

"Sheer off, cap'n! They mean to murder—"

The voice was cut short. Frazer laughed once more. One of his men passed up a rifle as he stood on the rail, and he flourished it.

"Here y'are, Rawlins! I could shoot you quick enough; that ain't my way. Come along and talk peaceable," he bawled. "I got you where I want you, damn your eyes!"

"Guess you have," rejoined Rawlins despondently. Yet he plucked up heart a little. His guess had been right. Better make sure of it. "Where's Cap'n Howard?" he demanded.

"Gone to Davy Jones, thanks to this blasted mate of yours. Your old grand-dad is done for, too. Got your mate here and Miss Kline in the fo'c's'le. Come along and join the party. Head for your schooner and we'll open fire."

Apparently the *Spindrift* had been left deserted. Rawlins did not doubt this in-

formation. Tomsing had put up a fight, Benson was dead, Howard and some of the Malays were done for. Fraser was left cock of the walk, and knew it.

"Don't shoot," said Rawlins. "I'm coming aboard."

Frazer eyed the boat sharply and nodded as it slid in closer. Rawlins was making for the ladder; with a heart-wrench, his decision was made. The schooner must wait.

"What kind o' terms you offer?" he asked. The lugger was fifty feet away. The Malays, armed with rifles, lined her rail, watching him.

FRAZER grinned. "Fair enough," he replied. "I've looted that blasted schooner of yours, ripped the heart out of her, found everything. I've got your bloody pearls, and I want the rest. Howard told me about that money-belt of his. What's that around your waist?"

"That's it," said Rawlins, letting go the sheet. The whaleboat had way enough to reach the ladder, now. "And if you murder me, it goes to the bottom with me."

"Right you are," said Frazer. "No murder, cap'n. Come aboard, hand over the belt, and everybody's happy."

"Throw me a line," said Rawlins.

Frazer laid aside his rifle. He himself tossed over a line, and Rawlins caught it and brought the whaleboat in between the two other boats, and made fast to the Jacob's ladder that dangled. The fog had closed in thickly; the figure of Frazer, above, was dim.

"I'm watching you," said Frazer. "Up you come!"

No danger here; Rawlins knew he was wanted safe aboard, with the belt that girded him. Frazer would take no chances of that loot going to the bottom.

"You can take your schooner and clean out," said Frazer, encouragingly, "if you hand over Howard's loot."

"All right," replied Rawlins. He reached for the ladder and swung his weight to it. He must get Frazer away from this point of the rail, somehow. There was damned little chance for him, in fact, and he knew it well.

He mounted. When his head and shoulders came over the rail, he paused. Frazer had stepped back, a pistol in his hand. Tomsing, tied hand and feet, sprawled in the opposite scuppers. Among the Malays stood Sembling, now clear of bandages.

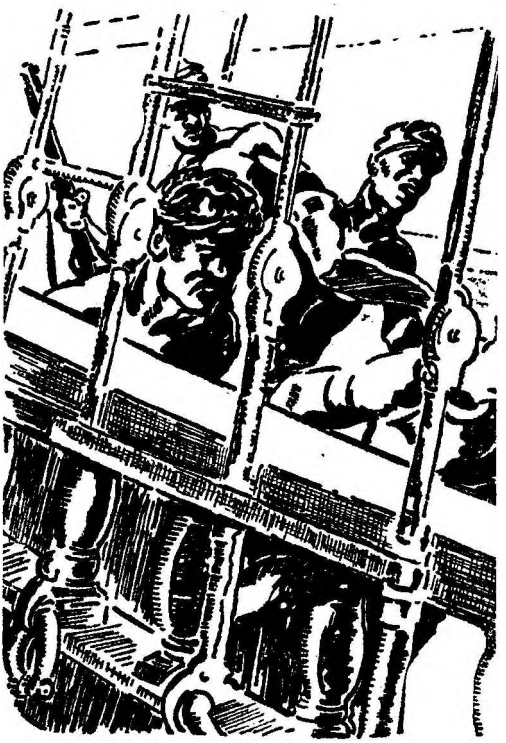
"So that lying rascal of yours was a decoy!" he said.

"Right," replied Frazer. "Come along."

"Not so fast." Rawlins stayed where he was. "Mean to kill me, do you? Then I'll drop overside, and the belt with me—"

"Don't be a ruddy fool," snarled Frazer, and pocketed his pistol. "That girl's locked in, for'ard. Ain't been hurt."

Rawlins came in and leaped over to the deck. He straightened up; but with the leap, his pipe had fallen from his pocket.



He picked it up and got out his folding pouch, put the pipe between his teeth, and looked at Frazer.

"I guess you win," he said quietly, and glanced at the Malays, who were crowding in. "Call off your dog-faced friends. I want a word in private with you over there."

Frazer grinned. "Right. What about the belt?"

"Oh, that's yours. Wait till I get my pipe going."

He began to fill the pipe, came to Frazer,

and nodded again. "So you broke open my cabin panels, did you?"

"And found plenty for my pains, damn you," said Frazer. "What's your private word?"

"Why," began Rawlins, pipe and pouch in his hands, "just to say—"

With absolutely no warning, he flipped the loose tobacco out of the pouch into the face of the other man, and followed it with a rush and a kayo punch for the belt. But he was not dealing with a cigar store Indian. Blinded as he was by the shower of tobacco particles, Frazer back-stepped, shot out a foot, and tripped Rawlins neatly.

Rawlins went to the deck. He recovered swiftly.

As he gained his feet, he saw Frazer whipping out his pistol with one hand, clawing at his eyes with the other. Desperately, he flung himself in—and the pistol exploded, almost in his face. The impact of the slug stopped him cold, turned him about, doubled him up. So this was it! Felt as though half his stomach had been shot away.

He wavered for an instant. Then, unexpectedly, he hurled himself at Frazer and bore the latter to the deck. The pistol was knocked away, and he locked his fingers in that brawny throat, sank them into the flesh and held on grimly, as Frazer began to thresh around and claw at him.

"I'll take you with me, you damned murderer," he grunted.

They rolled on the deck together, intertwined, both of them fighting in demoniac fury. Wild shouts broke from the Malays, watching; then, abruptly, these shouts changed to cries of alarm, to frantic shrieks.

The rapid drumming of carbine-fire whisked along the deck.

Rawlins could not see what was happening, because of the iron fists beating at him. His fingers were still locked fast in the swelling throat, but his senses were slipping. He could feel his strength going. The pain in his side became a deathly agony; that bullet, of course, had done for him—but he was intent upon taking Frazer with him, and hung on in silent ferocity.

SUDDENLY a frightful yell sounded in their very ears and a body fell upon them—a Malay, one of Frazer's men. Knife in hand, lashing out in dying convulsions, the Malay struck and yelled and struck again, and died. His knife reached Rawlins, who felt the steel bite into him—then reached Frazer. Rawlins felt blood on his hands, felt his fingers slipping, felt himself slipping—and that was all.

When he came to himself, Rawlins was greeted by daylight, by slim sunbeams piercing the thinning fog and warming his face.

He looked around, weakly, dazedly. He sat in the port scuppers, leaning against the rail; he was stripped to the waist, and bandages were about his shoulder and arm, where the Malay's steel had slashed him. At one side lay a doubled-up heap—Frazer, with the haft of a knife sticking from his side. Dead.

Nothing else was in sight. The deck was empty, splotched by pools of blood. It had been cleared of the dead, except for Frazer. Then, at a stab of pain, Rawlins recollected himself, looked down, moved a hand to his side.

No bandage, no blood—only a swelling, blackened bruise. The explanation came to him, at sight of the money-belt he had worn. It lay on the deck nearby, with a little stream of golden coins spilling from it as the lugger lurched to the seas. That bullet had smacked into a compartment where the gold was lumped together—there was the slug, gripped in three or four golden coins. Slow comprehension reached Rawlins. Not dead, not even dying!

But where was everyone? As though in response, he heard a light step, and lifted his head. There was Margot, coming to him, smiling, holding a pannikin. She sank down beside him and put the pannikin to his lips.

"Here. I made some coffee. It's not too hot—swallow it."

He obeyed, gulping, his eyes searching her face. Her features were radiant, happy, her eyes warmed upon him. He pushed the pannikin aside.

"Thanks. Where—what's happened? My men?"

"They're all right," she replied. "They've gone in the whaleboat. They'll be back. You'll be glad to know that I found everything—everything Frazer had looted from the *Spindrift*. All here, in the cabin. Your pearls and everything."

The coffee was like a shot in the arm. He felt himself all at once.

"What is it?" he asked. "Something wrong? My men—where?"

"Tomsing took them in the boat," she said. "To find the schooner."

To find—find—the word hit him like a blow. With a sudden motion, he moved, caught the rail, pulled himself up. His gaze went out to the schooner, and found nothing. Sunlight was banishing the fog now. She was not there. Not in sight at all.

"What does it mean, Margot?" he demanded harshly.

"Tomsing said that Frazer must have cut her cables before he came over here," she said. "They went to find her."

Rawlins grunted, and sank down as he had been, his head drooping, bitterness upon him. The schooner was gone. He could feel the certainty of his loss.

"Gone," he said in a dead voice. "Nothing matters, then."

The girl took his hand. "Cap'n, everything matters!" Her voice was rich, vibrant, urgent. "Look up! What's a mere ship? There are others. Take this one! You've not lost everything—the pearls, the money, your men, me! Take 'em all. We owe you everything."

He looked at her. "You're a darling. But you don't savvy. That schooner was everything to me—my whole life—"

"Well, what you've lost was lost for my sake," she said. "Is life so sour, because of a loss?"

In her eyes, Rawlins read the unuttered words. He recalled everything. When he had rescued this woman from the sea, she

had just lost everything—father and friends, home and all else. And had she once, even once, whined about it?

Rawlins drew a deep breath. Something changed in him at this moment; he saw with new eyes, saw what a little thing his loss was, saw what greater things remained.

"By the Lord, you make me ashamed of myself!" he said, and his eyes smiled, and his lips twitched. "I've been a fool—eh? What's that? Oars?"

Oars, and voices, and a boat coming knocking against the lugger's side. Over the rail appeared Tomsing, hurt and wounded but still active.

"Hello, Skipper," he said. "Sorry. She's gone."

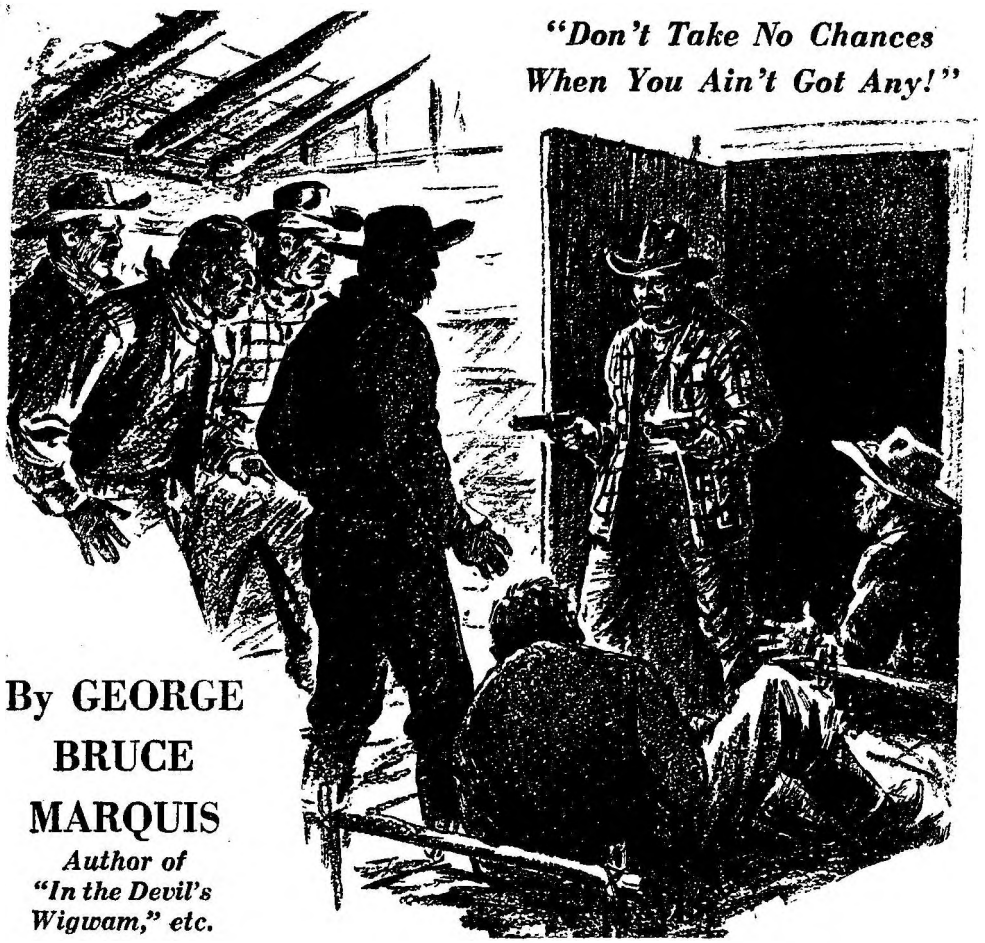
"Who's gone?" Rawlins asked. The other men were coming up now.

"The schooner. They cut her cables and must have knocked a hole in her bottom before leaving her. We did our best—"

"Good!" said Rawlins, to their amazement. He caught Margot's hand and came to his feet. "Better that she's gone, than that you lads were gone. There are better things in life than ships; better friends to trust, better company in which to go cruising across the years!" His eyes flashed. "Get the hook up, Tomsing, get some canvas aloft, and let's go! What d'ye say, Margot?"

Her fingers tightened upon his, her look, her smile, was suddenly glorious as she understood.

"Right you are, Cap'n," she said. "And I say yes! Let's go—it's a long cruise ahead, for us both, I hope!"



"Don't Take No Chances When You Ain't Got Any!"

By GEORGE BRUCE MARQUIS

Author of "In the Devil's Wigwam," etc.

A MATTER OF SILHOUETTES

"MR. HOOD, that's a pistol pressing against your spine, so don't move unless I order you to."

"She's only a forty-one from the feeble feelin'," Bat Jennison, *alias* Jim Hood catalogued its caliber disparagingly. "Even so, she's cocked. I heerd the hammer snick back."

"You've unusual ears if you did." The Voice paid questioning tribute to Jennison's auditory equipment. "And while, as you've guessed, it's a forty-one, that's a very heavy bullet to go roaming through your entrails."

"It ain't got the shovelin' power of a forty-five," Jennison maintained in honor of his own beloved pistols. "And whilst I'm plowin', I'll inform you I didn't *guess* the caliber of your pea shooter. I know by feel."

"Leaving that question for the moment," the man with the gun said without emotion, "unbuckle your belt and drop your guns. And make your motions slow motions."

"I think moren considerable of them Colts," Jennison understated widely, "and consequent I ain't drappin' of 'em fur you nor nobody else. I'll ease 'em down gentle."

"Don't worry," the other advised cheerlessly. "You'll have no further need for them after the boys who're down at my cabin right now get through with you. What are you straining about?"

"Tongue's stuck," Jennison maligned the flawless belt buckle. For he was luring a gun from its lair up-sleeve, down into his hand. Not for present use but at hand and ready. A fragmentary interlude, the briefest of brief reprieves, a split second of inattention on the part of his captor. That was all Jennison required.

Yet respite came, not through Jennison's guileful daring nor stupid carelessness on the part of The Voice. An unknown intruded purposefully, silently and with sledge hammer directness. The blow struck, whatever the weapon, was platted with skill and planted with precision. Almost before Jennison heard the squshing impact, he felt the muzzle of the pistol caressing his spine shimmy, then begin an aimless glide as if no master-mind longer guided its destiny.

Instantly Bat Jennison threw himself sidewise, and as instantly the thin space that had so recently warehoused him was widened magically by his captor's limber body. And Jennison, a stranger in a strange camp took swift sanctuary in the neighborly shadows. Behind him a low chuckle, full of self-esteem, pride of planning and joy of flawless execution. Yes. The bludgeoneer was handing himself a congratulatory pat between his mental shoulders. Yet threaded through the paean of self-praise was something else which Jennison would ponder at his leisure.

A WEEK ago, this rambunctuous placer camp of Rosebud on Brier Creek was a name to Jennison—nothing more. Then a bibulous pilgrim dowered him with a word of mouth picture of Rosebud and sprouted in his mind a determination to inspect this brimstone-tainted camp at first hand. Jennison had idled into his favorite saloon at Acme for a midday gargle, when he noticed a stranger teetering at the bar who clutched a glass reeking with cheap rum while he lauded the beverage in hiccoughed punctuated phrases.

"Rum," he muttered, "fitten only for hemen with hair on their chests."

"Rum," Jennison grinned a left-handed panegyric, "sure don't tickle your innards with no feather duster."

"Notwithstanding," the rum biber insisted stubbornly, "it's the drink of kings. I drink the same."

He illustrated his remark, then pivoted cautiously until his slack back cupped the edge of the bar. So anchored, he gazed at Jennison long and gravely, then clearing his throat he said dramatically, "Stranger, you behold in me a brand snatched from hell. I call Rosebud that. Besides they was out of rum. Well, that said camp is the rootinest, tootinest, shootinest place I'm ever seeing. It's polluted with sin and gold dust." A pause, then, "And a cripple."

"The formerly two," Jennison grinned, "moren seldom travel bitted together side by each, but wherefore the cripple? She don't follow."

"*He* don't foller," the relator emphasized as to gender. "That cripple don't foller nothing but his own sweet will. Guns, fists, what does *he* care? And as for words, you oughta hear him. Listen to what I seen and heerd him do, and him a hunchback."

The tale was prolix, circumstantial, yet vividly surrounded with the authentic aura of the camp as well. Indubitably this hunchback was somebody.

"Remember anything about him special?" Jennison asked curiously. "Name for instance?"

With corrugated brows the inebriate lugged at his heavy load. Gently, the rum-bemused pools of memory began stirring to eddy at last to the surface a shreaded fragment of half truth and a solid chip of authentication.

"His name was some animule." He pondered on that a moment. "Squirrel, that's it." Elation now, "And he was short one ear. Looked like saber work to me. I figger he'd been in the cavalry."

"Not saber work," Jennison corrected with plenty of animation. "I knew him. Have for years. His name you got in spittin' distance of. It's Burrill. How's fur another drink of rum?"

Yes indeed he knew Tib Burrill. Five years ago, Jennison as Jim Hood, had engineered a notable purge of thugs in a camp misnamed Harmony. His ablest lieutenant had been Burrill, the hunchback, he of the missing ear. Jennison had drifted on to other fields, Burrill had remained. Men in the old West seldom wrote, even to their families. Unless chance tangled their trails, rumor or hearsay was their only checking system as to the whereabouts of one-time

companions and friends. So as to Tib Burrill. And because he had been a sterling comrade and was now only one hundred and fifty miles away Jennison would surely visit Rosebud on Brier Creek and that at once.

IT WAS just short of sundown when Bat Jennison rode into town. The business houses hugged the north bank of the considerable creek. The main street was a brief segment of the stage road that ran east toward Montana and west toward the six hundred mile distant Pacific Ocean. Houses skirted the road north and south, houses by courtesy only. Dugouts, leantos, skeletons of poles walled with muslin and roofed with brush, anything that sheltered even scantily, these were houses. On occasion some more leisurely or less impatient souls had built genuine log houses. They were notable because of their rarity. Over the wooded slope behind the town proper other dubious habitations were scattered like a fist full of jack stones strewn by the hand of a fretful child.

The town was too squeaky new to have attained to the opulence of feed barns and restaurants. So Jennison rode through the town to emerge on a little flat, well grassed and bisected by a tiny spring branch chuckling contentedly, as it galloped along to join Brier Creek. Caring for Sunflower, his beloved buckskin saddle pony, he turned to his own wants. By the time he had finished his meal, full dusk had spread its dark mantle over the little camp nested in the bottom of the low-walled canyon. A full moon would in time lift the shadows, but that would be an hour from now.

Burrill had known Jennison as Jim Hood at Harmony and here Jennison would travel under that sometime alias. There was a more compelling reason, however, than the mere Harmony association. Jennison's fame had traveled far and a very deep hatred of the little man scorched in the breasts of the scattered survivors of a good many disrupted outlaw gangs. Jennison was here for peace not battle. Therefore he would not advertise his presence in Rosebud. It is only fair to say, however, that he would not swerve the width of a spider's web from trouble if it were pushed his way. One other thing motivated him. He had a constantly attendant worry that some new budded gunsman would try to add to his verdant glory by daring Jennison to a pistol duel. Despite his skill, Jennison entertained the fear that sometime he might injure one of these obstreperous youngsters more or less seriously. Up to the present a bullet-wrecked pistol or some shredded cuticle had been the token price paid by youthful temerity.

Jennison would have felt less undressed without his boots, than without his Colt's .45s. Yet they did not quite tally his present arsenal. On occasions not often, he wore a sleeve gun, a single-barreled derringer hung by the butt through the medium of a narrow ribbon of elastic, its upper end in turn anchored to the shoulder seam of his mackinaw, and of course, inside. In its quiescent state the small pistol was well hidden, nestling as it did in the inside bend of his right elbow. To stretch the elastic and so bring the butt of the derringer into his ready hand, required but a sharp outflit of his hand. Tonight at the nudge of a sudden hunch he added it to his Colt's.

As he walked townward, gradually he was being impressed with the notion that either the vast majority of the denizens of Rosebud went to bed with the birds or had already sought the solace of the saloons and gambling houses. Few indeed were the travelers on the road and these few slipped by elusive as shadows and as silent. A single grunt was the only vocal response to his several cheery greetings. Lights along that half mile stroll were fewer than the furtive travelers even. With one notable exception. A hundred yards from the business center he rubbed by a considerable cabin, with two windows, both shuttered, and a closed door, well fitted. It was well fitted because from beneath showed a very thin wedge of light indeed, none along its top nor edges. From behind the close-shuttered windows and cabinet maker's door oozed the sound of voices, words indistinguishable, yet stamped with the sure impression of a certain hard tenseness in the murmuring flow.

Because Tib Burrill had been a fastidious person as to liquor and surroundings, Jennison passed the humbler saloons with scarcely a glance. But when he stood before the refulgent groggery, The Shrinking Violet, he concluded he had arrived. Burrill's finicky bark would surely find anchor-

age in so sumptuous a port. Yet a long glance through the doorway failed to disclose his hunchback friend so Bat Jennison stepped in to query the gray-eyed knight of the corkscrew. First of all a drink, then conversation.

"I'm lookin' fur a friend," Bat Jennison stated, "who you'll surely know, Tib Burrill."

Not the tiniest crack appeared in the bartender's wooden features as he shook his head.

"No," he said with unsurpassed brevity and solidity, too.

"That don't stand to reason," Jennison insisted. "He's the kind of a feller people notice. Besides he's a hunchback."

"If there's a man in this camp who carries a hump on his back, I've never seen him," the dispenser of liquors asserted flatly, "and I've been here from the jump off." He started to move away then turned about.

"If by chance he should wander in," said he, "who'll I tell him is looking for him?"

It was a fair appearing question and Jennison accepted it at face value.

"Tell him," he instructed, "that Jim Hood is in town."

He left the misbranded saloon gripped in a medley of emotions. Some way, this princely bartender with the glacial eye did not quite impress Jennison with verity. His denial of all knowledge touching Burrill was a bit too pat. It smacked ever so faintly of something predetermined, not spontaneous. For unless the rum-saturated stranger at Acme had lied out of hand, Burrill was in Rosebud a week ago. And the description of the town had been true and the accuracy of Burrill's portrayal beyond cavil. And a hunchback once a denizen of a small mining camp is not forgotten the next day. Besides, Tib Burrill was a character men remembered without checking back for verification to his monstrous disfigurement. Without the classical background, Jennison nevertheless was in full agreement with Shakespeare that there was something rotten in Rosebud. And being a stubborn man he would prove it.

By the time he had worked down scale from the magnificence of The Shrinking Violet to within one of the total saloons and gambling houses, Jennison was in ninety-nine percent agreement with the starched and stately bartender of The Shrinking Violet. A single information booth remained for his venturing, a tiny cubicle of poles and muslin, whose bar was an unplaned board teetering across the heads of two mismatched barrels. What stock of liquor there was stood in a couple of boxes behind the bar. Five men leaned heavy elbows upon a table, engaged in low-voiced conversation. A pack of greasy cards were strewn about in careless fashion as if the matter under discussion far outweighed games of chance and problematical gain. All looked up at Jennison's intrusion and the fat one, dubbed bartender by his lack of head-covering addressed a query Jennison's way.

"Looking for liquor, or what?"

There was insolence in the question and Jennison's retort was crisp and without frills.

"I'm looking fur Tib Burrill. Know him?"

For the first time that sterile evening Bat Jennison struck pay dirt.

"Burrill?" the obese one chuckled throatily. "One of my regular customers. Just left for home a few minutes ago. Friend of hisen?"

"Fur years," Jennison said briefly. "Where's his cabin?"

"Last one down the road on your left," a second volunteered. "Sets out by itself. Me and Zeb here 'ill lead you to it."

"Don't bother," Jennison dispensed with the self-appointed guides genteely but firmly. "And I'm obliged fur the information. The drinks are on me, gents."

He had come that way. In fact he had made camp where the straggling cabins had finally faded out into an open flat. If Burrill's cabin was the last one on the left then Sunflower was browsing within a hundred yards of the long-sought man, *if Burrill had really gone home.* Jennison sighed heavily. For if the hog-jowled bartender had told truth, the moral down plunge of his old-time friend had indeed been catastrophic.

LEAVING the saloon, he set out briskly to retrace his steps. The moon had now floated up above the canyon walls making the way plain and the going easy. Again he found fellow voyagers few, and as before shyly furtive. Presently he was abreast of the one large cabin on the street. Under

the moonlight it was more imposing than when viewed in semi-obscurity. He could see too, that the latch string had been drawn inside, a camp oddity impressive in its rarity. From under the well-fitted door a yellowish emulsion of light spread thinly. And at least one man found security within these solid walls for as Jennison passed by he heard the inelegant clearing of a very masculine throat. Now he observed a man standing in the shadows between the princely cabin and its pauper neighbor. Because to him it appeared to be without personal significance he favored the gloom decked sentinel with but a passing glance.

Ten minutes and Jennison had reached the end of the street and the last house on the left. It stood in sullen aloofness from its next neighbor, a prodigality of wasted space unusual in those western camps. Shaded somewhat by a massive fir, yet Jennison saw that the door was half open, hanging awry on a shattered wooden hinge. His eyes narrowed as he considered that fractured hinge. Burrill was neat, not only in body but in surroundings. Unless he had changed notably, that hinge would have been mended immediately in its breaking. Now the door hung there drunkenly, prophetic of things gone wrong. And no answer came to Jennison's hail, no response to his knock.

There was menace in the crippled door and the brooding silence, and Jennison as cautious a man as ever lived drew and cocked a pistol before he reached even for a match. Then despite the fact that he would present an illuminated target for a possible skulker within the cabin, he scratched a sulphur match along his trousers' leg and advanced the robust flame into the cabin. Disorder and wreckage met his eye in that first flitting glance, later to be sorted out and tabulated at his leisure. For he looked first for a candle and found it, a mere stub, still glued with its own drippings in the neck of a squat bottle. Retrieving it from the litter he lighted the blackened wick with the last gasp of his flickering match. No one was in the cabin, nor had been, he calculated for some hours. Now he closed the decrepit door and jambed the cross-bar in place. He did not fancy an intrusion while he grappled with his bitter problem.

But was this indeed Tib Burrill's cabin? Nothing in the rubbish that had been dishes or cooking utensils or clothes to tell Jennison that. The battered coffee pot lying against the wall, the smear of grounds spread like a blackened tongue from its spout revealed nothing of its owner. Even the rusty pick, its handle cradled in a corner had nothing to report. Then Jennison's searching eye was fixed on something that held promise if this were Burrill's cabin. Stepping with care over that tattling red gout on the dirt floor Jennison lifted the rifle from its wooden pegs, turned it in his hands and looked at the stock. Looked and knew. Along that walnut butt he read this clipped legend: T. B U R done in brass-headed tacks. Burrill had always intended to finish out his last name, but brass-headed tacks were scarce in those pioneer camps.

Almost reverently Jennison returned it to the wooden prongs but when he had settled it there with a touch that was almost a caress, the soft light died in his gray eyes, and his jaw set in grim, hard lines. Again he studied the chaos that had once been an orderly cabin, studied it minutely for clews that might in some way furnish a shred of identity as to his friend's assailants. It was futile. Perhaps if he had not been a complete stranger to Rosebud and its people the result might have been different.

Last of all he pondered the red spot on the dirt floor that had been blood, Burrill's blood. The smear could be covered neatly by out-spanning his two hands, thumbs touching, fingers spread. Unless the wound was internal the loss of blood had not been serious. It had hardened, and its surface was crisscrossed with many check lines. A good many hours, their number not determinable had elapsed since Burrill had been shot down in his own cabin. Where was his friend now?

Jennison's return toward town was not unlike that of a suddenly aged man. For he was thinking deeply. The repeated asseverations that Burrill was unknown in Rosebud that had met his inquiries, save in that last disreputable deadfall, the certainty that these denials were false, the nature and reasons for the disaster that had engulfed his friend, all these mystifying and conflicting facts were food indeed for anxious reflection. So it was, that Bat Jennison who

rarely erred, committed a fundamental error of inattention and neglect. The jabbing pressure of The Voice's pistol against his spine was capitalized proof of that error. That he would have in all probability won clear of his captor detracted not at all from the timely aid of the unknown bludgeoneer.

WHEN The Voice crumpled to the ground, Jennison became one with the companionable shadows across the street. He gave little thought to the chuckling rescuer, for his relation to Jennison held no present meaning. Besides he had flitted townward following his self-congratulatory chuckle. As to the man who had hobbled Jennison's progress briefly with his perfectly planted pistol, not the man but what he said intrigued Jennison. He had called him "Hood," and he had threatened Jennison coldly with a fate that awaited him, Jennison, from "the boys down at my cabin." And Jennison on the authority of a sudden illuminating hunch knew the answer to that one. Twice he had passed by that cabin with only casual interest. Now, this third time he would be prepared to summon the gates.

He approached the well-built cabin warily. A glance showed that the shutters were still tight closed, that the latch-string yet did not dangle outside as an invitation to a friendly tug. Yet the narrow ribbon of light still edged the bottom of the sheath-fitting door, suggesting if not proving its present personal occupancy. Impregnable from the front, Jennison contrived a flanking movement. He hoped for a flaw in its armor, gift of shoddy construction. And found it. An upper log curved away from its neighbor log, not much but enough. The moss and clay chinking was lacking either through accident or design leaving an aperture just fitted to Jennison's needs. He could not see, but he could hear. The first thing that rapped against his inquisitive eardrum was heavy with its highly personal note.

"Don't fret about *Crump,*" a strident voice seemed answering some carping critic. "Fast as he is with that old forty-one he'll bring that Jim Hood in here or anyway his hide."

"Like hell!" A harshly doubting Thomas sneered. "Him and how many more?"

"How do *you* know?"

"That's *my* business.

Jennison had heard enough. Crump then was The Voice, this his cabin. And they waited his return. Well, Jennison grinned crookedly, they were entitled to whatever gratification Crump's speedy advent among his fellow conspirators might afford. He would be Crump. A capital mimic, Crump's slurring voice with its glacial timbre would be the open sesame to this ogre's castle. That there were raps and countersigns he did not doubt. He would overcome all this with a great impersonation. What he said must be brief lest his mimicry develop a betraying limp. It must be brief, yet bulging with immense news.

"Open up! I've brought Jim Hood!"

The pseudo Crump had chosen well. Six words and just enough.

"That's Crump, damn his brave soul!" an enthusiast within the cabin chortled. "Get a wiggle on, Chuck. Swing it open so as Crump can march Hood in."

The door was swung wide for the triumphal entry to be and only one man of its six in that buzzing cabin was not surprised. The doorway framed suddenly a bewildering tableau. The voice had been Crump's, his dazed followers remembered confusedly, but most emphatically this gray-eyed little man with two cocked Colt's .45s, held braced against his hips was *not* their much touted chief. Silence greeted his swift entrance save for Burrill's bellow of glad recognition, then Jennison was speaking in low uninflected tones that seemed like the remorseless tolling of the bells of destiny.

"Don't take no chances, fur you ain't got any. I know."

A cool-eyed, gray-bearded oldster sitting propped against the end wall nodded at Bat Jennison's words.

"Speaking in a personal way," he remarked, "I'm convinced. I believe you *do* know."

"So don't make no spurious moves," Jennison went on to instruct them. "Nobody 'ill git hurt in that case. I'm here fur one purpose solely. *I'm takin' Tib Burrill away.* But," and he stressed it, "we're *not* leavin' town. You men, I figger are Vigilantes. Well I've worked moren considerable at that. And helped to make some purty sad mistakes, also. You was on your way to

doin' the same tonight. I'm savin' you from it, that's all."

"You don't know what he's done here," one of the men burted out. "Or maybe you do."

"Answerin' that remark end to," Jennison replied, "I don't know. Nor what you say he's done. But *I do know Tib Burrill.* You've undoubted got him set down as a crook. I ain't leavin' town till I've proved him different to you. Untie him from that thar bunk. Dad, you're closest. Also you look like you've got sense to me."

The ancient grinned as he got up.

"Stranger," he chuckled, "that's just the scare showing through. But anyway I've got a feeling that bucking you and your guns is too much like trying to bluff a man out of a jackpot when you hold a pair of deuces and all he's got is a royal flush. Yep. I'll unhobble Tib and be damned to him."

TIB BURRIL growling like a grizzly just emerged from hibernation shook himself loose from his severed bonds, stood erect, then without a word reached for a belt and pistol hanging on the wall. Reached for and got it too at the first grab. Turning about, he cinched the belt up savagely about his considerable paunch and then glared at his captors, mouth working. Ebulitions were in process of becoming, and Jennison who knew him of old decided to cap the volcano before eruption.

"Tib," he counseled, "don't say it and don't do it. I'd hate to hafta shoot that pistol outen your fist but I'll so do if you lug it out. Come over here. Right. Now step outside and wait. Later we'll blow off steam."

And Burrill who knew Jennison obeyed, at which graybeard again nodded. Without argument, this Jim Hood was somebody. Now Jennison looked hard at the five.

"Your man Crump," he stated, "is down the street toward Burrill's cabin, say about a dozen doors away. He sneaked a gun onto my crupper, and whilst braggin' about this and that got careless himself. Anyway somebody toddled outen the shadders and belted him over the head with a shillelagh of some sort. Crump laid down so I wandered down here. In five minutes go pick up the pieces. So long."

Meshed in the shadows just beyond the cabin Jennison stopped and spoke to Burrill.

"Must be a way to your cabin without travelin' the street," he said in low tones.

"Sure," Burrill grunted. "This way between these cabins."

"I left a candle where I could find it," Jennison remarked when they had reached Burrill's cabin. "I'll go in and light it."

"When were you here?" Burrill queried.

"About a hour ago," Jennison told him as he forced inward the protesting door.

"Ain't it a hell of a mess," Burrill swore heatedly as he glared at the ruins.

"Could be worse, Tib," Jennison opined. "Fur instance you might be buried under it. Hey! You've tromped in your own blood."

"It ain't mine." And Burrill grinned with relish. "That come from the busted snoot of Saul Grubber. A back-handed clip and him trying like hell to bite and gouge—"

"Hold it fur the big powwow up at my camp," Jennison interposed a verbal block to Burrill's runaway tale. "Let's git your rifle and *klatawah.*"

A horse limned clearly by the soft moonlight whickered at their approach. No fear, no surprise, no anxiety in that gentlemanly call, but the greeting of one trustful comrade to a friend and partner. Sunflower had spoken from the heart.

"Does a horse know by sight or by smell, I wonder," Burrill pondered.

"Sunflower knows by *feel,*" Bat Jennison asserted. Then he chuckled. "As to sight or smell, I've heered that a Injun pony can tell when he's in two miles of a Siwash on a night black as the inside of a boot. And here's my dunnage. S'pose we build a fire and make some coffee."

"Suits me," Burrill okayed. "I don't want any grub, but coffee, that's different."

"Coffee 'tis then," Jennison nodded. "See if you can git a fire goin' whilst I flax round fur the coffee."

"Mu-um," Burrill presently was praising the gruel-like beverage. "Sure has got body to it, Bat."

"Yep," Jennison conceded. "I like it strong enough so as to float a iron wedge."

"This would," Burrill grinned. "Two of 'em in fact."

"I don't figger we'll be sharpshooted tonight," Jennison remarked when they had

finished their coffee, "but we might be smart to move back into the shadders at that. Here. My war bag 'ill make a jim dandy back rest fur you, Tib. I'll cup this tree with my shoulders. Still smoke a corncob, I notice. Now I'll git my old briar vishiatin' the air, then I'll tell you how I happened to be in Rosebud and how I've been treated here. After that we'll sort out your troubles."

Beginning with the inebriate at Acme, Jennison sketched events rapidly on through his various rebuffs after coming to Rosebud.

"And I never got track of you, Tib, till I hit that sure enough deadfall at the end of the street. That pock-marked kaig of lard told me where you lived. Said you was a reg'lar customer and—as to you two bein' friends—"

Burrill boiled over at that statement.

"Why the hog-faced buzzard," he snorted. "That Bill Segs is the damnedest liar unhung. Never was in his dive in my life never. 'Friend's' says he. Why only a week or so ago I caught him cheating in a stud poker game at the Frozen Lizzard and damned near made him eat my pistol. They threw him out on his ear. But I'd got my money first you bet."

"That's the fracas that drunk pilgrim told me about," Jennison chuckled reminiscently. "Yep from what he reported you got your money all right. But I couldn't figger you hangin' out any place but The Shrinking Violet."

"I did," Burrill said sourly. "But I didn't know then that Crump was planning to string me up. He heads up the Vigilantes, you see."

"And also is ramrod of that Violet saloon," Jennison mused slowly. "What's his first name?"

"Israel," Burrill told him.

"Israel Crump," Jennison seemed sifting it for implications. "'Pears a unholy name fur a saloon keeper. But you made a solid enemy outen Bill Segs. And it come to me now that he's the larky who whammed Crump over the head and so turned me loose. I heered him chuckle up at his saloon, and heered him chuckle after he had lammed Crump tonight. Them two giggles is twins."

"Being my enemy which he sure is," Burrill puzzled, "why the hell would he help to turn you free?"

"I'm makin' a guess on that right now," Jennison answered. "Bein' your enemy how could he a done you more harm any other way? The Vigilantes 'ud figger it was one of your gang wouldn't they? Sure that's it. We'll jest put that down as something settled. Now go on with your snake killin'."

"Well," Burrill began. "I've been here about two months. I've got a good mine and I've done all right by mysef. This camp is like dozens you've seen. Some robbings, holdups and so forth, and a few personal shooting matches. Nothing out of the average so far as that goes. That's the way it went to about two weeks ago."

"And then?" Jennison prompted.

Burrill drew a deep breath.

"Hell's kettle boiled over," he said slowly, "with me right in the middle of the stew." He paused for a long moment then continued.

"It's like I said before. What crimes that had come along before were just simple things, happenstances not planned, at any rate they had that general appearance. They looked like just single jobs done by one man. Not the work of a gang, you understand. That's the way it was, Jim, up to two weeks ago."

"So the gang arriv," Jennison said quizzically, "with you the *apparent leader*. Tell me."

"That's the way it's growed to look," Burrill admitted, "though at first it was only a hint that it was me. Three or four men masked did the robbery including two murders. The leader was outside at an open window. Only one man got a quick glimpse of him. That *one* man said later that the leader had a knapsack or something similar *on his back.*"

"And the second time," Jennison hypothesized, "more men seen the leader and plainer, too, and the third and fourth times settled it Tib. The whole damned camp by then had got you elected solid as that said leader."

"You've mapped it out exactly," Burrill said ruefully. "I've helped to hang crooks, as you know. But it's the first time I've been tabbed as a crook."

"Where was you, Tib," Jennison asked, "when them charades each and several was bein' played?"

"Every damned time," Burrill admitted,

"I was alone. If it had been planned it couldn't have happened different."

"It *was* planned," Bat Jennison asserted, "smart planned at that. Whoever that planner is, he's got brains. He knows where you are and when. Knowin' you as I do, I'd know if you wasn't in town, you'd be home or on the road thither, and it 'ud be a twenty to one bet you'd be by your sole lonesome. This slick schemer 'ud know that, too. You say you're the only hunchback in this camp. Well then, *somebody* is usin' a made up hump so as to mimic you. You tell me they travel masked. Then all it takes is a man of about your general build and height. Masked and with that pretend hump you're It."

"By God!" Burrill swore helplessly. "You sure draw a bad picture, 'specially with me being where nobody seen me, every damned time, too. Maybe you know who's maskarading as me."

"I've gotta hunch," Jennison said. "But I'll tell you this. Whoever is pullin' this on you is doin' it frum hate. I figger too it's a old hate. She wasn't spawned last week, nor last month. That lets Segs out. It's a hate that's been ripenin' fur years. We'll go into that later, but now tell me about last night and how the Vigilantes got you."

"I WAS pretty low by then," Burrill said soberly. "Men who'd been friends avoided me. When I'd join a group the talk 'ud be chopped off short. I can't blame 'em much neither. Things looked black for me. God, Jim, if I'd known where you were I'd have wrote you to come. And you did come, Jim," he added solemnly. "I do believe Providence took a hand."

"Providence sure works strange at times," Jennison said philosophically. "This time He made use of a mighty drunk pelican. Notwithstandin'. He did move and I'm here. Go on with your tale."

"As I was saying," Burrill obliged, "I was damned low. I'd stayed home alone two days, thinking things over, wondering what to do and so forth. By that time I was out of whiskey. Which didn't help none. Finally sometime after dark I leaked out for town, by the back way, too, I'm ashamed to admit. I made it to Crump's saloon because about the only feller in Rosebud who'd been white to me right along was that bartender, Nick Schneider."

"The one who told me tonight that he didn't know you," Jennison recalled.

"He's the one," Burrill nodded gloomily. "But last night he acted as he'd always done, friendly. Because of that I reckon I stuck right there at the bar. Schneider pouring the drinks and chatting along about nothing in particular, anyway so far as I can remember now. And I downed too many drinks and them too fast. You know I can hold my liquor, Jim, like a gentleman ought, but that night it was different. Worry also might have played a part in it."

"But and anyway," Jennison said thoughtfully, "you found you was gittin' drunk and had to hightail it fur your cabin."

"And didn't make it," Burrill confessed. "Not anyway that night."

"And whilst you slumbered out under The Big Dipper," Jennison continued his analysis of the night's somber events, "I'm guessin' the final move in the game was played which was to pervide you with a nice rope necktie."

"That's exactly what happened." And Tib Burrill shook his head at the thought. "They sneaked a two horse mud wagon out of town round midnight carrying forty thousand dollars in gold dust. Supposed to be a big secret, but somebody down round the express office must have leaked information like a busted sieve. There were two guards with the treasure, besides the driver. Well, just about a hundred yards beyond my cabin, the wagon was jumped. When the shooting was over, both guards were dead, likewise the span of horses, and the gold dust was gone. The driver wasn't touched, funny as that seems."

"Funny hell!" Jennison said explosively. "They had to have one solid witness left, didn't they, to tag *you* as the Chief?"

"Anyway he swore to that damned lie," Burrill stormed futilely. "Said the gang kept calling to me as the leader. "And all the time I was laying in the brush asleep, not two hundred yards from my cabin."

"And not a witness to prove it," Jennison stated the comfortless fact.

"God's truth," Burrill nodded soberly.

"That's water which has done rattled under the bridge," Jennison remarked, "so

we'll jest let it ramble. Tell me the rest of your tale."

"I woke up about daylight," Burrill continued, "wet with dew and just about froze. I shivered my way to my cabin and pushed the door open when a cyclone struck me. Vigilantes had hid there you see waiting for me to show up. We sorta wrecked the cabin, but then you've seen it. I managed to get in a good lick or two, but you know that, too. Then Crump shoved his old Colt's forty-one in my teeth and the look in his eye told me he meant it. They took me down to his cabin where you found me."

"How come they didn't string you up outen hand?" Jennison puzzled. "Usual thing they do."

"Tom Maddox mostly," Burrill answered. "He was the oldish feller who untied me, you'll remember. He's the owner of a store and a damned white man. Maddox evidently harbored some doubts. Another thing, too, that saved my bacon was that some of them figgered they could worm out of me the names of the men who'd been helping me. Biggest thing though I think was that they wanted almighty bad to learn where I'd hid all that gold dust. Of course," he added, "after you blowed into town and begin to ask fur me they decided to wait and hang us together. You can figger that out easy. Hell, Jim! As soon as I learned you were in town, I knew, though I didn't say so, that if they ever hung me they'd better be gettin' the noose around my neck."

HIS supreme confidence so dramatically expressed confused the little man.

"Damn it, Tib," he flustered, "I nearly failed you. I was took in by Crump in a way I'm sure ashamed of. If it hadn't been fur that Bill Segs—"

"Yep," Burrill laughed, "you'd have been five minutes working out some scheme to outthwart Crump, thought more probably less. And now, Jim, what's the answer?"

"As I said before," Jennison resumed his patient analysis, "she sizes up to me as a hate-grudge of long standin'. Somebody here in Rosebud knowed you some place else, or you've done harm to somebody he thinks a heap of, like a brother say. You've helped hang deservin' thugs in other camps fur instance. Think back now. Anybody here who fits that hate chromo?"

"I don't believe," Burrill said slowly, "there's a single man in this camp that I ever knew before. Faces, names, no, I'm certain."

"Whiskers can fog up faces," Jennison said practically. "And as fur names. Hell, they're as easy to change as a shirt. Voices is the one brand that's hardest to change, less it's a boy spraddlin' into manhood." He stopped short as memory's enchanted reel began spinning backward. Now he turned to lay his hand for a moment only upon his comrade's shoulder in a sentient gesture that quicked Burrill's pulse. For *he* knew that Jennison knew.

"Let's ranny back mental five years," Jennison was saying. "That takes you and me to Harmony. Remember that murderer who killed the miner, and who left the print of his crippled hand in the skillet of cold grease whilst doin' that said killin'? I *see* you do. And oughta, since you found the skillet. We hung 'em, but he claimed he was innocent."

"He was guilty as hell," Burrill maintained firmly.

"Sure he was," Jennison agreed. "You rememberin' his name?"

"Yep," Burrill nodded.

"Remember," Jennison plodded onward, "that he had a younger brother who got away?"

"A high grade gambler," Burrill contributed. "No better than the one we hung."

"But smarter," Jennison amended the indictment. Now he looked quizzically at his companion. "We got a letter the day after the hangin' of that cripple," he reminisced. "I've kinda toted it round in my mind, fur no good reason up to now."

"What 'id it say, Jim?"

"Something like this. 'Tom's crippled hand lied him into a noose. Burrill, I'm going to see that your ugly hump does the same for you some day'!"

"That's it," Burrill agreed. "Anyway that's the way I remember it."

"We figgered," Jennison remembered, "that it must have been wrote by that said younger brother, the smart gambler."

"Must have," Burrill nodded. "Let's see. Oh sure, I remember his name."

"Jest so," Jennison okayed this waif from out the years. "Now you know the Scriptures. Remember the man who had his

name changed follerin' losin' a wrasselin' match?"

"Sure," Burrill brightened, "Samson."

"And *you* know your Bible," Jennison said witheringly, "Samson won his match with that mountain lion. Well, I'll tell you."

"It don't mean much yet," Burrill admitted grudgingly.

"Look at it this way," Jennison said patiently. "That gambler achully changed his last but fur a first name changed exactly like the beat wrassler the Scriptures tell about. Listen. Here is what he was in Harmony. Here's the way he travels in Rosebud. I see you git the full flavor now. Outen a mortal doubt he's our huckleberry."

"I'd bet a thousand dollars against a plugged dime you're right," Burrill asserted. "But can you prove it, Jim?"

"I'll be honest with you, Tib," Jennison answered as he got to his feet. "As I look at it, thar's still a couple of letters missing from the rebus. I'm goin' uptown and look fur 'em. You stay here, and keep your eyes peeled. I don't figger you're in any danger tonight. Notwithstandin' have your pistol handy and keep in the shadders. Jest one thing more. Where'll I most likely find Tom Maddox?"

AT nine o'clock that next morning, the leaders of the Vigilante Committee of Rosebud on Brier Creek assembled in extraordinary conclave. It is perhaps a superfluity to add that they met in the cabin of the leader of the Vigilantes, Israel Crump. With his bludgeoned head swathed neatly, he looked little the worse for the vicious clubbing of the night before, though the two spots of high color on his swarthy cheeks and the fire smoldering in his sloe black eyes was proof aplenty that he seethed. Yet there was nothing in his manner or tones to betray that inward volcano. Not much. His voice was like the chilled thin breath from a sunless glacier. Seen by day, he was short rather than tall and powerfully built.

Beside Crump the five men Jennison had found in the cabin the night before with Burrill as their prisoner were present. Maddox the oldster and four plain solid looking men, all miners. There was also an added member Saul Grubb, whose swollen nose was concrete testimony to Burrill's self-praised, back-handed wallop. Burrill of course and Bat Jennison—still Jim Hood to all.

When the falling of the heavy cross-bar had put the seal of secrecy on their deliberations, Crump spoke.

"At the insistence of Mr. Maddox," he stated, "I have called this meeting. Personally I consider it an insult to the intelligence of this committee. After careful, patient work we had lain our hands unquestionably on the leader of the thugs. He would have been hanged last night, and that justly but for the clever interference of an imported gunman and the dastardly assault on me by some unidentified member of his gang. According to Mr. Maddox this man Hood, if that *is* his name, has uncovered evidence that tends to cast doubt on our decision that Burrill is guilty. Is that *evidence* here?"

That slurring upward inflection was larded well with sarcastic unbelief, yet Jennison chose to disregarded it.

"The evidence is here fur present showin'," he nodded, "but before I trot it out I've got a few things to say. In the first place nobody sent fur me. Me and Tib Burrill have been friends fur years. By chance I learned he was in Rosebud and I dropped in to see him. You men know what took place here last night so I'll leave that pie set. Now as quick as I talked with Tib alone and got the facts, not guesses, it was plain as old Bud Wiley's nose what was goin' on. *Somebody was aping Tib Burrill's crooked back.* Don't laff too quick, Mr. Grubb. In a damned few minutes you are goin' to feel like the boy the hen run over. But to go on. Knowin' that somebody was masqueradin' as Tib I ask myself why. The only answer was that it was the workin's out of a old hate-grudge. Not something sizzlin' in recent spite grease. Not much. She was a long-planned job, rootin' back into the fur past. I figgered then that somebody with the old hate load was here. Mebby he'd changed his name, growed whiskers et celery. Which in fact he had, only *his* voice was the same. When I heard it last night it sounded jest the same as when I heard it five years ago in Harmony. But it took me awhile to think back and jine 'em up. His voice sounds like it's comin'

through a frozen pipe crusted inside and out with hoar frost. You see he was a younger brother of a cold-blooded murderer me and Tib helped hang at Harmony. His name? Well, I'll give it to you by me by. Now with him ticketed, I hadta locate two things. First I wanted the make believe hump he was usin' and I wanted most of all to locate the *cache* where he hid the stole gold dust. And I found 'em. Nearly forgot to tell you his name. Well at Harmony he was knowed as Jacob Stumpf. But when he come to Rosebud he waggled loose a few tail feathers and moulted out here as Israel Crump."

NOW he turned to one of the goggling miners to say briskly, "Take that shovel standin' thar in that corner and pry up that flat rock in front of the fireplace. Sure you can git the pint of the shovel under it. Anyway me and Mr. Maddox did last night."

Every eye had been focused upon the man hovering above the treasure trove, save Jennison's and Crump's. The color had drained swiftly from Crump's face. Frustrated hate registered in his eyes, then instant resolution. His pistol appeared, swept to his temple, an intrepid finger cramped the trigger.

Jennison looked at the sprawled body and nodded.

"Why not," he said simply, "since he wanted it that way?"

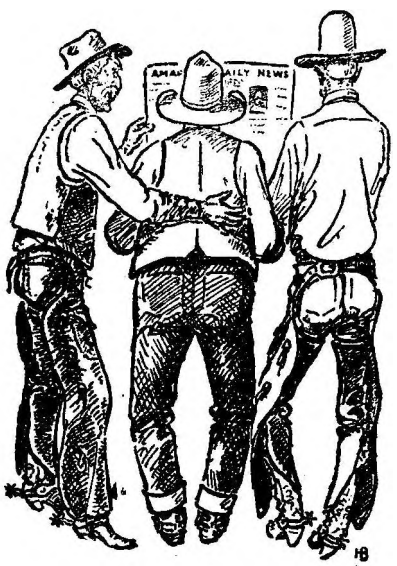
Tom Maddox looked long and speculatively at this amazing gray-eyed stranger, then slowly shook his head.

"From what I'd heard," he remarked thoughtfully, "I believed there was only one man in the West able to have worked out a thing this way and his name is Bat Jennison."

"Well," Jennison smiled shyly, "when I'm home thet's what they call me."

The Hero

by CLARENCE EDWIN FLYNN

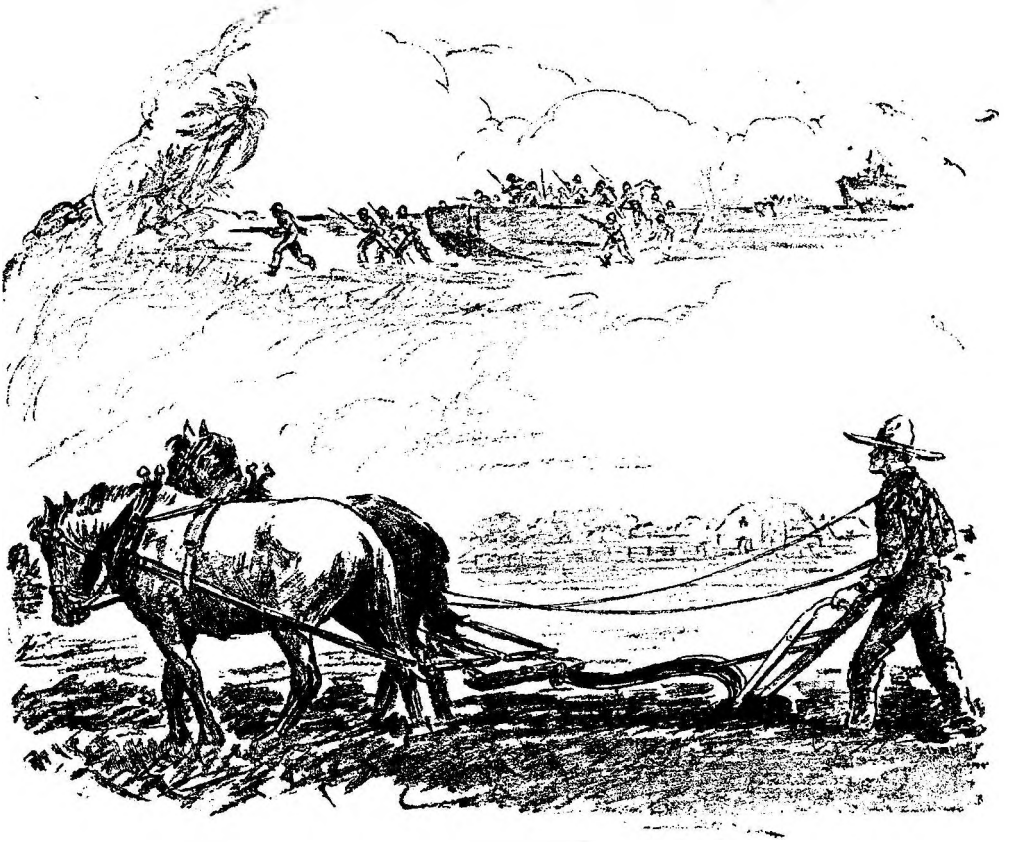


BILL was a chicken-hearted guy
Back on the ranch. We wondered why.
His help at brandin' time was small.
Wouldn't dehorn a cow atall.
An' so it was, as matters stood,
We didn't think he was much good.

Bill was conscripted in the war.
"He won't know what they're fightin' for,"
We laughed. But jiminy, one day
What did the paper up an' say?
Bill shot ten Japs, one spot to win,
An' brought two dozen live ones in.

We wrote an' asked how come, an' he
Wrote back: "It's different, you see.
I never did admire to bring
Hurt to a helpless, harmless thing.
I got no grudge agin a cow,
But these Japs make me mad somehow."

He Was So Much of a Farmer That He Couldn't Even Dig a Foxhole Without Examining the Soil



SECRET WEAPON

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

USUALLY after a guy has been in the infantry a year he's molded into the infantry pattern of a soldier. Maybe in civilian life he's been a ditch digger, professional football player or has sold ribbons or been Cedric who could give the Junior League gals a better hair-do than any other guy. Whatever he's been he comes off of the infantry assembly line looking like G. I. Joe.

But every once in a while some guy will go through the works and drop off of the assembly line looking pretty much the same as when he started. He can do everything his buddies can do with a rifle, bayonet, knife or just plain bare hands, but he's the same guy who, dressed in his civilian clothes, kissed the folks good-by in Eatonville, Squawk Center or Duckabush.

Rurik Means had farm kid written all over him and he was still a farm kid when we were alerted a year later. Robust health oozed from every pore. He had a rosy cherubic face, and you could imagine him at fourteen polishing a big red apple on his sleeve and saying, "Good morning, teacher. Or leading a big, ring-nosed bull past the judges at the county fair. Or digging a companion knowingly in the ribs

when the traveling troupe's Hawaiian dancer began wiggling her fanny.

The first night in camp he listened to taps and said, "Pretty, isn't it? Though it comes late." It was ten o'clock. "At home I usually go to bed around nine. We get up early on the farm." Then he dropped down to his knees and said a prayer his mother had taught him as a child. He probably thought that as it was a simple, adequate prayer, covering everything; there was no need of changing it as he grew older. You've heard it, the one that starts, "Now I lay me down to sleep—"

Somehow it set him off as a man apart, a fellow worth knowing and leaning on in a jam. Later when he had a chance he said, "I'd like to be with an outfit that handles secret weapons. I'd like to see the surprise on the Japs' faces when we turn it loose on 'em. Yes sir, no matter how tough the going was, I'd bust right out laughing if I could turn a secret weapon loose on those Japs." Then he roared with laughter as his imagination pictured the consternation among the enemies. It was infectious and it eased the pressure on everyone. That laugh was to prove a lifesaver many a time in the days to come. It seemed to spring from the very roots of America.

Again and again Rurik Means asked to be sent to a secret weapon outfit. I imagine that the brass hats couldn't reconcile his farmer-looking appearance with the resourcefulness needed to develop and operate secret weapons. "Next to a secret weapon, what do you want?" the major asked one day.

"I'd like to be the first man out when the doors open and the ramp goes down on some Jap island," Rurik answered.

"I think that can be arranged," the major said.

Our training continued, but every time Rurik dug a foxhole he'd examine the soil and comment on its fertility. "It isn't like our soil back home," he'd say. Or, "This is certainly fine soil. Folks hereabouts should be prosperous. The trouble is, though, they aren't getting enough for their crops."

We'd be on a forced march, so tired our rear ends were dragging and suddenly he would come to life. "Look at that farm over there. That's the kind I'd like to have. And I'll have it, too, after this war's over."

I'LL never forget the expression on his face the first time he saw the pigs roaming the jungle on a coral island. "Damnedest hawg I ever did see," he drawled. "Not enough side meat on 'em. It'd take years to build up that breed."

Months later he got his number one wish —he was the first man to go down a ramp and splash through the water to Jap-held territory. The navy had done a swell job of softening things up, but some of the others went over a ridge beyond reach of the navy guns and things were hot all along the line. Some of our boys scattered in every direction and we waited for a shell to burst or a Jap plane to strafe the spot. Nothing happened. It couldn't have been a machine-gun nest because there was no grass cutting going on. We approached warily and suddenly Rurik's farmer-laugh broke the tenseness. "Bees!" he exclaimed. "What's the matter with those guys? It's only a swarm of bees. They won't hurt you—if you know how to handle 'em. I wonder what kind they are? I like the Italian bees best."

"Are there different kinds of honey bees?" a sergeant asked.

"Hell yes," Rurik answered. "Take the Black bees now—"

"You take 'em," the sergeant growled.

"Hey!" Rurik exclaimed. "That's an idea, and surprising, too, coming from a sergeant. Other outfits have mascots—dogs, cats, birds and queer animals from Australia. We could have a swarm of bees. Besides being interesting a man could dip in and get a knife-blade load of honey of a morning."

He walked over and peered intently at a cluster of bees. "No, they aren't Italian. I'm not sure just what they are—a queer breed like the hawgs in this country, probably. If I had time, and some boxes I could make a hive—"

We moved on and Rurik said, "The Blacks are nervous—"

"Yeah?" the sergeant interrupted. "The Italians are placid, I suppose."

"Blacks are nervous. Good honey getters, but something upsets them and they go haywire stinging everything in sight. They don't resist disease as well as the others. They get discouraged too when the honey flow eases up and knock off work."

We had a five-minute brawl with the Japs. They lost. Rurik picked up where

he'd left off. "The Cyprian bees—from the Isle of Cyprus—are hard workers, but meaner'n sin. The Banats are the gentle ones."

"Sweet as your Aunt Ella," the sergeant drawled. "Or like them Japs ahead."

"Them Japs" pinned us right down tight to the soil and we scraped out foxholes pronto. "Good soil," I heard Rurik say.

The captain, then the major and finally the lieutenant colonel said more than that. The machine-gun nest dead ahead was holding up the entire advance, which was just as the Japs had planned it.

There wasn't much of a target and they got our flame throwers before any damage was done. Grenades and machine-gun fire were a waste of ammunition. Rurik studied the set-up for sometime and finally he chuckled. "What we need is a secret weapon, and I think I've got it."

He squirmed back to the captain, who squirmed back to the major. The major exploded and said something about blankety-blank nonsense at a time like this. Then Rurik said something and the major gave him a dirty look, then a thoughtful look, then his face betrayed lively interest. He nodded and Rurik disappeared.

WHEN we saw him again he was crawling toward the machine-gun nest. You've seen pictures of bee keepers who have a swarm of bees hanging from their face like a beard? Rurik had gone modern. He was wearing a long bob from the back of his head. The bees looked as if they were held in place by these snoods the girls wear.

We opened fire to divert the Japs' attention and suddenly Rurik jumped from the last bit of cover and dived at the nest. He took off his helmet and his snood went with it. For several minutes he didn't seem to be doing much of anything, then we could see thousands of bees buzzing around. Rurik squirmed back to cover and nothing happened for quite a while, then suddenly we heard Rurik's farmer-laugh.

Japs were squirting from the nest like seeds from a violently squeezed lemon. And Rurik's small arms were rattling away right merrily. Finally he stood up and waved his hand, then he approached the dugout and picked up a Japanese ceremonial sword, with enough jewels in it to buy a farm.

He was laughing so hard that he could hardly talk. "Didn't I tell you that I was a natural born secret weapon man?" he said. "But don't send me back home now, Major, I might miss something out here."

We moved on and consolidated our positions all along the line. Tonight the artillery would come up and we'd have the Japs where we wanted them. The colonel, then the general came up. They sent for Rurik. "How in the hell do you control a swarm of bees?" the general demanded.

"The same way you can sometimes control a swarm of men, sir — through a queen," and Rurik gave that booming farmer-laugh. "You see when bees are swarming they're usually full of honey, and most of 'em—though not all—can't double up and sting. The average human being doesn't know that. Neither does the average Jap. A bee is a bee to most. So I went back, washed my hands clean—bees don't like dirt or foul smells — and I poked through the swarm until I found the queen. She's larger than the others. I put the queen on my helmet and the rest swarmed onto me. Then I got to the machine-gun nest and found a small hole that wasn't plugged up, nor backed by a Jap gun. I picked the queen out of the swarm and poked her through the hole.

"The others followed. Japs smell. They are dirty. The bees didn't like it. They started buzzing around and the Japs instead of keeping quiet started batting at them, and those that could sting, stung and those full of honey buzzed and the Japs thought they were going to sting. Imagine being in a machine-gun nest with five or ten thousand bees? Those Japs forgot all about the Son of Heaven and got the hell out."

"And what do you propose doing with the swarm?" the general asked.

"With your permission, sir," Rurik replied, "I'd like to fix up a hive out of packing boxes and keep the swarm as a mascot. After all they cleaned out a machine-gun nest better than the artillery. Besides, in a couple of months, some of us could have a bit of honey for breakfast of a morning."

Curioddities By Weill

THE OPOSSUM IS THE MOST FERTILE OF ALL MARSUPIALS! THE POUCH IS EQUIPPED WITH FIVE TO THIRTEEN TEATS BUT USUALLY IN EACH LITTER OF YOUNG *THERE ARE* ***MORE THAN CAN BE ACCOMMODATED!***

ALTHOUGH BENJAMIN FRANKLIN ADVOCATED THRIFT, A STUDY OF HIS OWN BANK ACCOUNT REVEALS THAT *HE WAS OVERDRAWN AT LEAST* ***THREE TIMES EVERY WEEK!***

THE BEET HAS BEEN CULTIVATED SINCE 300 B.C. AND CONTRIBUTES **ONE-HALF** OF THE WORLD'S SUGAR SUPPLY AT THE PRESENT DATE!

LIGHTNING LUCK

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of the Hashknife Stories

DROUGHT had almost ruined the Camarillo range. For two years there had been very little moisture, and the cattlemen were facing ruin. Nearly every day the sky was like brass, and the heat-waves danced across the range, dusty and harsh. The beef and hide market was bad, but the cattlemen shipped as often as the market would permit, even at ruinous prices.

It was almost dark one evening, as two cowboys came riding a dim trail only a short distance from the Mexican border. They were hot and dusty, their horses tired. It was a strange country to them, and they were heading for the town of Camarillo. Far to the east of the Camarillo range a man had told them how things were in Camarillo. He mentioned Old Pop Anderson, owner of the JA spread. Pop Anderson had been a friend of Hashnife Hartley's father, years ago in Montana.

That was why these two cowboys, Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens, were heading for Camarillo. Hashknife remembered Pop Anderson, remembered the time when Pop Anderson staked the Hartley family to food for one of the worst winters Montana ever had. Hashknife's father had been a range minister in those days. Hashknife remembered the kindness of Pop Anderson, and if there was any chance to repay Pop Anderson—well, they were heading for Camarillo. As Hashknife explained to

The Rain That Ended the Drought on the Camarillo Range Brought Luck to Some Other People as Well, Including Hashknife and Sleepy

Sleepy, "He wasn't named Pop 'cause he was old or had a lot of kids. One Fourth of July he sat down on a giant fire-cracker, kinda accidental-like, and it was lighted. It blew him off the sidewalk. Everybody thought he was hurt bad, but he got up, fanned himself a little and said, 'Them damn things pop.' "

"He shore picked a good country," remarked Sleepy, mopping his brow with his sleeve. "I'm jist about to co-ag-u-late."

They struck a road, running at right-angles to their trail. It showed signs of some travel, so they turned to the right. Hashknife said:

"I hope this road runs to Camarillo. Somebody passed here recently. Yuh can see the dust in the air. Anyway," he amended, "yuh can smell it."

"I can't smell nothin'," declared Sleepy, as they stepped up the pace a little. "My nose is so full of dust and heat that I couldn't smell—"

From far up the straight road, possibly a quarter of a mile, they saw the flash of a gun, followed by the report. Again the flash, and the report came drifting back to them.

"Somethin' goin' on!" exclaimed Hashknife. "C'mon!"

They spurred into a gallop, and swept up the old road, watching the darkness ahead. The road-bed was hard, and their horses' hoofs made quite a clatter. Then they slowed down, going carefully. They heard a horse running through the brush, but was unable to see it. Hashknife's horse shied, and they drew up.

There was a man lying just at the side of

the road, arms outflung. He was only an indistinct mass, until Hashknife lighted a match and looked him over. He was possibly forty-five years of age, slightly gray. He was dressed in corduroy, an expensive flannel shirt, knee-length laced boots, and wore a small, stiff-brim sombrero. Hashknife was sure that the match-butts were ground into the dirt, and got back on his horse, accepting the reins from Sleepy, who did not dismount.

"A job for the sheriff," said Hashknife quietly. "Shot twice."

They went on slowly. Sleepy said, "That's all yuh need to make this here country invitin', Hashknife."

"Huh?" grunted Hashknife. "Oh, yeah —I was thinkin'."

They came to the forks of the road, where an old sign dangled on a post. A lighted match showed faded lettering and two crudely-drawn arrows, one pointing south the other north, and the barely decipherable lettering—CAMARILLO and AGUA BARROSO.

"Well, we're goin' the right way," sighed Sleepy. "I hope the eatin' places ain't all closed, and that there's ice. I'm shore tired of drinkin' luke-warm water. Luke! I don't even like the sound of it. Who was this Luke, Hashknife?"

"I'm just tryin' to think," replied Hashknife vaguely. "I've seen him some'ers—long time ago—mebbe."

"Luke?" asked Sleepy.

"No, his name wasn't Luke."

"I reckon we're talkin' about two different folks. Mine was the jigger who took the chill off water, and yo're talkin' about the poor devil down there in the dirt, starin' up at the sky. He won't care how hot it gets t'morrow. Life's funny. Yessir, it shore is. But it ain't much funnier than ridin' along with a feller and talkin' to yourself all the time."

"I didn't hear what yuh said, Sleepy."

"I know damn well yuh didn't. Let it pass."

Sleepy knew that Hashknife's thoughts were centered on the dead man down there beside the road. They were a queer pair, these drifting waddies, always seeking what they might discover on the other side of a hill, and then going on, heading for more hills to cross. Hashknife Hartley was several inches over six feet in height, lean, muscular, with a long, lean face, generous nose, a wide gash of a mouth, and a pair of gray eyes that never shifted, even in battle. His hair was faded to a neutral shade, and one lock of it invariably hung down close to his right eyebrow.

Sleepy Stevens was less than six feet tall, broad of shoulder, long-armed, powerful. His face was blocky, with many grin-wrinkles, and his eyes were a deep blue; eyes that seemed to look out upon the world with innocent amazement, which was disarming and very deceptive. Sleepy loved a fight.

They had been together a long time, these two, drifting from range to range. Hashknife lived to untangle range puzzles. They were in demand by the Cattlemen's Association, but only in rare cases would they agree to work for the law. They wanted to be free to ride on, unhampered by any regulations. They believed in justice, but not always in the law, which, in their opinion, was very often far apart. Death had struck at them so many times that they were confirmed fatalists. Hashknife had often said:

"There's a Big Book somewhere, and our names are in there. After the name is an entry, which says—well, mebbe it's a broken neck from a fallin' horse, a bullet from a rustler, a train wreck—somethin'. The date is there, too; and yuh won't die until that date—and for that reason."

THEY rode into Camarillo and tied their horses in front of the Aztec Saloon. The street was unlighted, narrow. They saw the sign on the sheriff's office, but the place was dark. There was quite a crowd in the Aztec, and the bartender pointed out the sheriff, hunched under the brim of a wide sombrero, deep in the mysteries of draw-poker.

"That's him—Matt Haskell, the sheriff," said the bartender. "Better not bother him now—he's loser."

"Touchy, eh?" remarked Sleepy.

"Uh-huh. Nothin' short of murder will git him out of a game."

"That's what he's got on his hands," said Hashknife soberly.

The bartender stared at the tall, lean-faced cowboy for a moment.

"Yuh mean—somebody done got murdered?" he asked.

"Yeah," nodded Hashknife. "Of course,

if he's too interested in poker to care about murder—"

The bartender was a sudden sort of person.

"He-e-ey, Matt! There's been a murder!" he yelled at the top of his voice.

Everybody jerked to attention, staring at the bartender. Evidently the bartender was addicted to joking, because the sheriff rasped, "Yeah, and there'll be another one if you—hu-u-u-uh?"

"No jokin', Mat," said the bartender. "Ask this feller."

THE sheriff got up from his chair. There was a lot of him to get up, too. Matt was six feet, four inches tall and weighed two hundred and thirty. His face was like carved granite and the color of mahogany. He came slowly over to the bar, eyeing Hashknife and Sleepy.

"What's this all about?" he asked quietly.

Hashknife explained, telling the sheriff what they had seen, and giving a sketchy description of the dead man.

The big sheriff cuffed his hat back on his head and scratched his forehead, as he muttered, "Wearin' corduroy clothes, eh? Laced boots and a—hm-m-m-m."

"That sounds like the feller who was here a couple days ago, Matt," said a cowboy. "He wore them corduroy clothes and had on laced boots."

"Yea-a-ah," breathed the sheriff. "Yuh say he's on the right-hand side of the road, about a mile below where the old sign-board is?"

"Yeah," nodded Hashknife. "The mesquite comes in close to the road at that point. He's right there."

"Uh-huh. Thanks. I'll find Rio and the coroner. Yo're sure he's dead?"

"If he ain't," replied Hashknife, "he's an awful good actor."

The sheriff hurried out, and business resumed. Hashknife and Sleepy went to a little restaurant, where they made up for lost meals. They heard the rattle of wheels, as the coroner followed the sheriff. The bald-headed old-timer behind the counter helped himself to a cup of coffee, while their meal was cooking.

"Jist git in?" he asked.

"Yeah," replied Hashknife. "How's business?"

"I ain't seen any for so long, I wouldn't know. Heat and dust and bawlin' cows. Hell, I'm closin' up and pullin' out."

"When?" asked Sleepy.

"Oh, sometime after the first of the year —mebbe."

"Do yuh know a feller named Pop Anderson?" asked Hashknife.

"I hope t' tell yuh, I do. Finest man on earth—Ol' Pop. It's fellers like that—yuh hate to see 'em goin' broke. Do yuh know Ma Anderson? No? She's finer'n frawg-hair. How do yuh like yore eggs?"

"Not too long removed from the hen, if possible," replied Sleepy.

"This heat's agin 'em," said the man soberly. "Had a half case settin' outside the back door a couple days ago—and the whole top layer hatched. Actual fact. I had baby chickens all over the damned place."

"Are our eggs out of the same case?" asked Sleepy.

"Yeah—lower layer. They never got too hot."

He dished up their meal and came back to the table, as a cowboy came in. He sat at the counter and had coffee, a good-looking young cowboy. After he went out the cook told Hashknife and Sleepy that he was Jimmy Anderson, foreman for Pop Anderson.

"Jimmy's a fine boy," he declared. "He's plumb stuck on Gale Bogart, they tell me—and Al Bogart don't like him. Jist between me and you, I don't believe Jimmy gives a damn what Al Bogart likes or don't like. Jimmy is as forked as they come."

"Al Bogart is Gale Bogart's father, eh?" said Sleepy.

"Well, not exactly—he's her step-father. You don't know Al Bogart, do yuh?"

"No," replied Hashknife. The cook mumbled something like, "You ain't never missed much," as he brought them more coffee.

THEY were at the hotel, where they took a room, when the sheriff, deputy and coroner came back. They walked down to the office, where the sheriff and deputy were shaking the dust off their clothes.

"How'd you say that man was dressed?" asked the sheriff curiously.

"In corduroy and laced boots," replied Hashknife. The deputy, Rio Jones, laughed. He was of medium size and height, but had

a funny nose, buck-teeth, and one eye jerked a little.

"Did yuh think that was a funny way to dress?" asked Sleepy.

"Huh?" grunted Rio. "Hell, no, I think it's all right."

"The funny thing," explained the sheriff," was the fact that the man didn't have a thing on him. He was as naked as the day he was born."

Hashknife rubbed his nose thoughtfully. It was evident that someone had stolen the clothes of the dead man, after he and Sleepy left there. But why? It was a queer thing to do, but must have been done for a reason.

"Would yuh mind tellin' me yore names?" asked the sheriff. "I ain't nosey," he added quickly, "but just for the records."

HASHKNIFE introduced them. Rio Jones squinted thoughtfully.

"The names is familiar, but I cain't place 'em," he said. "Anyway, I'm a heap pleased to meetcha."

"Which branch of the Jones family do you belong to?" asked Sleepy.

"By doggies, nobody ever asked me that before, pardner. Never knowed the family had branches."

"His'n is off the north side," said the sheriff dryly.

"How'd you know that, Matt?" asked Rio.

"They'd be on the shady side," replied the sheriff. "Yo're a sun-dodger, and yuh know it, Rio."

"Yea-a-ah, that's right. Are you two fellers goin' to be here a while?"

"Oh, mebbe for a few days," smiled Hashknife.

"Fine," grinned Rio. "I ain't had a stranger to lie to for weeks."

"I'm a good subject," said Sleepy soberly. "I believe anythin'."

"Good! I like 'em thataway. Mebbe I'll think up some good ones. Yuh see, I cain't sleep after lookin' at a corpse—especially if they've been murdered, and I'll have all night to think."

"What do yuh know about this dead man, Sheriff?" asked Hashknife.

"Not very much. He hired a horse at the feed corral a few days ago, and gave the name of Williams. Said he was goin' to hunt quail in Mexico, and would be stayin' at Agua Barroso."

"Had a right fancy shotgun," added Rio "Brand new, too."

"There wasn't any gun around where he was layin', was there?" asked Hashknife. "I couldn't see much—usin' matches to light him up."

"Wasn't any gun in sight," replied the sheriff. "We'll look it over again in daylight. You'll be around, in case we need yuh at the inquest?"

"We'll be here, Sheriff."

"Good. Well, I reckon I'll go down and see Doc Reber about the inquest, and let yuh know in the mornin'."

Rio Jones walked up to the hotel with them. It was still too hot to sleep; so they sat down on the porch. Hashknife asked him what sort of a town was Agua Barroso.

"It's a good place to go, if the law on this side wants yuh," replied Rio soberly. "Plenty liquor and brace games. Some senoritas that won't see forty again, unless they turn around and look back a long ways. Aw, it's all right. The Mexicans are all right, but I cain't give no cheers for the *Americanos* that hive up over there. They're *mucho malo hombres*. Pancho Aguilar thinks he's the boss of the place; him and his sidekick, Yaqui Lopez. But they ain't. They're jist a couple Christmas trees, smellin' of garlic and chili."

"Any smugglin' goin' on around here?" asked Sleepy.

"Oh, shore—all the time. Can't stop 'em. Good money, if yuh don't get in the hands of the Border Patrol. They're plenty salty. Have t' be. Yuh know, I figure that naked *pelicano* we brought in is a victim."

"Didja ever find one naked thataway before?" asked Sleepy.

"No-o-o, we never did. Mebbe some *ladron* liked corduroy and laced boots—yuh never can tell. We'll hold an inquest, bury the poor devil, and call it a day."

"Do you suppose he was killed for his clothes?" asked Hashknife.

"I don't even guess on a case like that—but I'd tell m'self that he wasn't. Wouldn't anybody dare to wear them clothes. Shucks, if yuh wear anythin' but overalls and high-heel boots down here, yuh stand out like a elephant in a burro herd. No, I'd say he wasn't killed for his clothes."

"The sheriff will make an investigation, won't he?" queried Sleepy.

"Oh, shore—he'll think about it. Matt is a powerful thinker. Sometimes he thinks for hours at a time. Course," said Rio apologetically, "he's cramped for things to think about down here. But if you give him somethin' that requires downright brain work, he's awful good. He's what yuh might call a broad-minded thinker. You know what I mean—he ain't set on any one theory. Nothin' stubborn about Matt."

"Allus ready to change his idea, if yuh differ with him, eh?" said Sleepy.

"That's it. He'd say to me, 'Rio, yore the laziest son-of-a-buck that ever came out of New Mexico.' I say, 'Matt, you ain't seen nothin'. You should have seen my brother, Ezekiel.' He'd say, 'Well, mebbe he was lazier than you, I dunno.' Yuh see how he is?"

"A very strong character," said Sleepy soberly. "You can see it in his face. Is Ezekiel younger than you, Rio?"

"He was, Sleepy—but pore Ezekiel passed on to his re-ward in the bloom of youth."

"Natural causes?"

"Yuh might so designate. Ezekiel was scientific. He invented a bullet-proof shirt-bosom, and to try it out he went out and choosed himself a gun fighter. Pore Ezekiel!"

"Wasn't bullet-proof, eh?" said Sleepy.

"We won't never know. Ezekiel got scared and started runnin'. All we know is that he wasn't bullet-proof from the rear."

"Pore Ezekiel," said Hashknife soberly.

"Thank yuh for bein' sympathetic," sighed Rio. "There ain't much sympathy around here. I've done told that story a hundred times, and yo're the first person that ever felt sorry for Ezekiel."

"They prob'ly know yuh never had a brother named Ezekiel," said Sleepy.

"Mebbe that accounts for it," sighed Rio. "Well, I better drift back to the office. Cain't sleep. Might's well be as miserable as possible. See yuh *manana.*"

THE next morning Hashknife and Sleepy went with the sheriff and Rio to make a search of the spot where the man had been killed, but to no avail. There was no sign of the horse and saddle he had rented from the feed stable at Camarillo. They went back to town, where they found a number of men, sitting in the shade of the hotel porch.

"That's Pop Anderson—the little one," said Rio, as the rode past.

Hashknife and Sleepy stabled their horses and went up to the hotel. The other men had gone, but Pop Anderson was talking with the hotel-keeper, when Hashknife said:

"How are yuh, Pop Anderson?"

Pop Anderson, a little, grizzled rawhider, skin the color of old leather, with twinkling blue eyes, looked the tall cowboy over from heels to hat.

"Yeah, I'm Pop Anderson," he said quietly, "but I don't know you."

Hashknife smiled. "You haven't sat down on any fire-crackers lately, have yuh?" he asked.

"Have I—hu-u-uh?" he gasped. "Why, I only—" He stared at the face of Hashknife. "Say, who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Name's Hartley, Pop."

"Hartley? Hartley? Why—" his eyes opened wide. "My Gawd, you ain't a son of the Sky Pilot, are you?"

"I am Henry Hartley, Pop. Maybe you don't remember me."

"Remember yuh? Why, I'll be tied up and burnt at the stake! Say, I knowed you, when yuh wasn't dry behind the ears! Why, darn yore long legs!"

They shook hands warmly, and Hashknife introduced Sleepy. Pop was full of questions. How long were they going to be there? Where did they come from? Where had he been since the old days in Montana? Hashknife brushed the questions aside. Old Pop yelled across the street, and Jimmy Anderson came over.

"He favors his ma, thank Gawd," said Pop, as Jimmy came across the street.

"I saw yuh in the restaurant last night," said Jimmy, after the introductions.

"Yore father was my father's best friend, Jimmy," said Hashknife.

"You make me proud," said the old cattleman. "Yore father was the finest man I ever knowed, Henry. He made me understand that playin' square brought its reward on earth—and we'd take chances on the hereafter. Yuh know he never talked about hell. Said it gave the Devil too much publicity. Yessir, the Sky Pilot was a *man.* Yore folks—all gone?"

"As far as I know, Pop."

"Shucks. Well, I dunno—it has to be, I reckon. All right, what are we standin' here

in the heat for? Git yore broncs—we're headin' for the JA. You've got to meet Ma. She's heard me tell about yore pa—plenty times. Now, don't try to figure out any excuses."

"You found that dead man, didn't yuh?" asked Jimmy. "That's a queer deal."

"Queer country," said his father. "Damn near burnt up."

ON THE way out to the ranch Pop Anderson told Hashknife and Sleepy the troubles they had experienced from lack of water and feed. The range was dried up, the waterholes drying fast.

"I ain't as bad off as Bogart or Brad Fields," said Pop. "They've got twice as much to lose as I have. Brad Fields said the other day that if we didn't get rain pretty soon he was goin' to rob a bank. He better hurry, or the bank won't have enough money to make it worthwhile."

Sleepy and Jimmy moved on ahead.

"Jimmy looks like a capable boy. Pop," said Hashknife.

"He shore is, Henry. The only thing—right now—Jimmy's in love. Kinda ruined for anythin' useful."

"I wish you'd call me Hashknife, Pop; I ain't used to Henry."

"Suits me fine—Hashknife."

"Is Jimmy goin' to get married, Pop?"

The old man shook his head. "I don't reckon so. Yuh see, Al Bogart don't like him, and anythin' that Al Bogart don't like—he hates. 'Course, Al ain't her pa, but he shore bosses her plenty. They tell me he wants her to marry Tip Evans, his foreman. Tip's all right, too—jist a little on the fancy-side. But Jimmy ain't no quitter. Gale is a awful sweet girl—capable, too."

"She ain't of age yet, eh?"

"Nope. Bogart is a solid cowman, but I ain't never exactly liked him. He kinda bulls his way along. Never done me any dirt. Mebbe I'm kinda wrong in sayin' anythin' against him, Hashknife—but I don't like him."

"Why don't he like Jimmy?"

"Jimmy," grinned the old cowman, "is one feller Al Bogart never was able to run a blazer on. He don't scare none."

"I reckon I'd like Jimmy," smiled Hashknife.

Ma Anderson was a big, portly, sweet-faced woman, who made them more than welcome. They met "Soapy" Smith and Slim McFee, the two punchers who were with the JA spread. Soapy was an old-timer, who had been with the Texas Rangers. He squinted thoughtfully, when introduced to Hashknife.

"Uh-huh, uh-huh," he said. "Hartley? Yca-a-ah, that's right. Pleased to meetcha."

"You ain't never met him, have you, Soapy"? asked Pop.

"Not pers'nally," replied Soapy gravely, "but I've met them that has."

"Friends?" asked Hashknife soberly.

"I'd tell a man," said Soapy quietly. "He can do anythin', except make rain—and that's what we need most."

"Well!" exclaimed Pop. "Hashknife, you've been around a little, eh?"

"We've been over a few hills," smiled Hashknife.

"That's him!" exclaimed Soapy. "Allus headin' for a hill—I 'member now."

"Well, sit down," urged Ma Anderson. "We're awful glad you came—and you're welcome to stay as long as you can. I'll start supper."

"That's my favorite tune, Ma," grinned Sleepy. "Me and food never did disagree."

"We shore eat here," said Slim heartily. "Pop's fired me three times, but I allus stayed for supper—and he relented, after seein' me enjoy Ma's cookin'."

"That's all a danged saddle-slicker is good for—eatin' and sleepin'," declared Pop.

THEY sat up late that night, just talking. Hashknife had heard that Pop was taking a herd of cows to the railroad, and offered their help, but the old cowman shook his head.

"I'm tired of playin' Santa Claus to the packers," he said. "If I've got to sink—I'll sink right here. Al Bogart sold twenty cars a month ago, and he told me they didn't hardly pay the freight."

"Yeah," said Jimmy," and they say he lost eight thousand in a blackjack game at Agua Barroso a week ago."

"Son, you hear a lot of things around here," said his father quietly.

"Mike Donnell told me," said Jimmy, "and Mike was with Bogart."

"Well—mebbe. Anyway, it's none of our business, Jimmy. We don't care how much

Al Bogart loses at blackjack. It's his money —not ours."

The talk drifted to the dead man they had found on the Agua Barroso road, but none of the JA outfit had ever seen the man. Jimmy contended that the man was the victim of smugglers, who probably took his clothes in order to prevent any identification.

"There's too much smugglin' bein' done along here," said Pop. "Mostly drugs, too. I've heard that a lot of jewels come across—but yuh hear a lot of things that ain't true. Still, I reckon there's money in it."

"Enough," said Hashknife, "to cause them to murder anybody who might interfere with them."

It was late when they rode back to Camarillo, and they slept until the hotel-keeper told them that the inquest was about to start. It was Saturday, the day of the week when everybody came to town. Rio Jones pointed out Al Bogart and Tip Evans, of the Two Bar B, and Brad Field, owner, and Mack Wells, foreman, of the Circle F. The courtroom was filled. Hashknife testified to finding the body, fully clothed, and the sheriff testified that the man was naked when they went to investigate. The jury yawned and decided that the man had been killed by somebody—they didn't know who —and closed the case.

"I'd be awful surprised if we had frost t'day," said Rio Jones, after the inquest was ended. It was a hundred and ten in the shade.

THE Two-Bar-B was the biggest ranch in the Camarillo country. The buildings were of thick adobe with roofs of handmade tile. There was a big patio, with walls three feet thick and eight feet high, where huge sycamores shaded the buildings. An old Spanish well was in the center of the patio, but the water-table had long since sunk below the level of the well bottom. Two tall windmills creaked in the vagrant breeze, and the leaves of the sycamores, what were still left on the trees, hissed like dry paper in the breeze.

Gale Bogart moved restlessly about the patio. She was only a slip of a pretty girl, with dark hair and dark eyes, which were just a trifle troubled now. Al Bogart came out and sat down on the back porch, where he filled his pipe. He was a big man, hard-faced, grim of jaw. Gale went back to an old bench, where she picked up some sewing she had been working on.

Al Bogart looked gloomily at her. She had refused Tip Evans for the tenth time—and, strange to relate, she had added some very effective profanity to her tenth rejection. Gale didn't like Tip Evans, and she was very sure that Tip Evans knew it now. At any rate, he had saddled his horse and headed for Camarillo, not waiting for supper.

Gale watched her step-father closely, wondering why he didn't go to town. Al Bogart hadn't missed a Saturday night in Camarillo since he broke a leg ten years ago. Gale wanted him away from the ranch, and for a very simple reason. At nine o'clock Jimmy Anderson would ride up to the ranch, they would saddle Gale's horse, and then they would head for Antelope, twenty-five miles away, where they would be married long before Al Bogart could stop it. No wonder she was worried. Al Bogart had warned Jimmy to keep away from the Two-Bar-B, and Gale didn't want them to meet there. Jimmy wasn't the kind to try and crawl out of a situation.

Her father had been in bad humor all day, snarling at everybody, except Gale, who kept away from him. She wondered if Tip Evans had told him what she said, when Tip proposed. It wasn't ladylike language, she admitted, but very effective.

It was nearly dark and Gale had started to go into the house, when a Mexican came through the patio gate. He was Poco Montero, who worked for the Circle F, doing odd jobs around the ranch. His command of English was very poor.

"I like see Teep," was what he said.

"Tip Evans?" queried Gale.

"Si, senorita."

Al Bogart came over there from the porch.

"What do yuh want him for?" he asked harshly.

"I gots *nota* for heem personal, Senor."

"Give it to me."

"No, Senor—I geeve heem."

Al Bogart said to Gale, "Go in the house —I'll handle this."

Gale stopped at the doorway and looked back. Al Bogart had cuffed the little Mexican against the wall and took the note away

from him. The Mexican didn't even wait to get his hat, and Al Bogart kicked it outside the patio. Gale had no idea what the note contained, nor why Al Bogart was interested enough to strike the Mexican in order to get possession of it. Gale hoped fervently that the note was of enough importance to send her step-father to Camarillo, but after the Mexican was gone he came into the main room and sprawled in a chair, showing no evidence of leaving.

Gale was too nervous to stay there, and went upstairs to her room. There was no chance for her to warn Jimmy. It was only a few minutes of nine, when someone came up on the front porch. Al Bogart went to the door, flung it open and faced Jimmy Anderson.

It was bright moonlight. Bogart stepped outside and carefully closed the door, and Jimmy stepped back against the railing.

"Lookin' for somebody?" asked Bogart quietly.

"Yeah," replied Jimmy.

Bogart's laugh was nasty, as he said, "Fine business. You thought I'd be in Camarillo, eh?"

"That's right."

"Too bad I happened to be here, eh?"

"Correct," replied Jimmy coldly.

"You've got plenty gall, Anderson," said Bogart. "Or did yuh forget that I warned yuh to keep away from here?"

"I don't forget very easy," replied Jimmy. "I came—so go ahead."

"I didn't think you'd sneak in, Anderson."

"Pull up yore loop," said Jimmy coldly. "I didn't sneak here, Bogart. I came to the front door. There's no use of us talkin'. You warned me and I didn't obey it. Go ahead and cut yore wolf loose."

Bogart was silent for several moments. Then he said, "Damned if I don't believe you'd fight."

"It'll be easy to find out," replied Jimmy.

"Yeah," said Bogart quietly.

Neither man said anything nor made any move, till finally Bogart said, "All my men are in Camarillo, Anderson. I've got to meet a man and I want a witness. If you'll go with me—we'll talk this thing over later."

"Talk over what—me comin' here tonight?"

"Yeah. Will yuh go with me?"

"Where do we go?"

"Over to the old Montez adobe."

"All right. I don't know what I'm runnin' my neck into, but I won't be asleep, Bogart."

"Don't trust me, eh?"

"I only trust my friends."

"All right. Come down to the stable while I saddle my horse."

Gale had been unable to hear much of the conversation, but she knew that Jimmy and Al Bogart were together. From an upstairs window she saw two riders leave the stable and go toward Camarillo, but she was unable to identify them.

Jimmy Anderson was suspicious of Al Bogart, and worried about Gale. Why would Al Bogart have a meeting with someone at the old Montez adobe, and require a witness, he wondered? Bogart said nothing, as they rode along. The old adobe was about a hundred feet off the road, an old, tumbledown ruin, without door or windows, surrounded with brush and weeds. They drew up at the edge of the road, and Bogart squinted at his watch in the moonlight.

"All right," he grunted, as he swung out of his saddle. "I'm a little early. You stay here. If I need yuh, I'll call."

He handed Jimmy his reins and walked toward the adobe. Jimmy saw him stop near the doorway for several moments. Then his figure blended into the shadows, as he went through the old doorway.

A moment later the shadows were broken by an orange-colored flash, and the heavy report of a gun shattered the quiet. Jimmy was shocked for a moment, but quickly dismounted, dropped the reins and went running toward the adobe, gun in hand. He stopped near the doorway. From behind the adobe he heard the thudding of running hoofs, as a rider raced away.

Jimmy felt sick for the moment. Someone was running away—and Bogart did not come out. Cautiously he went inside. There was only half a roof on the old shack, and the moonlight streamed down on Al Bogart, who was sprawled on the rubble-covered floor, staring up at the moon with sightless eyes.

Jimmy could see the blood oozing from his shirt bosom, directly over his heart.

There was no question in Jimmy's mind

but that Bogart was dead. He went outside and walked back to his horse, where he suddenly realized what this would mean to him. Bogart had warned him to never come near the Two Bar B, and that was no secret between them. Gale knew they met. His story that Bogart asked him to go with him to a meeting with someone would only make a Camarillo jury laugh. Pop Anderson knew that Jimmy and Gale were going to elope, and had tried to talk Jimmy out of it. Now Al Bogart was dead, and the only man who could prove that Jimmy Anderson didn't kill him was the man who *did* kill him.

Jimmy rode slowly back to Camarillo, trying to figure out what was the best thing to do. There was no use hurrying, because Al Bogart was as dead as he ever could be. Jimmy got off his horse in front of the hotel. Several men spoke to him, but he didn't answer. Hashknife and Sleepy came over from across the street and started into the hotel, when Jimmy hailed them.

"Let's go up to yore room," said Jimmy nervously. "I've got to talk with yuh."

"Sure," said Hashknife, glancing at Jimmy's face in the light from the hotel window.

They went up to the room. Jimmy and Sleepy sat down on the two chairs, while Hashknife sprawled on the bed. It was his favorite posture, when thinking or listening. Jimmy lost no time in telling his story. He went into details, explaining everything as minutely as possible. Neither of the cowboys seemed excited over the tale.

"You ain't a good liar, Jimmy," said Hashknife.

"What do you mean?" asked Jimmy quickly.

"A good liar," explained Hashknife, "wouldn't tell that story."

"But it's true," insisted Jimmy. "I'm not lyin'."

"Any jury would hang yuh on the face of it," said Sleepy.

"That's the devil of it—they would," said Jimmy.

"Did the lady know yuh came out to the ranch?" asked Hashknife.

"She must have known it, Hashknife."

"Uh-huh. Did she love her step-father?"

"She did not," replied Jimmy flatly.

"All right. She didn't see yuh, She can't testify that you was there. Nobody can swear you left the Two Bar B with Al Bogart. Yore best story is to say that you went there to elope with the lady. Yuh seen Al Bogart there; so yuh pulled out. Maybe yuh was able to see that some other man was with him. You went part way back to Camarillo, where yuh waited to see if Bogart went to town. You was close to the old adobe. Yuh saw him stop there, with another man. A shot was fired. The other man rode away, and you found Bogart."

"But that is a lie, Hashknife," said Jimmy.

"Uh-huh. Not bad either. Bogart is a big man. Everythin' is against yuh, Jimmy; the law and public sentiment. You ain't never lied an awful lot in yore life, have yuh?"

"No, I haven't," replied Jimmy.

"Then make up for lost time," said Sleepy.

"Go down and tell the sheriff you found the body. Don't talk much. If he gets suspicious, go ahead and lie. Don't get in jail. If yo're innocent, it can't hurt yuh to lie a little. You won't be defeatin' the purpose of the law by stayin' out of jail. And, dang it, if you get in jail, I've got to use up valuable time—gettin' yuh out. Run along."

"All right," said Jimmy, "I'll do as you say, Hashknife."

He started to step into the hallway, when from across the street came the thudding report of a six-shooter. Hashknife and Sleepy ran to the windows, where they could look across at the saloon. Men were running toward the hitch-rack, where a loose, saddled horse was trailing its reins across the street. A man went out aand caught it.

Jimmy came over to the window beside Sleepy, as a voice called, "Somebody get a doctor! It's Mack Wells—and he looks awful dead!"

"Mack Wells!" exclaimed Jimmy. "He's foreman of the Circle F, Brad Fields' spread. For heaven's sake, what's gone wrong with folks?"

"You go ahead and tell the sheriff yore tale," advised Hashknife. "We'll go find out what happened down at the hitch-rack."

The bystanders waited for the sheriff and coroner, before moving the body into the saloon, where the doctor would have light enough to examine it. Wells had been a hard-faced young cowboy, who wore his hair rather long and his heels high. Judging from the burned spot on his shirt-bosom,

the muzzle of his assailant's gun had only been an inch or so away when the shot was fired. They took the body from the saloon to the doctor's home, and Jimmy managed to get the sheriff's attention.

Hashknife and Sleepy met the excited Rio Jones in front of the hotel. Rio had his horse and was waiting for the sheriff and coroner.

"Business is good!" exclaimed Rio. "Two men in one evenin', if yuh please. Al Bogart and Mack Wells. Can yuh imagine that? I can't. I'm kinda dumb."

"Any clues?" asked Sleepy soberly.

"Any what?"

"Definite indications that might point to the positive identification of the perpetrators."

"If you'd jist hiss a little," said Rio soberly, "I'd say yuh swallered a dictionary and took sody for a chaser. Well, here comes the boss. See yuh later."

Jimmy Anderson was riding with the sheriff, while the coroner came in behind them, driving a fast-stepping buggy team.

"Two-bits to a doughnut they have Jimmy in jail before mornin'," offered Sleepy.

"I'm all out of doughnuts," sighed Hashknife.

JIMMY ANDERSON had told the sheriff his story, as they rode out to the old adobe, but the sheriff had no comment. They found the body as Jimmy had described it, and the doctor made his examination. After this they loaded the body in the doctor's buggy and sent him to town, while Jimmy, the sheriff and Rio Jones went on to the Two Bar B. It was the last thing Jimmy wanted to do, but he had no alternative.

Gale was still up. She knew that something was wrong, when she saw Jimmy with the officers. Matt Haskell, the big sheriff, tried to break the news as gently as possible, but got himself all tied up with words, and finally blurted:

"Well, damn it, Al Bogart got himself killed."

Gale looked at Jimmy, her eyes wide with fright.

Jimmy started to say something, but the sheriff stopped him.

"I'll do the talkin' now, Jimmy," he said firmly.

He turned to Gale. "Why didn't Al Bogart come to Camarillo tonight?" he asked.

Gale shook her head. "I—I don't know," she replied, and then added, "I'm sure he couldn't have known that Jimmy and I were going to elope."

"Oh-oh!" gasped Rio Jones. "You two was goin' to—"

"Drop it!" snapped the sheriff. "Gale, you and Jimmy was runnin' away to git married, eh? I see. And Al Bogart stopped it. Did you see Jimmy when he came out here tonight?"

Gale shook her head. "No, I—I only heard his voice."

"Talkin' with Al Bogart?"

"Yes."

"Quarrelin'?"

"I don't know."

"When Al Bogart left here, did Jimmy go with him, Gale?"

"I can't be sure," she replied. "I saw two men ride away together."

Matt Haskell smiled grimly, as he turned to Jimmy.

"Yore story don't match, Jimmy," he said. "Ain't yuh got a better one?"

"No," replied Jimmy, "I've got a worse one—the honest truth, Matt."

Gale looked bewildered.

"That sounds funny, Jimmy," said Matt.

"No funnier than my story," said Jimmy bitterly. "Listen."

Jimmy told them exactly what happened. Gale believed him, but she was the only one that did. After Jimmy finished Matt Haskell asked, "Did Bogart tell yuh why he wanted yuh as a witness?"

"No. He didn't even tell me who he was going to meet. He didn't seem so mad at me, after we argued a little while. I knew our chance to elope was gone, and maybe if I helped him out on this—well, if he wasn't mad at me it might make things easier for Gale and me."

"Yeah," said Matt Haskell quietly, "it might have—if he hadn't been killed. Jimmy, I'm sorry, I like yuh, and I like yore mother and father, but I've got to arrest yuh. It's the only thing I can do. I ain't chargin' yuh with murder, yuh understand, but I've got to hold yuh for investigation."

"But he never killed Al Bogart!" gasped Gale. "I—I know he didn't!"

"How do yuh know, Gale?" asked the sheriff kindly.

"Well, I—I just know he didn't. Jimmy wouldn't kill anybody."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'll put the story up to the prosecutor. Maybe he'll believe it—I hope. But it—well, I reckon we better be goin'."

Gale came over and Jimmy took her in his arms. The sheriff and deputy walked outside, waiting for Jimmy to come out. Rio said:

"I wish the danged fool would make a break," said Rio.

"It's pretty dark to shoot—or trail a man," said Matt.

But Jimmy came out and climbed on his horse.

"Can I get out on bail?" he asked.

"That's up to the law, Jimmy," said Matt. "I'm scared yuh can't."

RIO JONES was at the hotel next morning when Hashknife and Sleepy came down to breakfast, and told them about the arrest.

"The sheriff didn't believe Jimmy's story, eh?" remarked Hashknife.

"Not after askin' Gale a few questions. Yuh see, she heard Jimmy's voice, talkin' to Bogart. Then Jimmy told what he said was the truth."

"Hard to believe, eh?" said Sleepy.

"Yeah, I reckon so. I believed him—I think. Tom Whitsett, the prosecutor, was down talkin' to the sheriff a while ago. He said that any jury in the country would hang Jimmy on the evidence. He's done charged Jimmy with murder. They've sent out for Ma and Pop Anderson."

"Nothin' further on the killin' of Mack Wells?" asked Hashknife.

"Not a thing. This other killin' has kinda shoved that'n into the hole."

Hashknife asked Rio for directions out to the old Montez adobe, and after breakfast he and Sleepy rode out there. They met Gale and Tip Evans, heading for town in a buggy, just as they swung in toward the adobe. With the common courtesy of people who live outside cities, they all nodded to them.

"Mighty pretty girl," remarked Sleepy. "Mighty pretty."

"I reckon she's Gale Bogart," said Hashknife. "But for a queer twist of fate, she'd be Mrs. Jimmy Anderson by this time."

"Man proposes, but the law disposes," said Sleepy soberly.

They went into the old adobe and looked the place over. Dust and rubble was inches deep on the dirt floor, everything being well trampled in getting the body out. Hashknife searched the ground, but found nothing, until he sat down on a brick timber to roll a smoke. As he pinched out the match and started to rub it deep into the dirt, he saw the corner of a piece of paper sticking from the dust.

It was a crumpled note, on which was penciled, but badly smudged now:

> Danger meet me at old Montez adobe ten o'clock. Don't fale.

"The reason Bogart went to the adobe!" exclaimed Sleepy.

"Ten o'clock," mused Hashknife. "Yeah, that's about right. Somebody sent Bogart a note—and he fell for it."

"That note will help Jimmy," said Sleepy.

Hashknife shook his head. "It don't prove anythin', Sleepy. We don't know how long that note has been here. A lawyer would laugh at such evidence. It would indicate that Bogart was in trouble. And if he *was* in trouble, he wouldn't take Jimmy Anderson with him. He didn't like Jimmy; so he wouldn't want Jimmy to have anythin' on *him.*"

"Yeah, that's right," sighed Sleepy. "Well, I dunno."

They went out the rear of the adobe and looked around. The desert had moved in very close to the house, but they were able to find where a horse had been tied recently, and in the sand Hashknife found an empty, twelve-gauge shotgun shell. It was new and had been recently fired.

"But Bogart hadn't been shot with a shotgun," said Sleepy.

"I'm pretty sure he wasn't," nodded Hashknife, as he pocketed the shell.

They searched further, but found nothing, and finally went back to Camarillo. Pop Anderson and his wife were in town, conferring with the prosecutor, who told them that, without any doubt, Jimmy would have to stand a trial for first degree murder. Hashknife talked with Rio, who told him that Al Bogart had been shot through the heart, and that the bullet went clear through

him. They had no idea what caliber of gun had fired the shot, but the doctor said it looked like a bullet from an old buffalo gun.

"Mebbe one of them old fifty-hundred-and-tens," said Rio. "It shore made a awful hole."

Hashknife fingered the empty shotgun shell in his pocket, and wondered how it could, in any way, be connected with the killing.

"Matt Haskell's plumb loco," said Rio. "Three murders on his hands, and only one victim."

Hashknife and Sleepy went out to the JA ranch that evening, and found Gale out there. They were all very unhappy, but tried not to show it.

"Ma and Pop were kind enough to ask me to stay out here for a few days," explained Gale. "There are no other women at the Two Bar B, you see."

Hashknife could see that Gale was not mourning the death of Bogart; her whole interest being on getting Jimmy Anderson out of jail. She was sure, in her own mind, that Jimmy told the truth. Hashknife said, as they all sat in the main room of the ranch-house:

"Have yuh any idea why Bogart stayed at home last night?"

"No," replied Gale. "He seemed to be nervous all day; nervous and irritable, as though something was on his mind."

"He was irritable most of the time," said Pop Anderson dryly.

"Yes, he was," admitted Gale. "You see, Poco Montero, who works for the Circle F, came over that evening, looking for Tip Evans, Al Bogart struck him. Poco is a little fellow, too."

"Yea-a-ah?" said Hashknife quietly. "Wanted to see Tip Evans, eh?"

"Tip is the foreman of the Two Bar B," explained Pop.

"Yeah, I know that. What did he want Tip Evans for, Miss Bogart?"

"He had a note for Tip. I guess Al Bogart took it away from him."

"Do you know who this note was from, Miss Bogart?"

"No, I don't. Al Bogart told me to go into the house, but I saw him hit Poco, before I went in."

"That's kinda interestin'," said Hashknife.

"But it don't help Jimmy," said Ma Anderson sadly.

"What helps most," said Hashknife, "is to keep feelin' that Jimmy is innocent and that somethin' will prove it."

"What proof can be found?" asked Pop quickly, anxiously.

"Jimmy," said Hashknife, "can't be tried for three weeks. The next session of court don't open until then. I found that out today."

"Many things can happen in three weeks," said Gale hopefully.

Soapy Smith came in. He had been to Camarillo, and was just a little excited as he said, "Pop, you know Poco Montero—the little Mexican at the Circle F?"

"Sure," replied Pop quickly. "What about him?"

"Well, jist before I left town Brad Fields and Mike Donnell came in from the Circle F and said they found Poco beside the road, with a bullet-hole through his head. The sheriff and coroner have gone out there. They left when I did."

"I was afraid of that," said Hashknife.

"*You* was afraid?" queried Soapy curiously.

"Yeah. Yuh see, they shut Poco's mouth to keep us from findin' out who sent that note to Tip Evans last night."

"Will that help Jimmy?" asked Gale anxiously.

"No," replied Hashknife, "it'll hurt him. I was kinda figurin' on Poco to help us out. It'll be harder now—but we'll try."

"You ain't a detective, are yuh?" asked Soapy.

"I don't think so," smiled the tall, gray-eyed cowboy, and added, "at least, I don't want anybody to get the idea I am. They kill too easy in this country, Soapy."

"Oh, I'll keep my mouth shut, if that's what yuh mean, Hashknife."

"Thank yuh, Soapy Folks might get the wrong impression."

RIO JONES slept in the sheriff's office on a small, folding cot. It was late when they finished with the body of Poco Montero, and Rio was tired. He pulled down the blinds, made up his cot and was taking off his boots, when the unlocked door swung open and a masked man stepped into the office. Only a small lamp was lighted, sit-

ting on a small stand beside the cot. Rio reached for his gun, but the masked man covered him, and Rio changed his mind.

"Have some sense," growled the man, as he turned the key in the lock.

A glance around the room disclosed several pairs of handcuffs hanging against the wall, together with a coil of rope. Rio was helpless. The man made him lie face-down on the cot, and then proceeded to hog-tie the luckless deputy. It was a very good job, done swiftly. Then he took a soiled bandanna from Rio's hip-pocket and proceeded to gag him very effectually.

"Yuh see," explained the masked man, "I don't like to be interrupted when I do a job, so I do it well."

"Ogglemff," said Rio.

THEN the man opened a desk-drawer and took out the big iron ring, on which the jail keys were bunched. Rio couldn't turn over, but he heard the masked man go down the jail corridor. Jimmy Anderson was asleep, when the man awakened him, and got out of bed.

"Put on yore clothes, Anderson—we're goin' for a walk," said the interloper.

"Mebbe I don't want to go for a walk," said Jimmy.

"Scared, eh?" jeered the man. "Git into them clothes, you fool! I'm goin' to take yuh out of here."

"Take me out of here?" queried Jimmy. "What's the big idea?"

"They'll prob'ly hang yuh, if yuh stay—and all I want is an answer to a few questions. Hurry up. I've got the keys, and the jailer is tied up."

"All right," said Jimmy. "I don't sabe it, but I reckon yo're the boss right now."

In a shaft of moonlight from a high, barred window, he saw the gun in the stranger's right hand. Jimmy dressed quickly, and the man unlocked the cell door, stepping back.

"Go out ahead of me—and no foolin'," he ordered.

Jimmy walked out through the office. He saw Rio on the cot, but did not ask any questions. It was dark outside. The man said harshly:

"Turn left and walk until I tell yuh to stop."

They were heading straight out of Camarillo, and walked about a half-mile, before the man said, "This is good, Anderson."

Jimmy stopped. His guide was six feet away from him when Jimmy said, "What's all the hocus-pocus, anyway."

"I heard yore story, Anderson," said the man quietly. "Nobody believes it—except me—and I ain't goin' to prove it."

"How do yuh know it's true?" asked Jimmy anxiously.

The masked man laughed shortly. "That's my business, Anderson. Did Bogart tell yuh why he was goin' to the old adobe?"

"He said he had to meet a man there."

"Did he tell yuh who the man was?"

"No."

"What was yore part in the meetin', Anderson?"

"He just said he wanted me for a witness. I asked him what I was goin' to witness, but he didn't say. I didn't go over to the adobe with him. He asked me to hold his horse. He said if he wanted me he'd yell."

"Did he show you the note he got?"

"I didn't know anythin' about a note," said Jimmy.

"Yuh didn't see him have any note, eh?"

"No. We done all our talkin' in the dark."

"Uh-huh," said the masked man, evidently relieved. "He didn't even say he got a note, eh?"

"He never mentioned it. Bogart didn't like me well enough to tell me anythin'."

"Uh-huh. You and his daughter was goin' to elope, eh?"

"That was the idea," replied Jimmy, "but I ran into him. He said all his men were in Camarillo, and he wanted me as a witness."

"All right—I believe yuh. I'm pullin' out now, Anderson. Take my advice and high-tail it out of the country, while the pullin' out is good. You ain't got a chance with the law."

"Much obliged," said Jimmy, and watched the man walk away into the brush.

JIMMY didn't know what to do. If he left the country the law would be after him—and if he went back to jail, he might get hung. He had no liking to become an outlaw; so he walked slowly back to Camarilo. The masked man had locked the office door behind them; so Jimmy went up to the front of the hotel, where he sat down to

have a smoke. Several men went past, but no one paid any attention to him, until Matt Haskell, the sheriff, came from the saloon across the street, glanced into the hotel, turned and saw Jimmy.

Matt Haskell's jaw sagged a little, and he blinked his eyes. Jimmy grinned.

"Well, I'll—wait a minute! How'd you get here, Jimmy?" said Haskell.

"Walked, Matt. If you've got a key to the office, we better go down and let Rio loose. I imagine he's plenty mad by this time."

"Let him loose? Let Rio—Jimmy, what in the devil happened?"

"Oh, it wasn't much, Matt," said Jimmy easily. "A masked man came in, tied up Rio and took me out. He wanted to ask me a few questions—and give me a chance to pull out of the country."

"You—you didn't go, Jimmy?"

"Well, I don't reckon I did, Matt."

"No, yuh didn't. That was a fool question. C'mon."

THEY found Rio Jones still face-down on the bunk, and mad enough to bite a hole in the blanket. He looked at the soiled handkerchief, spat disgustedly and said:

"After this I hope I pack a clean one. Jimmy, did you know that *pelicano?*"

"Nope," replied Jimmy. "Can't place him, Rio, can you?"

"No, and I hope I never see him ag'in. Dirtiest handkerchief I ever saw."

"You'll live," said the sheriff. "C'mon, Jimmy. I hate to do this, but as long as yuh came back, I'll have to do it."

"Sorry?" asked Jimmy.

"Well, I dunno," sighed Matt Haskell. "I don't believe I'd have come back."

"Me neither," added Rio. "I'd be halfway there right now."

"Halfway where?" asked Jimmy.

"Son," replied Rio soberly, "when I'm scared—I go. Mebbe I ain't got no special place in mind at the time, but I'll run into it. When I start goin', all places look alike. I'm what you'd call destination bound."

"Would yuh run if you was innocent, Rio?" asked Jimmy.

"All I need is to be scared, Jimmy."

"The jury," said the sheriff, "will look at this in two ways. One is that you came back because yuh was innocent, and the other is that you ain't got good sense. They'll prob'ly vote on it."

"There's one good angle," said Rio, "they can't put the deadwood on yuh for killin' Poco Montero."

"Nor Cock Robin," added Jimmy.

"My Gawd, is there another?" gasped Rio, who never heard of a nursery rhyme "Nobody told me."

"I'll read it to yuh some time," said Matt Haskell.

AS HE and Jimmy started for the jail corridor Hashknife and Sleepy came in. They had just returned from the JA, and were curious for information regarding the killing of Poco Montero. Jimmy told them what happened to him, and Rio added a few words regarding the handkerchief used to gag him.

Jimmy told Hashknife the questions propounded by the masked man.

"I wonder what note he was askin' about," said the sheriff. "Al Bogart didn't have any note in his pockets."

"There was a note," said Hashknife." Gale Bogart told us about it. She says that Poco Montero brought the note to the Two Bar B and asked for Tip Evans. It seems that Bogart slapped the Mexican down and took the note away from him—and that's the last of the note. I figure that somebody killed Montero to keep him from tellin' who gave him the note."

"Yea-a-ah," breathed the big sheriff. "That's reasonable, Hashknife. Note for Tip Evans, eh? Well, I'll go out and have a little talk with Tip Evans. He'd prob'ly know who'd send him a note."

"Bein' a mind-reader—yeah," said Rio. "You can save horseshoes, Matt. If he knew, he wouldn't tell you—and how'd he know? He never got the note."

"Yeah, that's true. Sa-a-y! I just got an idea. Somebody sent Evans a note, but Bogart got it. It said for Evans to be at the old adobe; so Bogart got smart and went to see what it was all about—and got killed."

"That'l help my case, won't it?" asked Jimmy anxiously.

"If it can be proved—which it can't," replied the sheriff.

"You should have been a undertaker, Matt," said Rio. "I ain't never seen anybody who can hang crape like you can."

"Well, anyway, I reckon I better lock you up, Jimmy," said the sheriff.

"You'll be safer than we are," said Rio. "The way they're killin' off the population —nobody ain't safe, unless they're in jail."

Hashknife and Sleepy went on to the hotel, where Hashknife examined the note again.

Evidently the masked man, who liberated Jimmy, was afraid he might be identified by the writing, and was worried about someone getting it. However, Hashknife had little hopes of doing that. Why this Williams, who was supposed to be a quail hunter, was killed and his clothes taken, was a mystery. Bogart had probably been killed because he butted in on some sort of a deal. Poco Montero had been killed to shut his mouth, but there did not seem to be any reason why Mack Wells was killed at the hitch-rack.

THE next day was taken up with three inquests. Only one was of great interest to the citizens of Camarillo, and that was the one over the body of Al Bogart. Gale was called to the stand and told what she knew. She told of the note that Al Bogart took away from Poco Montero, but was unable to swear that Al Bogart rode away from the Two Bar B that night with Jimmy Anderson. She admitted that she and Jimmy had planned to elope.

Jimmy volunteered to testify and told his story frankly. It was easy to see that the coroner's jury didn't believe a word of it. The sheriff testified to his findings, and also told about Jimmy's enforced jail-break, together with his voluntary return to jail. The jury asked that Jimmy be held for the next term of court to face a charge of first degree murder.

"I told yuh yuh should have high-tailed it," declared Rio, as he took Jimmy back to jail. "They'll hang yuh, I tell yuh."

"It begins to look like I *was* a fool," said Jimmy bitterly.

"The only thing you can do," said Rio, "is to find the man who let you out, after puttin' that danged handkerchief in my mouth."

"Well, he's not in my cell," said Jimmy, "so where else can I look?"

"Yeah, that's right—yo're handicapped."

Hashknife and Sleepy listened to the conversation in the Aztec Saloon, and not one man defended Jimmy Anderson. As far as they were concerned, he was already convicted. Hashknife admitted to Sleepy that he was puzzled. There didn't seem to be anything for him to get his teeth into. They met Doctor Reber, the coroner, and Hashknife asked him if he had any idea what caliber bullet killed Al Bogart.

"I have no idea, sir," replied the doctor. "The size of the hole would indicate a large bullet, but a bullet usually leaves what might be termed a round hole. This was not round. In fact, it was more like a rapier wound."

"The bullet was not in the body?" queried Hashnike.

"No, it went through, sir."

The doctor hurried on, and the two cowboys sat down in front of the hotel. Sleepy said, "Yuh don't suppose he was killed with an arrow, do yuh?"

"An arrow in a gun?" asked Hashknife. "Well, now—huh! I remember one time when I forgot to take the ramrod out of a muzzle-loader, when we were huntin' antelope. I was just a kid, and I got excited."

"Did it kill the antelope?" asked Sleepy curiously.

"It'd be a good story, if it did," smiled Hashknife. "Yuh know, pardner, this deal is different than some we've run into. Nobody gunnin' for *us*."

"That's right—but they might."

"No reason to," said Hashknife. "We've just been driftin' along, not doin' anythin'. I admit I'm kinda stuck. On account of the Anderson's, I'd like to prove that Jimmy didn't kill Bogart. I believe that man Williams is the key to the whole deal. Find out who killed Williams—and why—and maybe the rest won't be so hard. Here comes that doctor again."

Doctor Reber nodded to them, as he was going past, and Hashnife said, "Doctor, did you perform a post mortem on that man who was killed on the Agua Barroso road?"

"Yes, I did."

"I understand he was shot twice, is that right?"

"Correct. Either shot would have killed him."

"Both bullets in him, Doctor?"

"Yes," nodded the doctor. "Strangely enough, one was a forty-five, and the other

was a thirty-eight. I removed them, and I believe the sheriff has them."

The doctor went on. Hashknife rolled a smoke and lighted it.

"Any ideas?" queried Sleepy.

"Thirty-eight, eh?" mused Hashknife. "Not many punchers pack that size gun—but Mack Wells did. The sheriff kept it. But what would the foreman of the Circle F be doin'—bushin' a quail hunter, I wonder?"

They went down to the sheriff's office and found Rio Jones there alone.

"What caliber bullet killed Mack Wells?" asked Hashknife.

"Forty-five," replied Rio. "The sheriff's got it some'ers."

"And Mack Wells shot a thirty-eight?"

"Shore did. The gun's locked up in the safe."

"Don't many punchers pack a thirty-eight," said Hashknife.

"Mack was the only one I knowed," said Rio. "He had a thirty-eight on a forty-five frame. Said it shot better than the forty-five."

MATT HASKELL, the sheriff, came in and sprawled in a chair. He was both mad and unhappy.

"I saw the Commissioners goin' up to their office," said Rio.

"I've been with 'em for an hour," sighed Matt.

"Want more prisoners, huh?" queried Rio.

Matt drew a deep breath and shook his head.

"They want my scalp," he said. "I've got jist one week to find out who killed Al Bogart, Mack Wells, Poco Montero and that feller Williams."

"Or else—" asked Rio.

"Yeah. Do it in a week, or resign."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Rio quietly. "Why, that won't give yuh time to do anythin' else. Evenin's, too. You won't hardly have time to eat. Won't they let yuh off if yuh jist try real hard, Matt?"

"They say yo're too dumb to be a deputy," said the sheriff.

"Too dumb?" wailed Rio. "Too dumb—"

"Too dumb," said the sheriff. "All five agreed on that."

"All five, huh? Well, that's what you'd call a majority. When are yuh goin' to resign, Matt?"

"This afternoon," sighed the sheriff. "No use prolongin' it. Let 'em hire a smart sheriff."

"Why not take their offer of one week?" asked Hashknife. "Yuh never can tell what'll happen in a week."

Matt Haskell looked at Hashknife thoughtfully. Perhaps he saw something in the gray eyes of the tall cowboy, or in that half-smile on the wide, thin-lipped mouth that caused him to waver.

"Well, I dunno. Like you say—" he began.

"That's fine," said Rio. "It'll give me time to shine up m' badge to turn over to a new deputy."

"That's all you've done for three years, Rio," said the sheriff.

TIP EVANS came to the office. He was helping arrange for the funeral of Al Bogart, and wanted some information from the sheriff. Evans was a good-looking cowboy, slightly fancy in his garb, and had slate-blue eyes that seemed to have no depth. Matt Haskell introduced him to Hashknife and Sleepy, and asked him to sit down.

"I wanted to talk with yuh about a note, Tip," said the sheriff. "All we know is that Poco Montero brought a note to you, and Bogart took it away from him. You wouldn't know who wrote that note, would yuh?"

Tip Evans shook his head. "Gale told me about it," he said. "Maybe somebody wanted to gun me down—and got Bogart instead."

"Why would Bogart try to investigate that note?" asked Hashknife.

Tip Evans looked at Hashknife curiously, wondering what right he had to ask questions.

Then he said, "How in hell would I know—I never seen it. Bogart must have destroyed it."

"Yuh don't know of anybody that'd want to gun yuh down, do yuh?" asked Hashknife.

"I do not," replied Evans.

"Do you think that Jimmy Anderson shot Bogart?"

"I don't know who shot him," replied Evans. "I do know that Bogart said he'd kick Anderson off the ranch, if he came out to see Gale again."

"Do you believe Jimmy's story?" asked the sheriff.

"He lied to yuh once—why couldn't he lie again?" said Evans.

"Don't get sore," advised the sheriff. "All we're tryin' to do is get some angle to work on. You and Mack Wells was good friends, Tip; who'd gun *him* down?"

"How would I know?" asked Evans testily. "Maybe he had an enemy—I don't know. Somebody got him—that's all I know. Anythin' else you'd like to know?"

"You haven't told us anythin' yet," reminded Hashknife quietly.

Tip Evans looked at Hashknife, scowling thoughtfully. Then he said, "What's yore interest in this, Hartley? You seem loaded with questions; so why don't yuh go out and find the answers?"

"Maybe I will, Evans," said Hashknife.

"Yeah—that's a good idea," said Evans, and walked out.

Evidently he had forgotten what he wanted to talk over with the sheriff.

"His skin's a little thin, I reckon," said Rio.

"Tip's a little off his feed," remarked the sheriff. "Yuh see, he wants to marry Gale Bogart—and I reckon Al Bogart was helpin' him all he could. But Bogart's gone now—and mebbe Tip knows he's sunk."

"Love's a awful thing, boys," said Rio. "It makes men cut, shoot and cuss."

"Do you speak from experience?" asked Sleepy.

Rio nodded solemnly and started singing quietly:

Oh, I loved a fair maiden, whose hair was
like gold,
And her eyes was as blue as the sea,
But her pa was a six-shootin' son-of-a-gun,
And I figured he didn't like me-e-e.

I had sixteen buckshot hived up in m' pants,
Seven forty-five holes in m' hide,
When he said he mistook me for somebody
else,
I laughed till I dog-gone near died.

"That's enough song," said the sheriff.

"I liked it," said Sleepy soberly. "I ain't hard to please. Do yuh know any more tearful love songs, Rio?"

"That'n didn't make yuh cry," said Rio.

"I sob inside," said Sleepy. "My tears all run backwards."

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy went out to the JA later that evening. Gale was still there. She had found out that her father had recently taken a fifteen-thousand-dollar mortgage on the Two Bar B from a bank at Antelope, and that his funds in the local bank had been drawn down to a fine point. He had recently drawn a check for ten thousand dollars.

"He lost a lot of money in a game at Agua Barroso a little while ago," said Soapy Smith.

"You only *heard* that," said Pop.

"If he had ten thousand in cash in the bank, why would he mortgage the Two Bar B for fifteen thousand?" asked Hashknife.

Gale didn't know. Al Bogart hadn't been buying any stock. They talked until late that night, and the two cowboys rode back to Camarillo. There was nobody in the little hotel lobby, as they came in and went up to their room. It seemed that no one ever bothered to lock their room at the little hotel.

They walked into the dark room, and Hashknife felt his way over to the little table, where he lighted a match, intending to light the oil lamp. He had his back to the room, when he heard Sleepy's quiet exclamation.

He had touched the match to the wick, and the lamp flared up, as he turned.

Two masked men were back against either side of the doorway, covering them with six-shooters. There was no chance for Hashknife nor Sleepy to reach for a gun. One man said:

"Unbuckle yore guns and let 'em fall, gents."

Slowly they complied.

"Mind tellin' what this is all about?" said Hashknife.

"Open yore mouth again, and I'll drill yuh," whispered the man.

Each of the men had a length of rope wrapped around them. One man kept them covered, while the other proceeded to hog-tie Hashknife, after forcing him to lie down on the floor. Then they tied Sleepy's arms and forced a gag into his mouth, but leaving his legs free. They didn't make him lie down. Then they gagged Hashknife, blew

out the light, and shoved Sleepy ahead of them.

Hashknife twisted and turned, but the ropes had been well fastened. He was sure that they would be back after him, as soon as they disposed of Sleepy. There was no light in the hallway, and the shades had been drawn on both windows. He could hear the three-piece orchestra playing in the Aztec Saloon across the street. Then he began hammering his feet on the floor, making quite a clatter. He heard a voice down in the lobby, and a moment later he heard someone coming up the stairs.

There was a sound at the doorway, and then a voice hissed:

"Git out of here—somebody comin'!"

Whoever came up the stairs stopped at their open doorway. He said in a querulous voice:

"Who's makin' all the danged noise? Anybody in there? Well, dang it!"

HE came into the room and started for the windows, but tripped over Hashknife and fell sprawling. Hashknife made a funny noise through his gag, and the man went out of there with a rush, struck the side of the doorway in the dark and sprawled into the hallway. He ran to the top of the stairs and yelled to someone down in the lobby:

"Come up here! I think I've found another dead man!"

Footsteps came up the uncarpeted stairs, and the voice of Rio Jones said:

"Yuh ain't sure?"

"I—I fell over him—and he made a funny noise."

"Kinda like a death gurgle?" asked Rio anxiously. "Mebbe sort of a rattle?"

"Somethin' like that."

"Go in and listen ag'in," said Rio. "I'll wait for yuh."

Hashknife hammered on the floor again with his feet. Rio said:

"That ain't no dead man! C'mon," said Rio.

The man with Rio was the hotel-keeper, too excited to even help Rio remove the gag and the ropes. Hashknife got quickly to his feet.

"Where's Sleepy?" asked Rio.

"They got him," said Hashknife huskily. "Two masked men, Rio. They tied me up and took him first. I think they came back to get me, but somebody scared 'em away."

"I heard 'em," declared the hotel-keeper. "They was back there at the door to the balcony. They ran down the stairs."

Hashknife and Rio searched for the men, but to no avail. Sleepy's horse was still at the stable. They found Matt Haskell and told him, but he merely looked blankly at them and said, "Can yuh beat that?"

Back at the hotel, the hotel man handed Hashknife his belt and gun.

"They must have dropped it at the bottom of the stairs," he said.

Hashknife buckled on his belt. He felt a little better, with that old, black-handled Colt swinging against his thigh. Rio said:

"Yuh better get a good sleep, Hashknife; yuh can't do anythin' at night," said Rio.

"I'll look around," replied Hashknife. "I couldn't sleep."

Hashknife had no idea where they had taken Sleepy, and he only had a hazy theory as to why it had been done. He knew very little about Agua Barroso, except what Rio had told him, but decided to go down there. If their discovery of the body of Williams had any connection with the kidnaping of Sleepy, the answer might be across the Border.

No one saw him saddle his horse at the feed-stable and ride away from Camarillo. He had gone past the place where they found the body, when two riders came down the road from toward Camarillo, riding fast. Hashknife pulled off the road in the darkness and let them gallop past.

There was no one at the Border to check his passing. Agua Barroso was only about two miles further on, and Hashknife realized that if Sleepy's captors had taken him there, they would be very much pleased to take him, too. Rio had told him that Pancho Aguilar had surrounded himself with a very tough bunch of "wanted" Americans, and that any stranger would have to be very careful.

THE whole village of Agua Barroso was on one street, which was both narrow and crooked. The biggest building in the place was used as a *cantina* and gambling house. It was a two-story adobe, very old. On the slope above the town was a string of

adobe barracks, unused now. Under the moonlight the place looked as peaceful as a churchyard, but Hashknife knew that appearances were deceitful.

He tied his horse some distance behind the *cantina* and came ahead on foot. A quick examination of the horses at the hitch-rack revealed one wearing the Circle F brand. There was no activity on the street, but he could hear plenty activity in the *cantina,* together with a string orchestra playing Mexican music.

He moved in close to a window and looked into the place. It was fairly well crowded, but he saw Brad Fields at the bar, talking with two men, one of whom answered to Rio's description of Pancho Aguilar. Lamplight flashed on his silver finery, and he seemed expansive, as he talked with Fields. In a few moments Aguilar and Fields moved away from the bar and went over to an open stairway, which led up to a balcony. They talked there for a few moments, before going up the stairs, disappearing from Hashknife's view.

Hashknife wondered if Fields was mixed up in this deal. Maybe someone had gone to get Fields at the Circle F, and they came back, riding fast. Hashknife looked longingly at that stairway, wishing he had a chance to find out what was upstairs. He could see several rough-looking white men at the bar, and decided against going into the place. There would be no good accomplished in starting trouble, until he knew where Sleepy was being held.

He went out behind the *cantina* again and studied the place. There was sort of a shed, with a sloping roof attached to the rear, which offered possibilities. About three or four feet higher than the shed was the tile roof of the main building, which seemed fairly flat for a long ways, ending up at another level, where he could see a window. If he could crawl across the old tile and reach this window, he might be able to get inside the second story.

It was little effort for him to get on the shed and crawl to the main building. The old roof was tiled in huge hand-made tiles, weighing heavily on the old roof. Many of them had been dislodged, and offered complications, as far as silence was concerned. But Hashknife was resourceful. He crawled up on the tiles, sprawled flat and moved inches at a time. It was slow work, but he was gradually approaching the window. Perspiration ran off the end of his nose and his elbows were getting very sore.

The window was only a few feet away now. He carefully placed his hands, inching forward, when the tiles seemed to be sinking under him.

SLEEPY STEVENS wasn't frightened, but he was mad. A masked man had shoved the burning end of a cigarette against his nose, and raised a blister. Sleepy didn't know where he was, except that he could hear an orchestra playing Mexican music, and guessed that he was in Agua Barroso.

They had roped him on a horse in Camarillo, threw a sack over his head, and took him a long ways. Anyway, it seemed a long ways to Sleepy, trying to get a breath of air inside that sack. There was only silver lining to the episode and that was the fact they had been frightened away, before they could go back and get Hashknife. He could hear them discussing that fact, and one of them said:

"Well, we got one." The other one said, "Yeah, one is enough. One can tell as much as two."

Now they had him in a little room, tied to an old chair, but he was not blindfolded nor gagged. Two guards had been left with him for an hour. Then another man came, also masked. He burned Sleepy's nose for no reason, except, as he said:

"That will make you talk when asked."

The two guards laughed. They were evidently the ones who captured him in Camarillo, because they explained why they failed to get Hashknife. They called him the "Tall One."

"That's where you made a mistake—you got the wrong one," commented Sleepy.

"You mean—he knows more than you?" asked the one who burned him.

"Wait and see," replied Sleepy.

He refused to say anything further. In a while two more men came. Sleepy recognized Pancho Aguilar by his raiment, but the other man wore the garb of a cowboy and wore a mask that covered his head and face, except for the eye-holes.

"Now," said Sleepy, "if somebody'd come, dressed as the devil, we could have a masquerade."

"You theenk these ees fonny?" asked Aguilar.

"Almost as funny as you look, Aguilar."

"You theenk you know me, eh?" queried the Mexican. "Bah! Wat I care wheech you know. I am boss here."

"Let's forget that part of it," said the man who came in with Aguilar. "We can't waste all night."

He pulled a chair in front of Sleepy and peered at him through the eye-holes of his black mask.

"Ready to talk, Stevens?" he asked harshly.

"If there's anythin' worth talkin' about," said Sleepy.

"You know what I mean," said the man, "and we're not foolin'. We want what you took off Williams. We don't care who killed him—but we want what you and yore pardner took off him. Tell us where it is and you go out of here all in one chunk. Refuse—and we slit yore throat. Take yore choice."

"What we took off Williams?" queried Sleepy. "Yo're crazy!"

"If you got robbed of a fortune, you'd be crazy, too, Stevens. If you value yore life more than what you took—you better talk fast."

"What was it?" asked Sleepy.

"No tell—he talk," said Aguilar quickly.

"I'm no fool," retorted the man. "I'll handle this."

"Afraid to tell, eh?" jeered Sleepy. "Meanin' you ain't sure, eh?"

"Let me burn him some more," said the man across the room. "That's one way to make 'em talk."

"I'll handle this. Stevens is no fool—he'll talk."

Sleepy had been looking at the man's hands. On the ring-finger of his right hand he wore a heavy silver ring, with a huge, green setting. The man saw the direction of Sleepy's gaze, and quickly jerked his hand away. Sleepy laughed.

"Laugh, you poor fool," said the man huskily. "You cooked yore goose."

"Even if I talk," added Sleepy defiantly. "Well, I'm not talkin'."

The man in front of him got out of his chair and turned to the man with the lighted cigarette.

"All right," he said, "go ahead. I'm through. Maybe he'll talk."

The other man came over, chuckling behind his mask, as he puffed the cigarette to a glowing end.

"First," he said, "we singe off the eyelashes, eh? Then we burn the edge of the eye. Very painful, my friend. After that, if you do not tell what we want to know, we will practice on the eye. Somebody hold his head."

"I hol' heem," volunteered Aguilar. "I like see theese theeng. Maybe I learn sometheeng, eh? You hold steel!"

He grasped Sleepy by both ears and yanked him around. "So—like those!" he exclaimed. "I gots heem, amigo—burn fas'!"

A piece of plaster the size of a saucer hit Aguilar on the head, and he quickly looked up. The whole ceiling was sagging.

"Madre de Dios!" screamed Aguilar, and sprang back.

A dry-rotted two-by-four splintered and came down, and then, like an avalanche came the rest of the roof, timbers, mud, tiles, and on top of that the plunging body of Hashknife Hartley. A tile smashed the one lamp, and the air was filled wtih dust and plaster. Hashknife landed on his knees on top of somebody, which broke his fall.

The man with the cigarette crashed into Sleepy, knocking Sleepy and his chair over backwards, throwing him away from the avalanche, but leaving himself right in the center of it. Guns flashed in the darkness, but no one knew what they were shooting at. The door banged open.

"Sleepy! Are you here, Sleepy?" panted Hashknife.

"Over here," gasped Sleepy. "Tied to a chair."

Somebody shot at Hashknife's voice, but the bullet only screamed off a piece of tile. Hashknife shot at the flash, and a man yelled. Then he scrambled over, found the chair in the darkness and slashed the ropes loose. Downstairs everything was confusion. Men were yelling, running around. Sleepy got to his feet and fell over someone. His exploring fingers found the holstered gun, and he got to his feet.

"I'm heeled, pardner!" he panted. "What's next?"

Hashknife peered up at the smashed roof, but it was too high for them to get out that way.

"We go out the front," he said. "We may have to shoot our way out, but it's the only way for us. C'mon—fast!"

They got out into the hall. Aguilar was out there on his hands and knees, trying to get up, but had no gun. They went past him and came to the top of the stairs. A man started up the stairs, saw them and fairly fell back. Most of the crowd had bunched in front of the bar, staring up toward the balcony.

Hashknife and Sleepy didn't hesitate, but came straight down, their guns ready for any hostile movement from the crowd. At the bottom Hashknife whispered, "Back to back, pardner—you walk front."

That was how they went out of the *cantina,* back to back, with Hashknife walking backwards, covering the crowd, while Sleepy walked forward, watching for any movement from the front. There was no one out there.

They ducked quickly aside, ran around the *cantina* and went straight for Hashknife's horse. No one followed them.

Hashknife didn't ask any questions, nor did Sleepy ask how Hashknife came through that roof at just the right moment. They both mounted the one horse, circled Agua Barroso and headed for the Border, riding as fast as the one horse could carry them, until they were on the American side.

Hashknife drew up and they dismounted near the road. Some heavy clouds drifted across the moon, and there was a cool breeze.

"It kinda feels like rain, pardner," remarked Hashknife.

"Yeah," agreed Sleepy, busily engaged in rolling a cigarette. "Pancho Aguilar will have to fix his roof. Man, I've shore suffered for a smoke. That snake-hunter down there was goin' to burn m' eyes out, and jist then the roof fell in on him."

"Sounds interestin'," admitted Hashknife. "What happened?"

Sleepy told him everything that happened from the kidnaping at Camarillo to the avalanche at Agua Barroso. Hashknife listened closely.

"But they didn't tell us what we were supposed to have taken off the body of Williams," he said.

"They didn't tell me anythin'," declared Sleepy. "They did say we robbed them of a fortune."

"Uh-huh. And one man wore a big silver ring, with a green settin', eh?"

"Yeah," said Sleepy," and if you hadn't showed up, I'm scared I'd never had a chance to tell anybody about it."

"And Mr. Fields is in on the deal," mused Hashknife. "I saw him go up the stairs with Pancho Aguilar, before I climbed the roof."

"Then he's the *pelicano* with the green ring, Hashknife. He came in with Aguilar and kinda took charge."

"Yea-a-ah. I just wonder if Al Bogart was connected with this gang. And what part Mack Wells had. Yuh know, pardner, I've got a idea. Let's go to Camarillo."

IT WAS about four o'clock in the morning, when Hashknife and Sleepy were awakened by voices on the street, under their window. They went to the open window and listened. A man was saying:

"—sent a man to get us to take him home. There ain't no doctor in Agua Barroso, so we brought him to Doc Reber. Doc says he's got a chance."

"Yuh say Hartley aand Stevens shot him in a poker game?" queried Matt Haskell's voice.

"That's right, Matt. They've got plenty evidence that Brad Fields never even reached for a gun. They want Hartley and Stevens arrested and turned over to Agua Barroso. It's up to you to git 'em."

"Don't make sense," said Rio Jones. "Masked men kidnaped Sleepy last night."

"I don't know anythin' about that," said the man stubbornly. "All I know is that Brad Fields got shot, and they said Hartley and Stevens shot him in a poker game. You can go down there and ask 'em yourself, if yuh don't believe me."

"I believe you, Mike," said Rio, "but I don't believe *them.*"

"You can't turn anybody over to Agua Barroso," said the sheriff. "There ain't no *law* down there, Mike."

"And yuh can't try 'em in Camarillo for what they done in Mexico," declared Rio.

"All right," said Mike Donnell. "If Brad Fields dies—mebbe we won't need to call on the law."

The three men went on down toward the sheriff's office.

"I wonder who got Fields," said Hash-

knife. "There was plenty shootin' for a minute, but I never dirtied my gun-barrel. I was too busy to do any shootin' until after it was mostly over, and then I believe I shot at Pancho Aguilar. Anyway, he was the only one in the hall; so it must have been him."

"Yeah, but we can't prove nothin'," said Sleepy. "That bunch in Agua Barroso will swear to anythin'. I have a personal feelin' that we'd be a lot better off if we pulled our freight, pardner."

THEY dressed, and were ready to leave the room, when someone knocked on their door. It was Rio Jones. He stared at Sleepy for a moment, and then sat down.

"What's this talk about us shootin' Brad Fields, Rio?" asked Hashknife.

"You—you heard us talkin', Hashknife? Well, you know as much as we do. Mike Donnell and Dib Andrews brought him from Agua Barroso. Sleepy, what happened to you last night?"

"Look at that nose," said Sleepy. "See that blister? Well, a man burned that with a cigarette, while my hands was tied. And if they said that Fields was shot in a poker game, they're liars. We don't know who shot Fields, but we didn't. Prob'ly one of his own gang, shootin' wild, when Hashknife fell through the roof onto 'em."

"My Gawd!" gasped Rio. "This gits better'n better. Why'd they steal yuh?"

"We don't know," said Sleepy. "Hashknife came huntin' for me, climbed up on the roof of the *cantina* at Agua Barroso, and the rotten old roof broke through, just as one man was goin' to burn my eyes out—he said."

"What was—sa-a-ay, was Brad Fields one of 'em?"

"They all wore masks," said Sleepy. "Does Brad Fields wear a big silver ring, with a green stone?"

"He shore does!" snorted Rio. "Shucks, I tried to buy it from him."

"We're goin' down to the doctor's place," said Hashknife. "C'mon."

They found the sheriff with the doctor, who was working over Brad Fields, still unconscious.

"Sheriff, did Brad Fields have a silver ring on his fingers?" asked Hashknife.

"You know the one, Matt—the one I tried to buy," added Rio.

"He didn't have it on," replied the sheriff, "but it was in his pocket. It's in that envelope on the table."

Sleepy took one look at it and said:

"That's the one! Sheriff, I charge this man with kidnapin' me, takin' me into Mexico, and threatenin' my life, if I didn't answer questions that I didn't know the answer."

"Well, heavens above!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Kidnapin'? Why, Sleepy, this man—are yuh sure this is the man?"

"He wore that ring. When he saw that I was lookin' at it, he told me that my goose was cooked."

"And that wasn't in no poker game," added Rio.

Matt Haskell scratched his head in puzzled wonder.

"That's shore queer," he admitted. "Mike Donnell said you shot him in a poker game, and that plenty men would swear to it."

"Poker game!" snorted Hashknife. "Rio, you cut me loose last night, after they kidnaped Sleepy. Would I be in a poker game. Certainly not! I went to find Sleepy. I saw Brad Fields and Pancho Aguilar go upstairs; so I tried to find a way into there. I crawled across the roof, tryin' to get to a window, but the roof busted, and I fell into their den. I don't know who shot Fields. They got scared and started shootin' in the dark. Pancho shot at me from the doorway, and I think I hit Pancho. Anyway, I hope I did."

"I believe every word of it," declared Rio.

"So do I," added the sheriff. "But if Brad Fields dies—what's to be done? Or can yuh absolutely prove that Brad Fields had a hand in the kidnapin' of Sleepy?"

"No, we can't," replied Sleepy. "I can't even prove that Fields was the man wearin' that ring, 'cause it's my word against a dozen damn liars in Agua Barroso."

"There yuh are," sighed the sheriff. "If Mexico demands the arrest of you two—what can I do?"

"We might be hard to find," said Hashknife.

"I sure hope so," sighed the sheriff. "I won't hunt for yuh."

"Why not?" asked Rio.

"Why not? Since they came here we've had a man for breakfast almost every day. I

ain't superstitious, but I'm shore gettin' that-away."

"Maybe I can get yuh one more," said Hashknife.

He and Sleepy walked out, leaving the sheriff staring at them.

"Rio," he said plaintively, "he acted like he meant it!"

"I don't think he was actin'," said Rio soberly.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy went straight to the feed-stable, and saw Tip Evans just riding out. He nodded and waved his hand, as he headed out the road toward the Two Bar B.

"Poker must have kept him all night, 'cause he looked sober," remarked Sleepy.

They saddled their horses and went out the road that led to the Two Bar B. Hashknife was very quiet, and Sleepy asked no questions. Most of the sky was black, and the air smelled of rain. It would be a godsend to the Camarillo range. Daylight came slowly, because of the overcast. As they dismounted at the old Montez adobe, forked lightning danced on the crest of the hills, and a muttering of thunder rolled down the sky.

"We've got to wait for more daylight," said Hashknife, as they leaned in against the old adobe wall and watched the storm coming down across the range.

"There comes dollars," said Hashknife. "Dollars in the pockets of the cattlemen. Sleepy, yuh can hear that dry earth drinkin' it up. Well, let's take our lone ace out of the hole and see what it looks like."

They went into the old adobe. Sleepy had no idea what Hashknife had in mind, as the tall cowboy went slowly around the old walls, examining them about waist-high from the ground. The rain began to hiss down, and the broken roof of the old adobe was no protection. But the gray-eyed Hashknife didn't pay any attention to the rain. Suddenly he grunted and began digging into the old plaster with his pocket-knife.

He found something, which fell into his left hand, along with chunks of plaster.

"A bullet?" asked Sleepy, backed against the wall for protection.

"A bullet worth thousands," replied Hashknife huskily. "Look!"

Even in the poor light that big diamond flashed colored lights. Sleepy gasped and came closer.

"A diamond?" he asked. "A diamond—that big, Hashknife?"

"The diamond that killed Al Bogart, Sleepy; the bullet that made a hole like a rapier. It went in edgeways."

"Lovely dove!" breathed Sleepy. "But why—"

"Wait!" exclaimed Hashknife, looking up at the corner. "It's a chance—a million-to-one shot."

The rain was whipping in through the broken adobe, as Hashknife sprang up on an old window ledge, grasped the top of the wall near the corner, where some of the roof was still intact, and reached over the edge. With a sweep of his hand he flung a small, square box to the floor, and then ducked aside as a shotgun came tumbling. Sleepy picked up the box. It was a paper shotgun shell box, the wrapper busted, shells spilling out.

Hashknife sprang down, breathing heavily.

"What a chance!" he gasped. "It was a hunch, Sleepy. I didn't have—"

"Hold it!" snapped a voice at the doorway, and they turned to see Tip Evans, the foreman of the Two Bar B, standing there, covering them with his six-shooter. He wasn't over ten feet away. He laughed, as the gun tensed in his right hand.

"Much obliged for findin' it, Hartley," he said harshly. "Yuh see, I wasn't able to find it, 'cause Mack Wells was the only one who knew where it was—and he ain't tellin'. I had a hunch to see where you two were goin'—and it paid."

"Yea-a-ah," breathed Hashknife. Rain whipped through the doorway, and from the broken roof. There was no chance for them to get the drop on Tip Evans.

"So you shot Bogart, eh?" said Hashknife.

"Wells shot him," said Evans quickly. "He thought I doublecrossed him because I went back and stripped the clothes off Williams. We knew he had the diamonds, but we didn't know where. Mack got scared and high-tailed it, when you two came along. I cut the clothes off and took 'em along, and when Mack came back all he got was the shotgun and shells. Mack was goin' to kill me; so he sent me a note to meet him here. Bogart, the fool, went to see what it was all

about—and stayed there. Wells didn't know what was in them shells—and neither did I until later."

"You shot Wells at the hitch-rack," said Hashknife.

"All right. I met him there—accidently. He said he was goin' to kill me, but his horse swung its head and knocked him sideways. Naturally, I shot him."

"And then yuh shot Poco Montero, eh?"

"Wrong again, Hartley; Wells shot him. They found him later. Brad Fields, Al Bogart and Pancho Aguilar bought diamonds and smuggled 'em across. Me and Mack Wells listened in and got the dope. Then we hi-jacked Williams. This was our first job—and it didn't work out so good. But that's all right—now. I've got the stuff, and you ain't goin' to prove anythin' to the law, Hartley, 'cause I'm goin' to leave both of yuh here, with yore mouths shut for keeps. Yuh can take it—"

At that exact moment, as his finger tightened on the trigger, a blinding flash of lightning seemed to envelop everything, and a deafening crash of thunder shook the old adobe. Tip Evans ducked his head and shoulders, as though trying to dodge the bolt, which struck near, and in that split second Hashknife drew and fired, his forty-five echoing the crash of thunder.

Evans was knocked back against the corner of the doorway, where he tried to lift his gun-hand, but did not have the strength. Sleepy had his gun on Evans, too, watching like a cat, as Evans slid to the floor.

THEN they saw Rio Jones, rain pouring off his big sombrero, step into the doorway. He had a gun in his hand, too.

"I'll be dad-burned if that wasn't close, Hashknife," he said. "I heard what he was sayin', and I was jist about to beef him around the corner, when that flash of lightnin' almost scared me stiff."

"Scared him stiff, too," said Hashknife soberly. "That's how I got a chance to draw. He ducked, too."

"But what's it all about?" asked Rio. "I only heard—but didn't see."

Hashknife picked up the box of shotgun cartridges, as he said:

"This box of shells, Rio. Every shell is loaded with a diamond. Here's the one that Mack Wells used to kill Al Bogart. I dug it out of the old plaster. It was the only chance I had to prove anythin'. I found the empty shell, and Doc Reber said the bullet made a wound like a rapier. Darned if this wasn't a tough case. Did you hear Evans confess?"

"Every word of it," declared Rio. "Mack Wells killed Bogart and Poco, and Evans killed Wells. Evans and Wells killed Williams. Yeah, I heard a lot."

"How did you happen to foller us?" asked Sleepy.

"Well, I didn't have anythin' else to do," grinned Rio.

"We better get Evans to a doctor," said Hashknife. "He ain't dead."

"That's right," agreed Rio. "We ain't had no real good hangin's in this county for years. Didja ever see a nicer rain. Jimmy Anderson's cleared—and we've got rain! Matt Haskell said you two was damned hoodoos—but yuh ain't. I'll make him swaller them words."

MA and Pop Anderson, with Gale Bogart, were just driving into Camarillo for the funeral that morning, when they came in, bringing Tip Evans. Most of the people in that county were coming to the funeral in the rain. Matt Haskell saw them heading for the doctor's place, bringing a man, sprawled across a saddle. Matt yelled at Pop Anderson:

"Hashknife said he'd get another—and he's done it! Darn his hide!"

Camarillo folks gathered out in the rain in front of the doctor's place, wondering what it was all about. Rio Jones came out and told them all he knew about it, and then Matt Haskell came out and told what they had told him. There was a general exodus for the jail to see what Jimmy Anderson would have to say, headed by Matt Haskell, who declared that all the time he didn't believe Jimmy was guilty.

Hashknife and Sleepy didn't want to go outside; so Pop, Ma and Gale came in to find them.

"Hashknife, you don't know what this means to us—me and Ma," said Pop.

"What about me?" asked Gale tearfully.

"Well, gosh!" breathed Hashknife. "It wasn't anythin'. Pop, this pays back a little of the good things you done for my folks in Montana. I've always wanted to do somethin' for yuh, yuh see."

"You go right up to that jail and meet Jimmy," said Sleepy. "We'll keep."

"Well, yeah, all right," said Pop. "C'mon, Ma—the kid's free. Gawd, that's the best thing I know anythin' about."

They went hurrying out in the rain, following the crowd. Sleepy and Hashknife looked at each other, turned and went out slowly, mounted their horses and dismounted behind the hotel, where they paid their bills and secured their war-sacks. There was plenty noise out on the street, but they swung far around the town, where they struck the road to Antelope.

The mud was already fet-lock deep on the road, and the sky looked as though the rain might last for a week. With rain splashing off their slickers and spewing off the brims of their wide hats, they grinned at each other, as their horses splashed along.

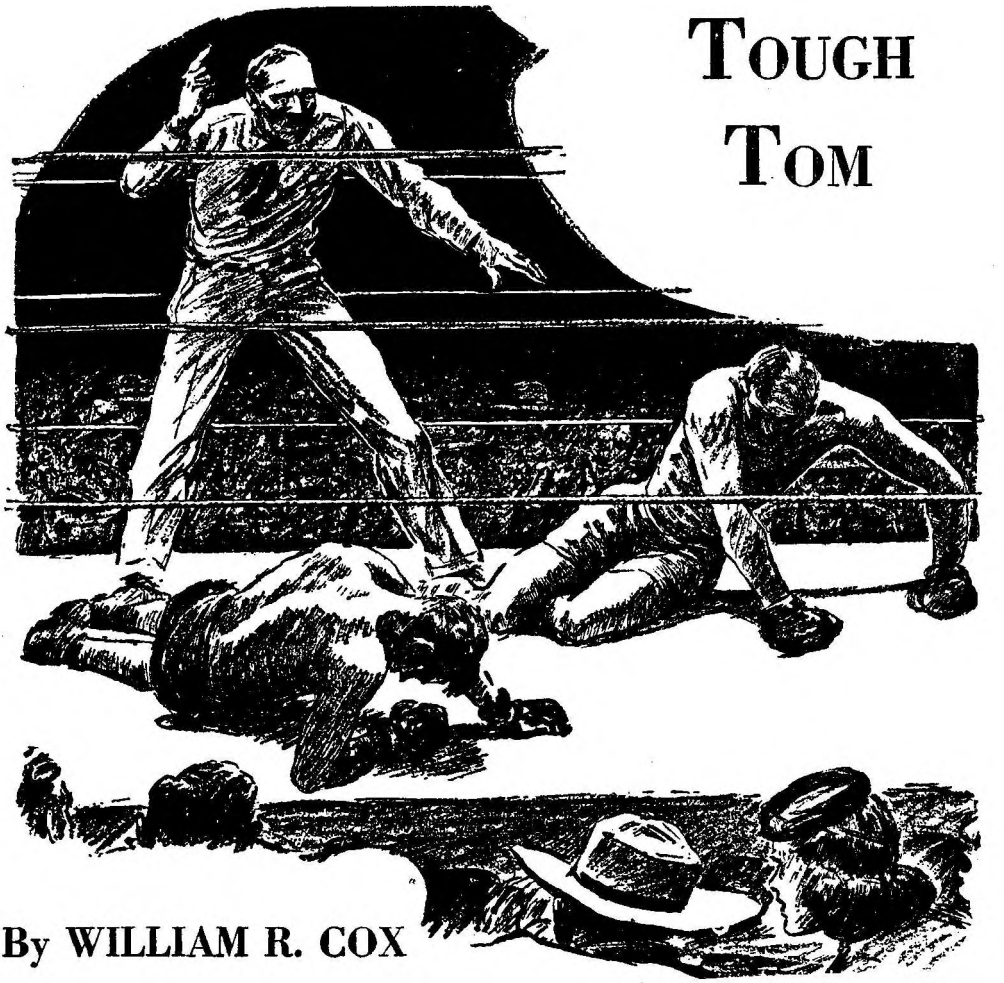
"This country is all right," said Sleepy, "but she's too darned flat."

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Hashknife soberly, "but I was lookin' at a map in the sheriff's office the other day. North of Antelope is a range of tall hills, and the map didn't show anythin' on the other side."

"Good!" exclaimed Sleepy. "Mebbe we can come back some day and tell 'em what's over there."

"I hope it's written that way in the Big Book," said Hashknife, and they went on, looking through the rain, hoping to see the hills soon.

TOUGH TOM



By WILLIAM R. COX

TOUGH TOM TOOEY stood in ring center and stuck out his chin. Willy Weaver danced and shot out a straight left. Tom allowed it to land upon his neck muscles and countered to the body. Willy, growling in his throat, roughed it up in close.

All the time Tough Tom wore a grin. He had blue eyes in a round face like a choir boy grown up and was apparently made of granite and steel. In there with the great Willy Weaver, contender for the middleweight crown, Tom should have been acquiescent if not frightened. He was a substitute, on a moment's notice, an army boxer thrown to the sacrifice by Rigid Roger River, the Miami entrepreneur of fisticuffs for profit. He had no right to seem amused.

Willy Weaver, slope-browed, swift, was good enough to be rated evens against Champion Jack Lugan. He was rough, mean, canny. He was managed by clever Tack Weaver, his brother, a sinister man with sideburns down his cheeks and a purple T-shirt strictly Broadway.

In the press row Roger River, the Rigid, looked on with stiff-necked dismay. It was the fifth round and Tom's grin had caught the fickle fancy of the fight fans. Willy, sensing the swing of opinion away from him, tied Tom in close and whispered

Sometimes the Way to Gunnery School Leads Through the Prize Ring. . . .

thickly, "Dive, you bum! If you don't dive, I'll take you the hard way!"

Tom said, "I like it the hard way." He hit Willy with an uppercut to the body, knocking him awry.

A red-haired girl with artificial eyelashes bit her lip, which were thick with rouge and put an uncertain finger to her slightly pugged nose. She had hazel eyes, wide open now, staring. Willy moved to attack and she inhaled sharply.

Willy scraped sharp laces across Tom's pleasant face. The referee started forward, scowling, but Tom still grinned. Willy dug an elbow into Tom's sun-browned ribs, stepped hard on Tom's toe and shoved a right cross for the belt line reckless whether it landed fair or foul.

Tough Tom stood in there and took it. His somewhat awkward left dashed against Willy's snarling features. His right swept like a meat cleaver. Willy rolled desperately to avoid it, but the blow caught his ear. Willy went to the ropes, rubber-legged and the crowd, with one motion. swept to its feet, howling.

The bell sounded with Willy still floundering among the hempen strands and Tom still grinning. . . .

In Tom's corner Joe and Jim seemed to have eight arms and a dozen legs. Joe and Jim were pick-ups, at ten bucks each, but their hearts were in their work. Joe talked. Jim handled towel, sponge, astringents. Joe waved his arms. Jim was silent, but good.

Joe said, "The bum fouled us! You gotta moider a bum like that!"

Tom said, "He is tough, huh? Very nice. Makes a good fight."

"You are nuts!" wailed Joe. "You croon like an amachoor!"

They were nice boys, slightly simian, very much alike. Jim made Tom feel good and Joe's patois was good to hear. Tom looked down at ringside and found the girl. She kept staring at him and he thought he could see freckles where the pancake make-up ended. She looked gaudy, but he had expected that. He had never lost complete track of her since Texas days. Since he had been assigned to Air Corps Special Services at Miami he had known he would see her again.

Well, it was a long way back to the Dirty Shame, when Rigid Roger River had been keeper of that tiny Texas bistro. Tom was just out of high school when Kitty Mallory ran away with the honky tonk show. That's why Tom took his football prowess to the pros instead of college, that's why he became a boxer—only he called it fighting, not boxing. . . .

He had, he admitted, become quite a character. Fighting all those toughies on the Coast, and beating them too, and then enlisting after Pearl Harbor and learning that his football knee put him in Special Services . . . when he only wanted to shoot the guns. . . .

Well, that had worked out to a certain point. Colonel Manning of Dallas was his superior officer here at Miami. If he could take a friendlier exam. . . . And Kitty was here, and Rigid Roger, who had eagerly signed him to this bout knowing that all boys from Live Oak County were fighters. . . .

The whistle blew and Joe pleaded. "Lay it to him, Texas! Make him walk that chalk line or he'll foul you off!"

TOM got up, waiting for the bell. He was very calm, surveying Willy Weaver, the master boxer. At the bell he went out, favoring his bum knee, and Willy went around and around, very clever, lancing that long left which was to give Jack Lugan trouble some day, people said. Tom accepted that left. He took it upon the seeming innocence of his countenance and countered short rights to Willy's aching body. He was patient under a butt which did not quite come off. However, although rancor was foreign to his nature, he began to dislike Willy Weaver. . . .

He bounced a left off Willy's skull. He lowered his sights and pummeled Willy's ribs with both hands. He took more punches to the face, rolling with them, stoically seeking an opening for his counters.

Willy was dirty. But he was a fighter, a winner. He had clawed his way to the top and he meant to remain there. He would cut the throat of his favorite aunt to get a shot at the title, and right on, Tom knew, Willy was a top-flight pugilist.

Tom swung under with his right. Willy, coming in, saw his chance. Tom saw the left hook exploding too late.

Tom hit Willy with the right. Willy

hit Tom with the left. Both seemed immediately to don roller skates and go backwards.

Each struck the ropes. Each came forward as from a giant bow. In mid-ring they crossed blind, atavistic ringing wallops. Both landed, smack on the chin.

Tom fell to the right. Willy fell to the left. They sprawled on the canvas and even the cynical eye of Rigid Roger glazed with excitement at the spectacle. No spectator was in his seat. Yells ascended to the Florida skies and even the banshees in Ireland trembled with envy, and gulls fluttered frightened to the sea.

At nine Tom rolled over. Willy pushed against the floor with his hands, unable, however, to raise his face from the canvas.

The referee's arm poised for the fatal ten count. Tom came erect and saw Joe motioning to him like an automatic signal gone mad. He walked straight ahead to the corner and leaned there.

Finally he turned. Through a haze he saw Willy. The game battler was walking in a small circle. But he was on his feet. Tom sighed. It had been a hell of an affray. . . .

The bell ended it. Through the remaining rounds they butted heads and swung. But that other bell had tolled the story. They mitted briefly, went to their corners and it was over.

The referee stood in ring center. He crossed his arms, uncrossed them amidst the applause for the contestants. He pointed a dramatic finger at each fighter. No one heard him pronounce the bout a draw, but no one doubted the decision except Tack Weaver, who was screaming to the world his objections. . . .

IN THE dressing room, Joe, the second, was raving. What a deal, pal! Now you kin fight a dozen bums and make a lotta dough. If on'y that bum Rigid Roger was not the promoter here and did not have himself tied with this Weaver you could mebbe get the Champ, even. You ain't got style, pal, but you got zoomph!"

Jim did not speak. He glowed. He rubbed Tom down with loving care. Joe prattled, "Now, I got a scheme, see? Tomorrow I will see you and we will see Sooley Morgan. . . ."

The door opened and Rigid Rover entered. He said tightly, "Throw these bums out, Tom. I must see you alone."

Tom dug down for twenty dollars apiece, instead of the ten. At the door he whispered, "See you tomorrow, at the Post."

He went back and Rigid Roger said, "You made a nice fight."

"But you didn't like it," nodded Tom.

Rigid Rover said, "I'm a Texan. You're a Texan. I gave you the chance. Now you've got to square me."

Tom said, "Well, I dunno. My colonel's the boss."

"You've got to fight him again," said Rigid Roger. "I'm committed. I've got Lugan promised to meet Weaver. But Lugan ain't signed. And this draw decision. . . ."

Tom said, "He fights dirty. I need my eyes to be a gunner. Supposin' he butts my eye?"

Rigid Roger said, "We're both from Live Oak County, Tom. Texans stick together. Remember when you used to hang around the Dirty Shame?"

"My mother remembers," said Tom drily. "She put the name on your joint. Said it was a dirty shame for kids like us to hang out there."

"I worked for your dad," said Rigid Roger emotionally. "And remember Kitty Mallory? Why—she's here. You ought to see her!"

Tom said calmly, "Kitty, the redhead? Here?"

"Singing star!" said Roger enthusiastically. "At the Silver Spoon. We will go see her right now."

"Well, well," murmured Tom. "Do tell! Kitty Mallory!"

He allowed Rigid Rover to lead him to the place as though he had never been there. It was a smallish night club filled with people who seemed to be spending too much money.

Willy Weaver and his brother Tack came in and sat at a ringside table. Tack's white dinner jacket appeared to be wearing its owner and Willy sported a fine shanty over his left eye. . . . The lights dimmed and Kitty came out and sang, "I'll Get By."

She certainly did not look much like Dad Mallory's tomboy daughter. She had been away five years and it showed on her. But

somehow she still looked mighty fine to Tom.

Always she had been showing off, singing, dancing and acting up, different from other girls. Dad was a widower and not much on keeping up with young folks.

Her voice still was not much, Tom thought. She got a big hand from the people and immediately began an encore, but it was the way she used those fake eyelashes and the fine Texas body peeping from the diaphanous gown, Tom thought. She kept gliding around now, and he could see her legs. It would make Dad mad to be there, but she sure had mighty fine legs. . . .

Then he realized she was singing "Honeysuckle Rose" and that she was standing above him, finishing the piece and he got up awkwardly and someone recognized him and there was a great round of drunken applause. Then the house lights came on and she sat down and said calmly, "Hello, Tom, you old horned toad."

He said, "Hiya, Kitty? How's tricks?"

Rigid Roger said, "Tack's calling me. . . ." He went over to Weaver's table and Tack was still bellering about being robbed and demanding things and making quite a fuss. Tom heard them out of one ear. The other he reserved for Kitty.

She said, "I am doing fine. This is a good job, and then I open in New York, at the Princes and maybe I will get a show. Yes, I am doing fine."

Tom said, "You like it, huh?"

"It is my career," she said with dignity. "Always I have to think of my voice. It is a long way back to the Dirty Shame, Tom."

"Honeysuckle Rose," said Tom. "You sang it there. For me."

"You got mad," she said. "You went to Dallas. You were always getting mad about something."

Tom said, "When I came back you were gone. Rigid Roger was gone, too. They ran him out, but you went on your own."

She stared at him. "Does Dad — did people say—that I ran away with Roger?"

"They tried to," said Tom. "But Dad got out his old Colt's. I had to fight the King brothers. Both of 'em. That's what gave me the idea I was a fighter. . . . Then nobody talked any more."

She said, "They believed that! Why—he's old enough to — I admit he's been around. He's helped me."

"He makes passes at you," nodded Tom. "But you don't go for them. Why don't you chuck it, Kitty? Dad's always trainin' a new pinto for you. Remember how you liked paint ponies, always? Dad has done good. His ranch is fine. He wants you home again."

Her mouth grew firm. She said, "I'll never go back."

"That show in New York," Tom said. "Is Roger going to back it with his promotion money from here? IF he makes any?"

She said, "Now wait, Tom. . . . If you begin believing that stuff . . ."

"I never said . . ." he began.

"You — you horrible-minded Texas farmer!" she said. Her red hair seemed to bristle. "I might have known! Dad sent you! You're after me! Trying to take me away from my career and drag me back to the brush!"

Tom said, "I never—it's only that Dad is gettin' old. . . ."

"You know what you can do?" she pronounced firmly. "You can go back to Texas and tell them all that Kitty Mallory will never return until she has reached the pinnacle of success, until she . . ."

"Such talk!" Tom said mildly. "How can I go back? I'm in the Air Corps. I'm a poor guy queer for B17s—into the big blue yonder. They only let me box and instruct and I want guns. . . ."

"Bah!" she cried. "You're a dumb Texan! You've always torn me down. You hate my singing. . . ."

She knocked her chair over getting away from him. She flounced over to the table where Rigid Roger connived with the Weavers. She became all smiles, greeting them, sitting with them, accepting a highball. Her white shoulder turned against Tom Tooey.

He got up and went out. The fresh night was gorgeous and the yellow ball of a moon over Biscayne was like a stage prop. The inky water lay deep and calm, but imparted to him nothing of its peacefulness. Kitty Mallory had always been like that. . . .

COLONEL HARRY MANNING was a sportsman, a Texan of the first water and an admirer of such characters as Tough

Tom Tooey. He said, "The General is coming down and he is sports nutty. Our football team kind of stinks. . . . You did not do us any harm with that draw. . . . But do you dare fight Weaver again?"

Tom said, "Sir, if I have your permission to train for it."

The Colonel said, "Train? Of course—anything you like. But can you whip a man like Weaver?"

"Sir," said Tom, "have I your permission to take another examination for gunnery school?"

Colonel Manning said, "You're a persistent cuss. You go ahead and try."

Tom saluted and went out. At the gate the two similar seconds were waiting. With them was an older man who wore spectacles and cauliflower ears. Joe said, "Sooley Morgan hisself!"

Tom looked curiously at the ex-welter king. One of the great boxers of all time, Sooley wore no marks but the bat ears, gained in slipping and rolling punches which might have scrambled his features and his brain. Sooley said, "I have a barn, over west on the edge of Miami. Should we proceed?"

They drove in a rattletrap flivver. Sooley Morgan had the precise manners of an old school dancing master. He spoke like a college professor. The barn was empty, with wide doors and windows to let in air and sunlight. In the center a ring had been set up.

Tom began to enjoy himself. He stripped and put on the pillows. Sooley stripped and his body was as young as Tom's. They sparred.

Sooley hit Tom a thousand light punches in two minutes. Then Tom got the range and led down the alley. He got Sooley on the button and the old man sat down, blinking. Tom said, "Hey! I'm sorry!"

Sooley arose and removed the gloves. He said, "No style! None at all! No rhythm! Tut, tut!"

Joe cried, "Let him try Jim! Give the boy a chance."

Jim took off his shirt. The silent lad had more muscles than Sandow in his prime, than Atlas in his magazine pictures. Tom's eyes bugged. He put up his hands.

Jim stood not upon ceremony. He began belting from the bell. He slugged Tom around the ring with blows which in lighter gloves would have cut Tom to ribbons. He made Willy Weaver seem like a cream-puff puncher.

Tom said, "Hey! Who the hell is the fighter in here!" He spread his legs, smothered a straight right. He dug in, clouting with a hook. It grazed the tip of Jim's chin.

Jim collapsed like a pricked soap bubble. Joe leaned forward and said mournfully, "Ain't it pitiful? The best in the woild. Nobody could touch him. On'y one thing wrong. Glass jaw!"

Jim got up and looked sad. Tom said, "Now, what the hell?"

Sooley Morgan said, "Eyes. Vision. Reflexes. It is wholly remarkable."

Tom said, "That's why I will make a good gunner. I got Texas eyes."

Sooley said, "I will endeavor to teach you. You are, I perceive, a counter puncher, which is because of your good eyes. Now you must learn to attack. Style. Champions must have style."

"I just want to make a good impression on the General," Tom said patiently. "And I do not love this Weaver. He fouls a lot."

Joe said, "You should lissen to Sooley, pal. In all the woild you could not hear more about boxin'. Looka Jim! If it was not for the glass button, Jim would moider Lugan!"

Tom said, "Okay. I will listen. I will work. You have convinced me. But I only want to be a gunner. . . ."

THERE were to be days of it, in the big, open barn. He went into town and talked to Rigid Roger. He said that he would fight Willy Weaver, but he said it had to be on the fifteenth. Rigid Roger said, "I can't do it! That is not my fight night."

Willy and Tack were present. Tack screamed, "Any night! Any place! But quick! This bum has got to be beat!"

Willy said, "I was robbed once, bum. This time I will kill you to pieces!"

"Sure," said Tom. "On the fifteenth. Okay?"

He went over to the Silver Spoon. Kitty came out and sang "I'll Get By" and then she sang "People Will Say We're in Love." No "Honeysuckle Rose."

But she stopped by his table and sat down. She said, "No use to squabble. I hear you are going to fight Weaver again."

He said, "Yeah. I'm training with Sooley Morgan in an old barn over west of town. I will be ready for Willy this time."

She said, "Tricks? You will beat him with tricks?" The indirect lighting played with the planes of her face. She had high cheekbones and her eyes were deep and clouded. Her voice dropped and she said, "Tom, do you know what you're doing?"

He said deliberately, "Rigid Roger is betting about four to one around town that I will get licked. He has not got any sock of money to put on that show, and he is under investigation here for his tactics in promoting fights. Ask him if he knows what he is doing. If I win—no show."

She said, "No show? My show?"

"You heard me," said Tom stonily.

"Roger has always been decent to me," she said. She seemed to debate with herself. "He has encouraged me. He has never really tried to take advantage . . . when things were rugged."

Tom said, "What kind of girl are you now, Kitty?"

She stared directly into his eyes. "I'm a show girl. I'm the product of show business. Texas is in the past. Don't forget that and you'll know more about me, Tom. I'm not falling for that con talk about pinto ponies. . . ."

He said, "Remember Clown, your first one?"

"Yes, damn you!" she stormed suddenly at him. "I remember. Now will you get out of here and leave me alone? Get out!"

"Sure," said Tom. "Who wants to be in this rat hole?" And he went out.

Every day he worked out with Sooley and Jim. Before the big open windows he practised shifts, counters. He developed a sort of imitation of Sooley's gliding, shifty style. He boxed, dancing.

He worked out a shift behind a long left, worked on it every day. It looked very fine, but synthetic. It was not Tough Tom Tooey, not any part of it. . . .

THE fifteenth came very quickly, it seemed. Only Joe was excited. Joe kept talking all the time. "It's gotta woik, see? Because this Weaver, he is strictly a smartie pants. Nobody ever beats Willy twice. And with what he knows about you . . ."

Sooley said only, "You have a fine body. Protect your eyes."

They went inside the ampitheatre. Sooley had a ringside seat. Jim and Joe entered the dressing room. Tom lingered outside.

After awhile she came, a hooded cape over her Silver Spoon costume. Tom said, "Hello, Kitty! How's tricks?"

She came close to him. She said, "Tom, maybe it was the pony. Maybe that was it. You knew I'd come, didn't you, Tom?"

He said, "Yeah. You tipped them about the barn, huh?"

She said, "you even knew that!"

"Who could miss that stiff-necked Rigid Roger with field glasses, lookin' through the windows of the barn?" asked Tom. "Him and that Tack and Willy, all gawkin'."

She said, "I told them. I wanted to be in that show so bad. I thought I did. Then you came with your talk about Clown. Remember how he used to play dead and wink at us all the time he was doing it?"

Tom said, "You've been with those characters so long. They are not our kind of people, Kitty. They are wise guys."

"All these years," she said. "Chasing after something I didn't need. Just a little horse talk. . . . Tom, can you win? I want you to win. It would wipe it all out, Tom. It would make me feel clean. I squealed on you, Tom. If you lose, it'll kill me!"

Tom said, "You want to see it? I got an extra seat, alongside Sooley, just in case."

"Yes," she said, "I'll see it. If you get beat, it will be my punishment."

Tom said, "After it's over, come back here. Will you?"

"Win, lose or draw," she whispered. "I'll be here."

All the hard veneer was gone from her. She had lost it in the lonely night hours, thinking of Texas and a paint pony and Dad and a younger Tom Tooey. He led her inside and an usher took her in charge. He rubbed his jaw hard and went into the dressing room.

AT RINGSIDE the army and the navy was howling for him. Tom looked for Colonel Manning. The General was with

the party, and a slope-shouldered civilian with a scarred face and some young officers from the post. Tom sighed with relief.

Willy looked sharper than last time. He sat on his stool and listened to Tack, who was nervous, but belligerent. They went out for instructions and the referee cautioned Willy against fouling and Tack made a squawk. Joe said, "Aw, nuts!" and led Tom away.

Sooley Morgan and the girl sat touching shoulders. Sooley looked studious and calm, but Kitty tore at a tiny handkerchief. Tom stood up, tried the ropes, looked down at Joe and Jim. The bell rang simply and loudly.

Tom went out with the long left extended. He boxed. Willy slid about, jabbing. Tom dropped the left on Willy, and shifted.

Willy came in like a thunderbolt, throwing both hands to meet the expected tactic. Tom took it in the middle, bending under the blows. They thudded against his belly and he wavered a bit, like a tree in a gale. The armed forces groaned in dismay.

A right came in and Tom folded over it, his belly all ache. Willy danced, ferocious, swinging short ones, never letting Tom get set. Tom tried to box. It was pathetic. Willy had it on him at that game every which way from the bell.

At the bell Willy threw a right. It was aimed for the head. Tom rolled away at the last second. It was a kayo punch had it landed and it came from nowhere. Willy was sharp, all right.

In his corner, Joe said, "Look, mebbe we have made a mistake. Look, mebbe you had better fight him the old way. Look—"

Joe was full of advice, mostly bad. Jim wielded the sponge and grinned silently. Rigid Roger was triumphant, stiff-necked, his fingers clutching a little black book which meant his fortune if all those bets were collected.

Kitty used up the hanky and started chewing her program.

The General looked mortified. They had given him this sports program and he believed in it. He wanted victories to prove his efficiency. Colonel Manning looked sleepy. . . .

In the second it started the same. Tom boxed, on his toes. Willy countered at will. Tom's body began to show red splotches. His adherents began to wince as the punches sunk into him. A body beating is a sad thing to witness. Tough Tom took it.

Willy danced with glee. His tight face set. He clinched briefly, staring down at the General's party. Then he shoved Tom briskly away and sparred off. His heels were down and he was set for a quick finish. It would erase the memory of that draw and put him back on top. He was a workman with a task at hand and he was superbly equipped to deal with a raw upstart from Texas. . . .

He swung under Tom's left. He brought both hands up, seeking Tom's face, seeking an eye to decorate, to blind for the work ahead. He butted a little, trying to get that eye.

Tom's head turned. A gash appeared on his cheek as Willy's hard head came against it. He speared once more with the left. Willy came confidently in to beat the shift.

Tom did not shift. His left leg straightened, his right seemed to grow longer. He swung from his hip. It was a hook, with all the authority of a hook. It wound against Willy's skull. It was high, Tom knew instantly. It was too high. . . .

Willy went sideways like a crab, gasping for air. Tom moved forward, his hands poised before him, crouching a little. Willy spun off the ropes. His eyes cleared.

Tom pursued him. Tom was flatfooted, now. His head leaned a little forward. He said past his mouthpiece, "Can't take it, huh, Willy? Just can't take a punch, glass jaw!"

He stuck out his own jaw. He made it a perfect target, and with his left glove he beckoned Willy in.

It was the exact antithesis of his previous style. It was the old Tough Tom Tooey, standing in there with his dumb puss stuck out, daring the world to sock him. It was Tough Tom's way, in the ring, or with a girl. . . .

Willy reacted beautifully. He slung them both, one and two. They were quick, accurate punches, good enough to drop any man.

Tom took his jaw away. He countered with a short right. He caught Willy's right on his glove and threw a left. He stabbed

Willy into a corner and straightened him up.

Willy fought. He came out swinging. Tom countered him with lefts. Willy tried to fall in close.

TOM stepped back. Willy was coming forward. Tom dropped his right hand below his hip. His left hand dropped on Willy's head. His right uppercut swung in a short but lovely arc.

Willy's face was between the two punches. They seemed to crack him like a walnut. He fell forward, his nose digging into the canvas. His feet twisted once, then drummed the floor.

Tom looked one moment, then walked to a neutral corner. The referee lifted his arm to begin the count. Tom looked over, not at Kitty, but at Colonel Manning. He closed one eye and his lips moved and the Colonel could understand, all right. He said, "And that's all, brother!"

In the dressing room there was some confusion and Kitty seemed a bit frightened, especially when the General came in. But Tom kept his arm around her and explained, "It was Sooley Morgan's idea, sir. We trained once for them and once for ourselves. It's my eyesight, sir. They thought I'd quit counter-punching, but Sooley says I'll never be a boxer, just a quick hitter. They thought Sooley would make me into a boxer, but not good enough. My eyesight, sir, is unusual. On those guns. . . ."

The civilian came forward and took his hand. He said, "You're all right, Tooey. I'll be glad to meet you next month."

"Hully Chee!" stuttered Joe. "It's the Champ! It's Jack Lugan!"

Tom said, "Thanks, Champ. Well, I knew you'd be here the 15th, with the General. . . . I hoped I could put on a show. . . . Sooley Morgan, now, he used to be the promoter here until Rigid Roger moved him out. . . . Roger got that stiff neck working for my father. . . . Stole a hoss and they almost hung him. . . . I wouldn't want to fight for Rigid Roger any more. . . ." He felt he was talking too much, but Joe and Jim were palpitating with excitement and he had to put it over. He said, "I don't care about the title. . . . I just want a chance at the guns. . . ."

Colonel Manning said, "Of course, Tooey. It'll all work out. Who are these two—ahem—gentlemen?"

"Joe and Jim?" said Tom. "Oh—they're Sooley Morgan's twin sons. But they can't fight, which hurts Sooley. . . ."

Colonel Manning said, "You seem to have combined to ruin Mr. Rigid Roger, all right. I received word today that the Commission is lifting his license. Some irregularities. . . ."

"Yes, sir," said Tom virtuously, "Once a horse thief, always a rustler, we say in Texas. . . ." He remembered Manning was a Texan and just grinned.

That seemed to break the ice, all right. Jim took Rigid Roger to the door and then pitched him out. The General shook hands, very pleased, with everybody. The party broke up. . . .

They were alone. Kitty said, "Is it all right, Tom? You're not mad with me? I did wrong, Tom."

He said, "Look. . . . I do not want you like this. I would rather have you show that temper."

"You're the one with the temper!" she flashed. "You ran away to Dallas and left me and that show came along and . . ."

He held her tight. He said, "That's my Kitty!"

She said, "Has Dad really got me a pinto?"

"He ain't missin'!" said Tom. "Spent my last leave breakin' him. . . . And you got to break a hoss for me. After I get me some people lined up in those guns and this thing is over I'll need a hoss. . . ."

She said, "Take your shower. Hurry!"

"Why?" he said. "What's the rush?"

"My show!" she said. "I've got to finish my show!"

"You're going home!" he said.

"I know," she nodded seriously, "but you wouldn't want me in bad with Equity, would you? A girl has to quit in good standing, doesn't she? Besides, I feel like singing tonight! I'll wow them!"

He went into the showers. He wondered if she would ever get over it. Showing off. Dancing around out there right now, humming "Honeysuckle Rose." . . .

He hoped she did not get over it. She was, he decided, kind of cute, just the way she was. . . .

THE DREVER DIAMOND

By HARRY BRIDGE

Author of "Murder at Flood Crest," etc.

THE STORY SO FAR

FRISBEE ELLIOTT is a big-time baseballer, but just now he is in Philadelphia to consult a surgeon about an operation on his leg. He has been told that DR. JARED HASKELL is one of the few men in the country who could perform it successfully. But Eliott's visit to the doctor's office convinces him he's landed in a screwball outfit. The office is dingy, rundown and deserted when Elliott arrives; to his amazement he is knocked down by a stray visitor before the office nurse returns and tells him the doctor is giving up his practice and can't do the operation. Visions of bush league ball on account of his infirmity haunt Elliott and he refuses to accept her say-so. He goes to the doctor's home which has a pri-

Part II

One Kind of Guy Is Born With Muscles for Brains and Doesn't Know the Difference

vate hospital next door, and here once more he is knocked down, this time by a sort of gorilla bodyguard. He gives as good as he takes, however, and makes his way into the house. Here he encounters a very eccentric and altogether unusual old gentleman, who is HENRY DREVER, the doctor's uncle. Uncle Henry tells him of his discovery years before of the fabulous Drever diamond and

how it has been a source of wealth to him ever since. He says, however, that his relatives guard him too carefully and invites Frisbee to have a night out with him. It all seems wacky to Frisbee, but he finally agrees to go and they make for the Hotel Wharton. Here they meet some more Drever relatives: a niece,
MRS. MAMIE BARTRAM, her daughter,
SHEILA, and a daughter by a previous marriage,
ROSALIND SCHUYLER. From this company Frisbee is called upstairs by two private detectives,
CORRIGAN and FOX, who try to keep him there.

They succeed, for Frisbee throws them both out, appropriates their room and proceeds to go to bed. So much mystery has left him groggy.

V

SLEEPING restlessly without benefit of pajamas or toothbrush, Frisbee Elliott dreamed himself into the midst of a disconcertingly weird baseball game. Twice he struck out dismally in pinches. Sometimes he couldn't even see the ball. At other times, the sphere lobbed toward him in slow motion like a toy balloon in a mild wind. He would set

himself for a ferocious swing—only to miss it completely as it sailed blithely between the legs of a chair that he unaccountably found in his hands instead of a bat.

It wasn't until his third trip to the plate that he finally connected. His ears rang with the soul-satisfying smash. His heart leaped joyfully as the ball started off on a long flight obviously destined to carry it over the right field fence.

To Frisbee's dismay, however, he found himself hobbling painfully around the bases on crutches. Instead of cheers, a loud chorus of "boos" came from the crowd. Standing out from among these like a fire siren over city traffic was a raspy feminine voice twanging over and over: "Young man, I think a healthy specimen like you could find a more worthwhile business than parasiting around on a business like this."

Plodding wearily into second, Frisbee brought up to a sudden halt. Coiled menacingly on the bag was a cobra, swaying for the strike. Luckily its strike fell short. The fangs buried harmlessly in his crutch and he staggered on, ignoring a cherubic, bald-headed shortstop who tried to delay him by engaging him in senseless conversation.

At third base, a surly keystone-sacker refused to let Frisbee touch the bag and finally ended the argument by lashing out with a blow that sent him spinning to the ground halfway to home plate. Staggering to his feet, Frisbee began remonstrating with an equally surly umpire—only to be knocked down again by a solid blow from the man in the blue serge suit. This time, he lay dazed and gasping. The boos of the crowd slowly faded. In their place came the discordant jangling of the bell of a distant ambulance that someone must have summoned.

It was a full minute before Frisbee recovered from his nightmare to the point of realizing that the ringing was real and that it was coming from the telephone at the side of his bed. The half light of a murky dawn made the instrument barely distinguishable as he shivered under the spell of the cold dampness and tried to collect his scattered senses.

Vaguely he understood that the call could only be in connection with last night's affair. Specifically, he condemned himself for the impulsiveness that had lead him to appropriate this room. Whose room it might be, under whose name it was registered, or just what might happen when he was found in it became questions that bothered him for the first time.

Obviously his early morning caller had no intention of letting up. The monotonous regularity of the instrument's jangles indicated that the operator had been told to keep at it until she got results.

VOWING to live up to his decisions to have nothing further to do with the Drever affair, Frisbee lifted the receiver and muttered a gruff, "Hello."

The irritable voice of a sleepy operator answered him.

"You musta died when you went to bed," she snapped peevishly. "I've been ringing you for twenty minutes. There's a call for you. Wait a minute."

There was a loud clicking as her connections were made. Then came a booming male voice that rattled the diaphragm of the receiver and tingled Frisbee's ear.

"That you, Elliott?" it asked abruptly. The voice was one Frisbee was sure he had never heard before. Its brusque, authoritative tone, however, served to put him on careful guard.

"You got the wrong number, Butch," he advised. "This is the South Side Brewery. We don't deliver before nine o'clock in the morning."

The wire rattled with the explosion of an impatient "Blah!"

"Look, Elliott," boomed the big voice, "quit stalling. I know it's you. I've been trying to locate you since three o'clock this morning. I'm coming up."

"How about using this phone instead. You paid at least a nickel for the call. Let's not waste any of it."

The receiver barely stood the strain of a vigorous snort.

"Cut out the funny business, Elliott. This is serious. I'm Haskell—Doctor Jared Haskell. Now that I've found you, I'm going to see you. I'll be up in a minute."

Then the caller hung up as abruptly as he had begun the conversation.

For a moment, Frisbee lay back, stared at the ceiling and pondered. A few short hours before, he had been breaking his neck

to see Doc Haskell. Now Haskell was the one who seemed to be on the neck-breaking end—and the thought left him cold. Already, he was sure he knew enough about the doctor that he wouldn't ask the fellow to treat even a mild case of athlete's foot. Besides, there was a vague premonition of impending trouble in the air.

Frisbee got stiffly up and closed the windows. He was just sliding into his underwear when the door shook under impetus of a herculean knock.

"It's me, Elliott," the booming voice announced from the hallway. "Doctor Jared Haskell."

Frisbee picked up the remains of the battered chair he had used on Corrigan and Foxy and propped it against the wall within easy reach. Then he unlocked the door, stepped cautiously to one side and said, "Come in."

Dr. Haskell's body was a perfect match for his bull voice. Frisbee quickly estimated that the fellow towered a good six feet four inches. He probably weighed two hundred and fifty, give or take half a dozen pounds. There was, however, no outward evidence of so much as a pound of surplus fat. His build was that of an athlete in perfectly-trained condition. Every movement exuded strength and vitality despite the fact that the man must be close to the half century mark as far as years were concerned.

However, it was neither the doctor's size nor his vigor that proved most impressive. No stranger could fail to be attracted, almost as though by some strange magnetic action, to Jared Haskell's great lion-like head. It was a head that seemed almost too large, even for the bull neck and huge body which supported it. Topping this and overflowing in unruly waves were great shaggy locks of steely gray hair. These formed an appropriate setting for the big ruddy face with deep-cut lines that gave it the appearance of being molded out of some rugged plastic. The truly dominant features, however, were the deep-set eyes. Flashing like camouflaged searchlights behind great bushy eyebrows, they gave the impression of glorying in their ability to transfix a subject in spite of their hirsute handicap.

Clearly, Doctor Jared Haskell in the flesh was a far different man than Frisbee Elliott had conjured in imagination.

Although Frisbee made no pretense of being a character reader, he would have guessed the doctor was worried. The rugged lines on the vast expanse of forehead seemed more deepset than might be normal. The hint of redness about the eyes may have resulted from lack of sleep. The nervous twitching of his mouth seemed entirely out of place in such a character. Frisbee noted too, that his visitor wore neither hat nor overcoat, and that his dark business suit was badly wrinkled.

Haskell wasted no time.

"Glad to know you, Elliott," he boomed, thrusting out a ham-like hand. "Otto Helms wrote me you were coming. Told me all about you. Sorry I missed you at the office yesterday."

Frisbee was surprised to find the hand cold and clammy and the doctor's handshake as lifeless as the final wiggle of a dying carp.

"Uh huh," he replied guardedly. "Maybe you missed me there, but not everyone did. I got attention all right. Now what was it you wanted to see me about?"

There was the mere rumor of Uncle Henry Drever's inane cackle in the laugh the newcomer gave — only when Doctor Haskell did it, the laugh was ten times louder and implied nothing more than an outlet for nervous energy.

"Don't say that I blame you for being a little cautious, Elliott," he roared. "I've heard a little of what happened yesterday. Guess there wasn't any real damage done, though. Seems you handed back about as good as you got. Anyhow, I apologize for it. Now let's have a look at that leg of yours. Glad you didn't bother getting dressed."

Doctor Haskell was not a man to be denied. Frisbee started to protest. Almost before he knew it, however, he was sitting on the side of the bed with his leg extended for inspection. Haskell adjusted the bed lamp to afford better light. Then he began going over the leg with deft, experienced hands.

Frisbee Elliott always claimed he could tell a potential big league ball player simply by watching how the fellow went about taking his first pitch at bat or assuming his place in the field. This same intuition now told him that, whatever sort of screwball he

might be personally, Doc Haskell was a man who knew his business. For almost ten minutes, and without saying a word other than to issue an occasional curt instruction, the doctor had his patient stoop, bend, squat, kick, kneel and flex. All the while, he followed the movements of the injured knee with clammy hands, the size of which belied their skill.

Ending his examination abruptly, he went to the bathroom and washed his hands as though he might be getting ready for an operation then and there. Then he strode out, drying them on a towel.

"Isn't as bad as I thought it might be judging from Otto Helm's letter," he said bluntly. "Otto always was an old woman where his ball players were concerned. Of course we'll need X-rays. However, I don't think there's any question but that we can fix you up as good as new with an operation. I've handled a hundred jobs just about like it."

For the first time since arriving in Philadelphia, the gloom of Frisbee Elliott's world was shattered by a ray of sunshine. He was even surprised to find his confidence in his hulking visitor—at least as a surgeon—surging back.

"You mean you'll do the operation for me?" he asked eagerly, then continued, "You see, I was getting all set to go back West. The nurse in your office told me last evening you were giving up all of your practice."

The doctor dropped heavily into an easy chair, produced a finger nail file and started to work with it. He gave the impression of thinking deeply.

"Y-es, I'll do it, Elliott," he said at length. "I'll not only do the operation. I'll do it absolutely free of charge—on condition."

"Yeh? What's the condition?" Frisbee's old caution popped suddenly back.

"Simply that I expect you to do me er—ah well a favor in return."

THE doctor's eyes gleamed brilliantly from their shaggy settings as they sought to ascertain Frisbee's reaction to the suggestion. He had a way of raising his eyebrows in a case like this that gave him a strange, almost demoniacal expression. Frisbee met the stare only with an effort.

"Such as slugging that guy Willie who popped me one in your office last night that was really meant for you?" he suggested.

The doctor started to emit his loud laugh, then broke off suddenly as though he had just realized there wasn't anything to laugh about. He leaned forward as he spoke, and his eyes seemed to bore right through Frisbee.

"Look here, Elliott. There's no use beating around the bush. Slugging a demented stuffed shirt like Willie is the least of my worry. The job I want you to do for a few weeks is to take care of my Uncle, Henry Drever."

"Uh-huh—but the old man made it pretty clear to me last night that he's always been in the habit of taking care of himself."

Jared Haskell snorted like a disgusted locomotive.

"Bah! If you listen to Uncle Henry long enough, you'll think he owns the world and half the Atlantic Ocean. The fact of the matter is, he's a mental case. It's my job to take care of him. I'm doing the best I can—but I need someone to look after him all of the time."

"How about Petey, that pet jack-in-the-box you keep to pop out and punch people who ring the doorbell? It's his job to look after the old coot, isn't it—or does it take more than one man to do all the punching that's necessary?" Frisbee made no effort to hide the strong flavor of sarcasm that crept into his tone.

The doctor simply shrugged his broad shoulders and went back to his nail filing.

"Pete's no damn good," he replied. "He's the kind of guy who was born with muscles instead of brains and doesn't know the difference. I fired him this morning. Now I need another man—and I need him quick. You saw what happened to Henry Drever last night."

"The last I saw, the only thing that was happening to him was a good time. He didn't seem to mind it in the least."

"Well he minds it this morning," boomed the doctor "—and so do I. Henry has a hangover that would be too big for a man a third his age. It also happens that he spent something over a thousand dollars before he passed out completely and had to be put to bed here in the hotel."

"Why squawk if the old boy wants to go

out and spend a thousand dollars? He owns just about all of the diamonds in South Africa, doesn't he?"

Doctor Haskel cleared his throat ponderously. His attitude was that of a teacher who has to re-explain to a sixth-grade pupil that two and two make four.

"Look, Elliott. At one time my Uncle Henry Drever was a rich man—very rich. He isn't any more. Whatever happened to all of it, I don't know. What's more I don't particularly give a damn. After seeing him in action last night, however, you can guess about it as well as I can."

"He had plenty of money when I left him," interrupted Frisbee drily.

"Yes—I know all about that roll he was sporting around. He's had it ever since I took charge of him. It contained something like $400. Last night he spent over $1,000 buying champagne for everyone in the hotel. I had to make up the difference. As far as I know, Henry Drever has only a few hundred dollars left to his name. That's deposited in his name in a New York bank. However, he still thinks he's rich. So does everyone else. That's the hell of it."

"What's the harm in thinking you're rich? Seems to me it would be a mighty pleasant feeling."

Jared Haskell grunted his impatience.

"What I'm trying to bring out, Elliott, is that I'm responsible for him — financially, personally, socially and every other way. My mother was his sister. I promised her I'd look after him if he ever needed it. Now he does—and I mean to keep my promise. The old man did a lot for our family when he had money. He bought our home for us after my father died. He even paid for my medical education. Do you blame me for feeling responsible for him now?"

Frisbee ignored the question.

"What about all of the other relatives? They seem to think a lot of him, too."

Haskell snorted angrily.

"Mamie Bartram and her daughter Sheila? Bah! They're people who'd be a disgrace to any family. They still think Uncle Henry's a rich man. So do some of the other relatives. They'd hound the old fellow to death trying to get on the good side of him if I'd let them. They even blame me for trying to keep them away from him. They claim I'm simply trying to make sure of getting all of his money when he dies. The fact is, he hasn't got any money. I'm simply trying to keep them from killing him off by encouraging him to go on toots like he did last night."

"What about the guy that slugged me last night in your office—Willie Drever. He must be a relative, too, isn't he?"

"If you call being a half ass adopted nephew a relative—well, then he is. Willie has been after Uncle Henry to finance some swindling patent medicine proposition for him. Thinks the old man ought to cough up $50,000 without batting an eye. Despite my precautions, he's seen him twice. Both times Uncle Henry has had a spell afterwards. The trouble is that Uncle Henry won't tell the relatives the truth about his money—and they won't believe me when I tell them.

He likes the attention they try to give him, and that's what we've got to avoid before it kills him. He's a sick man."

Frisbee smiled wrily.

"Sounds like a nice family," he commented, then rubbed his bruised cheek ruefully. "That's where Willie slugged me last night in your office in case you don't know. Seems like I'm allergic to brass knuckles."

Dr. Haskell swore wrathfully.

"Willie ought to be in a mental institution himself. It's not safe for him to be at large," he snorted.

"Of course, Elliott, I'm not asking you to get into any trouble on this job. It's strictly a legitimate proposition. I'll give you all the proof of that you want—professional and otherwise. Henry Drever is a sick man, and I mean to take care of him. All I insist on is that no one sees him for at least two weeks until we get him back into shape —and that goes for the relatives as much as it does for anyone else. I'll arrange things right away so that you can take him down to my place at the shore. No one will bother you there. You won't have practically a damn thing to do. I'll arrange to send a cook—and I'll get down myself whenever I can. Now how about it?"

Frisbee sat down on the edge of the bed and scratched the bottom of his bare foot meditatively.

"Looks to me like there's something very funny about the whole deal," he blurted out at length. "I don't like the smell of it—and

I still don't know what you'd expect me to do if I'd agree to do it."

Doctor Haskell leaped to his feet. He shook a big finger threateningly in Frisbee's general direction.

"Look here, Elliott," he roared, "if I thought you were insinuating that there is some ulterior purpose in a medical man like myself looking after a mentally unbalanced uncle I'd massage your nose in that rug." Suddenly he became calmer and continued almost apologetically. "The case is more serious than you realize, Elliott. Henry Drever is not a man who can be let run loose in his present condition. Take my professional word for that. Another episode like the one last night would mean his death. I don't intend letting that happen as long as I can avoid it—for the reasons I've already given. I want you to look after him—at least until I can find someone else for the job. Men are scare these days. That's why I'm appealing to you. I'll pay you well in the bargain—say, $75 a week. What's more, at the end of the month, I'll fix up that leg so you'll be in first class shape to start right in on spring training. What do you say?"

The man seemed sincere all right. Looming in the background of Frisbee's mind as vividly as a caution light on a dark street, however, was last night's chain of events. On the other hand, even these paled into rapid insignificance compared to the cold clammy fear that was now settling on him. He had come all the way to Philadalphia to have his leg fixed by the man Otto Helms said was the best surgeon in the country for such a job. Now he was letting the fellow walk out on him in a huff. Whether or not the doctor's explanation was logical, whether or not last night's affair made sense, such action made even less as far as Frisbee's own personal interests were concerned.

For one of the few times in his life, Frisbee Elliott struggled in bitter indecision.

"Frankly, Doctor, I don't know what to tell you. I—"

"You *do* want to get your leg fixed, don't you?" Haskell's booming question that was more a threat cut him short.

"Sure I want to get it fixed," snapped Frisbee, "but I don't want to get my neck broken doing it. That's what I'm trying to explain."

Haskell issued a prodigious snort and started out. At the doorway, he paused for a parting shot.

"If that's how you feel, Elliott, no explanation will be necessary. I might add that I'm hardly accustomed to being insulted by—ah, by my prospective patients."

"No more than I'm accustomed to being bopped on the jaw by some maniac when I go to an office to see a doctor." The hot retort flowed out before Frisbee could stop it. Even as he spoke, however, a sickening feeling of cold dread engulfed him and he added, "Look, Doctor—be reasonable about this. Give me a chance. Let me telephone Otto Helms. If he says it's okay, then I'll take your proposition."

Jared Haskell was already halfway out the door. His dark eyes flashed belligerently from the shadows.

"Call him then, but make it snappy. If I don't hear from you in an hour, I will have made other arrangements. I'll be in Uncle Henry Drever's room, 846. Get in touch with me there."

The door rattled on its hinges as the doctor slammed it behind him.

Reaching numbly for the telephone, Frisbee put through a call for Otto Helms at the latter's farm outside of Sedalia, Missouri.

It didn't occur to him until he heard Otto's sleepy voice that the Peewee's trainer was not up yet. It was now only 7:30 in Philadelphia. He should have remembered it would be an hour earlier in Missouri. Farmer or no farmer, Otto was evidently making good his vow to catch up on all of the sleeping he had missed during the World's Series.

Frisbee tried to explain the situation simply. He was surprised, however, to find that it wasn't a simple thing to explain—especially over long distance to a naturally suspicious trainer who was only half awake and probably in a bad humor in the bargain. Happenings which, only a few hours before, had seemed real and sinister, now sounded only strange and unconvincing even to his own ears as he heard his voice repeating them. It was almost like recounting a bad dream and not only asking one's hearer to believe it, but to advise him on a future course of action based on it — and Otto Helms of all people.

From long acquaintance, Frisbee knew

that Otto was strictly a realist where his ball players were concerned. In thirty years of organized baseball, Otto had heard all of the plain, fancy, and assorted alibis in the business—and his was a profession of not believing any of them. And, in all of his experience, Otto Helms had seldom been proved wrong.

His occasional grunts during Frisbee's explanations were made with the dual purpose of expressing this attitude now, while still proving he was on the other end of the wire. His voice was bitterly sorrowful when he finally spoke.

"Of all the boys I ever had, Frisbee Elliott, you're the last I thought would go around getting plastered—even out of season when it ain't none of my business," was his plaintive comment.

Frisbee raged—as much at his own futility as at Otto's vast ignorance.

"I didn't get plastered," he bellowed. "I only had two drinks and they were beer. I can prove it. I—"

"Sure — sure," Otto's voice dripped its sirupy sarcasm. "Two or three is all anyone ever remembers having. It's the ones they don't remember that does the damage." Then he added authoritatively, "Now get the hell back to bed, Frisbee Elliott. Get yourself together. Lay off them night clubs, too. Then go and see Doc Haskell when you know what you're doing. And make sure you get in the right office this time."

Frisbee boiled over—but to no avail. No amount of righteous anger or frantic explanation could convince the cynical Otto that the whole thing simply wasn't the result of some wild binge designed to forget the flop he had scored in the World's Series.

"I got into the right office, I tell you, Otto," he shouted for the third or fourth time. "What did I get? I got slugged, that's what. I got into the right house. I got slugged there, too. Then the doctor's half-wit uncle jumped a rubber snake at me in the bargain. I tell you Otto——"

"And I tell you you're drunk, Frisbee Elliott," broke in Otto. "And even if you're not as drunk as I think you are, you're crazier than hell. Just remember this: Doc Haskell is the best in the business as far as that leg of yours is concerned. Suppose he does want you to look after some nut patient for a few weeks, what's the difference? You ain't got anything else to do this winter, anyhow. What's more, if Doc says he'll have you in shape for spring training, that's enough for me. It better be enough for you, too—unless you aim to do your striking out and fly muffing in the bush leagues from now on."

Frisbee quailed before this storm of official wrath.

"But Otto—" he protested weakly.

"Quit talkin'. If Doc Haskell is there in the hotel, have this call transferred to him. I'll do your talkin' for you. I'll apologize for any damnfoolishness you've done and fix things up. Now get him on the line like I say."

FRISBEE meekly jiggled the receiver until the operator came on and got the necessary instructions. Then he hung up and dazedly continued with his dressing. He had finished and was staring dolefully out of the window when Otto called him back.

"Everything's okay—now see to it you keep it that way," the trainer advised. Then his voice assumed a kindlier tone. "Mebbee you ain't too drunk, after all. Doc tells me you did get mixed up with some screwy relatives of his. I still can't figure out what it's all about. What's more, I don't give a damn. All I know is the doc says he'll take care of you as a special favor to me. Now be a good boy like old Otto tells you. Help doc out by taking care of his Uncle what's-his-name. He'll pay you for the job—and throw the operation in to boot. What the hell more could you want?"

Frisbee was forced to admit there was nothing more he could want. Moreover, Otto's logic threw a different light on the entire affair. The sinister happenings of the night before paled into the insignificance of a mere family squabble. The bruises on his jaw as well as the resulting fractures in his pride became vastly unimportant by comparison with the very real injury to his leg that had brought him to Philadelphia in the first place. Otto's mention of the bush leagues wasn't meant the way it sounded. Nevertheless, it did carry a disconcerting element of cold truth that couldn't be denied. If Doc Haskell's surgical skill could prevent such a catastrophe, even a few more unexpected and unprovoked socks in the jaw would be a small price to pay.

Frisbee found Doctor Haskell in Room 846 impatiently awaiting his arrival. Although the lion-headed surgeon was more cordial, it was obvious that he was upset over the recent happenings. He waved a huge hand irritably toward the double bed.

"Look at him," he boomed. "Do you wonder why I'm so interested in having someone take care of him?"

Frisbee looked, and was amazed to see the change that had transpired. Instead of the jovial, bouncing Henry Drever of the night before, he saw a limp, pasty-gray specimen that lay sprawled diagonally under a mass of covers. The cherubic face had lost its rounded floridness. It was now the drawn visage of an old man—older than Frisbee had realized. Only the upturned whites of Uncle Henry's eyes were visible under the half-opened lids. He was moaning audibly. As Frisbee watched, this turned into half-distinct, still drunken words.

"Doc Hashkell's jush about the besh friend an old globe trotter like me can have," he mumbled, blowing a wilted point of his mustache away from his lips whenever it interfered with the effort. "He takesh me in an' gives me a good home. He keepsh me out of trouble—at least he trieshto. I've gotta do what he tellsh me, and I've gotta see that he gets——"

"He's a mighty sick man," broke in Haskell as though in embarrassment at the praise he was being accorded. "One more toot like this would probably finish him."

Frisbee smiled sheepishly like a schoolboy who has been caught supplying spitballs for a companion to throw. He realized now that he himself was at least partially to blame for Uncle Henry's present condition. If he hadn't let the old coot talk him into going hot-spotting the night before, this wouldn't have happened.

"Okay, Doctor Haskell," he said meekly. "I guess Otto Helms told you. I'm accepting your proposition. Instead of helping the old man to get into trouble, I'll do my damnedest to keep him out of it."

The surgeon lit a cigarette nervously and blew a huge puff of smoke halfway across the room.

"Fine, Elliott, fine," he replied. "That'll be a big help right now. I've got a lot on my mind and I want you to know I'll appreciate your cooperation."

"When do I start to work?"

"Right now. The sooner we can get Henry to my place at the shore the better it will be—only no one must know where you go. Basically, there's nothing much wrong with him that plenty of rest and absolute quiet won't cure. With these damn relatives on the warpath, I should have known better than to keep him at home in the first place. I'll get things arranged so you can start down to the bay in my station wagon this afternoon. Can you drive?"

With his thumb, Frisbee indicated the moaning old man.

"Sure I can drive," he demurred. "But what about the old goat being so sick? Aren't you coming with us?"

The doctor frowned his annoyance.

"I can't, Elliott. Not for a day or so, anyhow. I—ah—well, you see a patient died in my hospital last night. I've got to take care of some details concerning him first. A damn nuisance, too, if you ask me. He was the last patient I took in before deciding to give up my practice. Had a tubercular hip and developed pneumonia before I could do anything about it. All the sulfa drugs in the world wouldn't have saved him." The doctor shrugged his broad shoulders futilely and continued: "But don't worry about Uncle Henry. Under proper conditions, he'll snap out of it in a hurry. I'll give you some medicine for him. Besides, there's a telephone in the cottage. I can get down there in an hour and a half any time you need me."

Frisbee nodded unhappily. The prospects of nursing Uncle Henry alone in some deserted summer cottage for even a couple of weeks held prospects of unbearable monotony. Moreover, it knocked into the background the one phase of the affair that held any personal interest for him.

He felt carefully of the bruises on his face.

"Before I go, how about letting me start off by looking up that guy Willie Drever and paying him a little compound interest?" he asked. "I'll knock off a day's pay for the privilege."

Haskell rubbed his huge hands together in satisfaction.

"That sounds more like the Frisbee Elliott I've heard so much about," he beamed. Then he added with a note of caution, "But there

can't be anything like that, Elliott. We won't go looking for trouble. The less excitement, the better. All I insist on is that no one sees Uncle Henry Drever for at least two weeks—no one, understand? If any of his crazy relatives including Willie tries to butt in—well, handle it in your own way, just as long as you make it convincing. I'm putting you in charge of Uncle Henry. That means you're the boss."

VI

THE cold, misty wind of the evening before had blown itself out. The streets were still wet. Overhead, however, came the promise of a glorious fall day. It was still too early for the sun under daylight time rules. Nevertheless, a rosy glow already permeated the Eastern sky to a point where the forlorn statue of William Penn on its grotesque setting atop city hall looked as though it were edged in a dull-finished copper. The temperature was rising perceptibly, and Frisbee's spirit went up with it as he stepped out of the hotel and basked in the warming influence while looking around for a taxi. He remembered that his hat and coat were still in the main lobby coat room where he had checked them the night before, but there was no need for them now.

His first stop was at Broad Street Station where he retrieved his suitcase from the locker in which he had placed it upon his arrival. Then he instructed the driver to take him to the Haskell home on Spruce Street and leaned comfortably back in his seat to enjoy a short period of pleasant relaxation.

Considered in daylight, this whole affair might not be so bad after all. At least, Otto Helms had reassured him as to Doctor Haskell's status as a surgeon. That status was all that really mattered. If Frisbee himself had to pinch hit for the man-power shortage for a few weeks by taking care of the fellow's nutty uncle—well, it wasn't exactly his idea of a way to spend baseball's off-season, but it would have to do. Besides, if he didn't get his leg in shape, all seasons would soon be off seasons as far as his baseball activities were concerned.

Even the Haskell home didn't look as cold and gloomy as it had the night before. It was simply another big brownstone house on a street of brownstone houses that were probably no more drab than great age so often is in any form.

Frisbee smiled almost happily as he mounted the stone steps and noted that, although the doorpull had been put clumsily back in place, it still showed mute evidence of the battering he had given it. He wondered if Petey the human gorilla didn't have similar evidences of wear to show for the strenuous activities of the night before. That, however, was something he'd probably never learn. Petey was gone—fired, so Doctor Haskell said. The doctor hadn't mentioned last night's affair as the cause but no doubt that had a lot to do with it. Even from his brief acquaintance with the man, Frisbee could appreciate the forcefulness of the explosion that must have occurred when Haskell got home to find Uncle Henry missing and Petey nursing a bruised jaw. The whole affair had its elements of satisfying humor, now that Frisbee looked back on it.

His ring was promptly answered by a mousy little cleaning woman. Her head was swathed in a dusty towel that emphasized the moronic simplicity of her features.

"I came to get some of Mr. Drever's things," he explained. "Doctor Haskell sent me."

Her head bobbed eagerly.

"I been expectin' you, Mr. Elliott. Doctor called and said you was comin.' I'll show you up to the old gentleman's room."

Luckily, in the light of what later transpired, Frisbee carried his own suitcase with him as he followed her to Uncle Henry's quarters at the end of the long second floor hall. Here, with the cleaning woman watching him curiously, he lost no time packing an assortment of personal belongings into a huge worn suitcase he found in the closet. Doctor Haskell's instructions had been to collect whatever he thought the old man might require for the proposed trip to the Barnegat Bay place, then return to the hotel as promptly as possible.

The doctor said he himself had important business matters to attend to that would keep him occupied until early evening. He had made it clear that the first of these appointments fell at 9:30 and that he did not want to be late.

The handling of Uncle Henry's belongings gave adequate evidence to the old man's

claim of having been around. Even the suitcase proved that. Made of costly English leather, it was covered and recovered with hotel and transportation stickers from the world over. A comb and brush set bore the imprint of a Singapore dealer. A fine, straight-edge razor came from Melbourne, Australia. An expensive traveling clock came from an exclusive jeweler in Buenos Aires. The extra suit that Frisbee carefully packed was the work of a Parisian tailor. An alpaca topcoat, despite its worn condition, was originally one of the finest ever to have come out of London's Bond Street.

"I'm glad you're going away, Mr. Elliott."

Frisbee jumped at the sound of a woman's voice. The cleaning woman had been so quiet, he had almost forgotten she was there.

"Huh?" he asked. "How can you be glad I'm going away when you hardly even know me?"

"Oh—I don't mean it that way, Mr. Elliott. I mean I am glad for Mr. Drever's sake. He gets so lonely around here. A trip will do him good."

"How come? Isn't Dr. Haskell nice to him?"

Thinking was obviously difficult for the frowsy woman but she did her best under stress of Frisbee's question.

"I dunno, Mr. Elliott," she replied slowly. "The doctor's nice enough with the old man—like a ma that takes such good care of her kids she never lets them have no fun. That's the way with Old Mr. Drever. The doctor ain't around much so he has Petey look after the old man. Mr. Drever ain't even allowed to go out of the house unless Petey goes with him. He don't like it either. He frets something awful at times."

"Why don't he do something about it, then? He's over twenty-one, isn't he?"

The cleaning woman gave a silly giggle.

"Of course he's over twenty-one, Mr. Elliott. He must be near seventy but he ain't dead yet by a long shot. I ain't the one to be talkin' out of turn, but many's the time I seen Mr. Drever watchin' me like he's tryin' to make up his mind—well about something."

Frisbee smiled knowingly.

"I used to know a man about Uncle Henry's age—or older," he commented. "One time I asked him when a man got over being a wolf."

The cleaning woman leaned forward on her broom.

"What did he tell you, Mr. Elliott?" she asked eagerly.

"He told me I'd have to ask someone older than he was."

His listener giggled approvingly.

"He wasn't far wrong, Mr. Elliott. But all I'm sayin' is that Mr. Henry Drever is a gay old bird—except he don't get no chance to be gay around here."

"Maybe that's just because you won't let him."

SHE shook her head negatively.

"I got nothin' to do with it, Mr. Elliott. It's because Petey won't let him—and Dr. Haskell won't let him neither. Sometimes Mr. Drever almost seems scared of the doctor—well, maybe not exactly scared. It's sorta like he just isn't himself when the doctor is around."

"How does he act?"

"Sorta like a puppy dog that's afraid it might get licked if it does something wrong. All day he's frisky and like enough to talk a person's head off about places he's been and things he's done. Sometimes he cusses—especially when Petey won't let him go out. He rants and rares. Then when the doctor comes home—well, he just sticks his tail between his legs—like he didn't have a good bark in him."

"How long has the doctor had his hospital closed?" Frisbee asked.

Caught short by this sudden changing of subjects, the woman had to ponder.

"Must be close to a month now," she finally replied. "I can't understand why he done it."

"Did he usually have many patients in it?"

The woman snorted indignantly at this display of ignorance.

"Did he?" she replied. "The hospital was most always full. Doctors don't come no better'n Jared Haskell—least that's what everyone always says."

Frisbee briefly explained the reason for his unheralded visit to Philadelphia.

"How's about taking me in to the hospital for a peek around?" he asked in con-

clusion. "Naturally, I'm curious about the place I'm going to get sawed up in."

The weazened frame before him shuddered involuntarily.

"No, sir, Mr. Elliott. You don't get me in no hospital. I never go in there."

"Why?"

"Hospitals give me the jumpin' willies, that's why. Especially this one. When I first come here to work, Dr. Haskell asked me to help clean the place. There was a leg in a bucket in the cuttin'-up room. I fainted right smack on the floor. I ain't been back since. You couldn't get me back. I'll let you in—only don't never tell Dr. Haskell. He don't like people messin' around his places."

Coming through the upstairs hallway, Frisbee had noted a large double doorway that had been cut through the heavy dividing wall. Obviously it had been put there to provide the doctor with convenient access to the hospital from his bedroom. It was to this that the woman now led him. Producing a big string of keys from her apron pocket, she finally found the one that turned the heavy lock, then held the door open for him.

"Don't stay in there more than a minnit, Mr. Elliott," she cautioned. "I shouldn't be doin' this—but I can't see there's any harm in you just peekin' around."

Frisbee emitted a low whistle of pleased surprise. Actually, he might have been looking at a miniature of one of the finest hospitals in the country. The hallway that ran the length of the floor save for operating rooms at the rear, was immaculate. Gleaming hardwood floors vied in contrast with freshly painted green walls. In a niche directly across from Frisbee was a nurse's station. This was complete with a neat mahogany secretarial desk, telephone, desk set, lamp and the usual array of wall charts and other accoutrements. At the rear was a glass case filled with assorted instruments and hospital equipment of an intensely personal nature.

To the right of this an open door revealed a room calculated to make being a patient there almost a pleasure. There were Venetian blinds and colorful drapes at the window. Cosy easy chairs replaced the stilted straight-back chairs usually found in such a place. Throw rugs warmed the floors and original water color paintings in a pleasing semi-modern style graced the walls. Unique floor lamps with Chinese parchment shades were used for lighting.

There were three other rooms for patients on this floor and, walking slowly down the hall, Frisbee inspected them in turn. Each was decorated in a different color scheme and with furnishings of a different type. They reminded Frisbee of department-store sample rooms where each new one seems more appealing than the one just viewed—to a point where the would-be customer becomes completely befuddled.

Frisbee breathed a deep sigh of relief. Doc Haskell might be a screwball personally, but there was now no doubt as to his ability as a surgeon—and a highly successful one at that. Once again, Frisbee censured himself for not having trusted Otto Helm's judgment in the first place.

Walking to the rear, Frisbee paused before the big swinging doors to the operating rooms. The cleaning woman had abruptly disappeared upon admitting him to the hospital. No sound came from the adjoining living quarters to indicate her whereabouts. Even the normal rumble of the surrounding city seemed abnormally faint and far away. There was something uncanny about snooping around in such a place, but his curiosity won the upperhand. After all, he'd soon be paying the operating room an entirely different kind of visit. Inspecting now what he wouldn't be able to inspect then held a gruesome fascination that even thoughts of Dr. Haskell waiting impatiently for his return to the hotel failed to overcome.

THE first room was simply an antechamber, probably no more than ten feet square. It was almost bare of furnishings save for a cart for wheeling stiffs and an array of complicated-looking gadgets that Frisbee guessed were used for giving anesthesia.

Beyond this lay the main operating room in all its immensely sanitary but coldly impersonal glory. Walls of opaque glass brick gave a spacious feeling even though the room itself was not large. Huge batteries of lights, some with mirrors attached, hung from the ceiling. In one corner was a chair that looked as though it might belong in a

dentist's office except for the fact that it was obviously designed for more nefarious forms of torture. An operating table, a couple of smaller tables, and a glass case filled with a gruesome assortment of efficient-looking instruments completed the ensemble.

A door at Frisbee's left led to a tiled lavatory with its big triple washstand and huge tilt-jars of liquid soap. The door to an adjoining room beyond this was closed but Frisbee entered without hesitation. Now that he had seen the worst a hospital had to offer, he had no dread as to what might be disclosed here.

A vast array of bottles, vials and assorted laboratory equipment greeted him. However, it was not the unfamiliar nature of these materials that stopped him in his tracks, his eyes bulging in horrified fascination.

Pushed into a corner beside a laboratory work bench was another stretcher cart—not an empty one such as the others he had seen, but an extremely well-filled one. The shrouded mountainlike figure of what was obviously a man lay there limp and motionless.

Huge feet from which the shoes had not been removed protruded from one end of the sheet, and a burly head from other.

Frisbee had forgotten all about the patient who had been so inconsiderate as to die on the doctor's hands. Now it came as a distinct shock to stumble across the body in this fashion—but that wasn't what shocked him most. The real lightning stroke came with the sudden, head-throbbing realization that this was not simply an ordinary patient who had died of pneumonia as Dr. Haskell had claimed.

The dead man, in fact, had not been a patient at all.

He was Petey, the gorilla-like bodyguard who had slugged Frisbee the night before at the Haskell doorway, and on whom Frisbee had done an even better slugging job in return.

Frisbee gulped and steadied himself by gripping a table. His horrified gaze centered on the livid marks still visible on the man's pasty face. Terrifying realization swept upon him that those were the trademarks of his own handiwork. He realized too that he had not waited last night to learn the outcome of his blows. Petey had been sprawled groaning on the sidewalk when Frisbee had barged into the house—and had disappeared by the time he and Uncle Henry had emerged half an hour or so later. Now the bodyguard was here—clearly as dead as any man would ever be. If that didn't make Frisbee a murderer, he himself recognized it as at least a sufficiently reasonable facsimile to make plenty of trouble for him, in any court that might ever consider the case.

His knees almost buckled under him at the thought. Cold sweat popped out all over him. His mind spun like an idling motor under full throttle.

A long moment passed before things slowed down to a point where he could reach out and grapple with individual thoughts as they flew past. Why had Dr. Haskell lied about this death? Why had he called it pneumonia when it obviously wasn't, and why had he claimed the man was a patient? Who was he trying to shield —and why?

Such puzzles were as inexplicable as the thought that a man as husky as Petey had kicked off from nothing more potent than a couple of pops on the jaw. After all, Frisbee Elliott had hit plenty of fellows just as hard plenty of times before. Certainly none of these had ever suffered more than a few days' inconvenience, plus the natural embarrassment of explaining welts that obviously were not caused by walking into partially open doors.

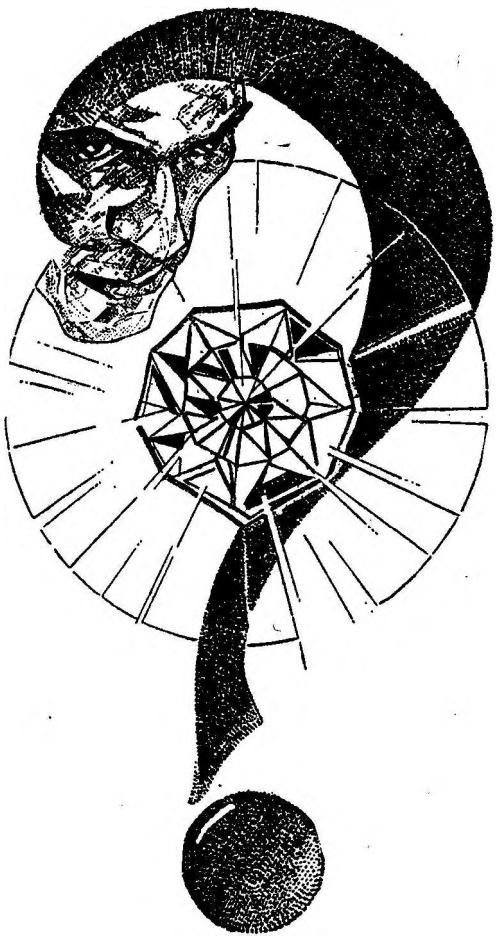
Mustering all of his courage, Frisbee approached the cart and studied the ghastly face with its half-opened mouth and glassy, staring eyes. There was a discolored welt on the corpse's cheekbone and a tiny cut on his chin. His lower lip was puffed and broken. That was all. Surely a man-mountain like Petey could shake off things like that with nothing more than a headache—unless——

Frisbee had a sinking feeling at the thought. He remembered with dismay that powerful Butch O'Rourke of the Peewees had died of a heart attack after nothing more strenuous than trying to stretch a triple into a home run. Only a rookie at the time, this affair had made a deep impression on Frisbee. It impressed him even more now. Such things did happen—even to powerful, well-trained athletes like the all but forgotten Butch.

Incredible as it seemed, what other possible explanation could there be?

Sick and weak under the sudden strain, Frisbee was on the point of turning away. Where to go or what to do were things that could be decided later. Right now, it was enough to know that he had to get out of there—and get out fast. With a carefully built world crashing about his head like a monastery hit by a complete flight of bombs, a man wasn't in a position to think too far ahead. The immediate present was all that mattered.

Suddenly Frisbee paused in his retreat. Whether it was the newest recollection that had flashed to the forefront of his mind, or what his eyes now centered upon that caused



him to stop, he wasn't sure. Probably the reactions were simultaneous. Certainly the moist, pinkish spot no larger than a dime on the sheet over the dead man's chest wasn't enough to attract attention in itself. Combined with the sudden swirl of memory, however, it served the purpose. Grasping the sheet in terrified desperation, he threw it back to expose the body. A gasp escaped him as he did so.

The upper half of Petey's clothes had been removed, disclosing a barrel-like, hairy torso.

There, just below the left nipple, was a tiny round hole. Powder burns surrounded it. The blood had been swabbed away, but the hair was still sufficiently wet and sticky to transfer the telltale mark to the sheet. There was no question but that the hole had been made by a bullet—that Petey had met death by a shot through the heart.

Frisbee groaned the vastness of his relief as his mind whirled quickly back to the happenings of the previous night. Things were becoming clearer now. He remembered the commotion in the rear hallway just as he had been leaving the house to follow Uncle Henry. He remembered the dull thud that might have been the slamming of a door, but which he now knew unquestionably had been the muffled report of the fatal pistol, fired at close range.

How or why it had all happened, or who the murderer might have been, Frisbee hadn't the slightest idea. Certainly there had been no sounds in the house to indicate the presence of other people. Certainly the dead latch had fallen on the front door when Frisbee closed it upon entering.

That meant that Petey had had to go around through the alley and come back in the back way, just as Uncle Henry had said. Equally certain, however, he had come across someone else in the back recesses of the darkened house and there had been a struggle. Frisbee now recalled the harsh voices in vivid detail. He was sure——

HE BROKE off abruptly in his thinking and jumped as though a mastodon had stepped up and stung him. It was only the faint clanging of a bell that had disturbed him, but to his throbbing brain, it sounded like the peal of doomsday's summons echoing through the deathlike stillness. Standing in sudden consternation, his grasp still frozen to a corner of the dead man's shroud,

he listened to the bell clang again—long and authoritatively.

This time, he recognized it as the doorbell in the Haskell living quarters, but there was a small consolation in the fact. Maybe it was only a delivery boy. That, however, was a forlorn hope such as wishing for a nice, quiet, normal ball game on a trip to Brooklyn.

Frisbee had already seen enough of Doctor Haskell's affairs to realize that casual, ordinary things such as delivery boys were entirely out of place in such a set-up. Everything turned out in some strange, sinister way. And everything that happened seemed to get Frisbee himself tangled deeper and deeper in the mess. Maybe this doorbell summons would prove to be the exception, but it was a chance he wasn't going to take.

Stopping only long enough to put the sheet back over the corpse, he hurriedly retraced his steps, carefully closing the hospital doors behind him. He was back in Uncle Henry's room tightening the straps on the old man's suitcase with hands that shook perceptibly when the cleaning woman scurried in. Her homely face was a mass of dirt and consternation.

"Mr. Elliott!" she gasped. "There's two men downstairs that wants to see you. One of them's a cop!"

Frisbee's heart skipped half a dozen more beats.

"Who's the other one?" he finally managed to ask.

"He's a big man with a derby hat. He ain't even the least bit polite. I heard the cop call him Cordovan—or something like that."

A big man in a derby hat! Cordovan! Such a description could mean only one man—and that one man was unquestionably Corrigan the private detective.

"Did you tell them I was here?" Frisbee asked.

"No. I told them you wasn't but that you was on your way. They seemed to know you was expected so there wasn't nothin' else I could say. Look to me like they aim to arrest you for somethin', Mr. Elliott. What on earth did you do, anyhow?"

Frisbee shook his head.

"Damn if I know—but I know what I'm going to do. Where's the back stairway. I'm leaving."

Grabbing a heavy suitcase in either hand, he tip-toed softly after the mousy little woman.

Halfway through the kitchen he put down the suitcases long enough to reach into his pocket for a crumpled bill that he thrust into her hand. Offhand, he could think of no way of investing $5.00 to better advantage.

"Thanks for everything, lady," he said. "And don't worry about the hospital. Don't you tell anyone about my being there and I'm sure I never will."

VII

FRISBEE ELLIOTT'S experience with the law had been limited to the sleepy, good-natured policemen assigned to ball parks. These, when they weren't forgotten or ignored, he accepted with an amused tolerance. Actually, their status was always a little puzzling. He had never quite decided whether they regarded themselves as honor guests of the occasion, or simply that they were being rewarded with an opportunity to doze away a lazy afternoon with peanuts and pop thrown in for good measure.

Once in a long while, of course, these cops might feel called upon to justify their presence, providing the disturbance was nothing more serious than an eager youngster trying to crash the gate. On occasion, and providing there were at least two or three of them handy, they might even go so far as to restrain some witless drunk from climbing onto the playing field with the announced intention of blacking out an umpire's failing eyesight completely. However, such things as gambling, pop bottle throwing, and inciting to riot left them cold. Even the many fracases in which Frisbee had engaged had never brought him seriously afoul of the law—at least not beyond the point where they could be patched up by autographing half a dozen balls for the cops involved.

This time, however, things were different. There was an ominous ring to the cleaning woman's announcement that two men were looking for him. As far as Corrigan was concerned, Frisbee didn't give a hoot. However, the fact that the burly de-

tective had a cop with him put a different complexion on the matter — especially in view of the fact that Petey had been murdered. The entire matter was becoming more serious than he had suspected. Big stakes must be involved. Moreover, somewhere along the line was at least one person who would not stop at simply slugging a victim unexpectedly with brass knuckles or blackjacks.

Luckily the narrow alley behind the Haskell house was deserted. Frisbee hurried through it as rapidly as possible under the handicap imposed by Uncle Henry Drever's heavy suitcase in addition to his own bag. His mind raced faster than his feet found possible.

It now occurred to him for the first time that Petey had been shot down while doing the job for which he himself had just been hired. Or did it? On the other hand, it was entirely possible that Doctor Haskell himself could have shot the bodyguard. Otherwise, why would he have lied about the death? He might have shot Petey as the result of a quarrel, because the bodyguard knew too much, or for any one of a number of reasons. There might be any number of angles to the thing—but right now there was only one of immediate importance from Frisbee's personal standpoint. Just why the murder happened was immaterial by comparison with the single fact that it *had* happened—and that he himself might easily enough be involved in the thing.

Sooner or later, Petey's body would be discovered. That meant an investigation. An investigation meant questions — and Frisbee had no intentions of walking meekly into the clutches of the law to be faced with any such barrage. As a matter of fact, there were plenty of questions he himself would like to ask—and not one that might be asked to which he could supply a convincing answer. Even his own innocence might take a lot of proving when all of the facts were known.

Still worse was the publicity that would be involved. Worst of all would be the reaction of baseball's front office. Frisbee well knew that his profession was no longer simply a sport with an incidental profit. Baseball had long since become a big business with an incidental sporting element. Extra-curricular activities of players that brought them into public disrepute brought careful scrutiny and prompt action. More than once, Frisbee had been called upon to explain nothing more serious than a hotel lobby brawl. He shuddered to think of trying to explain any connection with any murder case—and especially this one that he couldn't even begin to explain to himself.

AT Locust Street, he flagged a cab and told the driver to take him to the Wharton Hotel. He'd get this business off his mind once and for all. He'd deliver the old man's luggage plus his own resignation from the hour-old job. That would be that. Then, he'd check in at some other hotel, call Otto Helms and insist upon arranging for another surgeon. Even Otto, for all of his confidence in Doctor Haskell would have to admit that the present set-up was entirely too dangerous and far too uncertain as well. For all anyone could tell, the doctor might have no intention of doing the operation after all. Maybe he was only using his would-be patient for a good thing. And maybe, before the affair had ended, the only operating the fellow would be in a position to do would be with knife and fork on prison pork and beans.

Dismissing his cab at the side entrance, Frisbee side-stepped the ubiquitous doorman and fought his luggage through the revolving doors. Halfway down the arched hallway leading to the elevators, however, he paused. The alluring aroma of breakfast wafting up the broad stairway from the basement coffee shop brought an abrupt reminder from his stomach that it was the innocent victim of an eating slump probably unparalleled in its fulsome career. Dinner the night before had consisted of only a sandwich and coffee. Breakfast thus far had been skipped altogether. Now the organ was making clear that its sinking feeling of the past half hour was neither the result of fear nor dismay, but simply revolt at the neglect it was experiencing.

Even the whirling brain went to bat on the stomach's behalf. Eating was not only necessary, but it would give Frisbee time to do a little thinking. Not that there was any question of changing the decision already made, but simply that the situation was one calling for more diplomacy than would be likely if he barged in on Haskell in his

present state of mind. Besides, it might do the doctor good to stew around a while, missing his morning "business" appointments and wondering what was delaying his latest muscle man.

The Coffee Shop occupied a long, narrow room with cashier's desk and cigar stand at one end and an arched entrance leading to an adjoining downstairs bar at the other. Rows of high-backed booths on either side with a single line of tables down the middle filled the intervening space.

Frisbee parked his suitcases near the cashier's desk and started to follow a prim hostess toward a booth at the rear. Halfway there, he stopped abruptly at the mention of his own name from a booth at his side—not only his name, but a question addressed to him in a softly feminine voice.

"Well, Mr. Elliott, did you find it yet?" The question was repeated as he stared his surprise toward the girl.

SHE was seated there alone, sipping her breakfast coffee and smoking a king-size cigarette. There was a friendly smile on her face, but Frisbee sensed a touch of sarcasm in her tone.

He recognized her at a glance. It was Mamie Bartram's daughter—not Sheila of the bathtowel complexion, but Rosalind Schuyler, the good-looking product of Mamie's first marriage. In the French Room the night before, he had been impressed with Rosalind's attractiveness by comparison with her raw-boned sister. Now he was convinced that she was actually beautiful by any standard of comparison that might be named.

He was surprised to find himself stammering in embarrassment trying to explain that he didn't know what she meant by the question.

"I was simply asking whether you and the rest of the diggers had uncovered the Drever diamond yet," she explained, still smiling. "Why don't you sit down and have breakfast here? Then you can tell me all about it."

Frisbee half stumbled, half slid into the seat opposite her. This was another of those things he hadn't counted on. It did, however, hold possibilities of a pleasant relief from his previous encounters with mugs like Willie, Petey, and Corrigan. The stare he turned on her was one of frank puzzlement.

"Look here, Miss Schuyler," he said at length, "you'll have to take my word for it, I don't know what you're talking about. I'm only the guy who was standing on a street corner eating peanuts when the riot started all around me."

This time it was her turn to study him carefully. It was hard to tell what she might be thinking, but her smile was gone.

"You must admit, it didn't take you long to get well mixed up in things," she commented, then added, "You're a ball player, aren't you, Mr. Elliott?"

Frisbee nodded.

"I *was* a ball player up to the time the season closed," he corrected her. "Now, I'm not so sure. You see——"

Then he blurted out a judicious recounting of his story. All that he omitted was any reference to Corrigan of Foxy, or to the fate that had befallen Petey.

Rosalind Schuyler was laughing—almost a little hysterically, he thought—when he finished.

"The funny part of it, Mr. Elliott, is that I believe you," she said, "—but none of the rest of the family would. They've mistaken you for another of Jared Haskell's bodyguards to protect poor, dear old Uncle Henry. Anyhow, it didn't take you long to get acquainted with almost the whole Drever tribe—and typically, too. I suppose you realize now that they're a rotten lot. I suppose that goes for the part of me that's Drever, too."

Frisbee hid his wonderment in a smile.

"Let's leave you out of it, Miss Schuyler. So far, you're the only redeeming feature of my trip to Philadelphia."

Rosalind's eyes expressed her gratitude as he continued:

"What's the matter with them—the family, I mean? Believe me or not, I'm still 100 percent in the dark about the whole affair. Maybe you'll tell me."

The girl gave a mirthless laugh.

"The Drever diamond — that's what's wrong with them," she snapped almost angrily. "You said that Uncle Henry had told you about the diamond last night. What else did you suppose could be wrong with them?"

"Sure," admitted Frisbee," the old goat

told me about the diamond. He even showed me an old newspaper clipping about it, but so what? For all I knew it might all have been a lot of guff. I could show you a lot of newspaper clippings that say the Philadelphia Phillies are a good ball club. But they were printed twenty years ago."

"Well it isn't a lot of guff, Mr. Elliott," Rosalind Schuyler declared firmly. "There was a Drever diamond—and there still is as far as anyone knows. That's what all the scramble's about. All of them—oh, it's too long a story to tell now."

Frisbee's eyes met hers and held them in a steady gaze.

"I like long stories, Miss Schuyler. At least I can't think of anyone I'd rather have tell me one than you."

"Maybe so, Mr. Elliott but think of the chance you'd be taking just in case you did believe mine. Maybe I'm just as bad as all of the rest of the Drever connection turned out to be when they got on the scent of some money."

FRISBEE rubbed his hand ruefully across the cuts on his cheek as he spoke. "At least you haven't hauled off and tried to sock me.

Anything less than that is all to the good. Besides, I told you it's just curiosity on my part. I know well enough what happened to me. You can hardly blame me for being curious enough to want to know why."

"Well—," the girl hung onto the word as though trying to make up her mind about something, "it's simply that you got mixed up in the scramble, Mr. Elliott. It's the old, old story of a lot of people trying to get a lot of money that doesn't belong to them—and trying to keep the others from getting any of it at the same time. That makes things clear, doesn't it?"

"Perfectly. Just as clear as the sky around the Pittsburgh ball park on a bad day. What I can't understand though, is why the relatives don't all wait until Uncle Henry kicks off. Then they'll collect a share of his dough without fighting for it."

"That's because you don't know the Drever connection, Mr. Elliott—or Uncle Henry himself," replied the girl. "The old man never did anything for anyone but himself in his life. He isn't likely to start now. Probably nothing would please him more than to turn the Drever diamond over to a museum when he dies—then roll all around his coffin laughing at the nasty things his relatives would be saying about him. That's what they're afraid of."

Frisbee eyed her curiously.

"Frankly, Miss Schuyler, that statement doesn't gee up with what Dr. Haskell told me just this morning. He said that among other nice things, Uncle Henry had even paid for his medical education."

The girl's laugh sounded sincere. Most certainly it was bitter.

"Dr. Haskell told you that because he has an axe to grind—and I haven't," she explained. "He's the one who started all of this in the first place. I told you Uncle Henry Drever never did anything for anyone and that includes Jared Haskell. Uncle Henry was only in the United States once since I was born. He traveled all over the world—or, I ought to say, bummed his way over it. Most of the time he was just a glorified tramp. Then he struck it rich in Africa. The money went to his head. I guess he made himself the laughing stock of every important city in the world at one time or another. The newspapers used to carry stories about his eccentricities and the way he squandered money. He probably threw away a good-sized fortune, but if any of the relatives ever got as much as a picture postcard, it's more than I ever heard anything about. They were all ashamed of Henry in the first place. Then when he finally drifted to Africa and had a chance to invest in the diamond mine he tried to borrow money from them. They turned him down. That made him mad. It probably accounted for the way he ignored them later on."

"What's all the fuss about now if all of Uncle Henry's money is gone?" Frisbee asked.

"It isn't the money they're after, Mr. Elliott—it's the Drever diamond. It has never been sold to anyone. The relatives checked up plenty of times. They're sure of that—and it would be easy to check on a diamond only half as big as Uncle Henry's. That means he still has it."

"How come that the old duffer came back to Philadelphia when he feels about his relatives the way you say he does?"

The girl sipped her coffee and lit another cigarette before replying.

"He didn't come back. Dr. Haskell brought him back," she explained. "Just before the war broke out, Uncle Henry was in Europe. Evidently he saw what was coming and decided to get to the United States to avoid it. None of us even knew he was back until one night he was drunk and got mixed up in a taxi accident in New York. He was delirious for a couple of days and in his delirium he mentioned Dr. Haskell's name. The hospital authorities sent for the doctor—and right away Jared saw his big chance. He brought the old man back to Philadelphia and practically held him a prisoner in his private hospital. Uncle Henry wasn't seriously hurt. He got well in a couple of weeks. However, none of the other relatives was permitted to see him. We didn't even know he was there until Willie Drever found it out by accident. That is when all the scramble started. Willie and his mother, and Sheila and my mother weren't going to let Jared Haskell get away with anything like that."

"Get away with what? How did Haskell expect to get anything out of Uncle Henry by keeping him there by force?"

The girl smiled cynically.

"You don't know Jared Haskell very well, do you, Mr. Elliott? I only spoke figuratively when I said he kept Uncle Henry by force. Actually he kept him there by hypnotizing him—that plus having a guard to keep him from getting out, or to keep anyone from getting in to see him. That's why the guard hit you last night when you rang the bell. Willie Drever has probably been bothering them plenty. The guard probably mistook you for Willie."

Frisbee gave a soft whistle of surprise. Her suggestion that Petey the guard had mistaken him for someone else was not news—but her mention of hypnotism was. He knew something about hypnotism in an amateur sort of way. Not much, but enough to suspect that it was potentially dangerous if wrongly used. Kiki Rollins, a Peewee pitcher had a number of books on the subject. Frisbee had read most of them. He had also seen Kiki put on impromptu performances with other members of the ball club serving as willing victims. These affairs had all been in fun but, even at that, they had their sinister aspects. There was something strangely weird about the remarkable degree of control even an amateur hypnotist exercised over his subjects. The books always made a point of stating that a hypnotized person wouldn't do anything against his moral principles or judgment, but Frisbee had often wondered.

"I suppose the hypnotism explains why Uncle Henry is always cackling about what a swell nephew Jared Haskell is to an old globe trotter like him," he said. "He keeps repeating it like something he was taught to recite in the first grade. That's just about what happens. Doctor Haskell puts him in a trance, then pumps him full of what a swell guy Doctor Haskell is—then gets him to repeat it. Some day he'll have the old man really believing it. Then all the doc will have to do is suggest that Uncle Henry turn the diamond over to him for safe keeping. That may take a little time, but it shouldn't be too much of a trick—not for a guy with the eyes Doctor Haskell's got."

The girl shuddered.

"I always said I'd bet that Jared Haskell never had to bother with an X-ray machine.

"He just uses his eyes. They seem to bore right through you. Ever since I've known him I've always felt—well, sort of naked when he looked at me."

Frisbee smiled. He was on the verge of making a crack that eyes like that might have their advantages, but Rosalind saw it coming and cut him off.

"Of course, I only know what mother tells me about a lot of these family affairs—and I'll admit she is prejudiced," she continued. "However, I do know Cousin Jared well enough that I'd believe anything anyone told me about him—especially if it was bad. I know he's a clever hypnotist. There was even a write-up in the paper one time telling how he had hypnotized a patient instead of giving him anesthesia for some minor operation. The patient said he didn't even feel the operation. Besides, Jared Haskell is absolutely selfish like all the rest of the Drevers and probably utterly ruthless in the bargain."

FRISBEE shrugged. "The doctor seems to have had his monopoly on Uncle Henry for a month or so now. How come

he hasn't succeeded in horsing the diamond out of the old man by this time?"

The girl gave a nervous laugh. "Maybe you overestimate hypnotism—or maybe it's because you underestimate Uncle Henry. Hypnotism might work — but it probably won't work as fast as that. It takes time, even with Jared Haskell doing it. But don't forget that Henry Drever is no fool, even if he is old and worse for wear. He's kept his secret of where the Drever diamond is hidden for a long time now. He's apt to keep it for a while longer—especially when he sees his relatives squirming. I think he gloats over the fact that any one of them would give their right arm and maybe a leg or two for good measure to get their hands on it—one way or another."

"Uh huh—but he'd better remember that keeping folks in suspense like that can turn into being dangerous business. People have been killed over things worth a lot less than the Drever diamond." Frisbee buttered a piece of toast as he spoke and endeavored to make his remark sound as casual as possible. It would be interesting to sense the girl's reaction—to see if she would give any indication of knowing a murder had already occurred.

Rosalind, however, didn't so much as bat an eye.

"Maybe so," she mused innocently, "but I don't think you'll hear of any killings in this case—anyway, not yet. Willie's probably crazy enough to do something like that. Jared might do it. So might mother and even Sheila—providing they were sure of getting the diamond. But right now, anyone who would do anything of that sort would be a fool. Uncle Henry would be out of the way all right—but the murderer might never find where he has the diamond hidden. It might be in any one of a dozen countries that Uncle Henry has visited within the past few years. As it is, everyone tries to be as sweet to him as possible. They try to kill him with kindness. They hope he'll either break down and tell them something about the diamond or, at the very worst, decide they're pretty decent folks after all, and will it to them. Instead of killing Uncle Henry, it would be more likely that the family would start killing each other off so there wouldn't be so many heirs."

Frisbee changed the subject abruptly.

"How come I happen to meet you here?" he asked. "Don't tell me you passed out like Uncle Henry and had to spend the night in the hotel, too?"

"Maybe I stayed here so I could keep an eye on Uncle Henry," she suggested. "Remember I'm of the Drever connection. Or at least half of me is."

"Which half?"

The girl gave him a playful frown.

"All I know is that the Schuyler half is in the right place to make me very much ashamed of the Drever half."

Frisbee paused, decided maybe he'd better not dunk his doughnut in these ritzy surroundings, so munched it dry.

"And have you completed your check-up on Uncle Henry this morning?" he asked casually.

Rosalind's eyes flashed their annoyance.

"No," she snapped. "I only told you that *maybe* I had remained here at the hotel for that purpose. The fact is we have moved here to stay at the Wharton for the winter —Mother, Sheila, and I. Willie Drever and his mother live here, too. It's an old Drever custom—even though none of us can afford it. It's soothing to the soul. Besides, it has the advantage of being closer to Uncle Henry. That's why we moved to the hotel earlier than usual this season. Does that answer your question, Mr. Inquisitive?"

"Uh-huh, and with a little polite sarcasm thrown in for good measure. However, it's getting around to where I feel absolutely neglected if I collect anything less than an attempted punch on the jaw."

Rosalind laughed.

"That's out of my line, Mr. Elliott—but if you'll cooperate, I'll try to oblige. Anything to make you feel at home, you know."

Frisbee stuck out his chin and she hit it a playful tap.

"There—that makes it unanimous as far as the Drevers are concerned up to date," she said, "but I'm warning you, Mr. Elliott. Never give Mother or Sheila an opportunity like that. They might forget they were ladies."

"No more than I might forget I was a gentleman if they ever did," was his reply. "But don't worry, Miss Schuyler. If I never see either your mother or Sheila again it won't seem long—and I probably never will. Just as soon as I deliver this suitcase to Doctor Haskell I'm getting out of this mess once and for all."

"Where are you going?"

Frisbee frowned, the question emphasized the pressing importance of his own personal problem.

"That depends on where I can find a specialist who is more interested in game legs than in rich uncles," he explained. "First of all I'm going to call Otto—"

THE sentence was never finished. A man had just entered the coffee shop through the archway leading to the bar at the rear. He had on a topcoat and his slouch hat was pulled at a rakish angle over the side of his face, but Frisbee recognized him almost immediately.

The hostess was talking with the cashier at the far end of the room and did not see him. Obviously, she was not expecting customers to come popping in from the bar that early in the morning. This lack of attention, however, did not phase the visitor. Without even so much as a glance in her direction the fellow started for a vacant booth.

His hands were thrust deep into his overcoat pockets, and there was a look of worried, whiskey-inspired concentration on his handsome but dissipated face. He walked rapidly, paying no attention to his surroundings. Thus he did not see Frisbee or Rosalind as he passed their booth—nor did he see the foot that Frisbee suddenly thrust into his path.

The result was even more effective than Frisbee had pleasurably anticipated. Willie Drever not only tripped into a perfect nose dive to the floor. He also emitted a startled whoop of surprise, made a wild effort to save himself, but only succeeded in pulling over a vacant table from the line that extended down the center of the room. The resulting crash only served to accentuate the thud which Willie himself made when he stretched face down full length on the floor and skidded for a foot or two on its tiled surface. At the same instant, an ugly-looking automatic flew from his coat pocket and skittered to a stop under a nearby chair.

The coffee shop was in an uproar. Patrons leaped from booths or craned their necks over the tops of them to see what had occurred. A lone girl in the booth opposite where Willie had landed gave a stifled scream. The hostess, the matronly cashier, and assorted waitresses came running.

Rosalind's startled gasp was audible over the confusion.

"That's Willie Drever!" she exclaimed. "You tripped him on purpose."

Already halfway out of the booth, Frisbee turned a blandly innocent smile on her.

"Only the Drevery part of you would suspect a thing like that," he chided. "It was an accident pure and simple. I just had a cramp in my leg and was stretching it. Too bad Willie happened to be passing at the time—but actually, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have it happen to."

Rosalind Schuyler started to reply, but Frisbee didn't wait to hear what she was going to say. Sliding swiftly out of the booth, his first move was to pick up the automatic and stuff it into his pocket. Then he turned toward an excited group who, trying to help Willie to his feet, were only succeeding in interfering with the latter's efforts on his own behalf.

The fellow had suffered no serious damage. There was a burn on his chin where it had skidded over the floor. Outside of this, however, the only harm was to his mental and physical equilibrium—chiefly the former. Shaking free from his would-be helpers and brushing away the assortment of crumbs he had collected on his clothes, he turned fiercely to Frisbee.

"I ought to let you have one for doing a trick like that, Elliott," he snarled.

Frisbee's smile grew broader.

"Okay, Willie," he replied. "Go ahead and put on your brass knuckles. I'll wait."

Willie gave his head a couple of quick shakes as though to clear it of any remaining fog.

"Give me my—" he was on the point of saying "gun" but suddenly thought better of mentioning this with so many people around and added, "—you know that package of mine you just picked off the floor."

"I thought it was a present for me—or somebody," Frisbee taunted. "Anyhow, finders keepers, Willie, I'm making a collection of those things."

Willie Drever's bloodshot eyes glared savagely as he started moving forward.

"Damn you, Elliott, I'm not fooling this time."

There were screams from the assembled waitresses as they fell back to make way for him. Willie's hands slid into his pockets and there was a glint of brass on the knuckls as they came out. Frisbee simply took a step to the side, grasped a chair casually and waited for his attacker to come within range.

IN THE midst of the resulting uproar, Rosalind Schuyler broke through. Her pretty face was clouded with anger. Grasping Willie by the lapels she shoved him fiercely back.

"Stop this craziness, Willie," she demanded. "You may not care for yourself, but you're not going to disgrace the family completely—not if I can stop it. Think of the scene you're making over what—well, what was probably just an accident."

Willie's surge of unreasoning anger subsided swiftly. Not only did the girl's words carry weight; there was also the chair held casually in Frisbee Elliott's hands to be considered.

"Accident my eye!" he blurted, but then added in a calmer tone, "Don't worry, Rosy. There's plenty of time to take care of him later. Just now, I got other things to do."

With this he swiveled unsteadily on his heel and stalked briskly through a side exit just as an excited assistant manager and two hurriedly-summoned bellhops came rushing down the main stairway to see what the commotion was all about.

Despite Willie's abrupt departure, the uproar was slow in subsiding. Any such happenings were entirely unique in the staid history of the Wharton Coffee Shop and gossip made the most of it. For once in his life, Frisbee Elliott regretted the reputation he had gained on and off the ball diamonds. He had, of course, been recognized and the stares and finger-pointing accorded him brought a flush of embarrassment to his cheeks and a surge of impotent anger somewhere deep within him. Once again, despite his good intentions, he had tangled with the Drever affairs. Even the satisfaction of knowing that he had at least partially settled the score with Willie Drever was small consolation under the circumstances. Standing there in the midst of the slowly dwindling confusion, he felt like Exhibit A at a showing of clucks that every respectable person should avoid.

The attitude of the excitable assistant hotel manager only added to his discomfiture. The fact that Rosalind Schuyler backed up his claim that Willie's high dive had been purely an accident helped settle that part of it. But there were other things on the manager's mind as well.

"Even though we never cater to ball clubs at the Wharton, we're glad enough to have you with us, Mr. Elliott—providing you behave like a gentleman, and also providing you abide by the usual hotel regulations," he explained primly. Then, cocking his head to one side like an undernourished sparrow,

he added, "I understand you spent the night in Room 1057—and that you were not duly registered. Is that true, Mr. Elliott?"

"I was duly invited there as a guest, if that's what you mean," snapped Frisbee angrily, "—at the point of a gun and a couple of blackjacks. I might add that it's really a delightful place you keep here. One meets such interesting people and does such unusual things. Just let me know any time you want it and I'll be glad to write you a testimonial."

The manager was obviously confused.

"Frankly, Mr. Elliott, I don't know what you're talking about. All I know is that you slept in a room for which you were not registered. You were not even registered in the hotel. I also know that the housekeeper reports considerable damage both to the furniture and the wall in that room. Also, there is a long distance telephone call involved."

"Whose room was it then? Someone must have registered for it—or is this one of those hotels where everything happens to be Mr. & Mrs. John Smith?"

"The room, Mr. Elliott, *was* reserved by a Mr. John K. Smith of Baltimore and I might add there was no—er lady involved. The point is that Mr. Smith has apparently disappeared. You are the one who used the room. Therefore, I hope you will not think me impudent in holding you responsible for it."

Frisbee flared angrily.

"And I hope you won't think me impudent if I decide to sue this dump for more than it probably owes in back taxes. I've slept in more respectable places for $1.50 a night. I've met nicer people where the drinks were only a quarter and beer chasers were free. I've eaten in lunch wagons that were quieter than this glorified hot dog stand you call a coffee shop. What's more, I've been insulted by hotel managers who were at least big enough to make it interesting in case I decided to poke them one on the beezer. Now what would you say to that?"

The hotel straw boss fell back aghast. One bell hop smiled his broad approval at Frisbee while his companion snickered outright. It was obvious that anything exciting seldom came their way at the Wharton beyond the job of handling some social drunk, or covering up for a wayward husband out for a little fling.

The manager, however, recovered very quickly.

"You can't be as unreasonable as that, Mr. Elliott. It will only make things more embarrassing. Surely you must realize——"

"I realize now how glad I'll be to get out of this fire trap, if that's what you mean," snapped Frisbee, then added more calmly as he caught the anguished look Rosalind Schuyler turned on him, "But don't worry too much. I'll pay for the room and phone call but you'll have to see Mr. John K. Smith about the damage. That's his department, not mine. Get my bill ready and I'll stop by the desk and pay it just as soon as I deliver a suitcase and a few choice words to Dr. Jared Haskell."

WITH this, he turned on his heel and went over where he had left his belongings. Both bell hops rushed to help him with the luggage but he shook them off with a grin.

"Nothing doing, boys. You might carry this stuff all right, but you couldn't say what I'm going to say when I deliver it."

A side glance had told him Rosalind was preparing to follow him, but he paid her no further attention. It wasn't until he was halfway up the steps leading to the lobby that she spoke from behind him.

"I'm going with you, Mr. Elliott," she announced in a firm voice that was just a little breathless from her hurry.

Frisbee stopped and studied her for a moment.

"Why?" he asked at length.

The girl's face flushed, but she held her ground.

"If for no other reason than to keep you out of trouble. You act as though you need a guardian. Besides—well, you can't blame me for being curious to see how dear old Uncle Henry looks the morning after."

"He looks like something you might expect to find in a morgue — if they kept people that long. But you still haven't answered my question."

"Maybe that's because I'm not accustomed to having my motives questioned."

Frisbee gave an indulgent smile at her display of irritation.

"Okay, sister," he replied. "I'm not stop-

ping you from tagging along. But don't blame me if someone throws you out of the room on your—well, on the hall carpet."

She suddenly grasped his arm as he turned abruptly and again started to ascend the stairs. Her voice had lost its firm assurance of a moment before. Now it was almost pleading.

"Maybe I ought to tell you after all, Mr. Elliott," she confessed. "I—well, actually, I hardly know what to do. Uncle Henry gave me something last night while we were dancing in the French Room. I've just decided that I should return it to him immediately."

"Uh huh. A kiss, I suppose. Old duffers fall for stuff like that in a big way—especially when the girl is as pretty as you."

A flush of anger tinted Rosalind Schuyler's face, but she fought it back.

"I don't suppose I can blame you for not trusting me, but this is one time I wish you would. I'm afraid this thing is more serious than you think, Mr. Elliott."

"That all depends on what you think I think."

The girl leaned close to him. Her voice dropped almost to a whisper.

"Last night when we were dancing, Uncle Henry gave me something to keep for him. He said he had been a damn fool ever to have come to the Wharton in the first place. I'm not sure what had happened, but he was badly scared. He was as white as a sheet. I could feel him shaking all over."

"Maybe it was just the last two or three bottles of champagne he had had."

The girl shook her head violently.

"No, it wasn't," she said. "Uncle Henry was drunk—but not that drunk. I think it was someone he had seen."

"Maybe he had just seen himself in one of the wall mirrors."

She ignored the remark.

"I was sitting facing the entrance. So was Uncle Henry. An hour or so after you had gone, a man came to the door and looked in. The minute he saw we had seen him, he disappeared. When I turned around to Uncle Henry he was pale and shaking. That's when he asked me to dance."

"Who was the man?"

"I never saw him before. He was so short he almost seemed to be deformed. There was a big scar across his face from his forehead to his chin. He was hideous looking but he was well dressed. I remember he had on a tan fedora hat with a brilliant red feather in the band."

"What did Uncle Henry say while you were dancing?"

"He was so upset he could hardly talk," explained the girl. "Between that and his drinking, I could hardly understand him. He said something about maybe not having long to live—that he might not even get out of the hotel alive. At first I thought he was either just drunk or joking—until——"

"Until what?"

"Until he handed me something. He said he wanted me to keep it for him—that I was the only one of the Drever family he could trust—and that if he was killed he wanted me to be the one to have it. It was the—the——"

"The Drever diamond," Frisbee finished the sentence for her.

Roslind's pale face expressed her surprise.

"You knew it?" she gasped.

"What else could it have been?" explained Frisbee, then added, "I didn't even know he lugged the damn thing around with him, much less passed it out to anybody. How'd he happen to have it with him?"

Rosalind held her reply until a couple had passed them on the steps and disappeared out of hearing into the coffee shop.

"He always carried it with him," she whispered hoarsely.

(*Part III in the next* SHORT STORIES)

THE HUMAN DIVE BOMB

By CLAY PERRY

Author of "High Grading Midas," etc.

THE ear-splitting, weird siren of the fire whistle wakened Hal Osmond while it was still quite dark, although actually sunrise time. A succession of forest fires had sprung up in the drouth-pestered north country during the past two months and in early September a sullen haze hung over the land, but now drizzles of rain had begun to fall, damping out the last smoldering blaze in the woods and bush of this much cutover country.

Hal was into his clothes and out in the street, racing for the scene of the fire before the roaring trucks of the city department had blared their way past the hotel. On one of them when it did pass, he saw his partner, Chuck Prink, clinging with one hand to a brass rail on a speeding truck, with the other to his large aerial camera.

"Suppose he wants to try for a shot of the fire from upstairs," Hal told himself. "Good idea, I guess."

He looked up and down the street for a car that might be rushing to the fire, which was alarmingly near the airport where Hal's Chub-Cub two-seater plane was parked.

A small runabout came around a corner on two wheels and dashed erratically across the wide main street and Hal yelled and ran after it. The driver, a lean man wearing a green eye-shade instead of a hat, stopped and waited. It was Marvin Tyler, now acting as secretary of an informal but powerful group of paper and pulp manufacturers and allied industries. It was for them Hal and

Chuck were making aerial photographs of the cutover lands of almost half the entire state of Wisconsin, in preparation for a huge reforestation project.

"It's the paper mill pulp pile, this time," Tyler shouted. "And it rained last night. Looks like some more firebug work, Hal. The railroad had put spark arresters on all its locomotives and the tourists and campers have all been kept out of the woods. That smoke looks pretty black, like oil smoke."

They could see a lurid glow in the sky to the east, in the direction they now sped, with a great dark mushroom of smoke growing above it, rolling up in greasy-looking billows.

The wailing siren was still blowing, a second alarm signal.

"Damn that splinter-cat's meow," growled Tyler. "The noise cut me out of another of those suspicious short-wave broadcasts beamed toward St. Paul. And I just got a bulletin out of St. Paul an hour ago, saying that Minnesota police had chased Killer Jack Gallagher across the state line into Wisconsin and the Badger State police have taken up pursuit. All local police have been warned. Gallagher is supposed to be heading for a hideout up in the Land o' Lakes country. He and his gunmen and gun-moll held up a payroll car in broad daylight yesterday, shot two guards, got across the bridge at Stillwater, stole a big Packard somewhere in this state and are roaring across country at ninety miles an hour, somewhere. I think this is *it,* Hal."

"They wouldn't run a Minnesota car across the state line because that would start the Federals after 'em," Hal mused. "What route did they take, did you hear?"

"They turned south on U. S. 12, but I bet my hat they'll dodge on up to No. 64, take cross-roads, dive through Chequamegon Forest and hit right through here. This would be the shortest route to the hideout."

"What was the goofy short-wave stuff like this time?" asked Hal.

BETWEEN them they had been decoding the mysterious messages that were being sent from somewhere up north, and which they believed were radio warning and directive signals for Gallagher. They had caught one name, mis-spelled, evidently on purpose, and by a freak of chance, Hal had happened to stand within earshot of the man they suspected was Gallagher's "fence", the bald-headed proprietor of one of the four-score saloons in the notorious town of Hurley.

"I got that name Baldy again, spelled b-a-d-l-y," Tyler answered, "and I think Baldy is the front guy for the fellow at Lac Vieux Desert who owns that hideout you saw from the air, and got shot at for flying over, the other day."

"I thought so, myself," Hal agreed. "Baldy was trying to brush off some plain-clothes men who were quizzing him in his bar. I was there trying to get a clue to—you know whom."

"Did you get it? Is she—"

"Alouette is probably at the Lac Vieux Desert Rest Home, nursing," Hal cut in. "I can't be sure, but the close-up shot that Chuck took of the hospital and grounds showed up a girl, looking right up at us, that I feel is Alouette. I've been waiting for my plane to be patched up to fly over there and find out."

"Looks like you might get a chance to fly over that way right now — if Gallagher comes through. Just look at that bonfire!"

They were out on a state highway that ran close to the mill-yard, where a huge mountain of pulp-sticks rose over one hundred feet in air and which was blazing all over with those oily-looking flames. Other fire trucks roared past them, headlights on, showing up several parked cars, running men, firemen stringing hose, mill-hands inside the high wire fence with its two strands of barbed wire atop, also laying hose lines. The police were there, in force, and were blocking off traffic, posting men with red flags up and down the C. M. & St. P. railroad tracks and the road.

Tyler was passed through the police line as a radio newsman, and Hal wore his deputy's badge. In the course of his work he and Chuck both were serving as fire patrol scouts, along with the Rangers. It was coming daylight now, but the lurid flames and dark smoke still necessitated lights in the vicinity of the pulp-yard.

"It's a set or I'll eat my hat," exclaimed Tyler, then he snatched at the eye-shade. "Where did I get this thing? Oh, I was taking that code and—say, look at that fellow climbing the fence! Oh, he has a red flag, but why didn't he use the gate?"

It was a difficult scramble to mount that fine-meshed steel fence, ten feet high, and get over the tight barbed wire but the man made it like a monkey and ran up the road, waving the flag.

"He seems to feel his importance," observed Tyler. "Acts as if he intended to run clear up to the cross-road."

An instant later Tyler added:

"It would be something if the Killer tried to run through this thing, wouldn't it?"

"What do you mean?" asked Hal, sharply.

"Well, here are about all the local police tied up on this fire, some of 'em inside the fence; the chief is out of town at a convention. In all this excitement that big Packard could speed through the city without being stopped. No registration number given in the news. A big, blue, open car with top down and a double wind-shield, one for the back seat. They're heavily armed. Gallagher and three other men and the girl, who is said to have been badly wounded in a running battle in Stillwater. What a story! *Firebug sets torch to pulp pile while Killer races through blocked roads to a getaway.*"

"He'd hardly dare crash the main route, Marve," Hal objected, somewhat amused at the newsman's professional enthusiasm for a "story."

"He wouldn't have to," Tyler went on. "There's that gravel road that comes out from the junction of No. 17 and No. 51, or where they part company, on the east edge of town. That gravel shoots straight west, then straight north and comes back on this one, and there's another cross-road near the airport, as you know. He could dodge all this main drag stuff and get back on No. 17 and speed on to the north, or swing off through Pelican Lake on dirt roads and he wouldn't hit any town of size until Eagle River, the gateway to Land o' Lakes, but just a hamlet. After that it's all Nicolet State Forest to the Michigan line and Ottawa National Forest to Ironwood and Hurley."

HAL remembered how aerial photos had shown the excellent approaches from north and south to Lac Vieux Desert, which sprawled across the Wisconsin-Michigan boundary. Highway 17 was a likely one for the fugitives to take if heading to the lake.

The fire was being brought under control now. Tons of water had smothered the flames, and seemingly had literally washed off a blazing surface. Pools of water showed the rainbow hues of oil, mute testimony to the fact that an incendiary had doused some inflamable liquid onto the pulp pile.

"I'm going to see the Chief and ask him—" Tyler's words went off with him and Hal decided to get along to the airport, for daylight would soon make possible a takeoff, though it was going to be a poor day for photos.

He was grinning yet, at Tyler's vivid building up of a news story as he walked along No. 17. He was nearing the junction of the state highway with the gravel road Tyler had spoken of when he saw the man with the red flag who had climbed the fence. The fellow wore a slouch hat and a sport jacket of some sort. He stooped down suddenly, then seemed to be sneaking through tall reeds in a swale from the Pine River overflow to get to a telephone pole at the road junction. He seemed to be trying to conceal himself behind it, but soon straightened and reappeared, walking out into the crossing, his flag held down at his side.

Hal was only momentarily attracted to his actions, for he was looking far ahead to see what the wind-sock at the airport would tell him about a possible change in weather. The gravel road was hidden from Hal, where he now walked, by tall fodder corn, uncut, but he noticed a rising cloud of gray dust above the tasseled tops, speaking of the swift passage of a car that dug up the damp surface and kicked up the dust beneath. Then there came a shrieking of brakes and tires, and the man with the red flag waved it vigorously, and started running into the gravel road, flinging the flag away.

Hal was galvanized into a sprint, clapping his hand to where his gun should be and finding it absent; it was in his plane.

THE long nose of a big blue car slid out into the crossing, the flagman leaped on the running board and fairly dived into the spacious tonneau and the car lunged forward into high speed, turning onto No. 17.

Hal saw the muzzle of a gun poked over the flattened top and he threw himself flat

and rolled over into the ditch as a string of bullets gouged the paved road where he had stood.

There was no doubt in Hal's mind that he had seen the Killer and his gang, and that the flagman was one of them. He had been planted to fire the pulp-pile, for a purpose, and was taken aboard for the getaway. No doubt that Gallagher was well-named; that Tommy-gun had been aimed to kill him. Tyler's hunch or his news-sense had been exactly fulfilled.

The big car thundered on, and Hal got up and ran faster, to the airport. He found the motor warmed up, a mechanic tuning it, Chuck adjusting his camera in the cockpit.

"Did you see and hear what I just did?" Hal asked them both, as he climbed up and grabbed for his flying clothes, his 'chute and began to squirm into things.

"Thought I heard a truck backfiring, a minute ago," replied Chuck. "But I was in the cab and the plane engine was about all I could hear. What was it?"

Hal told him, quickly, then he asked, just as briefly.

"All ready to go, Chuck? We're going after Killer Gallagher and the firebug, right now."

THEY were off the ground within three minutes, thanks to the ready engine, and Hal opened full throttle as he circled for altitude while Chuck glued his eye to the periscopic finder that he used, to look down through the floor, his camera put aside at Hal's suggestion, so that he got a full birdseye view of the terrain that was unreeling beneath them. Hal could see out of his window a part of the territory and he kept No. 17 highway in sight, but continued to circle widely and climb higher.

"I don't want 'em to know we're chasing 'em," Hal explained to Chuck, through the inter-communication phones which each wore, and which could be switched onto their radio at will, to receive or send. "When you catch sight of that blue car tell me and I'll wing over to the other side of the road. All I want to do for now is sight 'em and keep 'em in sight. Hand me my gun."

Chuck picked the belted, holstered gun out of a locked compartment and laid it across Hal's lap. They flew on in silence for a few moments, seeing two or three cars heading south, traveling at moderate speed on the black-top road. Hal wondered if he had lost the bandit car, somehow, but could hardly believe they could miss such a target as that big blue Packard.

"What's the answer to all this?" asked Chuck finally. "How do you know it was Gallagher?"

Hal looked at his dash clock and turned on the radio to receive. It was a newscast hour and the first item that came through was a review of the sensational hold-up in St. Paul, the escape of the Killer and his gang and added details.

"It is believed that the Killer is heading at high speed for a hideout in the upper-Wisconsin-Michigan area, where the police say he aims to join up with another gangster, formerly connected with Gallagher's outfit. In his mad dash for a getaway, the Gallagher gunmen shot up a Wisconsin State Police car that was in pursuit, near Eau Claire, badly wounding one officer and causing the car to smash up against a concrete bridge. Three other officers were hurt in the crash, one seriously. Latest reports place the car—one moment, here's a fresh bulletin. The Killer car flashed through Merrill at about daybreak, taking advantage of confusion due to a pulp pile fire. The car headed north. The State Police of that district are chasing it. And here's another bulletin! A private plane is also in on the chase."

"Damn that fool!" cried Hal. "I'd like to jam him off the air. If Gallagher has a radio in that car he is being warned, and he must have, because someone had been sending him code."

"There she is," exclaimed Chuck, "just making the turn off No. 17 to the right, heading onto that crooked cut-over road to Pelican Lake that joins No. 47. Cripes, they must be hitting close to a hundred an hour!"

The plane was making 130.

"Yes, and he caught that dumb broadcast, all right," growled Hal. "It warned him to get off Seventeen. I'm going to take her down low and do some hedge-hopping, to try to keep out of his sight."

"And he's trying to keep or get out of ours, it looks like," Chuck added. "Wow! He almost turned over on that curve."

But the road now plunged into dense

woods and they lost sight of the swaying, skidding Packard as the blue waters of the lake came in sight and Hal climbed two or three hundred feet for a better view. A road completely circled the little body of water and branched both east and west, connecting with two main routes, three if the Killer made a detour easterly. But No. 47, becoming No. 45, farther north, was the most direct to Land o' Lakes. Unless the Killer was desperately trying to throw off pursuit, he would hardly afford such a detour, unless, too, Hal considered, he chose to avoid the direct approach from south, speed northwest toward Florence or Hurley, and double back in Michigan territory.

At any rate, the blue Packard had vanished somewhere near Pelican Lake and Hal cruised it well, then on over a small village west of the lake, back over another, on the east shore. The tiny towns were quiet, no evidence of excitement.

Hal opened his radio again but there was no news on any station that interested him. He considered landing at Rhinelander but after circling the city and noting no excitement there, he began speed north.

"We'll take it on the lam for Lac Vieux Desert," he told Chuck. "Try to beat 'em to it and wait. Rig your camera. We might as well do some takes, spot that cottage that I think is the hideout—and the Rest Home grounds. You didn't print up your negative that you got the other day."

"No. I had to skip down to Wausau and didn't have time. Why?"

"I printed it. Unless I'm much mistaken, you got a picture of Alouette."

"No kidding? So that's where she's hiding. Got a hideout, herself. Why did she run away, d'you suppose?"

"Why, you ought to know, Chuck. She turned you down, too."

"Oh, hell, that? Hal, did you think—what's the matter?"

The engine sputtered, the plane dipped.

"Trouble. Plenty of gas. Line must be plugged or something. That mechanic—hold everything, got to make a dead-stick landing. I'll drop in close to the State Highway Division shop, north of town. Crank down the wheels, Chuck."

The Chub-Cub was a special job, amphibian, with pontoons for water landings. Chuck cranked the wheels down below the level of the pontoon bottoms, grumbling.

"We can't beat 'em at this rate, when they can hit ninety or more on the main drag."

"I figure that they drove that blue car into a hole in the woods, back there, to throw us off. There were some police cars coming on No. 47, going like the deuce, up from Antigo, I reckon. Hold everything! The ground looks bumpy."

It was, but the light plane could be landed at low speed and softly, and nothing was hurt.

The trouble proved to be a leaky gas-line, letting air in, damage from the shots fired at Hal from the deck of a big motor-launch in front of the mystery cottage on the north shore of Lac Vieux Desert. The Division garage furnished a new copper tube and high-test gas, and while Hal and Chuck made repairs they listened to a blaring radio in the garage, detailing more news of a mad chase after Jack "Killer" Gallagher, "Punk" O'Hara, Jimmy the Wop Frecetti and Daisy, the gun-moll, the last again declared badly wounded and needing medical attention.

All police agencies of state, county, city and town were now in action. There was talk of rousing the State Militia if the murderous crew were surrounded in some hideout, but nothing was being sent out to give a clue to where the blue car had been seen.

IN THE air again, after a scant half-hour, Hal kept the radio on and soon caught a message in the code that the Associates used. It was Tyler's voice.

"Calling C. C., calling C. C.—" came his drawl.

"That's us," exclaimed Chuck, excitedly. "Give 'em an answer."

"This is C. C.; this is C. C. listening. Hello T. Hello T."

"Bandit car abandoned at P. Lake," came the startling news. "They are now traveling in a gray sedan, a gray sedan, stolen at P. Lake. A gray Chevrolet sedan with black top, white rubber. Are you listening, C. C.? Did you get it?"

"This is C. C. Yes, we have it. Thanks. Which road?"

"We do not have it. Reported they shot out of P. Lake toward Lennox and Crandon on dirt road in woods but no confirmation."

"We'll try for 'em on No. 55," Hal decided and swung northwest to cut across. "I

bet my hat they'll take it and No. 32, hit for the state line and on into Iron River to get to U. S. 2, then head back west, reversing their course, you see."

"Maybe hit for Florence where they could get a doctor," suggested Chuck. "What's your guess?"

"We can guess a lot, but how many gray Chevvies with black tops and white tires do you suppose there are up this way?"

They saw six within the next half hour, but none speeding or with white tires and when Hal swooped low at one of three others he got friendly waves, no bullets. He shook his head and said:

"They've out-smarted us. We lost almost an hour from that gas-line leak. And probably they are traveling slow now, to avoid suspicion. We're heading for Lac Vieux Desert."

"And then what?"

"To spot the hideout, for the police, anyway. I figure they'll try to get a doctor from the Rest Home—or even take the girl there. I've heard Gallagher is nuts about that moll. She helped him escape prison and he risked his life at the time to keep her from the cops."

"I can't imagine being so nutty over a *femme,*" said Chuck.

Hal looked at him sharply.

"Oh!" exclaimed Chuck. "Maybe you can. That's why you're so anxious. I reckon I know why she ran away, Hal. Didn't want to come between us. A woman's reason, or something. Well—there's Lac Vieux Desert, and the hospital on the hill and—"

Hal cut him off for the radio which came through with a bulletin that galvanized them.

"Killer Gallagher and his gang are reported hiding out in a secluded and well guarded cottage somewhere in the woods in the Land o' Lakes area. The area is being combed by the police. A cordon has been drawn about one suspected place at Lac Vieux Desert, the police acting on information from an authoritative source in Hurley, to the effect that an old-time accomplice of Gallagher who makes headquarters in Hurley, and is said to be a vice king in the north country, has been in touch with the Killer and made plans to shelter him, and that this man has used both bribery and intimidation on local officials."

There was an interruption, and a few sharp words by two voices, seemingly in altercation, then the newscast went on:

"The Gallagher gang is heavily armed with sub-machine guns and other weapons. There is a report of a cruising plane having once been fired on from a motor-launch on Lac Vieux Desert, identified as being owned in Hurley."

The newscaster evidently had been warned to tone down his sensational statements.

"That is more than a news report, mister," Hal commented. "It's close to the inside stuff. Chuck, take both guns and when I make a dive toward that motor-launch that is moored at the end of the dock, give the guy who may be there with a Tommy-gun a few lead messages. All set?"

Chuck nodded, grinning, and shoved his camera aside so he could point the automatics through the slot where his lens had projected through the floor.

Hal nosed down, and as he did so, four human figures came running out of the woods onto the dock, among them a limping, lean man in the lead, evidently Gallagher, the head of the gang. They were running for the launch, and bubbles and billows under its stern testified the motor was running. There was no girl in sight.

Two uniformed men burst from the woods a short distance up the shore from the dock. One of the armed men on the dock knelt down and opened a burst of fire at them, and one went down flat on his face. The other staggered back and fell into the bushes. The gunmen scrambled to the boat and got aboard.

"Just plain bloody murder!" cried Hal. "Chuck, never mind the automatics, now. They're too many for us. I'm going to take you over to shallow water, behind that point, where you can bail out."

"Bail out? Say, I want to put some lead into their dirty guts!"

"I said, bail out. I'm going to crash the launch. They're trying for a getaway, across the lake. I wouldn't put it past 'em to rush the hospital."

"I'll stick with you, Hal," declared Chuck stubbornly.

Bullets came whistling past their tail as Hal buzzed over the trees on the point and then climbed a bit.

"He's no duck-hunter; he doesn't know enough to lead the ship," chuckled Hal. "Get set, Chuck! No use two of us getting hurt, if at all. Get out on that wing before I push you out!"

Chuck took a look at the set, steady face of his pal.

"You're skipper," he said. "But before I go—remember this, *Alouette is your girl.* So long; here goes nothing!"

He slid back his door and lunged out on the wing and as Hal dipped that wing and turned, he shot off like a bundle from a whirligig.

Hal caught last sight of him as his chute blossomed, and he floated down to where the blue water was whitish, showing shallows over bright sand.

Hal dived from the altitude he had made for the jump, as the motor-launch moved away from the dock, gathering speed as its motor kicked up billows. It was a powerful Kriss-Kraft and it fairly leaped over the small waves in a west wind.

From on shore came the rattle of gunfire, and a man in the launch stern was firing back. Hal could see his shoulder recoil from the kick of the Tommy-gun. Two other men lay flat on the duck-boards in the bottom of the boat, a fourth was crouched low under the wheel.

Hal dived, aiming at the port side of the launch, until he was within a hundred feet of it, gaining on it, then he saw a man with a contorted face, raise another submachine-gun and aim at the plane, still on his back. Hal came down onto the water, his pontoons splashing spray, a pancake landing for a purpose, dashing water high, a sheet of it flying up over the nose of the plane and then a big wave catching the launch, as Hal lifted the nose a bit and with throttle full open, plunged at the speeding launch, just back of midships.

THE crash came amid the tearing sound of bullets through plywood, the rattle of them on bulletproof glass, then things went into a smother and tangle of plane, boat and water.

Something seemed to rear up and smash Hal on top of the head, and he went out.

"—about time you waked up, old man," came a familiar voice from a seeming far distance.

Chuck's face swam about in a mist, Hal could just seem to open one eye and that had to peer over the fringe of a soft white bandage.

"Today is Tuesday and tomorrow will be Wednesday and so on and here's a whole week almost gone and no work done," jibed Chuck. "Snap out of it, old fellow. Somebody waiting to see you. I'm supposed to break it gently. Can you take it?"

"Uh, huh, I guess so, after I stop spinning around, Chuck," Hal answered faintly.

Just one eye open made him dizzy, so he closed it. When he opened it again Chuck was not there but a slender, white-clad nurse stood just inside the door, her violet blue eyes brimming, her lips trembling, and Hal opened both eyes.

"Alouette, come here!" he commanded. "Don't try to run away."

She came and sank down softly on the edge of the bed and Hal found he could use his hands and that his lips were not bandaged.

"It seems," he said, after a while, "that I made a crash landing in heaven."

"You—you almost—went to heaven, indeed," she murmured.

"Has Chuck—told you things?"

She nodded, with a quick smile. "Everything. Chuck is a brick."

"He is," agreed Hal, "and so we don't have to bother each other, you and I, with a lot of questions. Everything is okeh. How am I doing?"

"The doctor says you are a miracle, after making yourself into a human dive bomb against those murderers. You got a bad concussion and you've been sleeping for three days."

"How—how many did I kill?"

"Not one, and they're all in Waupun prison."

"My poor plane! I suppose—"

"Oh, you are to have a brand new one, Hal! There is a reward of five thousand dollars waiting for you."

"Whew! And what else, Alouette?"

"Chuck says the new plane will have to be christened the Honeymoon Special," she answered, going pink and then sobering, as she added. "Forgive me for running away, Hal. I've been through purgatory."

"I know," he agreed. "So have I, but as I said—heaven."

". . . and Ungodly Nations Shall Come to Naught in Their Nefarious Undertakings."

HOMER TURNS BACK THE CLOCK

By FRANCIS GOTT

Author of "The Sims Ain't Slackers," etc.

THE sea chest was old, reinforced with brass and covered with seal-skin from which the hair had long since been worn. Captain Barnabas looked at it with both respect and curiosity. The ancient lock was formidable and had kept the chest's secrets hidden from idle hands since the Civil War.

"Well," Captain Barnabas mumbled, half to himself and half to his crew, "I cal'ate Uncle Zadoc's chest'll have to stay shut till we get to sea—if we want to get out with the tide."

"Where'd you come afoul of it, Cap'n?" asked old Vreeley, stooped body a-quiver with ill concealed curiosity.

Captain Barnabas scratched a whiskery jowl. "We found it plastered behind a partition when we tore down Uncle Zadoc's old place. Lumber's high now, ye know. War prices—"

"Bet it's full o' money."

" 'Tain't heavy enough."

"Treasure charts, then?"

"Aw, batten down, Oboe," Captain Barnabas chuckled kindly. "Uncle Zadoc was a poor man, like most of us."

"Ts'k!" old Vreeley sniffed, big ears twitching in unbelief.

The skipper of the *Sally L.* lifted his stocky body halfway up the ladder to the open deck when sudden suspicion smote him. He cast a worried look at the huge form of Homer Sims, sprawled out upon a bench locker. Homer, so big that he took up considerable of the limited space in the forecastle, was staring at the chest. His blue eyes, fat creased and sleepy lidded, were trancelike.

"Don't ye dast touch that chest, Homer," Captain Barnabas bade sternly.

Homer's sagging jaw slupped back into place. His little eyes held a guilty gleam that Captain Barnabas didn't like. He was about to raise his voice to give Homer a sterner warning when the forecastle radio blared: Seven German prisoners, destined for work camps in the Maine woods, escaped in a lifeboat from the freighter *Aras,* one hundred miles off Monhegan Island during a heavy fog mull. Small craft beware. These desperate men are led by a Lieutenant Flackenheim who speaks excellent English. It is believed that none of these men are seamen, so their attempt to escape is both futile and foolhardy.

"H'mn!" Captain Barnabas muttered.

He climbed to the open deck and sniffed the fog. He forgot all about Homer Sims. He shivered and buttoned his vest against the chill November air. His vest was a cherished possession, his one badge of authority; when he wore it he was skipper in every sense of the word. He prowled aft, taking his time, inspecting riggings, sails and hull.

"The old girl looks like the *Flying Dutchman,*" he grunted. "She looks bad enough in the daytime, but at night—"

HE TWISTED open the strands of a rope's end with splayed fingers. He noted with satisfaction that the line was sound in the heart, but it did look frayed and worn on the outside. The ragged condition of the sails was not improved any by the thickening dusk. Also the worn and splintered timbers of the paintless hull lent an illusion of great age to the usually trim schooner.

"Summer canvas all shot," he muttered. He chuckled philosophically. "Time for winter canvas anyway. Guess I been drivin' ship and men too hard this summer. They ain't growled much, though, not with war prices on fish what they be. 'Cept Homer, blast 'im, always gettin' us into messes."

He started aft again to have a chat with Hiram Hillgate at the wheel. Just then a giant bulldog careened through his legs and disappeared aft like a dirty white puff of smoke.

"Whumf'f!"

Captain Barnabas sat down on his broad backside with a thud that made the deck quiver.

"Them dratted dogs o' Homer Sims!" He tried to roar but could only wheeze through loss of wind.

He started to get up, when *swish,* a long body with one flapping ear sailed over his head, driving hind paws as big as saucers into his eyes and face. Homer's hound! Captain Barnabas sat, waiting. Sure enough, Homer's third dog, an ancient Airedale, tore past him down the deck.

Captain Barnabas got up slowly, joints creaking. Patient, kindly, he loved mankind and in especial did he love his crew and watch over them like a patriarch of old, but Homer was carrying things a little too far. He'd have to get rid of those dogs. One dog was bad enough on a small vessel —but three of them, and dogs such as Homer possessed! Homer had picked them up at the dog pound—at fifty cents for the lot, and a bargain at that, he stoutly maintained. Captain Barnabas snorted.

He heard an uproar coming from the base of the mainmast, yowls, snarls, thuds, and a fierce thrashing. On the rare occasions when he had to, Captain Barnabas could move fast. Now, like a giant puss in seaboots, he was where he wasn't, twenty feet down the deck, two seconds before.

"Lay off'n them trawl tubs, ye hounds o' Satan!" he bellowed. He eyed with an-

guish three tubs of trawl overturned, baited hooks and gangings spewed all over the deck.

The dogs fell apart like a splash of brine. Captain Barnabas looked at them with both relief and surprise, for not one scarred veteran had as much as a newly scratched nose. So fierce had been the snarling and snapping of fangs, that he had expected to find at least one brute dead among them.

With a scowl on his florid features yet affection in his heart, he let them spread wet tongues over his hands. Battle-tried veterans of God alone knew what hardships these homely, frightening yet blooded brutes had taken to the sea with both appreciation and gratitude. Homer had saved them from the dog pound and a potter's grave and of this they were apparently aware; for all three had already shown their willingness to die for the trawlers of the *Sally L.*

"Get!" Captain Barnabas said, and the animals melted away into the shimmering fog. Captain Barnabas, ever mindful that true greatness lay in the thoughtfulness of small attentions, covered the remaining distance to the quarter-deck where Hiram Hillgate stood his lonely wheel watch. Hillgate's long face sagged in a grin, the ends of his drooping mustache hanging past the corners of his cavernous mouth like gray moss. Tall, bony, an excellent helmsman, he steered by touch, sight and sound, instinctively.

"Opened Uncle Zadoc's chest yet?" he asked, studying a rosy shaft of sunset which had shot through a cleft in the fog and speared the dripping sails.

Captain Barnabas chuckled. "That chest! Cal'ate I'll have to break 'er open before ye fellers slaver yourselves into a fever, 'specially Homer, the durn fool."

"Homer?" Hillgate's blue lighted with speculation.

"Yep! Homer ain't took them cat's eyes o' his'n off'n it."

Hillgate bent his lank form as he eased the wheel two spokes to starboard. "That Homer! A problem, now, ain't he? Got more curiosity than a goat, big 'n strong as an elephant, and crafty like a fox. Reg'lar devil, he be."

"Now, Hiram," admonished Captain Barnabas. "We gotta put up with him. Sot him ashore and the poor feller'd starve to death, for nobody else'd ever ship 'im out."

"He keeps me on edge," said Hillgate, gnawing at a plug of tobacco.

Captain Barnabas nodded gravely; yet he chuckled inwardly. Hillgate sure was a comfort; born without nerves, Hillgate was. Not even the certainty of death nor the uncertainty of wartime taxes could disturb his perpetual tranquility.

"Funny, ain't it," ruminated Hillgate, spitting into the gathering dusk to leeward, "how Homer thinks he's somebody else when he's took sudden with one o' them spells."

"Yep," agreed Captain Barnabas uneasily, recalling the queer lights in Sims' eyes which his contemplation of the sea chest had brought out. "Cal'ate I better get for'ard and take a squint at 'im. That ol' sea chest, ye know, is quite an enticement to Homer, got 'im sort of all worked up. By the way,

Hiram, keep your weather eye peeled—radio says seven German prisoners escaped from a ship off here to the east'ard of our course somewheres."

"That so!" grunted Hillgate, bushy eyebrows twitching with interest.

Darkness was spilling over the rim of the world when Captain Barnabas descended into the forecastle. Sure enough, he found Sims' big form bent over the chest. Sims' dab of a cigarette was twitching, cigarette smoke slowly coiling out of the nostrils. The smoke was forming spirals of nebulae a foot above the chest. Sims, rubbing calloused palms together with the noise that a harsh rasp would make, was staring down

through the leather-covered boards of the chest.

"Terrible temptation, eh, Homer?" Captain Barnabas said, tartly. He gave the chest a heave, slid it along the deck under the triangular mess table. "Jest to teach ye patience, Homer, me lad, I ain't goin' ter open 'er yet."

Sim's beady eyes blinked. His cigarette, grotesquely small in the immensity of the huge face, worked back and forth in confusion.

"Ts'k!" clucked old Vreeley in disappointment.

Captain Barnabas' uneasiness increased. It wasn't that Sims was dumb, exactly; rather did he seem like two men chained together in one skin. Shaking his head over the hopeless muddle of human nature, he took to his bunk.

SEVERAL hours later Captain Barnabas awoke, the transition from deep sleep to complete wakefulness only a matter of seconds. A warning drummed in his head. Perturbation crept over him. The sixth sense that he had developed from a lifetime of fishing on the Banks told him that all was not well.

Raising himself on an elbow, he stared about the forecastle, sniffed the cloying odors of stale tobacco smoke, of cooked food and of men sleeping. He saw that only Homer Sims was awake, still sitting on the bench locker, still staring at the chest. Captain Barnabas looked closer. The hairs at the base of his scalp prickled. Sims was neither asleep nor awake.

Sometime during the night the three dogs had come into the forecastle; for all three were facing Sims and looking at the tobacco smoke coiling above the chest—and whining restlessly.

Homer Sims was in the grip of one of his spells.

"Snap out of it, Homer!" Captain Barnabas thumped the edge of the wooden bunk.

Sims sat on, unmoving, seeing things that other men couldn't see.

Exasperated, Captain Barnabas got up. Dead-eye, the bulldog, an almost shapeless mass of gnarled muscle, lapped his hand and whined. Cigarette butts, smoked down close, were thick about Sims' feet.

Captain Barnabas looked at his watch, his portly frame easily swaying to the canting of the deck. He listened to the creaking of the ship's timbers and lifted his cherubic jowls to meet the spray coming down through the partly open companionway hatch. He heard the wind whimpering in the rigging and felt the vessel's easy straining as she gripped the sea. Everything seemed all right, and yet—

Four men were asleep in the bunks, Hillgate, too, flat on his back, mustache sucking in and out of his mouth as he breathed peacefully. Old Vreeley had the wheel then.

Scowling at Sims, so like a Buddha in perpetual sleep, he slipped into sea boots and ascended to the open deck. Anxiously, he padded aft. The air was dank against his face as he sniffed and listened.

"Ye all right, Oboe?" he called softly.

"That ye, Cap'n?" He heard the old trawler's voice, lonely, adrift in the night like a bubble on an immense sea.

"Thick, ain't it, Oboe?" said Captain Barnabas. His voice was casual, concealing both relief and restlessness.

"Night's blacker'n the seventh pit in the old scratcher's hangout," complained old Vreeley childishly. "What time 'tis?"

"Six bells."

"Three o'clock. Well, I gotta 'nother hour."

"Nope, ye ain't, Oboe," Captain Barnabas said kindly. "I'll take 'er for a spell. Turn in, if ye want."

OLD VREELEY'S face showed momentarily, strained, deeply lined, leathery, as he bent over the binnacle and a finger of light reached up and caressed him.

"Creepy night, ain't ut?" he whispered.

Captain Barnabas laid a hand on the dripping wheel.

"Sou'east by a quarter east," said old Vreeley.

Captain Barnabas repeated the course.

"Sails be drawin' full."

"Just about 'nough air to cup 'em, eh?"

"Yup. Don't know but what ut's the fog that's drivin' 'er, at that. Creepy feelin'."

"Keep an eye on Homer, will ye, Oboe."

Old Vreeley coughed apologetically. "Reg'lar white walrus in a horse stall, ain't he, Cap'n?"

"Takes all kinds to make a world," Captain Barnabas reproved gently.

"I cal'ate."

Alone, Captain Barnabas felt the gentle pull of the vessel under him. The night was a vast tide, incomprehensible, drawing them on and on. That the cry of man, despairing, weary, age-old, should come out of that dripping void of darkness was a soul-disturbing question of ponderous meaning. The cry was in German.

"Lord God!" prayed Captain Barnabas. "Would ye play tricks with these old ears?"

The cry came again, weak, thinly drawn out yet definite.

"Durn nigh abeam," breathed Captain Barnabas, eyes straining against the murk.

He put the wheel hard over. The vessel listed easily, hung an instant, then glided slower and slower as the wind caught and held her, ever so gently.

"Who's there?" he called through cupped hands.

"Here! Foundered lifeboat—seven men —on—" The English was clipped foreign.

Captain Barnabas shivered. Seven men! That first cry had been in German.

"Hold tight!" he called.

He gave the wheel a spoke or two, listened as the sails filled. Then he brought the vessel up sharp again, judging his distance.

A furred body pressed against his leg and he reached down. One-oar, the wise old hound, sniffed the night, and pointed, head canted. Captain Barnabas let the schooner glide.

Then men were on that deck, with a suddenness that appalled him. Dripping phantoms, unknown humans, Germans, slopping about him. He lit a match.

"Ach!" The feeble flame startled them.

Captain Barnabas pressed tight his lips, studying them. They had expected guns, perhaps. Now they found themselves facing only the feeble flame of a match. He caught sight of a blob of shadow, ghostly against the sea—a foundered lifeboat, gunwales aslop, drifting astern. The match went out.

He lit another. The dog growled.

"Quiet, One-oar," he bade.

THE men pressed about him, dripping brine. He met their questioning eyes calmly, master on his own decks. The little man with the sharp face and measuring eyes would be their leader.

Captain Barnabas nodded. "Lieutenant Flackenheim."

The German officer stepped forward, surprise in his gray metallic eyes, his face alert, watchful, touched with wonder under the dim light of the match. His shoes were thin, his ankles sockless. He was bareheaded and wore only trousers and sweater. He brought his heels together, bowed.

"You know my name!"

Captain Barnabas nodded, absently. The Germans muttered, stared at each other, at the ancient hound, at the paintless hull, at the ragged sails, uneasily.

Captain Barnabas, eyes thoughtful, contemplative, watched the flame of the match burning close in his stubby fingers. That pin-point of brightness was such a feeble thing; yet the cheerful glow pushed back the great gaping, drooling maw of darkness that touched a man's soul with uncertainty, awe and a creeping chill. A strange mood of utter timelessness hung over that schooner.

Captain Barnabas had supreme faith in God, which cast a benign effusion of omniscience over his kindly features. The Germans backed away. He felt no fear of these men, only pity.

"Bring your men below, Lieutenant," he bade. "Ye'll need hot coffee, dry clothes, warm bunks."

"You are master, *nein?*"

"I am Barnabas Lee, cap'n and owner of this vessel, such as she be."

Flackenheim's lips thinned. "I must take over your vessel, Captain. You see—"

"So!" Captain Barnabas showed no alarm.

The German drew an automatic from under an armpit. "A prize of war—"

"Put your iron up, sonny," Captain Barnabas admonished. The German was perhaps forty years old yet looked sixty. Burnt out. A husk. Dangerous, though. "Ye people have neither the spiritual judgment nor humane understanding to be trusted with such weapons."

The lieutenant flushed. Captain Barnabas turned his back, started forward, letting the vessel flirt with the fitful breeze. A gentleman to the core, he lit another match; he had no desire to have these weary men stumble.

The Germans followed. By their mutterings, he knew them to be extremely uneasy. Old One-ear howled dismally, a frightful dirge of past killings; the cry thinned away into the penetrating mist. Thinner cries came from forward, spine-chilling, blood-curdling. The old bulldog and the old Airedale were answering the old hound. The Germans bunched together for comfort.

Captain Barnabas knew that should Lieutenant Glackenheim shoot him in the back he would never live to shoot again. The watchful and sagacious old hound would rip open the man's throat.

As they passed the waist of the vessel, a pearly glow of light spread from the companionway hatch and enveloped them. An eerie light, quite disturbing, Captain Barnabas clucked. This pea-soup fog sure did distort things.

THEN he reached the companionway hatch and looked down and wonder lay heavily upon him. Homer Sims had opened the chest.

An antique Turkish scarf, embroidered with characters and figurines, had been thrown over the mess table. Upon it had been placed a conch shell, delicately carved with the feminine forms of the three graces. Within the shell burned a candle, casting an unearthly light over the forecastle and the queerly garbed men within. Homer Sims had done his job well.

His huge form, resplendent in the uniform of a Civil War admiral, sat upon the chest now draped with a Persian rug. A sword rested across his mighty knees. To his right hand sat the old she Airedale, her torn lip giving her a perpetual sneer. To his left sat the bulldog, his one eye leering savagely. Each beast was draped in a tasseled silk scarf, fastened to the collar.

Even to the crew had Sims passed on his spell binding. Old Vreeley looked foolish in an ancient Civil War campaign hat. Hillgate rattled like a resurrected mummy in a coin tasseled jacket of some Far Eastern potentate.

Rich indeed had been the contents of Uncle Zadoc's sea chest.

"Ach lieber Gott!" As one, the Germans breathed their perturbation and awe.

Sims looked up. His little eyes glittered. His giant's voice boomed. He studied the foreign faces peering over Captain Barnabas' shoulder. Clouds moiled in his eyes and some conclusion, known only to his strange soul, was arrived at.

"Bring down the prisoners and we shall record their names." He bent his big head over the yellowed pages of an old ship's log, lifted a still older pen and dipped it into the jar in which Captain Barnabas kept his ink.

Captain Barnabas, cool as a sea cucumber, descended into the forecastle.

"Come down and meet the admiral," he said, looking up without batting an eye.

The German lieutenant, warily palming his gun, came down, followed by his men.

Homer Sims glanced at a dog-eared 1864 calendar which he had tacked to the wall.

"November 22, 1864," he muttered. "How time does fly!"

Lieutenant Flackenheim swallowed, harried features working in agitation. His eyes turned glassy. His men fidgeted nervously.

"Admiral Sims," Lieutenant Flackenheim," Captain Barnabas made grave-faced introductions. He chuckled inwardly. Might as well let Homer have his fling.

"Hag-h!" Sims stuck out a huge paw. Flackenheim, thin face twitching with suspicion, backed away uncertainly.

Old Vreeley gawped at the Germans. Hillgate offered one his plug of tobacco, but the man was so upset that he failed to notice it.

November 22, 1864—Sims dated the log.

The German lieutenant looked at that log. He licked dry lips.

"November 22, 1943," he corrected with Nazi punctiliousness.

Sims' fleshy face became stern. He tugged at a wisp of graying hair poking out from under his admiral's hat; his faded uniform fitted him well; for Uncle Zadoc had also been a big man standing six feet four and weighing three hundred ten. Captain Barnabas sighed. Sims turned back a page of the log, pointed.

Lieutenant Flackenheim read aloud the whorled script: "November 14, 1864. Today we very nearly lost to a Confederate sloop of war. Fortunately, because of a

thick fog, we were able to slip away and to give her our heels successfully. Secretary of War Stanton plays at war as he would at a game of chess, ruthlessly, without feeling. Yet President Lincoln keeps him, and we on this ship consider the President to be in the right. The President recently told his critics, 'Folks come up here and tell me there are a great many men in the country who have all Stanton's excellent qualities without his defects. All I have to say is, I haven't met 'em! I don't know 'em! I wish I did.'"

Even Captain Barnabas batted his eyes. That old log of Uncle Zadoc's sure was a find. He really felt Lincoln's wise eyes peering over his shoulder.

"A great man, the President!" mused Sims.

"Your President, Roosevelt?" asked Flackenheim, hopefully. He shivered, striving to catch the thought stream of this strange ship.

"Roosevelt! Who's he?" asked Sims, eyes beady and questioning in their creases of flesh. "I'm speakin' of Abe Lincoln, the President."

"*Ach,* so!"

"Lincoln!"

Even these Nazi Germans had heard of Lincoln. Flackenheim spoke in German. His men bunched together, their uneasiness turning to fear. They had no way of knowing that Sims believed so thoroughly in himself when in the grip of one of his strange spells that he made others believe, too.

"Lincoln!" Sims' voice rang out like a clarion bell. "The great emancipator! As long as his name shall be carried in the hearts and on the lips of free Americans, so long will unjust, ungodly nations, enslaving their fellow beings come to naught in their nefarious undertakings. Let freedom ring!"

"Amen!" Captain Barnabas put the weight of his capacious lungs into the word. Then he reached out and gently took the automatic from Lieutenant Flackenheim's flaccid fingers.

TREASURE IN THE TOMAHAWKS

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "Big Hoss and Little Hoss," etc.

FLAT broke, Sim Ledlow was, with hunger gnawing at his innards. He wasn't worth his salt as a cowhand; no relief lay in that direction. More or less gold awaited the diligent prospector in the hills, but this, too, required work. Sim believed in hunches. He had one, and it led him to a small room at the rear of the shadiest saloon in town.

"Hi, Dunc," he said to a man who sat at a little table dreaming over a solitaire layout. "How about tippin' me off to a job, anything short of a out-and-out stickup; huh, Dunc?"

"Yeah, you not having much nerve," drawled Duncan Barnett, tinhorn gambler. Like Sim Ledlow, he was slim, wiry and dark, shifty of eye; but he had a dapper appearance, while Ledlow was unwashed and unshaven. "Well, Sim, you know Big Ike Jennison?"

"When I see him, is all," Ledlow said.

Banks Go Bust, So the Jennisons—Big Ike and Little Ike—Thought They'd Keep Their Money to Home

"Met him on the Powder Creek Trail, hour ago. Headed for the north Tomahawk hills with his prospectin' outfit. Had hit a rich pocket there, I heard."

"Got nine hundred out of it," Barnett said. "Ike is about forty, and quiet enough, but in his younger days he was a hellion. Married and settled down, and his wife gave him a boy baby and then died. Folks thought he'd go back to the owlhoot. But he didn't. To him that boy—twelve now—is the whole world. For years Ike has been savin' money so's the kid can have a cow spread when he's grown. Don't bank his money, so he must keep it in his shanty. That's all the tip I know to give you, Sim, and I'm not specially advising you to take it."

"Orn't to be a hard job, robbin' a twelve-year-old," Ledlow muttered. "O' course, the *dinero* is hid. But the button would know where it is. Got any ideas about that, Dunc?"

"Well, few months ago," Dunc Barnett said, "Ike Jennison brought an old iron stage strongbox here to town so's the blacksmith could rivet a loose hinge. He'd naturally keep his valuables in that box. Find it and you've found the *dinero*. But oh, fella, don't you let Ike Jennison catch you!"

Sim Ledlow grinned through his dark stubble. "Ike won't be there. I'll make friends with the kid fust thing. Take him a purty toy, or somethin'. Gimme three dollars, Dunc, and I won't tell a dang thing I know on you; huh?"

Grudgingly Barnett gave him the money, gave him also directions for finding the Jennison shanty in the edge of the lower Tomahawk hills. Ledlow ate a belated breakfast in a restaurant, then went looking for an appealing toy and was lucky enough to pick up a half-size tin fiddle in a general merchandise store. The last of the Barnett three dollars went for cartridges to fit the Ledlow six-shooter.

Shortly before the middle of the afternoon, he dismounted near a sun-blasted old shanty at the head of a fenced-in narrow meadow on a little foothills creek. In the meadow seven calves frolicked like so many puppies. A red-headed and freckled, barefoot boy sat in the shanty doorway watching them. Forcing admiration into his voice, Sim Ledlow said:

"Sure is a nice little cow outfit you got here, pardner."

Only now did the boy seem aware that he had a visitor. The boy looked up. Ledlow could see him swell with pride.

"Will be some day," the lad said, his very blue eyes very bright. "I'm Little Ike Jennison, named after my daddy. Who're you, pardner?"

Sim Ledlow beamed. "Why," he said, "I'm Jack Jones, your pappy's cousin on his maw's side. Your pappy here, Little Ike?"

"No," the lad said. He did not elaborate. Much of his sire's iron strength of character was reflected in his countenance.

"Now ain't that too bad," said Ledlow, the bogus Cousin Jack. He was unwrapping the tin fiddle. "I was told over in town that Ike had a son, and I brung you a present. Hope you'll like it. Hafta tighten the bow a mite, fust. Twist the knob on the end there. I better tune her up for you. I cain't play a fiddle, but I do know how to tune one."

HE DID it, after a fashion. The boy tightened the bow. There'd been music in Little Ike Jennison's red-haired mother, and there was music in him. With eyes shining like a pair of stars, he sat there in the shanty doorway and sawed on that toy fiddle for solid hours. He knew only a few simple tunes. He stuck to just one, and at last decided that he had it.

"Know what that was, Cousin Jack, don't you?"

"Sure; purtiest thing I ever heared, too," said Sim Ledlow, lying like a gentleman for once in his life. "Play her some more."

Little Ike kept sawing.

Ledlow had off-saddled and staked his horse to meadow grass, had poked slyly around the shanty looking everywhere but as yet hadn't put an eye on the old iron strongbox. It occurred to him that this might be a hoax. If it wasn't, then why hadn't Dunc Barnett himself gone after the *dinero?* He soon found the answer to that. Dunc Barnett was afraid of Big Ike Jennison.

Well, he was too. He'd have to be all-fired careful. Once he had the treasure, he'd light a shuck for the Border and Mexico beyond.

At last Little Ike heaved a weary sigh,

rose and went to one of the two built-in bunks and there put the tin fiddle down ever so tenderly. Big Ike never had bought toys for him. Saving every cent possible toward Little Ike's cow outfit, Big Ike was. Sim Ledlow sat down in a chair that had been made from soapboxes.

"What sorta gun is that you're carryin', Cousin Jack?"

"She's a forty-one Colt," Ledlow said, and pulled her from her holster. "Peacherino, too. Can you shoot, son?"

"Lemme show you, Cousin Jack," said the redhead boy.

He took the iron, stepped to the front doorway, called Ledlow to him and pointed to the tip of a rock that showed above water some fifty yards up the creek. He leveled the iron with both hands, took aim and fired.

"How's that, Cousin Jack?"

"Busted her wide open!" cried Ledlow. "But that weapon is too heavy for you. She bucks nearly enough to break your hands."

"Oh, I've shot a forty-one before," said Little Ike. "Fact is, I got one. M'daddy thought somebody might try to rob us while he was out prospectin', and he gimme the forty-one and teached me how to shoot it. You wouldn't expect me to be a cowboy and not know how to shoot, would you, Cousin Jack?"

"Why, no, reckon not," Sim Ledlow said. He was bothered a good deal. If the kid caught him making off with the Jennison *dinero*, the kid would shoot him; no doubt of it. But he wasn't going to quit just yet. That tin fiddle had cost him a dollar and a half. Little Ike was speaking again:

"The sun's gone low. I better be fryin' out some supper for us, Cousin Jack. I can cook good as anybody. While I go to the spring for fresh water, if you don't mind lightin' a fire right over there—" He indicated a crude stone fireplace and hearth lined with battered cooking utensils, then caught up a wooden pail and hurried off.

Ledlow had seen the spring as he rode in. It was all of a quarter of a mile away. He would have some ten minutes in which to crawl under the shanty floor on a search for Big Ike's old iron strongbox.

But the treasure wasn't there.

The boy fried out bacon and flapjacks, and made a cup of coffee for the visitor. While they ate they talked.

"Over in town," Ledlow said in a casual voice, "they told me that Cousin Ike had been savin' his money to buy you a cow outfit when you was growed up, keepin' it in a old stage box. Looks like he'd put it in a bank, where it'd be safe."

"Banks go bust; it's safer here," Little Ike said. "All the bad hombres is afeared o' my daddy; he'd trail 'em to the very last inch o' the end o' the world, and they know it. Anyhow, I got that forty-one gun. You seen how I can shoot, Cousin Jack. Me and my daddy is pardners. He trusts me, lets me carry the key to the box, and it's got nearly four thousand in it, mostly in one-dollar bills."

"Ort to keep her in a good place," Ledlow said.

"She's in a good place all right," the redhead boy replied, and went no further. Ledlow concealed his disappointment.

The visitor occupied Big Ike Jennison's bunk that night. The lad took the tin fiddle to bed with him, slept with it, he was so proud of the toy! His sawing on it woke the visitor at daybreak. He kept up the sawing until almost noon, with never a thought of breakfast. This would have wrecked Sim Ledlow's nerves, had he not been so intent upon his sly search for the treasure. And still he hadn't found it.

"Looky, Cousin Jack," Little Ike said at last, as he put the tin fiddle down with greatest care. "I'll hafta stop now, on account my fingers is so sore I cain't hardly bear to touch the strings—but I'll tackle her ag'in in a day or so. Say, if you'll fetch us a bucket o' water from the spring, I'll fix a batch o' flapjack batter and slice some bacon while you're gone, and in no time we'll be eatin'. Huh, Cousin Jack?"

The bogus kinsman was as hungry as he was exasperated. At once he picked up the wooden pail and went.

Ledlow was about to set the filled pail on the back of the hearth when one of the flat stones, the biggest, gave an inch under his weight, and he knew, suddenly, where the Jennisons kept their savings. Smart, hiding the money in a hole under that stone!

His stubbly-bearded countenance betrayed nothing. To get the boy out of the

way for half an hour was his problem now. In half an hour, Ledlow figured, he could saddle his horse, transfer the old strongbox to his saddle-front and ride five miles. On foot, Little Ike could not even hope to overtake him.

Immediately Ledlow grabbed himself an idea. He ambled to the front door.

The seven calves were in the farther end of the narrow meadow, in the shade of cottonwood trees, near the pole fence. Ledlow ambled down that way, keeping out of sight from the shanty. Slyly he took out a section of fence poles and shooed the calves through, and they were soon scattered in thick chaparral.

Then he went back to Little Ike Jennison.

"Say, kid, all your calves is gone. Reckon somebody has rustled you?"

The redhaired boy left the shanty as though he'd been shot from a catapult. In one hand he had his .41 six-shooter; in the other was Sim Ledlow's bridle. He snapped the bridle on Sim's horse and in five more seconds had forked the animal's bare back and was riding off like a streak!

"For gosh sakes," moaned the unwashed, unshaven wouldbe robber. But he might have guessed it. Now he could get away with the treasure, but he'd have to walk!

The small soul of him became frantic. He wasn't going to pass up the chance, horse or no horse. Once he had made half a mile in the vast sea of boulders and scrub that stretched southward from the Tomahawks, he would be safe; he could count on that. Shakily he knelt at the hearth, unleathered his six-shooter and put it down near to his hand, though what he feared with neither of the Jennisons anywhere close was anybody's guess.

HE TURNED the biggest stone in the health and lifted out the old strongbox, brown with rust, double-locked and triple-hinged. It wasn't as heavy as he'd figured. He rose with it, and fled, across the creek and into the scrub.

After some ten minutes he slowed his pace, but he kept going steadily, sticking to rock patches in order to leave no trail. The noonday sun was hot; the box had begun to weigh something when he had carried it a mile.

Another hour, and he'd stop and shoot the locks, take the *dinero* out and toss the empty box into a thicket.

Suddenly Ledlow groaned. Shoot the locks, would he? How rattled he had been! He'd gone off and left his six-shooter lying on the Jennison hearth. Certainly he wasn't going to risk sneaking back after it. He struggled on with his burden, which became heavier and heavier, mile after weary mile.

It was all desert terrain. Night found him half famished, and very hungry. A few hours of rest, and he rose and shouldered the iron box and struggled on southward, Borderward, keeping himself oriented by the stars.

At noon of the next day, more or less delirious now, Sim Ledlow stumbled into the mud-and-pole *jacal* of an ancient Mexican sheepherder, who gave him water and food. It stiffened him almost miraculously. As one person to another, he spoke to his iron burden:

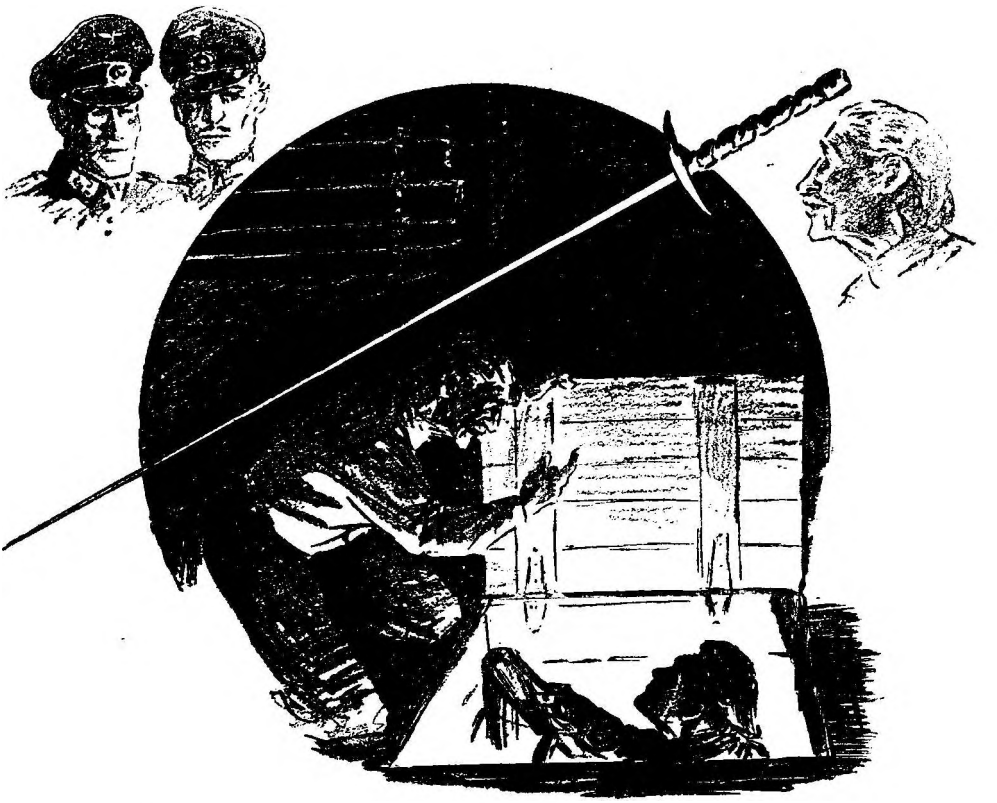
"Damn you, you cost me a good hoss, saddle and bridle, and a good gun. But four thousand dollars will buy a heap o' hosses, saddles and bridles and guns. Damn you, I'll carry you no further!"

He rose there in the shade of the *jacal,* looked for an axe and found one. Each of the heavy padlocks required half a dozen blows. He sank to his knees then, threw back the iron lid, and swore as he hadn't known that he could swear.

"While I was gone to the spring for water!"

There before his reddened eyes lay the treasure of the Tomahawks. The boy's treasure, that is, not the mere money, which the boy had taken out and hidden elsewhere in order to have room in the safest place he knew for his tin fiddle.

It Was Declared Past the Time When Frenchmen Found Excitement in Blood



FRENCHMAN'S SWORD

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

Author of "Arctic Flight," etc.

GONTRAN DE CRECY racked the practice foils on their felts in a display case in the reception salon. His hands trembled a little. The two Germans were sweating profusely as they drew on their tunics.

"You are a devil for work, Pere de Crecy!" the senior officer complained genially. "But an honor, Monsieur, a great honor. One does not every day secure the services of a master at fence. And a man keeps fit if he plays with the sword when he is not fighting, eh? Until tomorrow, then?"

De Crecy nodded weary agreement.

"Tomorrow, gentlemen, we will consider the high parries at *quarte* and *sixte.*"

The German officers moved out into the twilight of the street. De Crecy followed them to the street door. With the care of the old for the familiar details of habit, he locked this door and moved back to the big *salle d'armes* at the rear. Sloshing water from a pitcher into a basin, he scrubbed the wrinkled skin of his fingers with something near savagery. It was a foolish thing. A man did not rid himself of Teutonic taint so readily. But it made De Crecy feel better.

This was a dangerous game; these were dangerous days. France had long been in her grave. But a needle had been thrust under the soft Norman curve of her breast and by sea and air adrenalin was being poured into her empty veins. One did not know how long even so beautiful a woman as France could lie face in the earth and not be destroyed by rot. One did not know if the heart was dead, if the injection from across the Channel could send good blood once more burning to the tips of her fingers and the nails of her toes. One could but hope and labor and be cautious beyond the nature of Frenchmen for caution.

This pair of officers who had just quitted him—they were fanned by the new desperation reaching out from Berlin, but they were not fools; they were not stupid. This geniality, this interest in the graces of swordsmanship, this deference, this courtesy to an old man—all clever. They might mislead a man whose recollections did not already bridge three bitter generations.

Sabres were for Germans, slashed cheeks and gaudy scars about which a man might boast. Not foils. Not artistry. This pair had no real interest in the weapons at which he had instructed them for more than a month. Their interest was in the instructor—in himself. De Crecy made a small smile.

Let them ferret and cajole and flatter. Here in this familiar salon, by day and behind unlocked doors, he was only De Crecy, aged sixty, international authority on three weapons. It was at night, when old men should sleep and even the harried Gestapo was tempted to carousal by the lingering charms of France, that De Crecy was a Frenchman, a man of the Organization.

The world expected much of the Organization. This was its hour of trial, these uncertain days when there was no longer any doubt of victory and the question was one alone of time, of how many men must die. By radio across the Channel and the Atlantic came tributes and speculation. The Gestapo was engaged in a fury of search and counter-search. Yet the silent labors now bearing carefully nursed and tended fruits of retribution were understood by neither ally nor enemy.

"Underground," they called it. It was not underground. It walked the streets of towns and villages. It tilled the fields. Yes, and it worked in the factories for the invader. Through it, through every barrier the enemy had been able to raise, had passed a constant distillation of men and information to rendezvous on the English island. And an endless brew of violence, disaster, and revenge had simmered at home. Yet the work was but fairly begun.

The Germans had laughed. There was laughter left in France, but it did not show upon the lips.

WITH a glance at the high, securely bolted shutters of the *salle d'armes*, De Crecy bent, unsnapped the fasteners holding one canvas fencing-strip to the floor, and rolled back a six-foot section of the cloth. He lifted a square trap thus exposed. A lantern moved below. Men clambered up a ladder toward him.

Dr. Foucald was first, a gaunt, embittered man so twisted with arthritis that the Germans had scorned him for the field hospitals and had thus left his village more fortunate than most, with a medical man of its own. St. Omer followed, once a sot and libertine, now a man of merit. Racine, Dubonnet, Pilard—comrades.

The last man was nameless to De Crecy, but familiar of face and appearance, for all of that. It was strange that the young in these days all looked so much alike. De Crecy thought it might be their eyes. Each had their own sultry fire, checked by constant effort. Each of these youngsters had his own eagerness and his own bitter reasons behind it. Each was a drop of French blood, pulsing to the stimulus pouring ashore on the Channel coast.

This one lowered the trap, straightened, and grinned at De Crecy. It was a reckless grin. De Crecy shook his head to clear it. Perhaps it was not the eyes at all. Perhaps it was the gauntness of these young men, the marks of enforced labor and the deficiencies of food and comfort which all of them knew.

"Another comrade, De Crecy," Dr. Foucald said. "Laurent Loumena, and a good man who will be welcome in the north. He can sketch a little and he knows the latest expansions of the Renault works, at Paris. Our suspicions are sound; many of the robots come from there. Lomena knows

where the bombs should fall. He has been certified to us from Fontainebleu—and with complete documents! A relief, I tell you! I grow weary of watching every new man traveling our road for a cursed Gestapo agent!"

The doctor handed De Crecy the new man's dossier. De Crecy nodded absent recognition of the introduction, his eyes on the documents. St. Omer moved close and spoke softly.

"Your students stayed late today, Pere de Crecy! I don't like it. They watch too closely. They suspect you. We of this station should chose a new headquarters and find a new captain immediately. Who is to teach a new France the science of the sword if the salon of Gontran de Crecy is raided and the last of the great masters dragged off to face a firing-squad. You have had your share of risk. It should be another's, now!"

War bred queer loyalties. St. Omer was sometimes troublesome with his concern. He should know that a man who had labored through the hopeless years would not relinquish his post now when the armies were at long last again afoot in France. De Crecy shook his head impatiently, his eyes scanning the dossier Foucald had handed him. The doctor was right. This lad traveled with an unusually complete certification. He had been in the Maginot fortifications as a lieutenant in the third brigade of the Fourth Army and had been snared in a mass surrender at Montfaucon. Thereafter he had been nineteen months a prisoner in Germany and had served thirteen more in a Polish labor battalion. Ten weeks past, on good behavior, he had been returned to the critically short-handed Renault factories outside of Paris, from which he had escaped. He had made contact with the Organization at Fontainebleu and had been certified northward.

Pretty much routine, even to background, parentage, and a degree from a college of the University of Paris. A desirable, valuable man. Only one item in the brief dossier caught De Crecy's attention:

"Banner student, Academie d'Armes, Paris—"

De Crecy turned slowly, his eyes studying the youngster carefully. Yes, it was possible. Loumena was built of long lines, well knit together. There was a familiar elasticity to the way he stood and moved. This was something of which Gontran de Crecy was a competent judge.

"You come excellently recommended, Monsieur Loumena," he said pleasantly. "And you are, I perceive, a swordsman. This interests me. The Academie awards few banners. Who was your master?"

THE youngster's smile widened. He drew himself stiffly erect.

"Kirchoffer, Monsieur," he answered, "I was fortunate. But no more than tonight. I did not expect to find the great Pere Gontran de Crecy a station captain in the Organization!"

"You find that strange?" De Crecy murmured. "But Kirchoffer—yes. He was the best of them all! He made a magnificent try for the title. It was in the Court of Honor at the old Hotel Grand, in Paris, the last season before my retirement."

St. Omer nodded, old recollections lighting his face with sudden eagerness.

"I remember that meeting!" he said. "Kirchoffer, in his prime, meeting the greatest living swordsman of France in a bid for the international championship. Pini of Leghorn was there that night in the draped box to watch his old friend, Gontran de Crecy, defend the title. And there was gossip in the crowd that Pini feared you, De Crecy, would be defeated. The crowd—ah—and seats to five hundred francs a head! Ladies of fashion, carriages at the door, music from the balconies, and Paris alive! You won, De Crecy, how you won!"

"My master remembered that meeting, too," Loumena said quietly. "He spoke of it often, the privilege which was his, the memory of having faced the matchless De Crecy."

Racine poked a finger at Pilard.

"I told you your light-fingeredness would come to something, comrade! Go down. Fetch up two of the bottles of wine you lifted from the Hun's commissariat wagon. It is a young night. We have had a long day and Pere de Crecy the longest of the lot. The matter of certifying Monsieur Loumena on to the next station looks settled. He could, I think, have come here with no dossier and found friends. The Gestapo might secure a spy who was either a Frenchman of sorts or an indifferent swordsman. But they could not find one who was a master's pupil and a patriot at the same time! Is this not so, Pere de Crecy? We send the Monsieur on at daybreak?"

De Crecy nodded. A station captain had his duty and the great danger to the Organization was always that the invader might slip an agent into its secret channels and thus discover the identity of the whole delicate machine. But a man could be over-careful, also; he could be a fool. Endless grilling, the usual checking devices, these consumed valuable time. A man's judgment served him best.

And tonight it would be good to spend an hour over a little wine, talking with another, who understood it, of an art of war which was lost in the rubble-dust of bombing and the oppressions of the Prussian enemy.

"I have admired gentlemen," De Crecy said to Pilard. "Now I admire a thief. Bring

up your wine, good friend. We will drink to days which are dead and to days yet unborn. The air of this salon is fouled with German sweat. It needs the cleansing of a French vintage and talk of men and steel!"

Pilard, Racine, and Dubonnet dropped through the trap in the floor. Doctor Foucald handed De Crecy a pencil. De Crecy took it and scrawled a coded approval opposite his station number on Laurent Loumena's dossier.

"Three nights from now, God willing," the doctor said, "an air operations office will have a fresh target. And newsmen will marvel again at the needle accuracy with which fresh structures at the Renault plant have been leveled!"

The doctor shook with a dry, soundless chuckle. De Crecy handed back the pencil. St. Omer was in close talk with Loumena, across the room. The newcomer seemed excited. St. Omer was beaming broadly. Pilard and his three companions reappeared through the trap, bringing dusty glasses and two fine bottles of *Chateau Lafitte.*

With much ceremony St. Omer swabbed out the glasses, drew corks, and poured the bottled treasure out generously. When a glass was full for each man in the room, St. Omer raised his toast:

"Liberte, egalite, fraternite!"

Somber faces and glasses raised in answer. St. Omer turned to De Crecy.

"Monsieur," he said with a flourish, "in behalf of my young friend and countryman, Lieutenant Loumena, in behalf of myself and these comrades and good friends, I beg you to do the Lieutenant the honor of matching blades with him."

Sharp, eager breaths were drawn. The kind of breathing one hears in the throats of Frenchmen at a sweepstakes for thoroughbreds or a racing track for motor cars or at the alleys of an international match. De Crecy was pleased.

Why not?

If this lad was a Kirchoffer pupil, then he was at least competent. If, by a lash of fate, he had lied about Kirchoffer, if the certifications were false, what better way to learn it? Not that one master's pupil could be distinguished from another's altogether by the style of his attack and defense, but Kirchoffer had a name for instructing only those who held possibilities of greatness.

Yes, why not?

A match would serve a double purpose. Like a musician long banned from his instrument, De Crecy felt a hunger to face competent steel once again, to briefly forget the bungling clumsiness of prying German captains. And at the same time he could rid himself of the slight uneasiness he always felt when he certified a man whom he did not personally know to the next station in the Organization. He bowed ceremoniously to St. Omer.

"You may inform the lieutenant I should consider the pleasure mine."

ST. OMER abandoned his mock formality. He rubbed his hands together and giggled like a boy at the circus of a fair. Doctor Foucald scowled and started to voice a protest.

"Ah, now, Doctor!" De Crecy laughed. "I could fence with two good Frenchmen for an hour and not do myself or the pressure of my blood the injury caused by the sight of one fat German entering my salon!"

Foucald continued to grumble disapproval. A vapor of an old recklessness seized Gontral de Crecy. He laughed again.

"A man must have sport, Doctor! It takes wrinkles from his face and folds from his belly. Here—I give you proof. I have used blunted foils to deal with the Hun. But with a Frenchman — Monsieur Loumena, have you objections to the use of epees, untipped?"

It was bravado, bravado De Crecy had long thought dead. *Diable!* A man was not so old at sixty! The youngster could not object. Kirchoffer, martinet that he was, drilled his pupils often with the naked steel of the duelling-sword, the epee. They thus learned early to avoid the deadly point and to take care how they touched a foeman whom they did not wish to harm. It would lend edge to the bout and Foucald needed a reminder that not yet was Gontran de Crecy a cadaver!

Loumena shot him a queer look but shook his head easily. St. Omer was rolling down and fastening the strip of canvas over the trap. The others had ringed the canvas footing expectantly.

"Good!" De Crecy said. "Any contact of blade against body, point or flat, however slight, will constitute a touch. Racine and

St. Omer will judge. Three touches make the victor and the bout is finished. Agreed?"

"Agreed, Monsieur."

"The lower rack behind you contains a dozen epees. Choose your own. I shall use a thirty-five inch blade."

"De Crecy, you're an old fool!" Doctor Foucald rasped. "The time is gone when Frenchmen found excitement in blood!"

St. Omer was with Loumena at the rack against the far wall of the room, chosing weapon and glove. De Crecy smiled at Foucald, drained the glass in his hand, and turned to a case beside his cupboard. A single weapon was under glass there, a battered old epee which he had carried with him a few times to some secluded spot in a gray dawn, back in the hot days of youth.

He would, he thought, deal gently with his young opponent. It was not within the strict limits of ancient ethics for a master to humiliate an able student. But he would give his station companions an evening to remember. Let them hear the ring of flashing steel for weeks to come, steel crossed in friendliness and for sport in the heart of a war-torn homeland.

By the time he had lifted down his old weapon and gloved his hand, St. Omer and Loumena were already at the strip, waiting. He stepped briskly across to his own place. Here began an easy, familiar pattern.

Out of his youth De Crecy recalled the words of his own master:

"The fencing strip is a severe test of good manners—"

Loumena followed the pattern flawlessly. As the two weapons came up in unison to a mutual salute, as the two men made a quarter turn to swing their blades through a second whistling salute to the judges, De Crecy studied his opponent. And through life-long practice, that study at this point was confined wholly to the man's face and eyes.

Loumena was cool, keyed tightly, and with evidence of a pardonable amount of confidence in the set of his features. The salutes complete, St. Omer pleasurably called the signal:

"Messieurs, en garde!"

The blades crossed with that heartening sound which fencers are born to believe the most stirring in the world. As it had done a thousand times in the past, De Crecy's at-

tention left the face of his opponent at this sound, leaping to the man's arm, his weapon, and his grip upon it. Loumena pressed forward in a quick, jumping advance. De Crecy but barely avoided a severe touch in that instant.

De Crecy's head pounded. He was as shaken as though the steel had pierced him. And the impact did not come from his opponent's skill. His eyes, touching Loumena's weapon, saw something which changed everything. A clean, electric sport had become again what it had been in the beginning—a lethal contest.

Retreating, recovering, De Crecy pressed an attack. Loumena retreated, his eyes suddenly fined down and brittle. De Crecy understood. His own features must have betrayed him. This stone-faced youngster knew, now, that counted touches would not close this bout, that he faced an old man who would see him dead or die himself in the attempt.

De Crecy knew the odds. He lacked a young man's legs and a young man's wind. The pleasure was gone. Delay was valueless.

Like a foreshortened symphony from overture to finale, he loosed the whole gamut of his skill. A spanking parry, a stop-thrust, a counter-of-*quarte,* inline, and so into a flawless lunge. Loumena's point touched a red furrow across his cheek. But Gontran de Crecy's old epee stood from under-arm to under-arm through his opponent's body. He withdrew the weapon with a strong surge and Loumena fell slackily.

St. Omer stared foolishly. Doctor Foucald, swift of mind, dropped to his knees beside the body. His long fingers rummaged in Loumena's clothing, located a small pouch under his belt, and extracted a tight fold of tissue. He straightened, unfolding this. His eyes widened and his face blanched with anger.

"Every name along the road from Paris to this station—!" he breathed. "The whole chain of the Organization! A German agent —God, they're thorough!"

De Crecy was looking at the dead man. He was thinking this *imposteur* had been a swordsman, and for the death of such, he felt regret. But he had also been a liar and an enemy.

"You knew—you knew he was trapping

us all!" Foucald whispered. "That was why the naked points!"

De Crecy was forced to honesty. He shook his head.

"How, then—?"

De Crecy pointed to the epee still clutched tightly in Loumena's gloved hand.

"You said they are thorough, the Huns. But they ignore old prides and traditions. They suspect me, here. They are clever enough to send an agent to trap me who is expert with a foil, expert enough, as they claimed, to qualify him as a Kirchoffer pupil. But they do not think of the history of weapons. They do not consider that always in fencing there have been two schools. Some great French masters have chosen the Italian weapon with its cross-bar behind the bell of the guard and its wrist-strap to further increase the grip. I have aways preferred the French pommel, uncluttered by these aids and thus free of movement. Kirchoffer preferred it also. And a master will not instruct a pupil except in the weapon at which he, himself, excels. Now, look at the hilt of the blade this one chose from my rack!"

St. Omer bent and lifted the limp arm. Loumena's fingers were hooked about the cross-bar. A leather strap held the hilt firmly to the soft under side of his wrist. St. Omer quietly swore and let go the arm. The dead man's epee rasped on the floor. Doctor Foucald, who had not touched his brimming glass of wine, now downed it abruptly.

"Racine," he said hoarsely, "this is your work. You will dispose of the body in the usual way—"

De Crecy, feeling old again, racked his epee in the case beside his cupboard. He would not, he felt, take the scarred blade out again. The doctor, absently still carrying his empty glass, stopped beside him. He looked at the old weapon, resting again on felt.

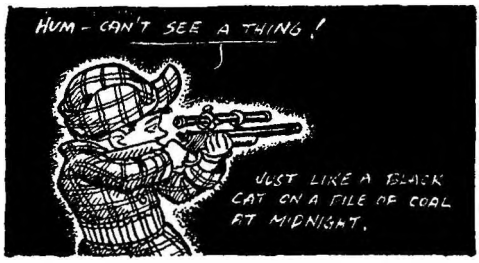
"Wars," he murmured abstractedly, "are fought with strange weapons—!"

The doctor was not an abstract man. De Crecy's brows were raised mildly. Foucald turned, clamping his glass with sudden firmness onto the cupboard.

"How long has it been since we've been drunk together, old friend?" he rasped. "I think Pilard would bring us more wine—"

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by PETE KUHLHOFF



Telescope Sights

SIR: If you will, please, a little information! I do not know a damn thing about telescopes for rifles—one of the many things I know nothing of.

The scope on my woodchuck rifle has something missing. I guess you would call it light gathering power. I cannot pick up a shot when it is in the shady edge of a field, especially when it is getting late in the afternoon. I can see all right with field glasses, but not the scope.

A week ago I felt very bad when three chucks played around in the late afternoon shade and I could see them with my naked eyes or glasses—but not through the scope. Cuss, hell yes, long and loud, not even the same word twice.

I will gladly consider your advice. What you you think of the Fecker scope, 1⅛ inch in 8 or 10 power? Does that scope have what I want? So I can see them in the shade?

When I go to New Jersey the farmers come to me and ask me to come out and shoot their chucks. Shot two off the top of a rail fence after I had shot one at the entrance of his den. One field 250 x 400 yards and ten chucks making faces at me. Some good hunting! Got a grandad chuck that

weighed over 15 pounds. But I can't see 'em in the shade. I use a .219 Zipper on a single shot action.

Thanks for any information you can give me. (E. S., Long Island, N. Y.)

Answer: First of all, let me say that when it comes to vermin shooting (crows, woodchucks, etc.) in dim light, the larger the objective lens the better. The objective lens is the front one and is the baby that brings in the light. The only drawback here is the fact that the larger it is, the more it costs—for the simple reason that the larger they are the harder they are to make. One point to remember, there has to be some light because, no light, no see—regardless of what scope you are looking into.

A scope sight is a great help for the shooter who has poor eyesight because it not only enlarges the target but also does away with the front sight. In other words, all we have to contend with is the cross hair within the scope. These cross hairs (reticule or graticule) are placed at the optical focus of the front (objective) lens or the rear (eye-piece) lens depending on the make of the scope or optical system used; and in the case of most hunting scopes it is adjustable for windage and elevation, while in most target scopes the cross hairs are stationary and the whole scope is moved to adjust for elevation and windage.

When properly adjusted, we just look into the scope and place the cross hairs on the target and ease off the trigger. When I say "look into" I mean just that. We see the image within the scope and definitely do not look through it.

These cross hairs are made in various thicknesses, generally referred to as very fine, fine, medium, and heavy. On the hunting scope which is generally 2½ or 3 power, I prefer the medium. While on the target or vermin scope I like the very fine or fine cross hair.

A few years ago several fellows and myself were out shooting crows and woodchucks. I had three rifles with me. One was a little single shot in .22 Hornet caliber on which was mounted an inexpensive 2½-power hunting type scope. The second rifle was a Model 70 Winchester in .30-06 caliber. (I was using a 110 grain bullet at 3,500 feet a second.) This gun was equipped with a 330 Weaver big game scope which enlarges 23/4 diameters. Incidentally this is one of our most popular scopes. It contains excellent lens and is in the medium-price field. It, together with the Lyman Alaskan which is considered one of our best big game scopes, is being used as standard equipment on the Army Springfield sniper's rifle.

And at the present time, the Garand semi-automatic rifle is also being equipped with the Lyman scope for sniper use. The Griffen and Howe people have designed and

are manufacturing an offset mount which positions the scope so that it does not interfere with the loading of the rifle. The rifle stock has a cheek piece which compensates for the offset scope.

The third rifle was my pet varmint gun of .218 Mashburn Bee caliber. It has a very heavy barrel and a Winchester heavy single-shot action. On the barrel is mounted dovetail blocks to take the outside adjustment target type scope, and at that particular time I was using a Lyman Super Targetspot of 15 power.

About dusk we saw a woodchuck walking around in the dim light under some bushes about a hundred yards up on the side of a hill. Using the little Hornet rifle with the cheap scope we couldn't detect the chuck at all. With the 330 Weaver we could see him very well. While with the Targetspot which has a 34-mm. objective lens we not only could see the chuck very plainly but were able to make a head shot.

After this experience I took the cheap scope off the Hornet rifle (which I use for a lending gun) and in its place put another 330 Weaver. As a matter of information, I believe the Weaver 330 and 440 (another good one) are the only ones available at the present time.

Many varmint hunters of great experience prefer a scope of not over 6 or 8 power which gives a field or 14 or 16 feet at 100 yards. While small game hunters in thicker country generally like a glass of about 4 power such as the Fecker and Unertl small game scope (field 21 and 25 feet respectively) or the 440 Weaver which has a field of 27 feet at 100 yards.

Regardless, I like a scope of high power with as large an object as I can get, especially for crow and chuck shooting at long ranges from the prone position with sling. These scopes in 20 power have a field of only 5 or 6 feet at a hundred yards and have to be focused for various distances.

But I suppose the 6 or 8 power scope could be called a happy medium for varmint work. But be sure and get one with the largest objective lens your pocketbook will stand. Lyman, Fecker, Unertl, and Litschert manufacture scopes meeting these requirements.

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